

Tuesday
20 November 2012

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 20 November 2012

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

CITY OF LONDON (VARIOUS POWERS) BILL [LORDS]
(BY ORDER)

*Second Reading opposed and deferred until Tuesday
27 November (Standing Order No. 20).*

Oral Answers to Questions

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

The Deputy Prime Minister was asked—

Constitutional Reform

1. **Gemma Doyle** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab/Co-op): What the Government's political and constitutional reform priorities are for the remainder of this Parliament.
[128848]

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr Nick Clegg): The Government have already introduced fixed-term Parliaments, a significant constitutional change, and given people a say on the voting system for this House, as well as overseeing significant transfers of power to both Scotland and Wales. We also have radical measures in train to shift power from the centre to local decision makers, including the recently enacted Local Government Finance Act 2012 and the second wave of city deals, which will accelerate the pace of decentralisation as well as unlocking new and innovative ways to drive growth. Work also continues on party funding, recall and lobbying reform.

Gemma Doyle: I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for that answer, but he has horse-traded with his coalition partner on Lords reform, electoral registration, our electoral system, and boundary changes. Does he not agree that the country deserves a better collection of policies than those that simply serve an individual party's needs?

The Deputy Prime Minister: That is a slightly curious allegation coming from a member of a party that had a manifesto commitment to hold a referendum on the alternative vote yet barely lifted a finger to campaign for it when it was possible to do so, and that has had a manifesto commitment for an elected House of Lords for years but has done even less to make that a reality. Perhaps the hon. Lady should practise what she preaches.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Two weeks ago, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Miss Smith), gave evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, and said that political and constitutional reforms were worth while only when there was a public appetite for them. Does the Deputy Prime Minister think there is a public appetite for any of the proposals he has just mentioned?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Clearly, the priority for all of us is to repair, rescue and reform the damaged British economy—the legacy left to us by Labour—but I have always been of the view that that does not mean that the Government cannot do more than two things at once. Those things could include mayoral elections, police and crime commissioner elections—which I know are close to the heart of the hon. Gentleman's party—other political reform enthusiasms shared by my party. Those are all things that we have tried to advance over the past two and a half years.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): In the light of the Prime Minister's visit to Northern Ireland today in advance of negotiations in Brussels and other possible announcements, and of the recent report on tax arrangements in Wales, will the Deputy Prime Minister tell us what discussions have taken place, or will take place, with the Northern Ireland Executive on the further devolution of powers to the Executive?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady knows, the proposals in Wales have been put forward on the back of the report published by the Silk commission this week, which advocates further tax devolution to Wales. We have said that we will look closely at those proposals. She will also be well aware that there is a long-standing debate in Northern Ireland about the freedom to set corporation tax rates, which would involve a different arrangement from the one that we have now. We have undertaken to look at that very carefully indeed, and there has been a succession of discussions and ministerial meetings on the matter. We will arrive at a definitive conclusion soon enough.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): One item on the Deputy Prime Minister's list of priorities was party funding. Is it not crucial, in the light of the lessons that we can learn from the American presidential election, that the parties in this country should come together and agree on a sensible measure of party funding, so that we can have a balanced electoral system that means all the people getting involved in the elections?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. I do not think that anybody, on either side of the House, would want to see our politics being hollowed out by big money as has clearly happened in the United States. That is why cross-party talks are going on at the moment, although agreement has not yet been reached. We are all familiar with the difficulties involved. It will require a bit of political will and a bit of political courage to reach cross-party agreement, but I hope that we will be able to do that as soon as possible.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I note the absence of the elections for police and crime commissioners from the Deputy Prime Minister's list of his Government's constitutional reforms. Those elections ended up costing £25 million more because he did not want them to be held on the same day as the May council elections next year. Will he admit that, in order to try to give the Lib Dems a better chance next May, he has wasted an extra £25 million of public money?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I know the right hon. and learned Lady is feeling sore that so many Labour has-been politicians did not get elected. *[Interruption.]* I know it was not a good day for Deputy Prime Ministers, past or present, and I admit that. Honestly, she knows as well as I do that there was a mayoral contest and Westminster by-elections as well as local by-elections all on the same day. Is she now going to start blaming the November weather for the poor showing of her party at the police and crime commissioner elections? That is beneath her.

Ms Harman: I do not know why the right hon. Gentleman is drawing attention to last Thursday's results because on the showing of his party in the Corby by-election, it will need more than a change of date to save his party's fortunes. Will he not admit that no one wanted these police and crime commissioner elections, whatever the weather, that they were a complete shambles and that the money should have been spent on front-line policing instead?

The Deputy Prime Minister: If the right hon. and learned Lady dislikes the PCC elections so much, why did her party put up candidates across the country? *[Interruption.]* I hear "She had to" from a sedentary position, but no one forced her to put up as candidates the recycled Labour ex-Ministers who then failed to get elected. No one obliged her to do that. I really think the Labour party has to get out of this habit of criticising things that are quite close to its own proposals. As I understand it, the Labour party's position is for directly elected members of the police authority—not a million miles away from the police and crime commissioners. As it happens, that was not my or my party's policy, but it was a contest that we all entered in good faith. I am only sorry that it did not turn out as the right hon. and learned Lady had rather hoped.

Recall of Members

2. **Lorely Burt** (Solihull) (LD): What progress he has made on introducing a process of recall for hon. Members found guilty of serious wrongdoing. [128849]

7. **Claire Perry** (Devizes) (Con): What progress he has made on introducing a process of recall for hon. Members found guilty of serious wrongdoing. [128854]

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr Nick Clegg): Last year, the Government published their draft Bill on the recall of MPs for pre-legislative scrutiny by the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, whose report was published in June this year. The Government submitted an interim response confirming that we remain committed to establishing a recall mechanism that is robust, transparent and fair. We are now taking proper time to reflect on the Committee's recommendations.

Lorely Burt: For some, life in politics can be a bit like a jungle, and a popular vote may help to decide whether or not someone should stay. When a Member of this House is found guilty of serious wrongdoing and does not walk away themselves, should not a popular vote by their constituents provide a chance to "get them out of there"?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Obviously, the devil is in the detail, and the issue is how we as a House define what serious wrongdoing is. I never thought that disappearing to a jungle on the other side of the planet would be one of the things we would have to grapple with on this recall issue. I very much hope to make progress, and we are certainly working actively in government to achieve it. It was a manifesto commitment of all the main parties in this Parliament to introduce a recall mechanism, but to do that we need to arrive at a common understanding of what constitutes serious wrongdoing and what does not.

Claire Perry: If I may press the Deputy Prime Minister a little further, does his reply not suggest that it is up to Parliament to define serious wrongdoing, which might give the impression to constituents that it is a case of the poacher turning gamekeeper? Surely it should be up to the majority of our constituents, perhaps through some sort of referendum, to decide what constitutes wrongdoing. Whether it be crossing the Floor, disappearing and not helping constituents, being found guilty of fraud or whatever, it is surely our constituents' job to determine that.

The Deputy Prime Minister: We have said that there is a sort of double trigger. First, whether in law or otherwise, we need some kind of approximate understanding of what constitutes serious wrongdoing. I do not think anyone would want this recall mechanism to be triggered for frivolous reasons or for partisan point scoring. The second trigger is that 10% of constituents sign a petition calling for a by-election. It is that basic design that we are still working towards.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does the Deputy Prime Minister think that reneging on a solemn election pledge is serious wrongdoing?

The Deputy Prime Minister: It is almost as serious as destroying the British economy, which is of course what the Labour party did when it was in office.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Does the Deputy Prime Minister have any plans to extend recall to other posts such as police and crime commissioners? In north Wales, for example, an independent elected last Thursday subsequently turned out to be a member of the Liberal Democrat party. Does the right hon. Gentleman feel that that would constitute grounds for recall?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I know the right hon. Gentleman thinks otherwise, but being a member of the Liberal Democrats is not yet a crime. By the way—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. This is Question Time; Members cannot divide the House now. There is no opportunity for that.

The Deputy Prime Minister: This is Labour illiberalism pushed to new extremes—and at least, by the way, it was not necessary for Greenpeace to film that candidate secretly before we knew what his views were, which seems to have been the case elsewhere.

We believe that the principle of recall should be extended—for instance, we should like it to be extended to the European Parliament—but, as I have already said in answer to earlier questions, we must first get the mechanisms and the definitions in the Bill right.

Individual Electoral Registration

3. **Tom Blenkinsop** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What his policy is on individual electoral registration; and if he will make a statement. [128850]

4. **Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): What his policy is on individual electoral registration; and if he will make a statement. [128851]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Miss Chloe Smith): The Government are fully committed to delivering individual electoral registration. In the coalition agreement we promised to speed up its implementation to improve the integrity of the electoral register, and that remains the Government's policy.

Tom Blenkinsop: Given how critical the Deputy Prime Minister said the Bill on individual registration was, why has it now disappeared?

Miss Smith: It has not disappeared, but, as you know, Mr. Speaker, by convention we in this House do not comment on the workings of the other place.

Chris Ruane: Before I ask my question, may I just say that Labour did not do enough to increase electoral registration during our 13 years in power?

May I ask the Minister, in the spirit of cross-party co-operation, what we can do together—as Members of Parliament, as political parties and as democrats—to put the 6 million unregistered voters on to the register and to improve democracy?

Miss Smith: I truly welcome what the hon. Gentleman has said. I think it is of concern to everyone in the House that, for example, 36% of people—according to a recent Electoral Commission survey—believe that electoral fraud is a problem. We are introducing safeguards to ensure that the maximum number of people can be individually registered. That includes the use of techniques such as data-matching, phasing in the transition over two years, a write-out to all electors in 2014, and a programme of work to maximise registration among previously under-represented groups.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): One of the lowest rates of electoral registration is found where it should perhaps be the highest, namely among our armed services. What can individual voter registration do to help to increase the number of soldiers, sailors and airmen who are registered to vote?

Miss Smith: My hon. Friend is right. Much needs to be done to make it easier for those people to register and to place their votes. As I have said, we are undertaking a comprehensive programme of reforms through individual electoral registration. We are also interested in looking into methods such as online registration, which might help the community whom my hon. Friend holds so dear.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Government told us that the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill, which would introduce individual electoral registration, was a priority and must be introduced as quickly as possible, but we have now been told that the Conservatives are delaying it in the other place. What is the reason for that delay? Has it anything to do with parliamentary boundaries? Yes or no?

Miss Smith: Again, Mr. Speaker, you would no doubt remind me not to discuss the workings of the other place here. I have every confidence that the hon. Gentleman can read for himself the speeches of my noble Friend Lord Strathclyde, who made it clear what that place must do with potentially inadmissible amendments. I also think it is clear that the programme designed by the last Government—a voluntary version of individual electoral registration—would have led to confusion and significant extra cost, and I therefore do not think it right for Opposition Members to lecture us about such matters.

Royal Succession

5. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What progress he has made on changing the law on succession to the throne. [128852]

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr Nick Clegg): Discussions with the other Commonwealth realms are ongoing, but legislation can be presented only when all the necessary arrangements are in place in all 16 Commonwealth nations.

Mr Hollobone: There will be much rejoicing on the streets of the Kettering constituency if the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge are blessed with a baby girl and she succeeds to the throne even if she has a baby brother. When does the Deputy Prime Minister expect legislation to be presented to us, and what is the legislative timetable likely to be in those other Commonwealth realms?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am sure all of us would share the joy of the constituents of Kettering if the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge were to have a baby girl—or, indeed, a baby boy. If it were a baby girl, the key thing to remember would be that the change to the rule of male primogeniture came into effect from the point of the Perth conference last year, so even if we had not secured all the necessary legislative changes in all the realms, we would none the less be able to proceed on the basis that the outdated rule of male primogeniture no longer prevails. A de facto change has already been introduced pending the legal changes that now need to be made.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is now more than a year since the Perth agreement, and I appreciate that the Deputy Prime Minister has put a lot of work into this. It is now in the hands of the Prime Minister of New Zealand, however, so will the Deputy Prime Minister consider visiting New Zealand—

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): And stay there!

Keith Vaz: Will the Deputy Prime Minister consider visiting New Zealand to try to speed up this process, because it is taking a long time and there is all-party agreement that it should be concluded as soon as possible?

The Deputy Prime Minister: One Member of this House on the other side of the planet is, I think, enough. I do not intend to take a long voyage myself, although I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kind suggestion. Thankfully, we do not need to travel around the globe to communicate with each other these days. We have other means by which we can liaise with colleagues and friends in the New Zealand Government—and indeed, with the other realms. As I have said before, I am as impatient as the right hon. Gentleman to see the end of the outdated and discriminatory rule of male primogeniture and also the bar on the monarch or the successor to the throne marrying a Roman Catholic. I am as anxious as the right hon. Gentleman is to see those rules updated and modernised. It just takes a bit of time and a little bit of patience to make sure that all the realms are properly aligned, as they need to be to make this change happen.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Will the Deputy Prime Minister—and the Prime Minister of New Zealand—bear in mind that, but for our law of male primogeniture, the German Kaiser would also have become King of England, which would have produced almost as interesting a coalition as the present one?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We always rely on my right hon. Friend for such erudition and grasp of history, which he possesses but unfortunately I do not. I am grateful to him for pointing that historical quirk out to us, but I hope he will agree that that is not reason enough not to modernise the rules of succession and bring them into line with the 21st century.

Mr Speaker: We can so rely on the right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Sir Peter Tapsell), which is one of the reasons why I particularly enjoy calling him.

Topical Questions

T1. [128863] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr Nick Clegg): As Deputy Prime Minister, I support the Prime Minister on a full range of Government policy and initiatives, and within the Government I take special responsibility for our programme of political and constitutional reform.

Jason McCartney: What are the Government doing to promote access to public office for people with mental health problems? With that in mind, will the

Deputy Prime Minister join me and other Members in growing a moustache for Movember, which is not only raising funds for the prostate cancer charity, but raising important issues about men's health, including mental illness?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, and I would be very happy to pay him to take his moustache off as soon as he wishes to do so. *[Interruption.]* Well, these are the times of austerity, so we will have to be modest.

On the first point, I think there has been a real sea change in how we debate and talk about mental health not only in society but, as we have movingly seen recently, in this House. The taboo has been broken and politicians now speak about mental health problems, which afflict one in four families in this country. That is a very healthy development, and we are seeking to reflect it in legislation by removing the bar on those with mental health problems being in office and remaining as Members of this House.

Sadiq Khan (Tooting) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister will be aware that the House of Lords will tomorrow consider Government plans to allow Ministers the right to have civil actions against them held in secret, thus depriving claimants the chance to see the evidence. Can he explain to the House why he and the Conservative party are right on this, and the Cross-Bencher Lord David Pannick QC, the Labour party, the Lib Dem peer and former Director of Public Prosecutions Lord Ken Macdonald, the Joint Committee on Human Rights, Liberty, Reprieve, Justice, the Lords Constitution Committee and other legal experts are so utterly wrong?

The Deputy Prime Minister: This is a very important issue and I am looking forward to the Labour party's revealing what it believes on this, as on so many other issues. If the right hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the Bill were accurate, I would agree with him. Of course I would; no one wants to see evidence and matters heard in open court decanted into closed material proceedings. Let me make it clear that the Government's view—it is certainly mine, as I would find this unacceptable otherwise—is that the provision will apply only to those cases where at the moment the evidence is not heard at all. It is not a question of a choice, with evidence held in open court being moved into closed court, as nothing will be heard—*[Interruption.]* The judge decides on how the procedure is conducted.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and I want to pick up on that if I may. As he knows very well, the Committee has tabled an extensive range of amendments to improve the Bill. I am very sympathetic to a lot of what the Committee says, and the Government are considering its amendments with an open and, in many respects, sympathetic mind. I hope that we will be able to amend the Bill to allay those concerns in line with many of the recommendations made by the Joint Committee on Human Rights.

T2. [128864] **Dan Rogerson** (North Cornwall) (LD): In the interests of fairness, my right hon. Friend is making the case for higher property taxes above a certain

threshold. Will he also consider the issue of second, third and fourth homes that might fall below any such threshold?

The Deputy Prime Minister: On taxational levies on higher value properties, it is no secret that there is a difference of opinion in the coalition Government. There is no point pretending otherwise. My view is that a police officer seeing 20% cuts in the policing budget, a teacher whose pay has been frozen or someone whose benefits are being reduced would find it very difficult to understand why we are not asking people in large multi-million pound homes to make an additional contribution as we have to tighten our belts further. I do not think that most ordinary people in this country think that it is fair that a family living in a family home, working hard to provide for themselves, has to pay the same council tax as an oligarch living in a £5 million mansion. That is why we will continue to make the case for a fairer approach to taxation. As we tighten our belts, as I have said on numerous occasions, we should start at the top and work down, rather than the other way around.

Mr Speaker: We have a lot to get through, so may we have short questions and short answers, please?

T5. [128867] **Mrs Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister will at least be pleased that last Thursday his party won the by-election in Wallsend, even though the turn-out was low. As the public largely boycotted the police and crime commissioner elections, which cost £100 million, does he think that it would have been better for his party's fortunes if that money had been spent on the 3,000 front-line police he promised in his election manifesto?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am grateful for a carbon-copy question of one asked earlier. I would suggest a little liaison—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady is waving a piece of paper provided to her by her Whips, but I suggest that she cross-checks against the questions asked by the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) from her Front Bench. As I said, there were PCC elections, a mayoral election, local by-elections and Westminster parliamentary by-elections. There will be more Westminster parliamentary by-elections in a couple of weeks' time. Is she really suggesting that when the clocks change we should stop elections? I do not think that she is, and that would not be a realistic way of proceeding.

T3. [128865] **Simon Hart** (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister will know that we have dozens of different deposits for elections, ranging from £500 to £5,000. In this post-PCC world, would now not be a good time to review that, as some of them have not been looked at for about 30 years?

The Deputy Prime Minister: That is not something that we have considered, but I am more than happy to ask officials to provide information about whether there is something erratic or illogical about the levels of deposit in different electoral contests.

T7. [128869] **Lindsay Roy** (Glenrothes) (Lab): What reaction has the Deputy Prime Minister had from the Secretary of State for Scotland on his reported plans to

evict the Scotland Office from Dover house, and why would the Deputy Prime Minister's small Department apparently want to move there?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am not aware of any plans to evict the Secretary of State from his office.

T4. [128866] **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): There is much discussion about constitutional reform, especially in Scotland and Wales. However, there is little discussion of arrangements in England, particularly with regard to local government. Lord Heseltine's recent report recommends that we should move away from two-tier local government to unitary authorities, which would be hugely welcome in Cumbria. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree with Lord Heseltine's recommendation?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As it happens, I agree with much of what Michael Heseltine set out in his report. Not only do we have a highly over-centralised political system in this country, but we have an economy that has over-relied on the City of London and the south-east, whereas we need to spread prosperity. He is very supportive not only of the regional growth fund and the localisation of business rates, but crucially and perhaps most radically of all, of the new city deals that we are entering into. I do not agree with him, as it happens, on the one point that my hon. Friend raises—moving all of local government on to a unitary basis, but I am well aware that that divides opinion across all parties.

T8. [128870] **Mr William Bain** (Glasgow North East) (Lab): Is the Deputy Prime Minister aware that figures from Gingerbread and the Library of the House show that 115,000 lone parents in work and on tax credits in Scotland will be worse off working full time than part time when the universal credit is introduced next April and housing and child care costs are taken into account? Would this not completely undermine the Government's promise to make work pay, and what is the Deputy Prime Minister going to do about it?

The Deputy Prime Minister: First, we are going to improve the provision of child care, which is why as of April next year this is the first Government ever who will provide 15 hours of free child care and pre-school support to the children from the poorest families in the country. Secondly, we are raising the point at which people pay income tax, taking 2 million people on low pay out of income tax. Rather than brandishing figures, the hon. Gentleman should wait and see the details of how the universal credit will work, because the interaction between the universal credit and those tax changes will be some of the most progressive changes that have been introduced by any Government in living memory in order to make sure that work pays.

T6. [128868] **Glyn Davies** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Yesterday the Silk commission recommended that tax-raising—tax-varying—powers be granted to the National Assembly for Wales, a big decision requiring the approval of the people of Wales. If the party or parties which form the next Government have clearly and openly included this as manifesto commitments, will a referendum be needed?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Silk commission is divided into two parts. The first report, provided just this week, advocated a substantial change in the fiscal arrangements and the fiscal powers enjoyed by the Administration in Cardiff, analogous to what happened under the Calman process but in some important respects, particularly on income tax, going even further than the Calman design in Scotland. That will then be supplemented by a second report on the wider constitutional future of Wales. Only at that point will we be able to decide exactly how all those proposed changes will be adopted and possibly sanctioned by the people of Wales.

T12. [128874] **Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): Talking to people last Thursday, I found that few supported the introduction of police and crime commissioners, and even fewer understood why they might be necessary. Does the Deputy Prime Minister accept that he totally failed to make his case to the electorate? Will he now answer the question that has been asked twice already—would not the money have been better spent on more police officers or the building of affordable houses to kick-start the economy?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Surely the people who failed to make the case were all those Labour has-been politicians who did not get elected. I am still mystified. Even by Labour's modern, contorted standards—let me get this right: the hon. Lady does not like police and crime commissioners, but she likes them enough to have Labour candidates. Then, when they do not win, she says that Labour never agreed with the introduction of PCCs in the first place. Who is she kidding?

T10. [128872] **Gavin Williamson** (South Staffordshire) (Con): Many of my constituents think it is somewhat unwise for a Member of Parliament to disappear off to the jungle for a number of weeks. Will my right hon. Friend share his views on whether it is wise or not and, if he thinks it is a wise decision, whether he would disappear off on a reality television show, and which one he would choose to go on?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have been invited to go to New Zealand and it has been suggested that membership of the Liberal Democrats should be made illegal; I am not going to supplement all of that by commenting on where I end up in a reality TV show. Of course I think it is unwise. Whatever party we come from, we are all elected to do a job for our constituents. That is what people rightly expect of us, and it is no wonder that people have been so unhappy about the decision of one Member of this House to eat insects in the jungle instead.

T13. [128875] **Mr David Anderson** (Blaydon) (Lab): It was claimed last week that one of the reasons why we had police and crime commissioner elections was that police authorities had no democratic legitimacy—indeed the Conservative party chairman said that PCCs are 5 million times more legitimate than police authorities were. If that is the case, what legitimacy is held by Ministers of State who have no direct democratic input from this country but who are, in fact, appointed in a way that is much less transparent than appointments to police authorities? Where is the legitimacy for any Minister of State?

The Deputy Prime Minister: If I understand it correctly, the Labour party's position is that there should be direct elections to police authorities, so it agrees that there should be a change in the arrangements to give the public a greater democratic say in how policing is organised in their local area. The policy happens to be one that was not advocated by my party, but it was, rightly and understandably, in the coalition agreement, having been brought in by the Conservatives, so it is right that we should deliver it. I remain nonplussed that the hon. Gentleman is now so critical of the policy when the posts were so ferociously contested by numerous—failed, as it turns out—Labour politicians last week.

T11. [128873] **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree with the Prime Minister, the House of Commons and the majority of the British public that prisoners should not get the right to vote, and will he oppose the will of the European Court of Human Rights on this matter?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady well knows, this is a vexed subject. We have the Court ruling that, in its view, the blanket rule is not consistent with the law, and it set a deadline. The House has made its contrasting views very well known, and I know that the Secretary of State for Justice is to set out the next steps on the whole issue very shortly.

T14. [128877] **Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I know the Deputy Prime Minister is an avid reader of the ConservativeHome website, written as it is by his coalition partners. In a recent article about the Boundary Commission review, and with particular reference to his party, it said:

“the next election is our best opportunity in a generation to significantly cut their numbers. While they are down...we shouldn't show mercy. We must finish them off.”

Given those views from his coalition partners, can the Deputy Prime Minister tell the House that his party's Commons votes cannot be bought for some sort of short-term deal on state funding?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I do not know many times I have clearly set out my position—

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Say it again.

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Lady does not normally welcome my views on most issues, but I will do as she asks. My view is that because of the failure to deliver the wider package of constitutional reform we entered into, it is entirely reasonable—a deal being a deal—that other parts of the package are not proceeded with. That is why my party wants the implementation of boundary changes to be delayed beyond the next general election, and that is how we will vote when the opportunity arises.

Amber Rudd (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What progress has the Deputy Prime Minister made on additional support for disabled people to achieve elected office, and might that be in place by the 2015 general election?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I know that a great deal of work has been done across party boundaries to make sure that people with disabilities have greater access to this place. In July, we launched the access to elected office strategy, with the aim of doing just that; a new £2.6 million fund will help disabled candidates to meet the additional costs they face; we have three paid internships for disabled people on the Speaker's parliamentary placement scheme; and there is new guidance for political parties on making reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of disabled members and candidates.

Dr William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): While the Deputy Prime Minister continues to discuss getting additional support for disabled people to achieve public office, which is an important matter, will he also ensure that impediments are removed from polling stations where disabled people wish to exercise their right to vote?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to point out that local authorities and returning officers have an obligation to ensure unimpeded access for all voters so that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, can exercise their right to a democratic vote.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): We now elect police commissioners, yet up and down the country, including in my constituency and in the Yorkshire dales and the Lake district, we have national park authorities, which, in effect, perform the function of a local council but are totally unelected by, and unaccountable to, the people they serve. Is not it time the Government looked at making our national park authorities democratically elected, too?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I, too, have a significant chunk of a national park in my constituency and know that this issue divides opinion among those who are familiar with our great national parks. I have a lot of sympathy with my hon. Friend's view that it would be a good thing if local people's preferences were reflected more fully in the way national parks are governed, and I know that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is actively looking at the issue.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): In view of the miserable turnout at last Thursday's elections for police and crime commissioners, will the Deputy Prime Minister and other members of his Government give a cast-iron guarantee that never again will they bleat about the turnout at trade union elections, which on average is more than double what we saw last Thursday?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The big difference is that police and crime commissioners do not write parliamentary questions for Government Members, which is what the trade union bosses do for Opposition Members, spoon-feeding them questions while funding 90% of all the Labour party's financial needs. Police and crime commissioners do not fund either the Conservative or the Liberal Democrat parties. That is quite a difference.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is not just national park authorities that are unaccountable; many quangos up and down the country make decisions that

affect many of our constituents. Does the Deputy Prime Minister have any plans to ensure that more of those decisions are made by elected representatives, rather than unaccountable bodies?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I think that the general principle that there should be greater legitimacy when people take decisions in the name of the public and that affect the public is an important one, and it is not one that found a great deal of favour across both sides of this House when we debated it as it applied to the House of Lords. We have made considerable efforts to streamline some of the extraordinary blizzard of unaccountable quangos that developed under Labour. I know that various Ministers have made considerable efforts in their Departments to reduce the number of quangos and, therefore, introduce greater legitimacy in public decision making.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister has taken an admirable position in relation to the Leveson inquiry. Would it not be in the interests of transparency for all the e-mails between Rebekah Brooks and Andy Coulson, while he was working at No. 10 Downing street and corresponding about the future of the licence fee and many other issues, to be in the public domain before the inquiry publishes its findings?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Prime Minister has made it quite clear that he has provided all the e-mails and information required of him by the Leveson inquiry. On the inquiry generally, the hon. Gentleman also knows that my view has been for some time, given that we established the inquiry, which the previous Government did not do, that if the recommendations are workable and proportionate, we should proceed and seek to implement them.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

The Attorney-General was asked—

Specialist Rape and Child Abuse Prosecutors

1. **Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to ensure that the Crown Prosecution Service's networks of specialist rape and child abuse prosecutors are adequately funded. [128878]

6. **Julie Hilling (Bolton West) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to ensure that the CPS's networks of specialist rape and child abuse prosecutors are adequately funded. [128883]

9. **Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps he is taking to ensure that the CPS's networks of specialist rape and child abuse prosecutors are adequately funded. [128886]

The Solicitor-General (Oliver Heald): The prosecution of rape and child abuse is and will remain a key priority for the Crown Prosecution Service and will continue to be funded accordingly.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the Solicitor-General for that rather brief response. Will child abuse cases always be prosecuted by specialist advocates or, as is now the case in rape trials, only when the specialist happens to be available?

The Solicitor-General: That is not correct. All Crown Prosecution Service advocates have been trained in how to deal with domestic violence cases. Some 800 have been fully trained as rape specialists, and they are always involved in any rape case, so it is not right to say that that is not so. A network has been set up, under Mr Nazir Afzal, the chief Crown prosecutor for the north-west, to look at child sexual exploitation and improve prosecution, and it is proving successful.

Julie Hilling: The Director of Public Prosecutions has indicated that the Crown Prosecution Service's failings in child grooming cases go well beyond Rochdale, and he said that a whole category of crimes has not been well treated by the criminal justice system. Does the Solicitor-General know how many cases the DPP is referring to and whether any of them will now be revisited by the CPS?

The Solicitor-General: Whenever a case is the subject of further evidence or it is suggested that the right prosecution decision has not been made, the CPS takes that very seriously, and, as the hon. Lady will know, it reviews cases as appropriate. It is worth making the point that the CPS is improving its performance in rape and sexual abuse cases. Rape convictions are up by 4% year on year, and that is continuing in the current year, and there is an improvement across the area of sexual violence generally.

Meg Hillier: Rape convictions may be up, but they are still woefully low. Given that next Sunday is international day to end violence against women, will the Solicitor-General expand on his earlier comments about the number of specialist prosecutors? The key question is whether there are enough of them for justice to be pursued swiftly, which makes things better for the victim and more likely that a prosecution will be secured.

The Solicitor-General: The hon. Lady is right to say that this is a key priority. It is extremely important that the Crown Prosecution Service deals effectively with these cases, which are so important. That is why a huge effort is going on, with improvements to guidance and ensuring that prosecutors are properly trained in this area. As she may know, the Director of Public Prosecutions himself led the training for prosecutors in the past year and made sure that particular reference was made to supporting witnesses. This is an area of vital concern. I could go on for hours, but I will not.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does the Solicitor-General share my concern at the delay in prosecutions being brought in North Yorkshire because of the lack of a sexual assault and rape centre? Will he use his good offices to ensure that we have one at the first available opportunity to enable not only counselling to be given but forensic evidence to be taken to enable rapid prosecutions to take place?

The Solicitor-General: It is important to have very good arrangements for the support of witnesses. As somebody who has prosecuted rape cases, I can say that

they are not easy. It is very important that witnesses feel confident that they can give their evidence, and that is all about support. I will certainly look into the situation that my hon. Friend has mentioned, but she should not think anything other than that the Government take this extremely seriously, as does the Crown Prosecution Service.

Deferred Prosecution Agreements

2. **Mrs Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the introduction of deferred prosecution agreements on the level of economic crime. [128879]

The Solicitor-General (Oliver Heald): It is not possible to quantify exactly what the effect of the new deferred prosecution agreements will be on the amount of economic crime, but we do believe that they will contribute to the welcome trend of an increase in self-reporting by organisations. That will enable the Serious Fraud Office and the Crown Prosecution Service to obtain better evidence so that prosecutors will be able to bring more cases and restitution will be obtained, and this could lead to a reduction in the amount of economic crime.

Mrs Glendon: What steps will the Minister take if the proportion of cases resolved by the CPS creeps higher than the Government have forecast in the impact assessment? Does he agree that a sunset clause of five years would be a sensible safeguard?

The Solicitor-General: It is certainly important to recognise that this is not an alternative to prosecuting in serious cases, and the SFO and the CPS are very anxious to ensure that that is the case. It is particularly important that individuals should not feel that they have any way out of their liabilities, but this relates purely to organisations. A sunset clause is not contemplated at present, but the hon. Lady has put the idea forward and of course I will look at it. I thank her for making that important contribution.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): But all too often directors of companies are, in effect, complicit in what has been going on when economic crime is involved in their organisation. They want to protect the company rather than self-declare. Indeed, this surely must lead the Crown Prosecution Service to take very seriously the idea, when directors are negligent, of bringing prosecutions under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 or the Data Protection Act against the body corporate—for instance, News International.

The Solicitor-General: I clearly cannot comment on a particular case, but the hon. Gentleman makes a good point. It is important that this should be about self-reporting by companies. That does not let individuals off the hook, but means that the business and jobs can continue and that these business entities have certainty, while ensuring that they are on tough conditions. The whole point of this is that a company should pay a penalty and be on tough conditions that will be monitored by a judge, to ensure that it cleans up its act and provides all the information necessary to the prosecution authorities.

Hillsborough

4. **Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): What recent representations he has received on an inquest into the death of Kevin Williams in the Hillsborough disaster; and if he will make a statement. [128881]

The Attorney-General (Mr Dominic Grieve): In relation to the death of Kevin Williams I have received a number of representations. I acknowledge the significant public support for Kevin Williams's case to be accelerated. However, the evidence that supports a new inquest into Kevin Williams's death is basically the same as that in relation to the deaths of all the other victims of Hillsborough. My duty is to act in the public interests of all the victims of Hillsborough and I consider that wider public interest requires a single application to be made in relation to the inquests. I have made good progress on preparing an application to the High Court for new inquests in these cases and I expect to make the application in December.

Graham Evans: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that reply. Will he join me in recognising the role that Mrs Williams has played in fighting for justice for the 96 in setting up the charity Hope for Hillsborough?

The Attorney-General: I entirely acknowledge her key role in this matter and am particularly troubled to hear of her ill health. As I have said, I will do everything I can to take this process forward as quickly as possible, but I have to consult properly. There are a number of things that I simply cannot short-cut. I am endeavouring to do it as fast as possible and, as I said a moment ago, I hope that I can stick to the timetable that I have identified.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I know that the families will welcome what the Attorney-General has said about making an application in December and I thank him for that. Anne Williams is seriously ill and all she wants is official recognition of why her son died. I know that the Attorney-General understands that, but could I urge him to do all he can to grant her wish before it is too late?

The Attorney-General: I fully understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but he must also appreciate that my application is to quash the existing inquest verdict and, if that happens, for the court to order a fresh inquest or inquests. Once I have carried out my task of presenting the case to the court, my function will be at an end and I obviously cannot predict the time it would then take for the fresh inquests to take place. I have no doubt that, if the original inquest verdicts are quashed, it would be greatly in the public interest for the matter to move forward as quickly as possible, although, as I have told the House before, some criminal investigations might affect the time scale.

Stephen Mosley (City of Chester) (Con): The e-petition calling for a speedy new inquest into Kevin's death has passed the 100,000 mark in the past hour. May I add my voice to those of Government and Opposition Members calling for a speedy inquiry into Kevin's death?

The Attorney-General: I fully appreciate the good reasons why many would sign such a petition. I acknowledge that entirely. I can only do my job properly and professionally. As I have said, a number of things have to take place, such as consultation with each individual family. Medical evidence also has to be reviewed so that I can reassure the court that any new inquest could reach an informed decision on the cause and time of death even on the basis of the paper documentation available. For that purpose, I have retained the services of an expert forensic pathologist. That just gives the House a flavour of what I have to do.

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Could the Attorney-General assure the House that he has all the resources available to him to expedite this matter as quickly as possible?

The Attorney-General: Yes, this is not a resource issue; it is a mere time issue. We have written, for example, to the families—we have to consult them—and I think it is reasonable to give them a calendar month in which to respond, and that date has not yet expired. I hope that the hon. Gentleman appreciates that no short-cuts can be taken to take the matter to the court.

Prisoner Voting Rights

5. **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): Whether he has given legal advice to the Secretary of State for Justice on the potential financial penalties the European Court of Human Rights could impose on the UK in respect of its policy on prisoners' voting rights. [128882]

The Attorney-General (Mr Dominic Grieve): By long-standing convention observed by successive Governments, the fact and substance of advice from the Law Officers is not disclosed outside government. I hope that my hon. Friend will therefore understand why I cannot say whether I have given any legal advice in relation to this matter.

It may be helpful for my hon. Friend to know that the Strasbourg Court can order the payment of compensation and of legal costs and expenses, but cannot impose any other financial penalty. Non-financial sanctions are a matter for the Committee of Ministers and, ultimately, for the Council of Europe itself.

Karl McCartney: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that answer. Does he agree that this instance of judicial activism by the European Court of Human Rights seeks to undermine the democratic mandate of this House? Does he recognise that talk of the UK meeting its international obligations with respect to the Court's judgment seems a bit premature when one considers that hundreds of unimplemented judgments are pending review by the Committee of Ministers at the Council of Europe?

The Attorney-General: No, I have to disagree with my hon. Friend. I do not believe that the democratic mandate of this House is challenged. Parliamentary sovereignty remains. It is open to Parliament to decide not to change the law. However, if Parliament chooses not to implement the judgment, it would be a serious matter, because it would place the UK in breach of its international obligations to which it is a signatory. I accept that other

countries are in breach of their implementation obligations, but that does not provide an excuse for our not honouring our own.

In addition, it is right to point out that only one other pilot judgment, besides the Greens and MT judgment, has not been implemented. That is in a case concerning Ukraine. There are, of course, many hundreds of judgments at various stages of implementation, but that is a slightly different issue.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman's answers are invariably works of scholarship, from which no matter that he judges could be of any conceivable interest would ever be excluded.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Does the Attorney-General agree that there are two good reasons why we should implement legislation on prisoners' voting rights? Firstly, we would be adhering to our obligations under the European convention on human rights. Secondly, it is a useful part of the rehabilitative process that prisoners do not lose all their rights when they go to prison, but rather lose their liberty. The opportunity to vote is actually quite helpful, as the South Africans have found out now that they have universal voting rights for prisoners.

The Attorney-General: On the latter point, the hon. Gentleman may be correct. That is a matter for robust debate, which this House has had and may well continue to have on this subject. On the former point, it is right to say that the UK has always, in modern times, adhered to its international obligations. There are good reasons why a country should adhere to its international obligations, such as to set an example and to provide international confidence. Ultimately, of course, it is a matter for the House to determine.

Law on Contempt

7. **Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What plans he has to review the law on contempt. [128884]

The Attorney-General (Mr Dominic Grieve): In February 2011, an undertaking was given to the House that I would conduct an informal review of the law on contempt. As part of that process, I started consultations with various interested parties. However, my review has been overtaken by recent developments: Lord Neuberger's report on super-injunctions, the Leveson inquiry and, of particular significance, the Law Commission's review of the law on contempt. The last is a detailed and comprehensive formal review and the commission's findings will doubtless inform what, if any, action is required from the Government.

Pauline Latham: Will my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that jurors are made aware of the sanctity of the jury room at the start of their jury service, and that possible offences under the Contempt of Court Act 1981, including use of social media, will be followed up?

The Attorney-General: Yes, I share my hon. Friend's concern. The judiciary makes it clear to jurors that they must respect the sanctity of the jury room and avoid research on the internet. That message has been reinforced by a number of contempt proceedings that I have

brought, including in the cases of Mrs Fraill, who revealed details of the jury's deliberations, and Dr Dallas, who conducted research on the internet. Both received terms of imprisonment. I can also confirm that yesterday, the president of the Queen's bench division issued a protocol on jury irregularities, which provides guidance to the judiciary and practitioners on how best to address contempt committed by jurors.

Jimmy Savile

8. **Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on the Crown Prosecution Service's handling of cases referred to it in 2009 involving alleged sexual assaults by Jimmy Savile. [128885]

The Solicitor-General (Oliver Heald): Neither I nor the Attorney-General have yet had discussions directly with the Director of Public Prosecutions on the case. This week, the Attorney-General was briefed by the principal legal adviser to the Director of Public Prosecutions, Alison Levitt QC, on her draft review, and I understand that that draft review is now with the director for consideration.

Yvonne Fovargue: What consideration has been given to proposals by the Director of Public Prosecutions that the Crown Prosecution Service should be able to refer cases to other relevant agencies—such as social services—where it concludes that there is insufficient evidence for a prosecution?

The Solicitor-General: The hon. Lady is right and it is an important point. The Crown Prosecution Service is currently considering its policy on how it shares information with other relevant agencies. It is, of course, important that disclosures and information that may be helpful in protecting a vulnerable person are shared where possible, and the Attorney-General and I feel that that process should be considered carefully and in a positive way.

Serious Fraud Office

10. **Mr Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What plans he has to improve the efficiency of the Serious Fraud Office. [128887]

The Attorney-General (Mr Dominic Grieve): I have appointed a new director to the Serious Fraud Office who started work in April. David Green QC has restructured the office, made high-profile appointments and built in layers of quality control. He has clearly restated the intent and purpose of the SFO, and I am confident that, as a result, we will see improved efficiency and performance. I have placed in the Libraries of both Houses the report of the inspection of the SFO by HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, which I requested. I thank the chief inspector and his team for that helpful report, and confirm that the new director of the SFO has accepted all its recommendations and is already implementing them.

Mr Bellingham: I thank the Attorney-General for that helpful reply. Does he agree that the SFO has a vital role to play in the drive against crime linked to corruption and bribery, but that UK exporters must

know where they stand and be treated fairly? Can he confirm that the current guidelines are fit for purpose and that no major or fundamental changes will be made to them?

The Attorney-General: Bribery and corruption are serious offences. Guidelines have been published to help companies in that respect, and I have every confidence that no company will be prosecuted unless it has committed a serious offence. I cannot, however, give an undertaking that the guidelines will not be subject to review. The guidelines will evolve over time, and they are just that—guidelines. Ultimately, it is for the director of the SFO and the Director of Public Prosecutions to make a decision based on an evidential test and the public interest.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Two weeks ago we were astounded to learn that the former chief executive of the Serious Fraud Office had received an unauthorised send-off of £440,000 for just two years in the post. Last week we learned that the outgoing chief operating officer struck a confidential deal on similar lines to that offered to Ms Williamson. What is the scale of that second payment and can it be stopped? Who knew about both payments, and when? Is this negligence, incompetence, or a deliberate bypassing of the system? Finally, what guarantees can the Attorney-General give the House that he is no longer asleep at the wheel?

The Attorney-General: First, neither I nor anyone in my office was aware of the irregular payments that were

made. They came to light subsequently on the appointment of the new director, and are a matter of great concern to me, as are all irregular payments. I am satisfied that the new director has put in place all necessary measures to ensure that such a matter will not occur again. The hon. Lady asked about dates. I would be happy to write to her so that she is aware of exactly when the matter came to light, although I am afraid I do not have that recollection in my mind at the moment. I will ensure that her point about the chief operating officer is also answered.

Mr Speaker: Generosity of spirit gets the better of me. Mr Robert Buckland.

Mr Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that a request for further resources for the SFO to investigate the LIBOR scandal will be met favourably by the Government?

The Attorney-General: I reassure my hon. Friend that the matter has already met a favourable response from the Government in terms of ensuring that adequate funds are made available. My hon. Friends and colleagues in the Treasury will want reassurance that the money is being well used, but I am quite satisfied that money and resources are available for the SFO. The director and I are also quite satisfied that he has the necessary resources to carry out the investigation properly.

Middle East

12.35 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr William Hague): Mr Speaker, with permission, I will make a statement on Gaza, the middle east peace process and Syria.

The whole House will be united in concern both at the intolerable situation for the residents of southern Israel, and at the grave loss of life and humanitarian suffering in Gaza, including the particular impact on children. On 14 November, the Israeli defence forces began air strikes against the Gaza strip in response to a sharp increase in rocket fire. Hamas and other militant groups responded with even greater rocket fire, although those attacks have been reduced in the last two days. As of today, three Israeli citizens have been killed, including one woman and one child, and at least 109 Palestinians have been killed, including 11 women and 26 children.

We have made clear both that Hamas bears principal responsibility for the start of the current crisis, but also that all sides have responsibilities. We quickly called on Israel to seek every opportunity to de-escalate its military response, and to observe international humanitarian law and avoid civilian casualties. At the meeting I attended in Brussels yesterday, EU Foreign Ministers condemned the rocket attacks on Israel and called for an urgent de-escalation and cessation of hostilities. We have also warned that a ground invasion of Gaza could lengthen the conflict, sharply increase civilian casualties, and erode international support for Israel's position.

We wish to see an agreed ceasefire that stops the rocket attacks against Israel and ends Israeli military operations. Efforts to agree a ceasefire are continuing as I speak, and the UN Security Council will continue discussions on the situation today. More open access in and out of Gaza is part of any longer-term solution. We pay tribute to the efforts of the Egyptian Government and the UN Secretary-General to secure an agreed ceasefire, and have supported those efforts over the past few days. I discussed them with my European colleagues yesterday, and with the Egyptian, Israeli and Turkish Foreign Ministers over the weekend, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister did with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Morsi. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), is in Ramallah today, where he will meet President Abbas, after visiting southern Israel yesterday.

There is no military solution to the crisis in Gaza or to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Peace becomes harder to achieve with each military confrontation, each loss of life, and the creation of facts on the ground. The only way to give the Palestinian people the state that they need and deserve, and the Israeli people the security and peace they are entitled to, is through a negotiated two-state solution, and time for this is now running out. It requires Israelis and Palestinians to return to negotiations; Israel to stop illegal settlement building; Palestinian factions to reconcile with one another; and the international community, led by the United States and supported by European nations, to make a huge effort to push the peace process forward urgently.

While there is any chance of achieving a return to talks in the coming months, we continue to advise President Abbas against attempts to win Palestinian observer state status at the United Nations through a vote in the UN General Assembly. We judge that that would make it harder to secure a return to negotiations, and could have very serious consequences for the Palestinian Authority. Our collective goal must be a two-state solution based on 1967 borders with agreed land swaps, Jerusalem as the capital of both states, and a just settlement for refugees, so while we support Palestinian aspirations and understand the pressures on President Abbas, we urge him to lead the Palestinians into negotiations and not to risk paralysing the process, but we also urge Israel equally to make every effort to restart negotiations, before the window for a two-state solution closes altogether.

The urgency of all of this is underlined by the conflict in Syria. The whole House will join me in condemning the barbaric violence by the Assad regime, which continues its aerial warfare against Aleppo, Homs and Damascus itself. Thirty thousand people have died already, and more than 100 are still being killed each day. Countless homes, clinics, hospitals and essential infrastructure, such as water and sanitation systems, have been destroyed or severely damaged, and between 1 million and 3 million people have been displaced from their homes. There are appalling reports of rape and sexual violence by Government forces and militia, and as a form of torture in regime detention centres, which the UN Human Rights Council-mandated commission of inquiry has said could be prosecuted as crimes against humanity.

There are now well over 400,000 refugees in neighbouring countries. The impact on young Syrians is particularly acute, since 50% of all Syrian internally displaced persons and refugees are children. We are increasing our humanitarian assistance as the crisis grows and winter approaches, and our appeals to other members of the international community to give far more to UN relief efforts have been intensified. Our £53.5 million in humanitarian assistance so far includes £9.7 million for the World Food Programme to feed 80,000 people inside Syria each month; £4 million to the UN Refugee Agency to provide shelter and other basic relief items; and £9.7 million to other relief agencies for medical services and supplies, food parcels, water and sanitation services, distribution of blankets and hygiene kits.

In neighbouring countries, we have given £10 million for the UN Refugee Agency to provide shelter, protection, registration, and water and sanitation services to refugees; £5 million to the World Food Programme to feed 20,000 people; and £6 million to UNICEF to provide education and trauma support for children, and water and sanitation services. In Cairo last week, I called on other countries to increase their contribution to the relief effort, which the UN has described as "critically underfunded". But what is urgently needed is a political transition to new and legitimate leadership that reflects the will of the Syrian people and that can end the violence and begin to rebuild the country with regional and international support. On 11 November there was a major breakthrough in Doha, with the establishment of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which has been welcomed by many Syrians.

Last Friday, I met the president and two of the vice-presidents of the national coalition on their first visit to Europe. I sought assurances from them in three

areas. First, I urged them to commit themselves to developing their political structures, widening their support among all sections of Syrian society, and agreeing a detailed political transition plan for Syria. Secondly, I encouraged them to use the next Friends of Syria meeting, which we hope will be held in Morocco next month, to set out a plan for Syria's future in detail. Thirdly, I urged them to show a clear commitment to human rights and international humanitarian law, including the protection of all religious communities and unfettered and safe access for humanitarian agencies. In response, they stressed their determination to build on the Doha agreement and to leave the door open to other opposition groups to join them. They spoke of their intention to win the trust of Syrians from all communities, to be a moderate political force committed to democracy, and not to repeat the abuses of the Assad regime. They told me that their priority was protecting the civilian population against attack, and focusing on achieving a political transition. It would be for the people of Syria, they told me, to approve a future Government.

These are important and encouraging statements by the national coalition. They have much to do to win the full support of the Syrian people and to co-ordinate opposition efforts more effectively, but it is strongly in the interests of Syria, of the wider region, and of the United Kingdom that we support them and deny space to extremist groups. On the basis of the assurances I received and my consultations with European partners yesterday, Her Majesty's Government have decided to recognise the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people. As the president of the national coalition said to me on Friday, recognition imposes responsibilities on the coalition, and we will continue to press them to uphold their commitments.

I can also announce a significant increase in practical support for the Syrian opposition by the United Kingdom. First, we will invite the coalition to appoint a political representative to the UK, and we will offer support to them as they set up their political and humanitarian structures. Secondly, we will provide a £1 million package of communications support, which could, for instance, include mobile internet hubs and satellite phones to improve their ability to communicate inside Syria. Thirdly, we will urgently deploy a stabilisation response team to the region to work with the coalition to develop its plan to meet people's basic needs in opposition-held areas. This team will draw up recommendations for areas for further UK assistance.

Fourthly, and separately, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is looking at increasing our assistance to Syrians affected by the conflict. This could include increasing our humanitarian medical assistance for wounded Syrian civilians by providing UK funding for hospitals and mobile clinics, and training for health workers. We also intend to launch new work to build on our existing work to support victims of sexual violence in Syria.

This new package of support amounts to about £2 million of immediate commitments, and we will look to expand this considerably in the coming months. This comes on top of the training of citizen journalists, human rights advocates, doctors and Syrian activists that we have already provided, and the generators, communications equipment and water purification kits

for unarmed opposition groups and civil society that I announced during the summer. Alongside that increased political and practical support, we are pressing the EU to increase its support to civil society in Syria.

We will continue to increase the pressure on Assad and those who support him through EU sanctions, including seeking accountability through the UN's commission of inquiry. We also expect there to be discussions in NATO in the coming days about supporting the security of Turkey, and we will continue to work with all of Syria's neighbours to help them mitigate the effects of the crisis. We will also step up our support for political transition and our planning for the day after Assad.

Finally, we will continue to support the work of the UN and Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, whom I met a few days ago in Cairo, and we will renew our efforts to persuade Russia and China to work with us at the UN Security Council. I will take every opportunity to urge my Russian and Chinese colleagues to support a political and diplomatic solution to the conflict in Syria. Without such a solution, everything that they and we most fear is coming closer, including ever greater loss of life, instability in neighbouring countries and an opportunity for extremists to pursue their own ends.

The basis for such a political settlement is clear. A credible alternative to the Assad regime is emerging that has the growing support of the Arab League, the European Union, the United States and an increasing number of other countries, and we have an agreed basis for a transition in the form of the Geneva communiqué, which all permanent members of the UN Security Council signed up to in June. In the absence of that political and diplomatic solution, however, we will not rule out any option in accordance with international law that might save innocent lives in Syria and prevent the destabilisation of a region that remains critical to the security of the United Kingdom and the peace of the whole world.

12.47 pm

Mr Douglas Alexander (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for making his statement and for giving me early sight of it today. I shall first address the issue of Syria and the announcement that the Foreign Secretary made in his statement, and I wish to note my recent visit to the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, which has been appropriately registered.

As we have just heard from the Foreign Secretary, only a credible and inclusive transition plan and a united opposition hold the prospect of being a bridge between conflict and a sustainable peace in Syria. Until now, not only the Security Council but the Syrian opposition have been disastrously divided. Over many months, the Russians have continued to ask the west, "So if Assad goes, what comes next?" On 11 November, however, we saw the establishment of the new Syrian national coalition in Doha.

Last week, the Opposition called on the Government to recognise the new Syrian national coalition, so I welcome the Foreign Secretary's announcement today that the British Government have taken the decision to recognise it as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Recognition is a vital step forward, but can

[Mr Douglas Alexander]

he tell us whether he intends to use this new-found unity within the opposition as the basis for a fresh diplomatic approach to the Russians?

The Opposition are clear that the correct focus for the UK's efforts on Syria in the days and months ahead must be helping to unify the Syrian opposition, not helping to arm them, so will the Foreign Secretary give the House a guarantee that the recognition of the Syrian national coalition is not a precursor to arming the Syrian opposition fighters, which he must acknowledge would be against the European arms embargo currently in place?

The emergence of a political process must not distract us from the pressing humanitarian crisis. On my recent visit to the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, I saw for myself the sheer scale of the human suffering that is a devastating consequence of this war in Syria.

As winter approaches, with more than 2.5 million of Syria's 23 million people now displaced and non-governmental organisations warning that 200,000 Syrian refugee children are at serious risk from freezing temperatures, action is needed. I therefore welcome the Foreign Secretary's announcement that the British Government will be increasing British aid, but will he set out what specific steps he and his colleagues in Government will take to encourage others in the international community to increase their support in the face of the growing humanitarian crisis to which he referred? There is still a significant shortfall in the funds for the UN appeal for Syria. Britain must play its part in encouraging others to contribute and make up this inexcusable shortfall.

Let me turn now to the issue of Gaza. In common with those on the Government Benches, we abhor the loss of life that we have seen in recent days. The Foreign Secretary has reiterated today that principal responsibility for the start of the crisis lies with Hamas. Of course the recent rocket attacks into southern Israel, targeted at a civilian population, deserve our categorical condemnation, but does he accept that although the rockets were the proximate cause, the deeper causes of the latest crisis reflect the failure over years and decades to achieve a two-state solution? Every time a military solution is prioritised over a political solution, greater future problems are generated. Indeed, there is and can be no military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Israelis have stressed that their response is justified by the recent escalation of Hamas rocket attacks. No civilian population should have to live in such constant fear, but does the Foreign Secretary recognise that acknowledging—as I do—Israel's right to defend itself does not oblige the British Government to suspend judgment on the wisdom of its chosen actions? As a response to the rocket attacks from Gaza four years ago, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead, in which 13 Israelis and more than 1,400 Palestinians were killed. Operation Cast Lead had the aim of

“destroying the apparatus of terror”,

yet four years on Hamas is still in power in Gaza. More than 1,000 missiles have been launched from Gaza into Israel this year, and in recent days rockets have reached Tel Aviv and the outskirts of Jerusalem. Since Operation Pillar of Defence began on Wednesday, three Israelis

and more than 100 Palestinians, many of them civilians, have been killed. Does the Foreign Secretary therefore accept that the scale of the casualties in Gaza, together with the continuing blockade, fuels hatred and emboldens those seeking to isolate Israel internationally? Does he also accept that the marginalisation of the Palestinian Authority by these events further diminishes the prospects for immediate negotiations—and, indeed, Palestinian unity—and that Hamas will undoubtedly claim itself to be the victor, whatever the outcome of the operation or, indeed, the negotiations currently under way in Cairo?

Does the Foreign Secretary accept that if the operating logic of Hamas is terror and the operating logic of Israel is deterrence, then pleas for restraint risk simply falling on deaf ears? We on the Opposition Benches have for a number of days been urging not simply restraint, but an immediate cessation of violence. We have been clear that a full-scale ground invasion would be a disaster for the peoples of both Gaza and Israel. It would risk escalating the already spiralling death toll and further damage the hope for peace and security. Does the Foreign Secretary accept that, given reports of overflowing wards in Gazan hospitals and the prior degradation of those facilities as a result of the blockade, free and unfettered access, including free passage through crossings, should urgently be guaranteed for medical and humanitarian personnel? Will he also set out what discussions he has had with the Egyptians about humanitarian access and stemming the flow of arms into Gaza—specifically Iranian missile technology—not only in these volatile days of conflict, but in the longer term?

On Saturday, Opposition Members called for a full-scale UN diplomatic initiative to end the violence. We urged the Secretary-General of the United Nations to travel to the region, and we welcome the fact that he has now done so, because sustained international engagement will be vital in helping to bring the conflict to an end. Past military action has failed to bring a durable peace. The fear of the Israeli population today stands alongside the suffering of the Palestinian people. Permanent occupation and blockade is not a strategy for peace; it is a recipe for repeated conflict. Talk of the “middle east peace process” ignores the fact that, sadly, today there is no peace and there is no process. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the long-term security of Israel will depend on its readiness to be as bold in seeking peace as it has been in using military force? At a minimum, that means that Israel must immediately end illegal settlement expansion, which is currently a key barrier to advancing negotiations.

Labour urges the Government to reconsider their stated opposition—repeated again today—and instead support the Palestinians' bid for enhanced status at the United Nations at this month's General Assembly meeting. This is not an alternative to negotiations, but a bridge for beginning them. The Foreign Secretary in his statement argued that recognition at the UN could “risk paralysing the process”, but when will he understand? There is at present no process; there is only paralysis. There is continued illegal settlement building. There are continued rocket attacks. There is continued fear and anxiety. There is continued occupation. There is continued blockade. But there are no meaningful negotiations, and there have not been any for a number of years. The suggestion that enhanced recognition of the Palestinians could

somehow imperil progress in the peace process implies that progress is being achieved—and, indeed, that a peace process exists. At present, sadly, neither statement is true. Let us acknowledge this fact. After decades of diplomatic failure, increasingly some are questioning whether a two-state solution is any longer possible. That is why it is vital that as an international community, amidst the undoubted despair and the disappointment, we encourage the Palestinians to take the path of politics and reject the path of violence, and we rekindle hopes that there is a credible route to a viable Palestinian state and a secure Israel achieved by negotiations. The British Government, among others, have a heavy responsibility to advance that goal at the United Nations in the coming weeks.

Mr Hague: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. Although there is one difference between us, on the UN General Assembly, I welcome his support and the fact that there is so much accord across the House on so many of these subjects and—taking them in the order he raised them—certainly on the new national coalition of the Syrian opposition. As he said, he has called for their recognition. Before the Government gave that recognition, I very much wanted to look into their eyes and ask the questions that I set out earlier, but I have given that recognition, and it is right to do so. All of us across the House have referred for a long time—as the right hon. Gentleman did in his questions—to the need for a unified opposition and the absence of that in the past as one of the obstacles to peace in Syria. Now that the Syrian opposition have done their utmost and made so many compromises to form a national coalition, it is right that we get behind them and that as much as possible of the world gets behind them. It is right for us to join in that, and we now look to the Syrian opposition to fulfil the commitments they have made.

We have taken no decision consequent on that—or no decision at all as things stand—to change our policy on the EU arms embargo. We look at all options, as I have repeated today. We rule out no options. It is the job of the National Security Council to look at all options, particularly as the crisis worsens. At the moment it is going in the wrong direction, but we have taken no decision as things stand to change the policy. We are certainly putting other nations under a lot of pressure—there is a lot of persuasion—to increase the aid they are giving to address the huge humanitarian suffering that I and the right hon. Gentleman have seen on the borders of Syria. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development convened a meeting of many nations on this issue at the UN General Assembly. Since then some of them have increased their aid. Last week I attended the meeting of EU and Arab League Foreign Ministers in Cairo, and that was one of the main points I made to them—that increased contributions, particularly from the Arab world, will be necessary as winter comes and the number of refugees continues to increase—so I think I can readily agree with everything the right hon. Gentleman said on that subject.

Of course we will now—again, as the right hon. Gentleman suggested—use the fact that the opposition have come together in an unprecedented way to renew our diplomatic efforts with Russia. If one of Russia's objections is—and it always has been—that there is no single interlocutor on the opposition side, that objection at least has now been removed to the possibility of

diplomatic progress. I stress that it remains the case that the only real solution in Syria is a diplomatic and political solution. Neither side has anywhere near the military strength to overthrow or remove the other. Even if they did so, they would then be dealing with a deeply fractured society for generations.

There is a lot of agreement on many aspects of the middle east peace process. Whenever a conflict such as this one in Gaza occurs, it is vital to remember the wider picture. At the root of all this is the failure to make progress on the middle east peace process. It is absolutely right to point to the sharp increase in rocket attacks—they have gone up steadily over the years since Operation Cast Lead—as producing the current crisis, but it is also quite right to make clear the need for improved access in and out of Gaza in order to allow humanitarian assistance and trade to proceed. It is a mistake by Israel to have such tight restrictions on Gaza; we have often made that clear.

The one point of difference between the right hon. Gentleman and me has been over the tactics of the UN General Assembly, and I want to explain the reason for the Government's position. Time is running out for the two-state solution. Owing to unacceptable settlement building on the west bank and in east Jerusalem, we are not far from a two-state solution becoming impossible and unviable. With the Israeli election coming to an end in January, with the US election now over, and with time clearly running out, this coming year will be a critical one. People always say, "This will be a critical year," but this really is one. If progress towards a two-state solution is not made in the coming year, it will, in all probability, not be made.

The message that we have given to the United States is that it is vital that they and we and the major EU countries put our full weight behind this over the coming months. However, we have to ask whether a motion on observer status being carried at the UN General Assembly now would make that easier or more difficult. There is a perfectly respectable and legitimate case for saying that it would be right to pass such a motion because this has gone on for so long and because Palestinian frustrations are so intense, for understandable reasons. I believe, however, that the balance of judgment comes down on the side of saying that to do so would be more likely to retard efforts to restart the peace process than to advance them—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members will make different judgments about that. We will see, over time, what the reality is.

If such a motion is carried, we must of course move heaven and earth to prevent it from retarding the peace process and the attempt to restart negotiations. Our message to the United States would be the same. As things stand, however, because of the possible reaction of the US Congress and the possibility of Israel withholding tax revenues, the position of the Palestinian Authority could be made worse by the passage of such a resolution. We will therefore use our vote on this in whatever way we think will keep open the best prospect of negotiations. We will consult closely with our partners in the European Union about this, as I was doing yesterday. I hope that there will be a large measure of European agreement on how to vote on the resolution.

That is the reason for our position on the matter, and it has the best interests of the Palestinians and the creation of a Palestinian state at heart. In international

[*Mr Hague*]

diplomacy, when our heart and our head pull in different directions, we have to give precedence to the considerations of our head, and the best way to pursue the peace process is to put our full weight behind it in the coming months.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Inevitably, I have granted some latitude to the two Front Benches to enable them to treat of all the various matters involved. In trying to accommodate this level of interest, given other pressures on time, it would help if right hon. and hon. Members could confine themselves to a single short question, rather than covering all the terrain. Such questions will, I know, be followed by a typically succinct reply from the Foreign Secretary.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): In view of the increasing gravity of the situation in the middle east, will my right hon. Friend ask the Leader of the House and Mr Speaker whether they will arrange a full-scale parliamentary debate on the middle east in prime time next week, with time limits on Back-Bench speeches of not less than 15 minutes, so that we can have a proper Back-Bench debate and not a series of soundbites?

Mr Hague: I think that that is a question for my colleagues, and my right hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House has heard that request. I must say, however, that it would be a tragedy if the comments of my right hon. Friend the Father of the House were limited to 15 minutes.

Mr Jack Straw (Blackburn) (Lab): Given that the experience of the past decade or more is that Israel pockets any concession made by the west to accommodate its position and then not only does nothing but makes the situation worse—by illegal settlement building, for example—will the Foreign Secretary please reconsider his position on the British Government's refusal to vote for the United Nations General Assembly resolution? He is a man of great fluency, and he normally convinces the House with his arguments, but I find his reason for that refusal utterly incomprehensible. It is not that I disagree with it; I simply do not understand why our voting for the resolution would make the situation worse. Surely it would make it much better.

Mr Hague: I always listen carefully to the right hon. Gentleman, for obvious reasons. For the sake of clarity, I should say that the Government have taken no decision yet on how to vote on the resolution. We are arguing against the holding of such a vote, which would be carried in the UN General Assembly, because of the number of nations in favour of it. As I mentioned earlier, we will consult closely with our EU partners on this matter. There was a time when the right hon. Gentleman used to place great weight on the views of European Union Foreign Ministers, and after yesterday's discussions, I believe that most of them have the same view as ours. That is the majority view for a reason: there is genuine anxiety about whether it would be possible, in the remaining short window, to restart the

middle east peace process negotiations if the motion were carried now. It is therefore a tactical difference. There is a respectable difference of opinion on the matter, but I come down on that side of the judgment.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the emergence of the Syrian national coalition, and this Government's welcome recognition of it today, removes a major barrier to the supply of defensive military equipment to the Syrian resistance? As the European embargo is due to expire on 1 December, and as President Hollande of France has said that France is now willing to reconsider the supply of defensive military equipment, will the Foreign Secretary look at this matter constructively? Does he recognise that what he rightly described as the barbaric violence of the Syrian regime against the civilian communities will not come to an end unless and until the Syrian resistance is able to defend itself?

Mr Hague: My right hon. and learned Friend has consistently made the case for the active arming of the Syrian opposition by western countries. In response, I have often pointed out some of the disadvantages of that course of action. There is no automatic change in our policy on that as a result of the recognition of the Syrian opposition. I have discussed the issues with the French Foreign Minister. The arms embargo is due to be rolled over and continued from 1 December, as part of the entire package of Syrian sanctions. Whatever one's views on the arms embargo, we very much want to maintain all those sanctions, so any changes would rely on a subsequent amendment to the overall sanctions package. There has been no request from France to the EU to change that position at this stage. We will keep all the options under review, but we have made no decision to change our policy on arms supplies, as things stand.

Mr Peter Hain (Neath) (Lab): But surely the Foreign Secretary must accept that his specific and chilling refusal to rule out western, British-backed military activity in Syria will make a disastrous policy even more disastrous. Nobody can win this civil war. Assad's savage regime has the backing of at least a third of the population, including Christians and other minorities. The conflict is also a proxy for Sunni versus Shi'a, for Saudi Arabia versus Iran and for the west versus Russia and China. We have to resolve this by political settlement, not by upping the military stakes.

Mr Hague: I think I made the point a few moments ago that there can only be a political and diplomatic solution. It is also important to point out that no one knows exactly how events in Syria will proceed in the coming months and years. Situations such as the one that arose in Libya last year and the present one in Syria are uncharted territory in international affairs. It is foolish to rule out options when we do not know how the situation will proceed. However, it is right to place huge emphasis on diplomatic and political progress and on humanitarian assistance, as I have done in my statement.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD): Israel has an unambiguous right to defend itself, but along with such rights go duties, and in this case the duty is to use only proportionate means to effect that defence. Does my right hon. Friend believe that targeted

assassination, the destruction of civilian infrastructure and the imposition of casualties on women and children is consistent with that duty?

Mr Hague: Of course all our efforts have to be directed to making sure there is a ceasefire, and only at a subsequent stage could one make the judgment that my right hon. and learned Friend is inviting me to make. I have not shied away from it in the past, as he knows; in fact, during the Lebanon war when we were in opposition, I was very clear about the disproportionality of what happened. In this case, we have to ask ourselves whether the current conflict in Gaza would be taking place without the increase in rocket attacks, which have gone up from 200 in 2010 to more than 1,300 before this conflict began and up to last week. That is clearly an intolerable situation in the south of Israel, so we have to bear that in mind as well.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Does the fact that Hamas is committed to the destruction of the state of Israel, that in 2005 Israel removed all its 9,000 settlers and soldiers from Gaza and that that was followed by Hamas firing thousands of rockets from civilian centres in Gaza targeted at Israeli citizens mean that Israel deserves full support in defending its citizens against this aggression?

Mr Hague: We are rightly critical of Israel when there are civilian casualties, but we have to bear in mind that for Hamas and other groups firing rockets out of Gaza, the sole intention is to cause civilian casualties; that is the entire purpose of what they do. We are right to stress the responsibilities on Israel and the need to stop settlement building and restart the peace process, but also the responsibility on Hamas to renounce violence, to recognise previous agreements and to recognise the right of Israel to exist. Such things would also be immense steps forward in the peace process in the middle east.

Richard Ottaway (Croydon South) (Con): Over the weekend, Israel was widely condemned for a military strike on an international media centre in Gaza in breach of the Geneva convention. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that it was in fact a base for Islamic Jihad and that the only person who lost their life was its military commander?

Mr Hague: I have heard that, but I hesitate to confirm the actual fact definitively. Certainly the Israelis explained that, rather than targeting a media centre, they were targeting a different organisation. We have also been in touch with the media organisations concerned. I very much take my hon. Friend's point.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Is it not interesting that when Assad lethally represses the Syrian people, he is the bad guy, yet when Netanyahu lethally represses the Palestinian people, he is the good guy—*[Interruption.]* I mean the good guy—I wish it was goodbye! Also, when the Syrians respond with brutal force to that repression, they are the good guys, yet when Palestinians respond with brutal force to that repression, they are the bad guys. It is this kind of discriminatory attitude by the international community that will prevent there being peace in the middle east.

Mr Hague: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I always have a great deal of time and respect for him, although I think that in that question he tends towards a caricature of the situation in the middle east. I do not think that is the attitude of anybody in this House; there are responsibilities on all sides. Our response—the response of the western world—is, yes, to give assistance to the Syrian people, but it is also to give a huge amount of assistance to Palestinians. DFID's current programme provides £359 million for the Palestinian Authority and for humanitarian assistance, including in Gaza. We are trying to assist everyone in desperate need in the middle east—Palestinians and Syrians.

Mr James Arbuthnot (North East Hampshire) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my interests as declared in the register. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a world of difference between Hamas, which specifically targets Israeli children, and Israel, which does its best to avoid killing Palestinian children, although both sometimes fail?

Mr Hague: Yes. As I pointed out a moment ago, it is important to remember that the rockets launched against Israel have no other purpose than to cause civilian casualties. That is the only reason they are fired. It is important to bear that in mind. Of course Israel's Iron Dome system means that it is able to stop a large part of them, and some rockets are inaccurate in any case, but that is little consolation to the people who have to be within 30 seconds of a shelter in southern Israel. My right hon. Friend thus points out an important difference.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is not it the lesson of the last decade that meaningful progress towards a two-state solution is made only when American Presidents in their second term use that freedom to make the huge effort that the right hon. Gentleman says is required. What, then, are he and the Prime Minister doing to persuade Barack Obama that he needs to make such an effort?

Mr Hague: The right hon. Gentleman is broadly right. We have already had that discussion with President Obama earlier in the year, and I have discussed the issue many times with Secretary Clinton and, just a few days ago, with Senator Kerry, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The United States must now make its decision. As the re-elected Administration, albeit with many new personnel, is established, they must now take their decisions. Throughout that, the US will hear very clearly from us at every level that this provides an opportunity—perhaps the last opportunity—to push this forward. If that does not happen within a year from now, the US would probably find the votes of many European nations being very different, the process being very different and American leadership of that process being in considerable doubt.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): In his statement, my right hon. Friend said that the security of Israel and the security of the region have a direct impact on UK national security and the peace of the whole world. Given that the current diplomatic efforts, and indeed efforts over the last few years, have failed, would he

[Mark Pritchard]

consider a new possible solution: an EU security treaty with Israel in return for substantive and meaningful negotiations over land?

Mr Hague: There is an important role for the European Union and its nations, but for the moment or for the coming months, we must not take our eyes away from the goal of a negotiated two-state solution with the United States playing a leading role. The US still has a unique degree of leverage over all concerned and a particular influence on Israel, so it is important for the Americans to be able to lead such efforts. The EU should act in a way that buttresses and supports those efforts—unless they are not made or come to an end.

Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary has rightly drawn attention to the impact on children. The 13,000 rockets fired into Israel since 2001 have led to many children and young people suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, while the children in Gaza must fear the terror from the Israeli action and also from Hamas. I urge the Foreign Secretary to redouble his efforts to call for peace, because of the impact of these events on these children's future, which will be lifelong.

Mr Hague: Yes, the hon. Lady makes a very important point. That is why we support the current efforts to bring in a ceasefire. I pay tribute again—I referred to it in my statement—to the efforts of the Egyptian Government over the last few days. This is a new Government with a new presidency and a new system of government. Our impression is that the presidency, the Foreign Ministry and other Egyptian agencies have worked together cohesively, talking both to Hamas and Israel to try to bring about a ceasefire. We have to support their efforts.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the greatest stride towards peace was made when President Sadat signed the treaty between Egypt and Israel? Does he share my disappointment at the recent statement by President Morsi of Egypt that the present situation constitutes an act of aggression solely by the Israelis?

Mr Hague: While that statement is different from what my hon. Friend or I might say about the origins of this, I hope that he will bear in mind the answer that I gave to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Meg Munn) about the very constructive role being played by Egypt. My experience, and the Prime Minister's experience, of meeting President Morsi suggested to us that he wants a peaceful future for his country, that he has not turned against the peace treaty with Israel, and that he knows the importance of building up the economy and society of Egypt and not having conflict on his borders. I think that we should give him the space and time in which to accomplish those things.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): No one is trying to justify rocket firing into Israel, but does the Foreign Secretary recognise that Israeli air strikes have caused so many civilian casualties in Gaza that the killing of children—the burning to death of children—should be considered a war crime? As for the overall position, is not the truth of the matter that since the

state of Israel was created in 1948, and even more since the 1967 war, the Israeli authorities have refused to recognise the legitimate entitlement of the Palestinian people to statehood, dignity and a proper life? That is the real issue that faces the international community now.

Mr Hague: There have been failings on all sides. I do not want to agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman has said. On other occasions, he has heard me criticise both the Israeli and the Palestinian leaderships from the Dispatch Box for their failure to make progress in the peace process. Many opportunities have been missed by both sides, but it is our job in the international community to try to bring them closer together and to ask for de-escalation rather than inflaming these situations. I will not, therefore, take up his invitation to go down a more dramatic rhetorical path.

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): Given that it is firing missiles on civilians while hiding behind civilians, is it not Hamas that is guilty of war crimes?

Mr Hague: All these terms and accusations are flung around in the world and across the House, and the extreme feelings engendered by these situations are completely understandable. Indeed, we have referred several times to the targeting of civilians by Hamas, and to the way in which they have sometimes shielded themselves behind civilians. I stress, however, that our job now is to de-escalate and use the language of de-escalation, and to encourage that to happen over the coming hours.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): It is welcome that the British Government followed France in recognising the Syrian national coalition, but merely saying that it is the sole legitimate representative does not make it so. What action is being taken to deal with the problem that has already arisen in Aleppo, where groups have rejected the coalition's leadership, and to secure international recognition for it as well as its effectiveness in Syria?

Mr Hague: I think that there will be further international recognition for the coalition—I think that, for example, other EU countries will recognise it, in stages—and that growing international recognition will in turn lead to an increase in practical support. I have announced several areas in which we would increase our own practical support and channel it through the coalition, and if other countries do the same, that will steadily add to their credibility inside and outside Syria. Obviously we cannot control or dictate the reactions of all groups in Syria, but from all that we understand, the coalition has received a warm welcome from many people there. I do not think that we shall see a better attempt to create an umbrella opposition group, and I think that we should therefore get behind this one.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Egypt surely has a key role to play, given its proximity to Gaza and its Government's proximity to Hamas. Will the Foreign Secretary therefore continue to encourage it to broker a genuine ceasefire, and, together with others in the region, to enforce both the ceasing of fire and, crucially, the ceasing of the supply of weapons to terrorists?

Mr Hague: Yes, we are fully engaged in that process. I have spoken to my Egyptian counterpart twice during the last few days, and the Prime Minister spoke to President Morsi at the weekend. We are strongly encouraging Egypt in that regard. However, it has more than a responsibility to try to bring about a ceasefire. In a diplomatic context, in the aftermath of the tragic sequence of events over the last week, there is an opportunity to work with Israel to deal with security challenges as well as improving the overall situation in Gaza, and I hope that Egypt will move on to that.

Dr William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): Will the Foreign Secretary encourage fairer and more balanced reporting of the middle east conflict, rather than the anti-Israel bias that seems to be featuring in the news? Will he do all that he can to ensure that Hamas stops hiding behind the civilian population, deliberately putting them in the line of fire and in danger of death, and using that as political propaganda?

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman has illustrated well the fact that serious accusations can be made on all sides. Hamas certainly seems, as so often, to have had little regard for civilian life. As for the question of balanced reporting, it is not in my remit or in the power of Her Majesty's Government, but it is very much to be encouraged.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that Israel's legitimate right to self-defence does not extend to a pre-emptive attack on Iran?

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend has introduced a different subject, and one on which he has often given his views to the House. He knows from my earlier answers that we have counselled Israel against a military attack on Iran in circumstances in which we are pursuing a twin-track policy of intensified sanctions and negotiations with Iran, and that remains the position.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that unless the blockade of Gaza is ended, there will be little chance of a permanent end to the violence?

Mr Hague: More open access into and out of Gaza is an important part of the solution there. That includes access for more normal items of trade as well as people. I made that point briefly in my statement, but I am happy to reiterate it.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Since the Israeli withdrawal in 2005, nearly 7,000 missiles have been fired on Israeli towns by Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In this year alone, 47,000 tonnes of food and provisions and 300 trucks went from Israel into Gaza. Does my right hon. Friend think that Israel's response in taking out missile silos in Gaza is proportionate?

Mr Hague: I will not expand on the answer that I gave to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) and become involved in defining different degrees of proportionality. I have, I think, laid out clearly the responsibility for precipitating the current crisis—the exchange of fire

with Hamas that has taken place over the last five days—and I do not want to enter into any finer judgments than that. We would now like an agreed ceasefire between both sides.

Mr Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman gave us an up-to-date account of the involvement of our Department for International Development, along with NGOs, in the relief effort in Syria. Can he give us a similar update on their contribution—it must be a dreadful situation—in the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel?

Mr Hague: Yes, if the right hon. Gentleman would like me to. DFID's Palestinian programme is contributing £359 million to—among other things—provide primary education for more than 36,000 children, immunise 2,000 children a year against measles, train and equip the Palestinian police so that they can provide a more professional service, provide basic services for refugees across the region, and help to develop the private sector in order to stimulate the economy. Until 2015, £106 million of that funding is going specifically to UNRWA and one third of that to Gaza.

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): Will the Foreign Secretary congratulate President Morsi of Egypt on his moderating role in this crisis and heed his advice to vote yes to the recognition of Palestinian statehood at the United Nations, thereby demonstrating some small progress for those Palestinians who are promoting the path of diplomacy, not violence?

Mr Hague: This is the debate that we entered into earlier, and I have had that discussion with my Egyptian counterpart a couple of times already, understandably. There are wholly legitimate points of view about that. My judgment is that it is important to do whatever is necessary to support a return to negotiations, and that a vote now in the General Assembly does not support that. That is the Government's considered view. We will continue to discuss with our European partners how we should respond to any actual vote.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Can the Foreign Secretary have a word with the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who is apparently in Ramallah today, and who visited southern Israel yesterday? Will he suggest to the Under-Secretary that he should go on to visit Gaza, and talk to the people of Gaza and their elected representatives and examine for himself the destruction Israeli war planes have wrought on the people of Gaza? That would be a way of promoting the unity of all the Palestinian people, which is what the Foreign Secretary says he wants. This opportunity should not be missed or wasted.

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is very busy in the region today. I am not going to comment on his programme for security reasons, but he has not only visited southern Israel, and he is in the west bank today. He has now had his meeting with President Abbas. I am not going to speculate about where my hon. Friend will go next, but of course we will want to understand the humanitarian needs in Gaza and the

[*Mr Hague*]

extent of the damage that has been caused, as well as alleviate that problem for people in Gaza and in southern Israel.

Jessica Lee (Erewash) (Con): First, I declare an interest: I have just returned from a trip to Israel and the west bank. Israel has made genuine efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to Gaza, to maintain the fabric of civilian life there, and that has been done despite the current hostilities and increased number of rocket attacks. What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with his Israeli counterpart as to the importance of this humanitarian support?

Mr Hague: My Israeli counterpart frequently makes that point, and it is true that Israel sends that humanitarian support. Nevertheless, I think there are additional steps that it is important for Israel to take. We have been talking about some of them, including freer access for others into and out of Gaza. That must be part of any longer-term solution for Gaza.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): What conversations has the Foreign Secretary had with colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Home Office to ensure that relations between different British communities are not adversely affected by the violence in the middle east?

Mr Hague: Since one of our Ministers of State, Baroness Warsi, has a DCLG hat as well, we are in constant—hourly—discussion about such matters. They are important, of course, but it is also important to pursue the right foreign policy for the United Kingdom bearing in mind the whole interests of the UK, and that is how I regard these subjects as Foreign Secretary.

Mr James Clappison (Hertsmere) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the aim of our diplomacy is not only to reduce these rocket attacks but to bring them to an end? Surely, we in this country would not have put up with hundreds of long-range missiles being fired into our centres of population? If some of those rockets had landed in Fife, even the right hon. and learned Member for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) might have had something to say about that.

Mr Hague: I am sure he would, although he is no longer in the Chamber and I will not put words into his mouth. My hon. Friend makes a wholly legitimate point, but at the same time we must, of course, recognise that it is important to bring the entire conflict to an end, of which the violence in the last week is another tragic symptom. It is important for Israel to address itself to doing that, as well as to the immediate security of its population.

Mr Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Palestinian victims of Israeli atrocities are so many that they often go unnamed. I would like to name the four youngest members of the El Dallo family: Sara, 7; Jamal, 6; Yusef, 4; and Ibrahim, 2. They were four of nine family members and of 26 children killed in Israeli air strikes in the last week. Does the Secretary of State accept that hundreds more Palestinian children will die, as they did

four years ago, if he and other western leaders do not put more pressure on Israel not to launch a ground assault?

Mr Hague: I think I have made very clear what we believe about a ground assault, and in my statement I briefly gave several reasons why that would lose Israel a great deal of international support. The Israelis are very clear about the message they are receiving from the United Kingdom on that. The best thing we can do to avoid more names being added to that list is to support those trying to bring about an agreed ceasefire, but that has to be a ceasefire on both sides, of course, and it has to include an end to rocket fire against Israel as well as an end to Israeli military operations.

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it easy to call for Israel to show restraint from the safety of this Chamber, but showing such restraint is difficult for those living with the daily threat of seeing their family and friends wiped out by the rockets fired from Gaza?

Mr Hague: That is true, of course. We heard earlier about the need for balanced media reporting. Some of the recent media reporting has brought out what a terrifying experience the current situation is for people in southern Israel as well as for people in Gaza. It is important to understand that, and to direct ourselves to bringing this situation to an end.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the Foreign Secretary recognise that his repeated claim that Hamas bears principal responsibility for the current crisis is gravely misleading, as it completely ignores the five-year blockade Israel has put on Gaza, which the UN has called a policy of collective punishment? It is illegal under international law. What more will he do to put pressure on Israel to lift the blockade?

Mr Hague: I have already addressed the need to do that. I hope the hon. Lady heard that, but I also hope she is clear that if there had not been rocket fire—and an increase in rocket fire—in recent days and weeks, we would not now be debating this situation or the deaths of so many people on either side, so I think she should think again about who is misleading people about that.

Mr Speaker: I took the use of the word “misleading” by the hon. Lady a moment ago to be a reference to inadvertent misleading. I am sure she would not suggest the Foreign Secretary would seek knowingly to mislead the House. We do not entertain such thoughts in this Chamber.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend have any information on the supply of sophisticated weaponry to Hamas from the Iranian regime?

Mr Hague: I do not have any information I can give the House of Commons on that, but I do believe Iran is involved in sending weapons to Hamas, as I mentioned on the television a couple of days ago. That contributes further to this type of crisis, of course, instead of turning people’s minds to a negotiated settlement and a peaceful way forward, and Iran should desist from that.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary will no doubt be aware of the understandable concerns of many about the nature of Israel's response to the rocket attacks, but may I press him to say something more about an issue that many of my constituents are concerned about, and to which the shadow Foreign Secretary alluded: the growing crisis in the Gaza hospitals, and whether they are able to cope with the number of casualties they are seeing?

Mr Hague: Those hospitals, particularly UNRWA health centres and food distribution centres, benefit from the support of some of the DFID money I was talking about earlier, and which has been established for several years. My information is that at the moment the majority of those health centres and food distribution centres are managing to operate, and valiant attempts are made to continue that, of course. We will watch what is happening very closely, however. We are in touch with the situation, and I know my DFID colleagues are following it very closely as well.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I recently visited Sderot and Ashdod as part of a pioneering cricket tour to Israel, the purpose of which was to bring together Israeli and Palestinian children in the pursuit of peace, but I also saw at first hand the anxiety felt by citizens in southern Israel about the persistent threat from Hamas rockets. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that any sovereign country would feel a duty to protect its own citizens from such a threat?

Mr Hague: Yes, of course that is right. I read about the cricket tour, and I applaud that initiative. If cricket can be brought to Israel, peace can be brought to the middle east. It gives us hope for the future. Any nation will wish to protect its own citizens against attack, of course, but at the same time any nation must try to ensure that there is long-term security and peace, so it is very important that Israel does that, as I mentioned a few moments ago.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): In equally condemning terrorising violence against civilians, whether they are in southern Israel or in Gaza, we cannot all subscribe to the hierarchy of blame offered by the Foreign Secretary for the immediate crisis. On the UN resolution, which is a modest proposal from Palestine, does the Secretary of State not believe that if time is running out for a two-state solution, it is time that the international community took the chance to create more of a semblance of a two-state process?

Mr Hague: As I explained earlier, that is a completely acceptable argument. The frustrations are intense and there has been completely inadequate progress in recent years. We have to judge what is the best hope for that now, and I do not believe that a debate and vote on a resolution at the General Assembly will improve matters. If it happens, we will do everything we can to try to make it improve matters but it will make things more difficult for the US Administration and possibly for the Israeli Government, whatever their intentions, to engage in the peace process over the coming months. That is why at this moment—not for ever—I counsel against it.

Sarah Teather (Brent Central) (LD): I visited Gaza in early 2009 with other Members of the House in the weeks following Operation Cast Lead. The evidence of destruction and misery that I saw there was almost indescribable. May I urge the Foreign Secretary not just to warn Israel against a ground invasion but to condemn those plans in the strongest possible terms?

Mr Hague: Following the conversations we have had with Israel at many levels and following what I and many other Foreign Ministers and Heads of Government in other western countries have said, Israel is in no doubt about the opinion in the western world. At the same time, our greatest effort is supporting the efforts to bring about a ceasefire so that any such plans for a ground invasion become academic.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree with me that there will be no solution to this appalling and tragic situation if any side feels that it can act with impunity? In particular, where Israel's recent actions are found to have breached international law and fallen far, far short of the UN convention on the rights of the child, to which it is a signatory, what will he do to ensure that it is held accountable?

Mr Hague: We must bear in mind at all times the need to try to bring about a settlement in the whole region. The hon. Lady is right to refer to this, as it is important to abide by international humanitarian law. That is one of the specific points I have made to the Israeli Foreign Minister in my conversations with him over the past few days. Of course, we will have to judge what happens after that and after any breaches of humanitarian law when we have the evidence of those things. It is also very important for other organisations, including Hamas and militant groups, even to begin to think about international humanitarian law, something of which they have taken no notice so far.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): What assessment has the Foreign Secretary made of the involvement of Egypt in supplying weapons to Hamas and other terrorist organisations?

Mr Hague: I reiterate what I said earlier: I think Egypt is playing a very constructive role and is wholeheartedly behind efforts to bring about a ceasefire. I pay tribute to the Egyptian Government for that and do not want to say anything that cuts across it.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow Central) (Lab): Surely the Foreign Secretary sees the double standards in his statements. The only way that the UK will be seen as an honest peacemaker in the middle east will be if we treat every life as equal, irrespective of religion or nationality—every British or American life as equal to every Iraqi life and every Israeli life as equal to every Palestinian life. Although I condemn the rocket attacks into southern Israel, surely the principal reason behind this ongoing conflict is an ongoing illegal occupation and an ongoing siege and blockade in Gaza. Twice the Foreign Secretary has been asked what the humanitarian response is from the UK Government and twice he has told us about the ongoing support that we give on an annual basis. What support have the Government given in this specific week to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza?

Mr Hague: I very much agree that all lives are of equal value to us in our society and in this Parliament. That is absolutely right. Of course, we stress, as I did in my statement, the importance of more open access to Gaza and of stopping illegal settlements. The hon. Gentleman asked for a balanced approach, or for no imbalance, and it is right to call for those things. If we are doing those things, it is also right to assign blame or responsibility when it belongs elsewhere and not to give a totally one-sided picture the other way. On the humanitarian side, the help goes in every week but my colleagues in the Department for International Development have a budget of several hundred million pounds going in to help Palestinians. If the evidence is there for them to change or adjust that budget, they will look into that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I would like to accommodate several more colleagues, but I shall have a better chance of doing so if hon. and right hon. Members would now confine themselves to single short supplementary questions without preamble, and we will have comparably succinct replies, as ever, from the Secretary of State.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): According to article 51 of the United Nations charter, Israel's actions are in self-defence. May I therefore urge the Foreign Secretary and this Government to provide support to Israel in her sovereign right to defend her people?

Mr Hague: Some are not happy about it, but I have been clear about where the principal responsibility for this sequence of events lies. We also must be clear about the need to make progress more generally in the peace process and on Gaza. I am sure that that is the right position for us to uphold.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What help have or can the British Government, either alone or in tandem with the United States Administration, give to Israel to ensure that the iron dome defence system that gives security to sections of Israel can be delivered for vulnerable parts of Israel that are not at present protected by a defence system?

Mr Hague: Israel, as I understand it, receives a good deal of help from the United States on its iron dome system, and it is American technology that has made that possible. The United Kingdom is not involved in that and I do not see any need for the UK to become involved. Israel and the United States have worked on it successfully together.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is now clear that far from it being homemade rockets that are being sent from Gaza, these are serious missiles supplied by Iran. What action is my right hon. Friend taking internationally to stop the resupply from Iran or anyone else to Gaza so that Israel can feel less threatened?

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend is right and it is clear, particularly in the case of longer range rockets, that they are coming from elsewhere. I mentioned earlier the involvement of Iran and of course we encourage all countries that might be transit routes for such weapons—whether they are Iranian weapons going into Syria,

Gaza or Lebanon—to live up to their international responsibilities and stop the transfer of such weapons. We will intensify those efforts.

Sandra Osborne (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary accept that in seeking to discourage a vote on observer status at the UN, he is undermining those Palestinians who seek a peaceful solution and bolstering Hamas and other extremists?

Mr Hague: What I am calling for in conjunction with that is a major effort by the United States and European countries to drive forward the peace process. That very much has at its heart strengthening Palestinian moderates and saying to Israel that this is a Palestinian leadership with which it can do business in our judgment. Although there is a legitimate difference of view and argument about tactics, I believe that that is the right way to go about it.

Paul Uppal (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): I refer to my interest in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have just spent a week in Israel and I came back and spoke to Israelis and Palestinians alike. Despite prejudices in this House, I can assure hon. Members that everybody to whom I spoke has an absolute thirst for peace, but one of the greatest obstacles to peace is the Israeli dilemma of how to trade off intangibles for tangibles. Israel will happily give up land, but how can it have guaranteed security and peace?

Mr Hague: Of course, this is one of the challenges and the widespread perception in Israel. However much they might want peace, some Israelis argue that peace is not available. That is the importance of giving the support we give to the Palestinian Authority and of trying to ensure that progress is made in the coming months. As I was arguing a moment ago, there might not be a better Palestinian leadership for Israel to come to a peace agreement with than the current one.

Cathy Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab/Co-op): Under normal circumstances the hospitals and medical facilities in Gaza operate without essential supplies, and that has been exacerbated in the past week. What efforts have the UK Government made to ensure that essential medical equipment and supplies reach Gaza urgently?

Mr Hague: Earlier I gave the information that I have about the operation of health centres as well as food distribution centres. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has just left the House, but she heard all the comments that other hon. Members have made. If we think it is necessary for the United Kingdom to do more on that, do not worry—the United Kingdom will certainly do so.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Do not my right hon. Friend's comments about Iran supporting Hamas illustrate starkly the threat to Israel of an emboldened Hamas and Hezbollah if an anti-Semitic Iran becomes a nuclear armed power?

Mr Hague: Yes, absolutely. It is very important to prevent wider proliferation in the middle east and for Iran's nuclear programme to be solely for peaceful

purposes. That is the purpose of the negotiations that we are engaged in, as well as the sanctions that we are applying to Iran. My hon. Friend reinforces the importance of this very well.

Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): In his response to the right hon. and learned Member for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell), the Foreign Secretary declined to say what he felt was proportionate. When an organisation such as Hamas gets international sympathy and support, and unprecedented support in the region, does he not think Israel's approach is a mistake, and if so, is he willing to say so?

Mr Hague: I have made very clear my views about a ground incursion, but I have also said many times that Israel is making a mistake through settlement building, through not easing access into Gaza and through not, so far, making a more decisively advantageous proposition to the Palestinians about a two-state solution than they have made in recent years. So we are very clear about all of that and very clear about mistakes that have been made. Now we have to bring an end to the mistakes and make progress on a two-state solution before it is too late.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): On the Syrian opposition group and recognition, what discussions have been held with the United States to get it to recognise the opposition group? So far the United States has refused to recognise the group.

Mr Hague: The United States has so far used different wording from that which I used today. It has talked about the coalition being a legitimate representative of the Syrian people. It has not yet gone as far as we have, or France, Turkey or the Gulf states. It is for the United States to decide over the coming days or weeks but I believe, as I said, that other countries will add to the recognition that we have given today, and I hope that in due course the United States will be one of them.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab): I would be grateful if the House would note my recent employment with Oxfam. The Foreign Secretary will no doubt be aware that in the Cast Lead operation four years ago, there was significant damage to UN facilities and the operations of other humanitarian agencies in Gaza. What conversations have he and the Secretary of State for International Development had with the head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and other humanitarian agencies in the past week about the continued functioning of their operations?

Mr Hague: May I be the first across the Floor of the House to congratulate the hon. Gentleman on arriving in the House of Commons? I speak as someone who won a by-election for the governing party many years ago, although in my case there were not very many at that time. I welcome him to the House and so quickly speaking in the House. The issue that he identifies is important and other hon. Members have raised it. Ministers at the Department for International Development are in constant touch with UNRWA and with this problem. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who is in

the region now, is forming his own assessment of the situation in Gaza, and I will make sure that those contacts are properly followed up over the coming days.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): The blame game in the middle east can be taken back tens, hundreds, even thousands of years, but it will never bring us closer to peace. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that our focus now must be on an immediate ceasefire and ensuring humanitarian access so that we can end the unacceptable toll in civilian lives on both sides?

Mr Hague: Yes, we do need that, but we need a ceasefire that works, a ceasefire on both sides—that means an end to rocket attacks on Israel, as well as an end to Israeli military operations—and, of course, the proper humanitarian access of which we have all spoken.

Mr Michael McCann (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Lab): The pictures on last night's television of Palestinian children being put in graves is an abomination, but does the Secretary of State concede that the firing of rockets from Gaza means that the lives of innocent Palestinians have been used as pawns on the jihadist and Hamas chessboard, and that the only game in town must be an intensified effort for peace talks?

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman puts it very well and places responsibility quite broadly for those tragic deaths. He is right to do that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): One hundred per cent. of Hamas's rocket arsenal is delivered across the Egyptian-Gaza border. Over the past year Egypt has lost control over a lot of the increasingly lawless Sinai. Is there any realistic prospect at all of Egypt securing its border with the Gaza strip?

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend draws attention to a very important issue. When I met President Mursi a couple of months ago for the first time, we discussed security in the Sinai. It is crucial for Egypt to ensure that there is such security, and I believe that this situation and other incidents that have happened over recent weeks demonstrate clearly the need for that. Now it is extremely important for Egypt to attend to that, as well as to bring about the ceasefire for which we are calling.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Yesterday, 38 aid agencies asked for the help of the international community to put pressure on to get the crossings into Gaza open so that essential humanitarian supplies—clean water, food and medical supplies—could get through. I acknowledge that the Foreign Secretary has acknowledged the role of the blockade in this conflict, but notwithstanding the responsibilities on both sides for the recent escalation, does he believe that the actions of Israel have had a disproportionate impact on civilians?

Mr Hague: The hon. Lady invites me to get into the proportionate/disproportionate debate, which I am not going to take any further, but she makes a very important point about humanitarian access and what aid agencies have called for. The Government will pursue that in our contacts with Egypt and with Israel, and my colleagues

[*Mr Hague*]

in the Department for International Development will look particularly at whether further British assistance is required.

Angela Watkinson (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Given the volume of rockets that have been fired from Gaza on to civilian targets in Israel over a very long period indeed, and given the cost of intercept missiles, does the Foreign Secretary agree that maintaining a purely defensive strategy in Israel is neither effective nor economically sustainable?

Mr Hague: Clearly, such a strategy has not succeeded in reducing the number of rocket attacks. That has gone up over a long time, although it has protected many Israelis from the consequences of those rocket attacks. As we have said before and as I said in my statement, there is no military solution to the problem. There is only a political solution, and that is for the Israeli leaders, the Egyptian leaders and Palestinian leaders to concentrate on very hard over the coming weeks and for us to support them in doing so.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary earlier mentioned the fact that the window of opportunity was closing for a two-state deal. Is that because Israel will not lift the sanctions on the Palestinians and it would be impossible for Israel to dismantle the settlements?

Mr Hague: Certainly, the more settlements are constructed, yes, the harder it becomes for anyone to envisage a two-state solution working. That is the heart of the argument, particularly the expansion of settlements in east Jerusalem, which of course makes it harder for Jerusalem to be the shared capital of both states, as all of us envisage, in an eventual settlement of this issue. So yes, we are on the same lines.

Sir Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): As the international community has failed the Palestinian people for the past 64 years, perhaps a new approach is required. Will the Foreign Secretary therefore contact the Jewish Voice for Peace based in Oakland, California? Perhaps its programme could be a catalyst for a peaceful future for Israel and Palestine.

Mr Hague: I will have a look at that. I have a lot of people to contact but if the hon. Gentleman gives me the details—he is looking rather mischievous about this, so I am not quite sure what is entailed—I will, as always, give due care and attention to his ideas.

Mr William Bain (Glasgow North East) (Lab): What discussions has the Foreign Secretary held with Secretary Clinton over Egypt's role in brokering a comprehensive ceasefire agreement? Might such an agreement deal with issues such as border crossings and trade between Gaza and Egypt, which would help reduce Gaza's economic dependence upon Israel?

Mr Hague: Yes, we are in close touch with the United States. I have regular discussions with Secretary Clinton and we are to have another very shortly. The wider solution for Gaza, not just an immediate ceasefire, is of

course important. It includes the role of better access to and from Gaza and greater assurance that weapons are not going into Gaza—there are many aspects. We will discuss that with the United States as well as Egypt directly.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I declare an interest: I have just returned from a visit to the Palestinian authorities and to Israel. The Foreign Secretary's statement that Hamas bears the principal responsibility for the crisis and could end the conflict by stopping bombardment of Israel was heard attentively, but does he agree with me that the use by Hamas of long-range imported missiles capable of striking Jerusalem has made that much more difficult to achieve?

Mr Hague: Yes, absolutely. It is clear that the armoury of rockets in Gaza has changed since the time of Operation Cast Lead; there are now longer range rockets, which have been launched at Tel Aviv and, in at least one case, at Jerusalem. Of course, that is an escalation of the threat to Israel, but it only underlines the importance of taking forward all the work on a negotiated peace and settlement in the middle east, which is supported across the House.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): In August this year, an UNRWA report found that Gaza would be unliveable by 2020. Already, because of the blockade, 44% of Palestinians in Gaza are food-insecure, and 80% are aid recipients. What recent conversations has the right hon. Gentleman had with his Israeli counterparts about increasing the flow of basic humanitarian goods into Gaza, and ensuring that that continues to increase, to meet the needs of the Palestinian people?

Mr Hague: That is a constant part of discussions with Israeli leaders. Of course we have put the case for that, and indeed more than that, by saying not only that humanitarian relief is required, but that a different and more open approach is required. In fact, tight restrictions often serve the purposes of Hamas, rather than directly the purposes of Israel, and sometimes help to fund Hamas through its operation of smuggling and the use of tunnels into Gaza, for example. We will continue to have those conversations, I hope more successfully, in future.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): The civilian populations of southern Israel and Gaza desperately need an immediate and effective ceasefire: that means no rockets, no air strikes and no land invasion. What hopes does my right hon. Friend have of the US Secretary of State being able to broker that immediate and lasting ceasefire?

Mr Hague: There are some hopes. I do not want to overstate them, because of course these things can go wrong. Anything at any moment can go wrong, endangering the process through some event on the ground or breakdown in what either side seeks from a ceasefire, but the UN Secretary-General has put energy behind this; Egypt is playing a strong role, which the visit of Secretary Clinton will bolster; and all of us in the EU countries are determined—a lot of effort is being put behind the ceasefire proposal.

Thomas Docherty (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): May I press the Foreign Secretary to say more about future consultations with his fellow EU Ministers on Gaza, and what consultations he is having with the Quartet's special representative to the region?

Mr Hague: We had the whole EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting yesterday, from which the conclusions are published. It made calls very much in line with what I have said to the House in terms of the need to end rocket attacks on Israel, but also stated our support for a negotiated ceasefire. The whole of the European Union spoke clearly together on that yesterday. Of course, we also regularly discuss matters with Tony Blair, the Quartet's envoy to the Palestinians: most recently, I spoke to him about this nine or 10 days ago, and my colleagues are in constant touch with him. We will see whether there can be a role for the Quartet in the coming weeks in attempts to restart negotiations on the peace process.

Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): The Secretary of State has made clear his belief that Hamas bears the principal responsibility for the start of the crisis, but does he not accept that many people believe that the blockade of Gaza amounts to an act of aggression perpetrated by the state of Israel against the Palestinians every single day, whether a rocket or a shot is fired? How does he believe that assigning blame for the present situation will help the Government to work with both sides to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Mr Hague: I think we have to speak clearly about these things. The hon. Gentleman is right that restrictions and blockades are part of the problem, not part of the solution, and we are always clear about that. The occurrence of yet another crisis in Gaza adds to those arguments, but we also have to be clear that the firing off of hundreds of rockets at Israel certainly does not help and is no tactic designed to get rid of any blockade or restrictions; it is totally counterproductive in that respect, as well as killing civilians. We should not hesitate to criticise that just because we want a wider solution.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Given the blocking stance taken by Russia and China on Syria, have they contributed any money to address the current humanitarian crisis in Syria?

Mr Hague: Contributions from Russia and China have been very small. I would have to write to the hon. Lady with the details, but they are not so large that I have them immediately in my mind, let me put it that way. We will encourage—I have done so previously—Russia to make a contribution to the UN funds, but the biggest contribution has been from the United States, the second biggest from the EU and the third biggest from the UK—of course we are also contributing to the EU money—so as things stand, the backing is heavily western.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary said that he did not want to get into a debate about disproportionate or proportionate, but while it is right that we condemn militant rocket attacks, should we not also condemn the loss of innocent lives and particularly children? Regarding the vote at the UN, is

he wholly convinced that the UK Government, by taking the stance they have taken, do not risk undermining those who want a peaceful solution?

Mr Hague: That the Government and the whole country deplore the loss of life in Gaza and southern Israel, particularly children, was the first line or second sentence of my statement today, and I reinforce that now. As I think I have explained, the reason why we are so concerned about a vote at the United Nations General Assembly coming now is precisely that we think it will make it more difficult to advance the peace process. We will make every effort to prevent its damaging the peace process, but the likelihood is that it will.

Mr Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): May I press the Foreign Secretary once again on the importance of ending the blockade if we are to make progress in the peace process? The impact of the blockade on the Palestinian people, in terms of the destruction of their economy, has been mentioned, but there is also an impact on Israel: there is a thriving tunnel economy and most of the weapons currently being used in Gaza come through it. There could be a win-win situation if we can make progress on the issue.

Mr Hague: I do not think I need pressing very much, because I just made part of that point myself when I talked about the tunnels and the way Hamas, rather than the security of Israel, profits from them through smuggling. For a win-win, there has to be a greater degree of trust and peace on the border, which has eluded us all so far, but if that can be brought about, then yes, there can a very big win-win for all involved.

Mr Speaker: After 23 years in the House, the Foreign Secretary well knows that the fact that a point has been made does not prevent it from being remade, usually on multiple occasions, very eloquently and sometimes at length.

Katy Clark (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I will try to raise an issue that has not been raised so far. Has the Foreign Secretary been able to assess whether UK-made components are being used in Gaza, as part of Israeli equipment, and what implications do the actions of recent days have for UK military links with Israel?

Mr Hague: The hon. Lady has raised an issue that no one else raised, which is pretty good going after one hour and 40 minutes, so I thank her for that. As she knows, we have very tight export controls, through our and the EU's consolidated guidance. We always evaluate any arms export licences against the risks of misuse, of intensifying conflict and of being used for internal repression. That leads us to refuse some export licences for Israel, but to grant others. Of course, any future grant or refusal of licences will be considered against the background of recent events.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Foreign Secretary and colleagues for their assistance, which enabled 65 Back Benchers to take part in 66 minutes of exclusively Back-Bench time. I fear that there are points of order, but I am sure that they will be legendarily brief.

Points of Order

2.10 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Legendarily brief though my point of order will be, it is about an anniversary of something that is legendarily long—65 years is a milestone by anyone's reckoning. Could the House find some way to pass on its congratulations to Her Majesty the Queen on achieving 65 years of wedded bliss?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has just done so, with admirable grace and succinctness. We thank him.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. For the avoidance of doubt, when I asked the Foreign Secretary my question I should have referred Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting that on the record.

NEW MEMBER

The following Member made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Lucy Maria Powell, for Manchester Central.

Representation of the People (Members' Job Share)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.12 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to enable representation of a constituency by two persons sharing membership of the House of Commons; and for connected purposes.

The Bill would introduce job sharing for Members of Parliament. At the outset, let me thank all those who have helped to shape the proposal, particularly Debbi King from Disability Politics UK, the QCs Karon Monaghan and Gordon Nardell and, of course, our House of Commons Clerks for their advice.

The motivation behind the Bill is to contribute to fulfilling the objective so eloquently set out in the report of the Speaker's Conference on parliamentary representation in 2010. It stated:

“Justice requires that there should be a place within the House of Commons for individuals from all sections of society. If anyone is prevented from standing for Parliament by reason of their gender, background, sexual orientation or perceived disability, this is an injustice... While justice is the primary case for widening Parliamentary representation, there would also be real benefits for both Parliament and wider society if the House of Commons were to be more fully representative... We believe that a more representative House of Commons would be a more effective and legitimate legislature.”

The stark reality is that this House is certainly not fully representative of our society: more than 500 of the 650 MPs are male, so women are seriously under-represented; and there are only a handful of disabled MPs in the House, but there would need to be at least 65 if it was to be representative of disabled people in the population.

In recent years discussion has taken place about what changes could be made to remove barriers to people who want to become MPs and serve their country in that way. A number of organisations representing people with disabilities have expressed the view that there are some people whose particular conditions means that, although they wish to serve as MPs, they physically would be unable to do so on a full-time basis. Others representing carers and women's organisations have explained that, although they might wish to serve as MPs, they did not want to give up their caring role and so wanted to combine the two jobs. That included not only parents with young children, but carers of elderly or sick family members. The reality is that the vast majority of carers in our society are still women, so not being able to combine more flexibly caring responsibilities and the role of an MP was seen as an issue that needs to be addressed if we are to secure greater representation of women in Parliament.

Over the past two decades, Members from both sides of his House and several civil society bodies representing people with disabilities and women have advocated the introduction of job sharing for MPs in order to assist more people with disabilities and more women to become MPs. I recall my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Margaret Hodge) raising the call in the 1990s. The new generation of Members has taken up the

cause; my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and the hon. Members for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Mary Macleod) have all advocated change. The hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) summed up the issue eloquently in a recent debate when she said:

“I have always thought that job shares—potentially having a Cabinet position as a job share—would send a powerful signal, allow women to achieve their best and also recognise the complexity of many of our lives.”—[*Official Report*, 22 March 2011; Vol. 525, c. 185WH.]

Many organisations across the political spectrum have urged consideration of job sharing, ranging from the Fabian Women's Network to Women Liberal Democrats and the Fawcett Society. Two of the major charities that represent people with disabilities in our country, Radar and Rethink, included a call for job sharing in their submissions to the Government's consultation, “Access to elected office for disabled people.”

Individuals have tried to stand for election to this Parliament and the Scottish Parliament on a job-share basis but have been barred on the grounds that the current law does not allow it. However, recent legal advice obtained by the Equality and Human Rights Commission has shown that that bar might be open to legal challenge on the grounds of discrimination under the Equality Act 2010 and various international conventions. In law, public bodies have a legal responsibility to make any reasonable adjustments to their operation to overcome such a bar. Job sharing could be construed as just such a reasonable adjustment.

Many Members have suggested that job sharing might be fine in principle but that there are real practical problems with its implementation. Let me deal with the practical questions. The Bill would be an enabling Bill establishing the principle of job sharing for MPs and dealing with the key questions of election, voting rights and the death or disqualification of a Member. That would leave further detail of implementation to secondary legislation that would be subject to the approval of the House.

The Bill proposes that the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 be amended to allow two people who have agreed to a sharing arrangement to stand for election in a constituency on the basis that, if elected, they would share the representation of the constituency between them and serve in Parliament on that basis. Each of the two Members elected for a constituency would be able to cast a half vote in votes of the House. If the two Members agreed and informed Mr Speaker or the person presiding during a vote, one of them would be able to cast a single vote. Not all the detail about the operation of the process are suitable to be addressed in primary legislation and would usually be the subject of secondary legislation or changes to the Standing Orders of the House.

Let me deal with some of the main questions that have been asked by Members about the practicalities of the proposal. Would the two job sharers have to be from the same party? It is proposed that that would be the case, and that would be covered in secondary legislation. What would happen if the job sharers disagreed on an issue and wished to vote accordingly? As the job sharers entered into a sharing arrangement before the election and were from the same party, one would expect them not always to agree on votes—I admit that finding a job

share might be difficult at times. However, where there is a difference, they can each exercise their right to use their half vote. Frankly, single Members are often in two minds about something and end up abstaining.

What would happen if one of the job sharers left the party under whose banner he or she was elected? At present, there is no provision for forcing a by-election when a Member crosses the Floor of the House, but that is something Members might want to examine. It is not proposed in this Bill, but it would need to be taken into account by electors at a subsequent election. What would happen if one of the job sharers resigned, died or was disqualified? Because the job sharers were elected on the basis of a job-share arrangement, both would be treated as having ceased to be MPs.

Another question is what would happen in situations where electors were happy with the performance of one of the job sharers but not with the other and therefore would not want to vote. The job sharers would be standing as a team; that would be the job-sharing arrangement. The elector would still have one vote and be unable to split it, but would have to decide, in casting that vote, whether, on the basis of his or her overall judgment of their performance, the job-sharing team worked and whether he or she would vote for that arrangement in future. To be frank, there is very little difference between that and what happens at the moment, because electors will often take the view that because the person has stood for a party while, at times, not necessarily supporting the party line, they want to vote for the individual rather than the party.

What would happen if one of the job sharers became a Minister and were covered by collective responsibility? A job sharer would be able to fulfil a ministerial role to the extent of the time that they had to devote to the role on a job-share basis, and in appointing Ministers the Prime Minister would take that into account. This could, and eventually would, lead to job sharing for Ministers. With regard to collective responsibility, the job sharer assuming ministerial responsibilities would naturally cast his or her half vote in line with that requirement.

Would it be more expensive to have two Members per constituency? No, because the job sharers would share offices, facilities and staff. The parliamentary expenses of job-sharing MPs would be managed by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority IPSA under the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009 in exactly the same way as for a single MP.

Right the way across our society, in virtually every walk of life, in the public and private sectors and in most professions, job sharing is now a reality, and it has proved to be successful for the organisations and individuals concerned. In fact, there is substantial evidence that job-sharing arrangements are more productive than the employment of individuals. This House should not be the last bastion standing against a measure that could increase access for women and, in particular, for carers and people with disabilities in being able to stand as Members of Parliament. We in this House should explore every opportunity we can to assist in promoting greater access for people who would like to serve as MPs. This would not be positive discrimination but simply the introduction of a practical administrative change to facilitate wider participation.

[John McDonnell]

As I said, the main thrust of this proposal has come from organisations that represent carers and people with disabilities. It is a minor, modernising reform that could improve the representativeness of the House of Commons. If it allowed just one more person with disabilities, one more woman or one more carer to have the opportunity to serve their country in this House, it would be a beneficial move.

2.22 pm

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Every so often I hear a proposal that is so outrageous and unusual that I have to pinch myself to check whether I have heard it correctly, and I found this to be one such. There are many reasons why I believe that the idea is unworkable—so many that I fear that the 10-minutes rule will not provide sufficient time for me to do justice to them in this debate. I will therefore keep my remarks very brief.

This Bill is supposedly about increasing diversity. I do not accept that as a middle-aged white male I am unable to represent others who do not fit that description, be they female, from an ethnic minority, gay or disabled. It is nonsense to suggest that the composition of this House must exactly mirror the composition of the United Kingdom. I very much doubt that someone such as Winston Churchill would have ticked many boxes for diversity, and yet few would dispute that he spoke for the whole of our nation at the most difficult of times. We do not increase true representation simply by having people who look like others.

Nothing that I have heard today suggests that this idea, even if it could ever be made into a practical possibility, would produce the desired result. The plan to have a Parliament made up of Tweedledees and Tweedledums would open up a constitutional can of worms—and for what? For example, what if two heterosexual white middle-aged barristers decided that it would be quite a nice idea if they both shared the job of being an MP while continuing their practice at the Bar? How would that help to increase the diversity of this House? We hear much criticism of politicians who have jobs outside Parliament, yet this Bill would cement the practice into law and make it the norm.

If the Bill is supposed to be a measure to help disabled people, I fear that it is simplistic and, indeed, patronising to many current and former Members who have performed and continue to perform their duties with such distinction. Are the advocates of the Bill really suggesting that just because someone is female, black or disabled they are capable of doing only half the job on a part-time basis?

We have heard that Members would have half a vote each or a joint vote if there were agreement, but what if there were no agreement? What if both MPs took a different view and cancelled each other out, leaving their constituents unrepresented? But of course, as Members on both sides of the House will appreciate, our role is about much more than just voting. Who would constituents contact with a problem—one of them or both of them? What would happen with this dual approach as regards Select Committee membership? Would one half of the job-sharing duo hear some of the evidence and then the other half hear the rest, so that we finished up with

neither of them having heard it all? Indeed, how would it be decided who was elected to serve on the Committee in the first place?

Next, what about debates in this House? Would both Members be entitled to be called? Would both be entitled to table questions? Would every constituency in the country be required to have two Members? If it applied only to some constituencies, then surely those with two Members would have an advantage over those with a single Member. As everyone will be aware, with 650 Members there is already insufficient space in this Chamber for them all to have a seat. How on earth would we cope with double that number?

As some Members may be aware, I think that it is particularly important that private Members' Bills are properly scrutinised. Therefore, if I were to represent a constituency as one half of a job-sharing duo with someone else who shared my concern that private Members' Bills should be properly scrutinised, we could together, on behalf of just one constituency, debate one Bill for a very long time.

Would those sharing the same role have to be from the same party? What would happen if two people from the same party were elected and then one of them decided to change parties? How would that work? Would there have to be some form of electoral pre-nuptial agreement? Would that become the norm? What would happen if the agreement were breached? Who would adjudicate in the event of a dispute?

I am not convinced by the "two for the price of one" argument. It is hard to see how two people would not, at some point, need extra staff or office space. They would need a bigger taxpayer-funded residence in the capital or even require two separate residences in London if they represented a constituency some way away from Westminster. At the very least, there would be two sets of travel expenses.

I think that most people want to see fewer politicians, not more. This proposal runs the risk of being the thin end of the wedge. I dread to think what would happen if the number of Members of the European Parliament were doubled, and how long would it be before we had double the number of councillors, elected mayors or, indeed, police and crime commissioners?

So far, despite considerable media attention, this proposal does not appear to have attracted much public support. Despite a letter to *The Guardian* in September, signed by the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and more than 40 other influential people, urging people to sign an e-petition on this very subject, when I last checked it had only 403 signatories. Perhaps after today's debate others will be tempted to sign it and, if it reaches the 100,000 barrier, who knows what will happen? We may return to debate this whole issue again.

The proposal starts off as a politically correct attempt to increase diversity, but ends up as a potentially dangerous attempt at constitutional meddling that would break the historical link between an MP and their constituency. I do not propose to divide the House on whether the hon. Gentleman should have leave to introduce the Bill, because, in view of the importance of these matters, I think that the House should have the time and the opportunity—ideally over several Friday sittings—to debate them at great length, so that the concerns that I have outlined can be expanded on.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That John McDonnell, Dame Anne Begg, Robert Halfon, Lorely Burt, Caroline Lucas, Sheila Gilmore, Mr Virendra Sharma, Meg Hillier, Jeremy Corbyn, Jon Cruddas, Mr Frank Field and Mr Tom Clarke present the Bill.

John McDonnell accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Tuesday 27 November, and to be printed (Bill 91).

HGV Road User Levy Bill

Second Reading

2.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As the House knows, the reason for this Bill is to enable the introduction of a new levy for all heavy goods vehicles weighing 12 tonnes and over that are kept or used on the UK road network. We plan to implement the levy from April 2014 for UK-registered hauliers. Subject to the completion of a procurement process, it will apply to foreign-registered hauliers from the same date.

We intend the levy to apply to all categories of public roads in the UK and to both UK and foreign-registered HGVs. Vehicles that cause wear and tear to our roads should make a payment that takes that into account. HGVs registered abroad are more likely to carry their weight on fewer axles than UK-registered vehicles, which means that foreign-registered vehicles cause more wear and tear to our roads. It is therefore more unjust that they do not make a contribution towards the maintenance of these roads. They leave the burden to fall entirely on the British taxpayer.

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What about foreign truck drivers who come over with large tanks full of fuel and who do not contribute to the ordinary wear and tear on our roads because they do not pay the fuel duty?

Mr McLoughlin: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. Under this Bill, we will at least charge them something to use British roads—at the moment, they pay absolutely nothing. Although I am not saying that this is the entire answer, we are moving in the right direction.

Foreign hauliers using roads in the UK have long enjoyed an advantage over our own haulage industry in that they do not pay to use the UK's road network, while our own hauliers pay to use roads through tolls and other charging schemes when they travel abroad in Europe. For many years all main parties have wanted to introduce a measure to correct that imbalance and I am delighted that this Government are actually doing it.

I am sure that the House recognises that HGVs play a crucial role in our economy by supplying businesses and servicing customers. More than two thirds of all goods moved within the UK travel by road and, in the main, on HGVs.

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right to pay tribute to the work done by HGVs in this country but, at a time when UK hauliers and other businesses that make deliveries are suffering economically, will he outline the rationale behind introducing the Bill now? What other things will the Government do to protect UK hauliers from additional costs?

Mr McLoughlin: The reason for introducing the Bill now is to try to level the playing field and to take action that the previous Government talked about but, I am afraid, never found the time to do anything about.

[Mr McLoughlin]

I make no apologies for wanting to do this now. I wish it had been done sooner, but at least we are doing it at our first opportunity.

A key part of the movement of goods is provided by foreign hauliers and the Government recognise the important contributions they make to the economy. They make 1.5 million trips to the UK every each year, and we do not wish to discourage free trade with our partners in other countries. However, it is only right that we ensure that our own haulage industry has a fair chance to compete, and I hope that the Bill goes some way to achieving that. I met some hauliers when I announced the Bill and they said that it would lead to more jobs in this country.

As colleagues will be aware, any road user charge is subject to the strict conditions set out in the Eurovignette directive, which provides a framework for charging on roads and specifies the maximum daily charge as €11. That is likely to rise to €12 by 2014, which will mean that it should equate to the £10 a day that we intend to charge the largest vehicles that use our roads.

I also recognise that many trips made by foreign hauliers take longer than one day, so they will also be able to pay the levy for different periods, up to one year. In the case of the largest vehicles, this annual charge will be £1,000. Our estimate of the revenues that will be gained as a result of foreign hauliers paying a charge is between £19 million and £23 million a year. Although that is not enormous, it shows we are doing something that is clearly wanted. That is why the Bill is right. The Government are also committed to introducing other measures—principally vehicle excise duty reductions—that are not part of this Bill to ensure a fairer deal for HGV drivers.

I will now go through the Bill's points of interest.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): I have a question about something that I genuinely do not understand. The new levies will be welcome, but why will there be a delay, as I understand it—I may be wrong—between their imposition on UK hauliers, who will have to pay first, and on non-UK hauliers?

Mr McLoughlin: I very much hope that there will not be a delay. As I have said, I intend the levy to be introduced in April 2014, subject to certain procurement measures. Once it is introduced in this country, there will be a reduction of a similar amount in VED charges, so our lorry drivers should not pay anything extra. Foreign drivers will be charged from, I hope, April 2014. I hope that that addresses the hon. Gentleman's question.

Robert Flello: The Secretary of State is being extremely generous with his time. Will he clarify why overseas hauliers are not required to pay for a year up front, but can pay on a daily, weekly or monthly basis? Is there a legislative reason why they cannot be asked to make an annual up-front payment, as with VED?

Mr McLoughlin: Overseas hauliers will pay in advance of coming to this country. However, asking somebody who is bringing a lorry over for a day to pay for a full year would be quite unfair. We are therefore allowing them to pay daily, weekly or yearly. Most HGV drivers

who come to this country regularly will find it much more convenient and a lot cheaper to pay for the year than to pay for each individual day. I hope that that clears up the hon. Gentleman's point.

The Bill states that HGVs weighing more than 12 tonnes will have to pay a duty of excise levied by the Secretary of State if they are used or kept on a public road within the United Kingdom. It will be known as the HGV road user levy. It will be charged to allow both UK-registered and foreign-registered vehicles to use our roads. The levy applies to all roads in the UK. However, clause 3 provides the power for the Secretary of State to exempt specific roads from the charge by way of statutory instrument, should the need arise.

Clause 4 sets out the liability for the levy. For HGVs registered in the UK, liability for paying the levy will lie with those in whose name the vehicle is registered and with the person keeping the vehicle. That applies the principle used for vehicle excise duty in section 1 of the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994. That allows for the levy on UK-registered vehicles to be paid at the same time as vehicle excise duty. For non-UK-registered HGVs, the person who holds the Community licence for the vehicle and the person who keeps the vehicle are liable to pay the levy. For both UK-registered and non-UK-registered vehicles, when two or more people are liable to pay the levy, they are jointly and severally liable.

Clauses 5 and 6 set out the methods of payment for UK-registered and non-UK-registered vehicles. For UK-registered vehicles, the levy will be paid either yearly or half-yearly at the same time as vehicle excise duty. Where appropriate, rebates may be made for vehicles that are stolen or destroyed. The circumstances under which a rebate will be available and the method of calculating the value of a rebate, together with other conditions that must be met to make a claim, are covered in clause 7.

Some types of rigid vehicle weighing less than 12 tonnes will be exempt from the charge. The Bill also provides powers to allow the Secretary of State to make regulations that exempt some categories of HGV from the charge.

Collection and enforcement of the charge, and related elements, are covered in clauses 9 to 16.

Huw Irranca-Davies: Before the Secretary of State continues, will he clarify one point? Again, I am happy to be corrected. I believe that the Bill sets out that different and potentially higher levels may be charged for weekly or monthly payments for non-UK HGVs. I am not against that. However, will he give a cast-iron guarantee that it does not infringe any anti-discrimination trade provisions within the EU?

Mr McLoughlin: Yes, we have covered that. The hon. Gentleman is obviously going to take part in this debate and may well find himself on the Public Bill Committee in due course, so he will be able to cover that point in much more detail. I am glad that the Committee is tempting and am sure that the Opposition Whip has made a note of his details. [Interruption.] Was the hon. Gentleman making a request to be on the Committee? Perhaps he would like to share it with the House.

Huw Irranca-Davies: Regrettably, I have to inform the House that I am on another Committee.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr McLoughlin: I give way to the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick).

Jim Fitzpatrick: We are grateful to the Secretary of State for trying to recruit our members of the Committee. Much as I would love to see my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) on it, I think that the Secretary of State should leave it to us and the Whips.

Mr McLoughlin: I apologise to the Opposition. I was going back to my old territory, which I must not trespass on any longer. I am glad that we have managed to smoke out the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) as to his willingness and availability. I am sure that he gives distinguished service to the other Committee. I must check which it is after this debate.

The level of vehicle excise duty evasion among UK hauliers is extremely low at less than 1% of vehicles. I have no reason to anticipate that that will change once the levy is introduced. To reduce the administrative burden, the levy will be paid at the same time as VED. We have looked at ways to make the introduction of the levy cost-neutral for UK hauliers. To do that, we will reduce the level of VED to take account of the new charge. That reduction will mean that an estimated 94% of UK hauliers will pay no more than they do at the moment and that 98% will pay no more than an additional £50 a year. Clause 15 allows the Secretary of State to refuse to issue a tax disc when the appropriate levy has not been paid. That will lead to vehicles being unlicensed, which brings the associated penalties of immobilisation, removal and disposal.

For foreign-registered hauliers, a system will be procured to allow the levy to be paid online before the vehicle enters the country. The levy is based on the length of time, so visiting hauliers will have to select the period for which they will be using UK roads. The options will go from a single day to a year. Once a haulier has paid the right fee, the payment record will be entered automatically into a database, allowing enforcement agencies to check the status of any HGV using UK roads. Information relating to whether a vehicle has paid the levy will be made available publicly.

There is a risk of foreign hauliers evading the new charge. We will ensure that the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency, which will enforce the charge in England, Wales and Scotland, and the Driver and Vehicle Agency, which will enforce the charge in Northern Ireland, are properly equipped to do the job from the start.

Huw Irranca-Davies: May I take this opportunity to invite the Secretary of State to join me on the Groceries Code Adjudicator Public Bill Committee at his earliest convenience? Does he foresee any problems in enforcing this wonderful measure due to the Government's decision to opt out of the EU directive on cross-border enforcement?

Mr McLoughlin: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for sharing with us which Committee he is sitting on. The Committee on this Bill will really miss his attention to detail. I have no reason to believe that there will be any of the problems that he mentions. I have assured myself that what we are doing is wholly within the law and within EU competition rules.

For non-UK hauliers, there will be no physical sign of the levy having been paid. I believe that paper discs or similar signs would impose a needless burden and open the door to fraud. One of the main methods that we will use to detect vehicles that have not paid the charge is by linking our automatic number plate recognition cameras to the payment database. The use of that technology will enable quicker checks to be made on all HGVs. The power to install such equipment where it does not exist is being introduced in the Bill by amending the Highways Act 1980, the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 and the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 in clause 16.

Robert Ffello: What will be the situation if an overseas haulier, either deliberately or by omission, does not purchase a sufficient amount of time? What will happen to the load that a vehicle is carrying if it is seized by one of the agencies?

Mr McLoughlin: Drivers will know that they have to pay the levy before they come into the country. If they fail to pay, the measures available to the enforcement agencies will be used. I make no apology for that. If they think that they will be here for three days, they should pay for three days.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr McLoughlin: Very briefly.

Michael Connarty: Who will be fined? Will it be the driver or the owner of the vehicle? If it is a hired vehicle, who will suffer the fine?

Mr McLoughlin: The driver is responsible for ensuring that the vehicle that he is driving is covered. He is in charge of the vehicle.

The penalty is currently set at £200 and would also be paid in situations where the levy had been underpaid—if someone had declared a lower vehicle weight limit, for example, or the wrong number of axles. Clause 13 inserts the offence into schedule 3 of the Road Traffic Offenders Act 1988, which lists the offences for which fixed penalties can be given.

Where there is frequent non-compliance by a specific vehicle or haulage company, clause 11 will allow for the imposition of a fine up to category 5 on the standard scale—currently £5,000—when someone is convicted of failing to pay the levy. I hope that those measures, coupled with active enforcement, will be seen as a suitable deterrent. Collected fine revenues will be paid into the Consolidated Fund; there was a lot of debate on that when we discussed the Ways and Means resolution.

I am sure the House will agree that by creating fair competition for the UK haulage industry, the Bill will help finally to put right a wrong. I commend the Bill to the House. It is well overdue and should have been introduced some time ago.

2.50 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is good to see the Secretary of State in his place for this Second Reading debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and I are delighted to see all three Conservative Ministers from

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

the Department for Transport here this afternoon. By leaving a Liberal Democrat Minister in charge of the shop, the coalition Government have made a statement of their trust and confidence—or perhaps he has been given the afternoon off.

Mr McLoughlin: I think the hon. Gentleman will find that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker), is responding to a debate in Westminster Hall.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am sure he would be under suspicion—no, I beg your pardon—I am sure he will be watched wherever he goes, because of the excellent job that he does as the senior and longest-serving Minister in the Department for Transport, having survived from 2010. I welcome his new colleagues to their places.

The Secretary of State took something like 18 minutes to move the Second Reading, which is par for the course. According to *Hansard* from 23 October 2012, column 861, the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Lewes, took a minute to move the Ways and Means motion—it actually felt like a lot less than a minute, but he was just procedurally introducing that debate.

The Secretary of State graciously said that both main parties have wanted to introduce this legislation, and I am sure he is aware that in my speech on the Ways and Means motion, I commended the coalition Government on finding a way to introduce this welcome measure.

I do not want to detain the House too long, because I spoke for 18 minutes during the debate on the Ways and Means motion—that was my Second Reading speech and is contained in columns 861 to 865 of *Hansard* from 23 October 2012, should anybody wish to look at it. We covered a lot during that debate, including road exemptions that the Secretary of State is implementing in clause 3(2). We covered hypothecation at length, and I am sure we will return to that in Committee. We spent a bit of time on road safety—particularly cycle safety—and whether the money raised from the scheme could be devoted to that. We also raised the Secretary of State's discretion in clause 7(9), and asked questions about short sea shipping and moving freight from road to rail—we will continue to ask about that. We asked questions about the contract for running the scheme, the technology involved, and who is making the arrangements. Cross-border enforcement, which my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) raised a moment ago, was also part of the discussion.

A number of issues were raised during that debate. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) answered most of those points, although some were left without a response on the basis that they were detailed matters. I am sure we will look at those in Committee. In principle, however, the Opposition support this measure. We will want to look at the detail when the Bill goes to Committee, but we welcome its arrival to the House this afternoon.

2.54 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): As has been suggested, this Bill has wide cross-party support. I want to make a number of observations on the legislation,

and commend the coalition Government for getting a grip on this matter and providing an answer. As the Secretary of State suggested, they are trying to create a level playing field between UK haulage businesses and foreign operators. My constituency is within the M25 and has close links with the M3, M4 and Heathrow airport, and transportation and logistics are at the heart of what we do in Spelthorne. As the Member representing that constituency, I am particularly gratified to commend the Bill and recommend that it proceeds. Several haulage firms in Spelthorne have made representation to me, including Cummins haulage in Shepperton and others, and they will be gratified by this measure. I am pleased to recommend and support the Bill in the House today.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) was right to suggest that we will have to consider a number of details in Committee. For now, however, I am happy to lend my support to the Bill, and gratified to see such wide support across the House for this sensible measure.

2.55 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, support this Bill, which is about backing the UK haulage industry and helping to create a level playing field. The impact of the freight industry on the UK economy is strong—the turnover for road freight is £23.9 billion a year; it adds gross value of £10.7 billion a year; and employs 299,000 people in 30,000 enterprises. The sector is important and its impact on the economy is great. The issue concerns disparities in cost between UK-based hauliers and foreign hauliers, and relates to differential fuel and road charging costs, as well as what are often seen as different safety standards, which also impact on cost. The legislation also deals with cabotage, which is the subject of ongoing European Union negotiations. The Transport Committee has taken up this matter—indeed, it first considered it a long time ago in 2009 when we looked at road charges and taxation. The issue was taken up again in 2012, and we returned to it this July with a session of the Transport Committee on road freight.

In 2008, the Government started to take action and proposed a vignette. Much to the Committee's regret, however, that was not pursued and no real action was taken. An alternative to taking action on charges was the allocation of an additional £24 million to the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency to enforce safety standards for foreign—and domestic—vehicles. Something was done, although it was not the action for which the Committee was hoping.

I have one or two points that I hope can be considered today or—perhaps more likely—in Committee. Will the impact of this legislation and the cost for UK hauliers be monitored? We heard in the Transport Committee, and the Secretary of State repeated today, that the overwhelming majority of British hauliers will not face any extra costs. Will that be monitored to ensure that that intention is realised? Will the agencies charged with implementing and enforcing the scheme—DVLA and VOSA—have sufficient resources to do their job properly? Will debts of overseas hauliers be collected in view of the Government's decision not to sign a cross-border agreement on enforcing debt? What is the current position on cabotage, which I know is giving some concern to UK hauliers? Those points are important although I

know they will be discussed in Committee. I support this Bill, and agree with the Secretary of State that it has been a long time coming.

2.59 pm

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I welcome the cross-party support for this Bill which, as the Secretary of State pointed out, has been under discussion for many years. However, if we look at the background to this issue, it is interesting that more than a decade ago, the previous Government looked at a scheme that aimed to restore fairness between UK and foreign lorry drivers. The consultation document published in November 2001 considered two forms of charge—a time-based system and a distance-based system. The former was a cheap and simple solution, and the latter was a complex-to-administer, Big Brother-type charge, which sought to raise yet more revenue from the UK haulage industry. True to form, the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time, the right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr Brown), went for the latter.

More than 10 years later, after much indecision and delay, the coalition Government are finally delivering a workable scheme. Had the previous Government taken note of the Conservative party economic competitive policy group in 2007, which recommended the swift introduction of a lorry user charge, balanced by a reduction in vehicle excise duty, the problem could have been resolved far sooner. We could also have protected our domestic haulage industry from unfair competition earlier, and raised hundreds of millions of pounds for the Exchequer from foreign hauliers. I congratulate the Government on introducing this long-overdue, important legislation.

I note from the consultation document that a large HGV currently pays between €35 and €46 for a 100-mile Autobahn journey in Germany. That highlights the disadvantages that UK hauliers face against European competition—European HGVs currently make no contribution whatever when they travel on UK roads. The proposals have been welcomed by the haulage industry, which was rightly in favour of the time charge rather than the distance charge. As I have pointed out, the distance charge would have become a stealth tax. The Freight Transport Association says that the Bill delivers on its requests that the scheme should be fair, that it should not add administrative burdens, and that it should come with heavy penalties for non-compliance.

Clause 3 makes an exception so that the congestion charge zone and the M6 toll can be charged as well as the levy—they are congestion measures. Any future toll roads to be built in the UK are highly likely to be classed as congestion measures, so can the Minister confirm that EU prohibitions on double-charging will not prove to be a problem should any new toll roads be proposed in future in the UK?

Clauses 5 and 6 relate to the rate at which the levy will be set, which is governed by an EU directive. As pointed out by the Secretary of State, the daily maximum was originally set at €11, but is set to increase to €12. That will mean that the daily rate is low compared with the sums that UK hauliers pay to use toll roads in other

European countries. Perhaps the Secretary of State or the Minister will confirm whether there is any scope for the UK Government to request an increase in the rate, especially if other European countries increase their toll rates significantly ahead of inflation, which will further damage our competitiveness?

It is estimated that the levy will raise around £20 million per annum. Clause 9(4) states that the revenue from the levy will go into the Consolidated Fund. Will the Minister confirm that the revenue raised will not be hypothecated for transport?

Clause 13 establishes an efficient and effective way of enforcing payment on foreign lorries that fail to comply with legislation, as does clause 15, which allows the Secretary of State to refuse to issue a vehicle excise duty licence for which a levy has not been paid. Those measures underline the effectiveness and simplicity of the legislation.

Clause 16 allows highway authorities to install equipment for the detection of non-payment of the levy. Will the Minister confirm what equipment exists that can be used for the purpose of detecting non-compliance, and what new equipment will be requested? I understand that the set-up costs are estimated at between £3 million and £6.7 million. Will he also confirm the prosecution procedure if a foreign lorry that has not paid the levy is detected by a system other than a roadside check? How will the prosecution be enforced?

To sum up, the Bill has been a long time coming. It is another example of this Government delivering on things the previous one only ever talked about. It makes a more level playing field between UK hauliers and European hauliers, who for many years have made no contribution whatever to the UK road infrastructure and have cost the UK economy a huge amount of money owing to the accidents they cause on our motorways. The Bill will help to ensure that our domestic road haulage industry remains competitive, which is more important than ever.

3.5 pm

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I am pleased to make a declaration: I have no interests apart from looking after the interests of my constituents. Hon. Members have said that it is time to level the playing field for road haulage in the UK, but to use more thematically correct imagery, it is time to smooth out the anti-competitive bumps faced by UK haulage companies on the road to European markets.

The Bill will not deal with many anti-competitive burdens placed on the many road haulage companies in my constituency and many others. Grangemouth, which is in my constituency, and which is the only EU-recognised inter-modal transport hub in Scotland, and the many communities along the M9, M8 and M876 triangle with employment in road haulage, suffer from damaging high taxation on road fuel. Competitor haulage companies from mainland Europe use that fuel price advantage to collect and deliver in the UK, even in Scotland. The Government must look at that seriously if we are really to level out those bumps.

I know hon. Members want to get on with the debate quickly and that they have discussed the Bill between one another many times, but my constituents probably do not know the Bill's contents. They know that, currently,

[*Michael Connarty*]

operators of UK-registered heavy goods vehicles pay charges or tolls in most European countries—as they tell me every time I meet them—but that foreign-registered HGVs do not pay to use the UK road network. The imbalance is unfair to UK HGV operators.

The Bill will seek to address that by introducing a levy for using UK road networks for all HGV vehicles weighing 12 tonnes and over. The requirement to pay the levy will apply to all categories of public road in the UK and to both UK and foreign-registered HGVs. The levy will range from £85 a year for the smallest HGV to £1,000 for the largest. The idea is to link the charge to the amount of damage caused on the roads by different types of HGVs.

The Bill states that UK-registered HGVs will pay the levy for the same period and in the same transaction that they pay vehicle excise duty, which means that they will pay annually. However, foreign-registered vehicles can pay the levy daily, weekly, monthly or annually, which strikes me as an imbalance, because road haulage companies do not have their vehicles on the road at all times. If paying only when they are on the roads is good enough for foreign vehicles, why should that not be so for UK vehicles?

The Bill states that there will be an associated reduction for UK-registered HGVs in the amount of vehicle excise duty that is payable. That is intended to mean that the vast majority of UK-based hauliers will pay no more than they pay currently. However, if 10 million vehicles use the road and pay the levy, and suddenly 15 million or 20 million start to use the roads, why should the 10 million not pay less than they paid previously? Is this just another way for the Government to make money for the Exchequer, and not a way to advantage current road users?

Robert Flello: The intention is that UK hauliers should not pay more, but one of my concerns is that there is no guarantee of that. Some of the numbers I have seen suggest that some UK hauliers will end up paying more. That hardly seems like smoothing out the bumps—quite the reverse.

Michael Connarty: I do not know whether my hon. Friend is looking over my shoulder from a distance, but I was about to express that exact concern. The Government have failed to devise a scheme that protects all UK-based hauliers, because EU rules mean that vehicle excise duty cannot be set low enough to compensate all Britain's HGV users.

I have a number of other concerns, which I am sure will be addressed in Committee. The Bill states that no British road haulier will be worse off as a result of the reform, but I would like to see detailed figures on how much the Government expect to raise from the exercise and on how it will be disbursed. Could some of the money be disbursed to keep vehicle licence duty down for UK heavy goods vehicles? Clearly, the Government need to look at whether they can reduce vehicle excise duty in some way.

Why are UK hauliers set to pay the levy one year before non-UK hauliers?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Stephen Hammond) *indicated dissent.*

Michael Connarty: The Minister is indicating that that is not the case. If he is about to tell me that the levy will come in at exactly the same time for everyone, that would be a vast improvement.

Stephen Hammond: The Secretary of State confirmed that this afternoon in his opening remarks, and I confirmed that in the Ways and Means debate on 23 October. The only possibility of that not happening would be if there is a minor delay to the procurement of the database, but the reality is that we have moved it so that there will be simultaneous introduction.

Michael Connarty: I congratulate the Opposition Front Bench on winning that battle before it has even begun. That was a cause for concern for the Opposition, so I am pleased if that has now been swept away by their good offices and oration. It was an issue only a few days ago.

Will the Minister look again at whether there is a way to enable UK-based drivers to have the same options for payment as non-UK-based drivers? I made this point earlier. Why should it be that those not based in the UK will pay weekly, monthly or daily, but UK owners will pay every day, whether they run a vehicle or not? That seems to be somewhat strange.

Returning to the question of how to police the Bill, I have serious concerns. How does the UK guarantee collection of the fines—a point I made to the Minister? He indicated that it would be the driver who would be responsible. The reality is that the driver will be changed the next time the vehicle is sent into the country. The driver could be changed again, again and again. We are talking about a massive permutation of drivers. I have been attached to the police scheme twice in this place and have spent time with Serious Organised Crime Agency. One difficulty we have is that people come into the country with the deliberate intention of stealing. They are brought to court, bailed and then disappear—they never come back to the country. Someone else will turn up in that or a similar vehicle to steal once again.

Is the Minister trying to tell us that they will be able to catch the driver, and that the next time the vehicle comes into the country it will not have a different driver? It is all right when there is a family car, and either the Minister or the Minister's wife could have been driving the car when they were fined, as happened in the case involving a former member of the coalition Government, but it is not the same with a heavy goods vehicle. The owner can change the driver every single day, so why is it not the owner of the vehicle who gets fined? The fine would not be able to be avoided then.

Robert Flello: Does that not come back to the point that if the owner of the vehicle lives in another country, then without the cross-border ability to pursue the owner of the vehicle, the money will be collected from nowhere?

Michael Connarty: My hon. Friend must have unbelievable eyesight, because I am just about to come on to that very point. It is clear that some Government Members argue that we should extract ourselves from

arrangements such as the European arrest warrant. In reality, however, whether it is the vehicle owner or even the driver it may be that we have to extract the person, who is a criminal if they are breaking the law, from another country by using the European arrest warrant. If we withdraw from the European arrest warrant agreement, how will we pursue such people among the 500 million people who live in the EU?

Andrew Bridgen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Michael Connarty: I will certainly give way to the hon. Gentleman who declared his interest earlier.

Andrew Bridgen: If the driver is not fined, it should not necessarily be the owner, but the registered operator of the vehicle. The registered operator may or may not be the owner—it is a technicality.

Michael Connarty: In the same way that I am pursuing the idea of looking at the supply chain so that human trafficking and modern day slavery can be eradicated by looking at the companies who eventually get the goods, I also think that the owner of the vehicle should discipline and instruct their employees to ensure that they do not break the law. There has to be some way of dealing with this so that we can pursue the vehicles. We have a major problem if we stick with the driver.

Andrew Bridgen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Michael Connarty: I will not take another intervention—people want to get on to other business today. These matters must be discussed in some detail in Committee. If we have a situation where there is no European framework through which we can arrest people—the European arrest warrant—then the Bill will come to naught.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for being gracious in giving way. I want, through him, to give the Minister the opportunity to answer the question I asked in the Ways and Means debate, the same question the Secretary of State perhaps misunderstood and answered, when I raised it earlier, by referring to European trade rules. I hope that the Minister, in his response to my hon. Friend's very good point, will be able to clarify what will happen now that we do not have cross-border enforcement, because the Government have opted out of it.

Michael Connarty: There will be a lot of things that, if the Government opt out of them, will collapse around our ears. I hope, in making these points, that I am providing positive criticism, because I would like to see the Bill emerge in a perfect form, or as perfect as it can possibly be. I welcome the Bill in principle, and hauliers in my constituency welcome the idea behind it, but we must make sure that it comes out of Committee in a form so that it will do what is intended to do, and is not just a precursor to road pricing for everyone in the UK.

3.16 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Like hon. Members on both sides of the House, I congratulate the Government on introducing the Bill. In particular,

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning) who, as roads Minister, met with me and listened to the complaints of my constituents regarding the previous charging scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) made a good point about the Conservative policy group's proposal in 2007, which set out a scheme similar to the one in the Bill, to introduce HGV road charging. It is a shame that that scheme was not looked at more seriously by the Government of the day, and that more progress was not made. This Government should be congratulated, because a view was expressed that it would not be possible, under EU law, to introduce a charging scheme, but the Bill demonstrates that it is possible.

Most hon. Members have made the point about fairness—fairness to the UK haulage industry and fairness to the UK taxpayer. It is not fair when large HGVs can fill up with cheap fuel in Europe—typically, in somewhere such as Luxembourg—and make an entire tour of the UK before returning home having made no direct financial contribution to the UK at all. They are not buying fuel, and they are not paying any other charges or tolls here. Typically, our lorry drivers have to do that when they visit the European continent, so it is fair that the measure is put in place to redress the balance.

The issue is of keen interest to my constituents. As the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe—I am looking at the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is in his place—I am probably the MP with the closest thing to a land border with the continent of Europe and the EU, as the channel tunnel is in my constituency. The idea of enforcing this measure and these charges across jurisdictions is particularly important, both here and for hauliers operating from outside the United Kingdom. My constituents feel particularly strongly because of our proximity to the port of Dover, and because of the presence of the channel tunnel. We see the costs of the road haulage system on our roads and infrastructure as well. It is a concern that financial compensation is not extracted from foreign hauliers for the road network that they use so freely.

Robert Flello: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is not just a matter of the wear and tear that overseas hauliers have on our road infrastructure, but that they also cost British hauliers money by congesting the roads? That means that our British hauliers are more inefficient when driving on our roads, because of the added congestion. That is costing our drivers more money in fuel.

Damian Collins: The hon. Gentleman's point underlines how important it is to have a system that creates a level playing field of charging. One set of hauliers who are not paying UK vehicle excise duty get a free rein, while UK hauliers pay for the impact on the infrastructure that they use in common.

There are other issues that make this particularly important. I want to touch on an issue common in areas with ports that service the UK and the continent of Europe. In my constituency, when the port is closed, owing to bad weather or—typically with the Dover-Calais link—industrial action in the port of Calais, Operation Stack comes into action. This means that lorries are stack parked on the motorway, normally closing the

[Damian Collins]

coast-bound carriageway of the M20 at different stages. This is very expensive to enforce for Kent police and adds to wear and damage not only on the motorway network but on the roads surrounding it. It is not unusual to see lorries parked on minor roads and roundabouts and in lay-bys, often creating mess and causing damage.

One reason my constituents have pressed for these measures is that there should be some means of extracting payment through a charging scheme and—I hope—through the measures in the Bill to create a register of hauliers licensed to use our roads, which will be published on the internet. That way we will know who these lorries are owned by and where they are coming from, and it might make it easier to enforce other charges, not just the charge for taking out the vignette to use the UK motorway network. I would like more action taken to follow up lorries that cause damage on the roadsides, that litter and that might be associated with other accidents or problems caused while they are here. Creating this database and register of foreign hauliers using our roads will be a good first step towards taking such action.

I do not share all the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Michael Connarty). The important thing is that there is a system of fining, and that the fines are enforced. Hauliers that come here frequently and are fined frequently will soon realise that they would be better off taking out the vignette in the first place. If action has to be taken against the lorry driver while they are in the country, and if their progress is delayed, it will often have considerable financial consequences for the hauliers, which operate on a tight schedule while completing their tours. They will not want to be delayed. If lorries are clamped or taken off the roads while the driver waits for someone to pay the fine, that, too, will have financial consequences for the haulier. The important thing, then, is that the charging scheme is in place, that it is enforced equally and that foreign hauliers are made to pay the charge for using the road or receive a financial penalty for not doing so, either directly or indirectly, through the lorries being clamped or taken off the road.

I mentioned earlier the cost of Operation Stack. I am sure that all colleagues will have a view of what the Government could do with the money raised from this charging scheme. Earlier in the debate, the Secretary of State estimated that it would be between £19 million and £23 million a year. I hope that the Government will be mindful of some of the pinch-points in the motorway network, particularly where the cost from the haulage industry—the impact on the roads and the infrastructure—is particularly great. That can be seen in Kent with Operation Stack, especially in the winter months, when the effects are extremely acute. Let us consider whether some of the funds raised could be given, on a discretionary basis, to alleviate some of the damage and problems caused by the haulage operating on some of these major pinch-points, particularly the one running through Kent in my constituency.

I congratulate and thank the Government for bringing forward a Bill that introduces the level playing field that we want and introduces fairness not only for the UK haulage industry but for the UK taxpayer.

3.23 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the Member for Strangford in Northern Ireland, I know the importance of a viable freight industry that can deliver all the products we have. The UK freight industry has supported the principles in the Bill for the past few years, and there is a consensus in favour of the Bill. Members on both sides of the House are of that opinion, and the freight industry is telling us the same thing as well. The industry is vital to Northern Ireland and my constituency in particular. Some hon. Members, their families and their constituents will enjoy the vegetables and potatoes that come from my constituency, because 70% of our food is exported to the rest of the United Kingdom. So when Members sit down to the humble Comber spud on their Sundays, quite possibly it has come for my constituency. It is important, therefore, to have a viable freight industry.

I have a couple of quick questions. The Bill makes it explicit that the vehicle excise duty will be the means by which the rebate will be made. Can the Minister give us the precise reductions in the duty that could bring that about? I rather think that they will not be known until the Budget statement of 2014, when they will be included in the Finance Bill. The levy is to be introduced for UK operators from May 2014, but the process must be operational in time for the vehicle excise duty renewals. Will he assure us of that time scale? It is vital for the industry.

Figures released by the Department indicate that about 6,500 vehicles fall into bands for which vehicle excise duty rates are already too low to offset the cost of the levy. I understand that half of these vehicles—about 3,250—are 28-tonne 2x2 articulated vehicles. Will the Minister indicate, either today or later, the breakdown of operators using vehicles requiring a higher net charge than at present? In particular, where do they operate from? Are they one-man bands or small companies that need a bit of help? It would help if consideration could be given to that. It is unclear whether the 2% of vehicles identified in the money resolution debate as facing significant extra charges as a result of the change are to be found largely in a particular sector or sub-class of vehicle.

It is important that the Minister considers another matter. Businesses need to plan ahead and have some indication of what the costs will be for the future. That is particularly important, as down-plating might not be possible for some operations.

I would like to focus on one final point touched on by the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins). I would like the Minister to clarify a few points for Northern Ireland Members in particular—given that we have a land border—about how this will affect us. How will the charging work in Northern Ireland across the land border with the Republic of Ireland? I ask because I understand that the Irish Government have already begun discussions with Ministers about the amount of cross-border trade. If that is the case, could Irish vehicles be regarded as a special case? It would be useful for Northern Ireland MPs and the House as a whole to know whether the UK Government are minded to permit this exemption. Finally, how will holders of reduced pollution certificates be compensated through replacement grants?

We are moving to a better place with this Bill. We have a chance to do something that is important for the freight industry in the area I represent and the many companies that depend on it. It is also important for the produce that is moved from Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic. The Bill will have an important impact on those industries. I want to see the Bill go through and the benefits that come from it. I understand that I will not be on the Committee, but others will, and I will keep a watchful eye on it.

3.27 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a further short contribution to this debate, following the Ways and Means debate on 23 October. I will not detain the House by repeating all the points I made then, but I want to put on the record my support for the Bill on Second Reading, and add my congratulations and thanks to the Government for bringing it in. It is a long, long overdue measure.

My interest in this subject stems partly from my membership of the Select Committee on Transport—the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) set out in detail why we have taken an interest—but I also have a constituency interest. Milton Keynes is home to many hauliers and large logistics and distribution companies. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned that most potatoes in the country come from his constituency. At the top end of the scale in my constituency we have the national distribution centre for John Lewis, so if Members buy their Christmas gifts from John Lewis—other department stores are available—the goods will very likely start their journey in my constituency. I paid a visit to those at the John Lewis distribution centre a couple of weeks ago and asked their opinion on the Bill. They told me: “Our view is that the Bill is a positive step, because it is helping to address the unfair balance of foreign trucks coming into the country with lower diesel costs. In that regard it is very welcome.” I believe that is the typical view of the haulage industry.

I want to use a little example to flesh out the reasons why UK hauliers are currently at a competitive disadvantage. The point has been well made that fuel prices on the continent are lower than in the UK. As of last month, the average UK diesel price after adjustments was around €1.72 a litre. That contrasts with €1.37 in Belgium, €1.35 in France, €1.30 in Luxembourg and €1.44 in the Netherlands, so foreign hauliers coming to this country stand to make a gain of 20-odd per cent. When fuel represents up to 40% of the operating costs of an HGV, that makes a critical difference to the operating margin for many haulage companies. I have had many representations from hauliers, as I am sure other Members have, about the disadvantage they face, not only from international competition, but from cabotage, whereby trucks fill up overseas and can then cherry-pick short-haul domestic journeys in this country. That can create huge employment uncertainty for HGV drivers in this country, which is a problem that I do not think has been mentioned in the debate thus far. I have had representations from constituents who have been HGV drivers for many years who have found it more and more difficult to get long-term permanent jobs because of the competition from overseas lorries. This measure will go a long way to creating some certainty and security in that employment market.

I will not detain the House any longer—I do not want just to go over all the points I made in the Ways and Means debate. I support the Bill and wish it a speedy passage today and in Committee, and I look forward to it becoming law sooner rather than later.

3.31 pm

Mr Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): This is indeed a great day for UK business and for small and medium-sized enterprises. Combined with the Groceries Code Adjudicator Bill yesterday, today’s Bill represents a stamping of this coalition Government’s commitment to small and medium-sized enterprises and to solving some of the problems they face. That goes not only for small and medium-sized enterprises, but for our consumers and constituents, who pay for the costs and the bureaucracy that are built into business. Anything we can do to solve some of those problems will be of benefit to them.

I want to take a few moments to seek clarification on one or two points. I am sure some of them will be thrashed out in Committee, but I will start by being a little pedantic. Can the Minister say how he will define “a day”? Is it 24 hours from the point of entry into the country, or is it a Monday, a Tuesday, a Wednesday, and so on? When does “a day” begin? Does it begin when someone has cleared customs, when they leave the port or when they exit the ferry? If someone is caught in a road traffic accident or in a queue caused by one and they miss the deadline by five minutes, the definition could become quite an issue. I hope that ANPR technology will assist the authorities in ensuring that people are registered and are paying the levies. I hope that the Minister will confirm that ANPR will be installed in all our ports and at all entrances to the country.

Damian Collins: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Does he agree that consideration would need to be given to lorries that get caught up in Operation Stack, which I mentioned in my speech? Sometimes lorries may be held for two or three days when they are only a few hours away from the port.

Mr Spencer: Absolutely; I acknowledge that point, which is particularly applicable in my hon. Friend’s constituency, where, for reasons beyond the driver’s control, he may find himself missing the deadlines. Indeed, that point is vital, because if the police are to have access to ANPR data, those data need to be live and in real time, because any vehicle might be complying with the levy at that moment, but not in half an hour’s time. I hope that those data will be live and available.

We have heard quite a bit about enforcement today, and about whether it should apply to the driver or the owner. I want to caution the Minister to ensure that it will not involve the owner. The identity of the owner could be the source of some debate. It could be a leasing company, or a hire company. It could well be someone who is not connected to the way in which the vehicle is being operated. I hope that that point will be clarified.

Finally, will impounding be used as the ultimate sanction to ensure that these vehicles do not continue to move? That could give rise to issues if the goods on the vehicle were perishable or, even worse, if the vehicle were carrying livestock. How would we deal with impounding an articulated lorry full of bees, for example, or sheep or pigs? We need to think those issues through.

[Mr Spencer]

Broadly, however, I welcome the Bill. It represents a great step forward in levelling the playing field and assisting the hard-working HGV companies in the UK. The Minister and his Department are to be congratulated on it.

3.35 pm

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): I will not detain the House for long, as there is further business that we want to get to. I want to add my voice to those who have paid tribute to the Government for introducing the Bill. It is long overdue and very welcome. I am also pleased to see that it has gained cross-party support.

My constituency has a large number of haulage contractors because we have a lot of quarries. Those contractors run many wagons up and down the country, and the Bill will help and support them. They move the finest limestone in the world to various parts of the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) mentioned John Lewis products being in everyone's Christmas bags this year. I dare say that most hon. Members' houses contain a little piece of High Peak limestone somewhere.

Those hauliers have been operating under more and more pressure as a result of foreign hauliers coming into the country. They use our roads, which results in wear and tear. We hear the thunder of wagons trundling down the roads in the High Peak day and night, and many of those wagons come from abroad. There has been much talk about levelling the playing field to give our own hauliers the competitive edge that they need. I believe that the Bill will achieve that, and I applaud it.

When our hauliers go abroad, they pay tolls and user charges on foreign motorways such as the autoroutes in France, the autostrade in Italy and the autopistas in Spain. Our hauliers pay to help with their upkeep. I am not wont to quote anything European, but when European HGVs come here, the French pay rien, the Italians pay niente and the Spanish pay nada—that is, nothing. The Bill will address that issue. As we have already heard, foreign haulage contractors also use cheaper fuel.

This is a great Bill, so let us speed it through. Let us give our hauliers and the wagon drivers they employ a level playing field. I used to supply haulage companies with machinery, and I know that other people's jobs rely on those companies. They include mechanics, suppliers and those in the oil industry. The Bill is a great thing for British hauliers and the British economy, and, together with the Groceries Code Adjudicator Bill that we debated yesterday, it shows that this Government are serious about helping small and medium-sized enterprises up and down the country. They are not just talking about it; they are actually doing it. I commend the Bill to the House.

3.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Stephen Hammond): As my right hon. Friend Secretary of State for Transport said in his opening speech, the intent of the Bill is absolutely clear. It will help to deliver a fairer deal for UK hauliers, going some way to correct an inequality that has existed for too long.

On 23 October this year, we held an extensive Ways and Means debate, and I was urged to make a contribution that owed more to quantity than quality. Today, I have been urged to make my speech one of quality rather than quantity, and I will obey that stricture. I should like to thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for the points he raised today and during the Ways and Means debate. He rightly said that the Bill was to be welcomed. I tried in the previous debate to answer some of his questions, and I shall try again to deal with points that he has raised, along with those raised by the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Ffello), for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman).

Vehicle excise duty rates will be published in the draft Finance Bill towards the end of 2013, so they will be known well before the start of the levy. There has been a great deal of discussion about enforcement today, and about whether opting out of cross-border enforcement arrangements would hamper enforcement. Let me make it clear that the cross-border enforcement directive is only about data exchange. As we said in the Ways and Means debate, and as my right hon. Friend said earlier today, there is therefore no question of enforcement being hindered by our not being involved in the directive. Outstanding fines and penalties can be pursued even if they are not in the directive.

Questions were raised about who is paying the fine. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was exactly right: it is the driver, but the registered vehicle keeper is jointly liable, so VOSA—the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency—and the DVLA can act against both, including by impounding vehicles and by taking drivers and operators to court. Drivers without a satisfactory UK address will be required to pay a financial penalty deposit on the spot by a VOSA enforcement officer. This enforcement strategy is designed to overcome the problem, raised by several Opposition Members, of foreign drivers fleeing back to their own country and out of UK jurisdiction. The question of enforcement has been well dealt with, and there is always the option of a prosecution in the magistrates court for the offence, as set out in clause 11.

Questions have been raised about what would happen if the load was seized and how much of it could be seized. The Bill makes it fairly clear that the whole load is seized. I will consider the point of my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr Spencer) about whether a lorry might be carrying bees, locusts or whatever else, and about what needs to be done at that stage. Let us none the less be clear: the Bill contains the power to seize the load.

As I said in the Ways and Means debate, the Welsh Government were seeking a legislative consent motion at that stage. Since then, after further discussions with departmental officials, they decided that they did not need to do this. Scotland and Northern Ireland had already said that. Let us be clear that the HGV levy is a tax, so it is a reserved matter, but we have no intention of limiting the power of any of the devolved Administrations to introduce charging if they so wish at some future date, and the Bill allows for geographic coverage of the HGV road user levy to be amended by order to allow this, if necessary.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked about Northern Ireland. As I said in the Ways and Means debate, Ireland already has road charges in

the form of tolls. The new UK charge applying in Northern Ireland is about the same as existing Irish tolls, so this would be relevant to a round trip from Belfast to Dublin and back again. It would be difficult to exempt Northern Ireland, because the Government are introducing this by means of reducing VAT. If the hon. Gentleman wishes, I am sure we can explore the issue further in Committee.

To return to the main aims of the Bill and the key point about the level of charge, we consider our plan to charge large vehicles £10 a day or £1,000 a year to be fair, proportionate and compliant with relevant EU legislation. For the daily amount, we are seeking to charge the highest level permissible while remaining compliant with EU law.

Robert Flello: Does the Minister agree that it might be worth the Department going away and looking again to see if there are perhaps more creative ways of raising that amount? As Government Members themselves have said, a driver from the UK going across the channel and perhaps using an Autobahn or paying a toll in Germany might end up paying a great deal more than £10 a day.

Stephen Hammond: I will look at that again, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we have already looked at it in some detail. The clear requirement is to ensure that the Bill remains compliant with EU regulations and law about the vignette; at that level of charge, it does.

Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Flello), asked how many UK hauliers would not be better off. I can tell him that 94% of UK hauliers will pay no more than they pay now, and 98% will pay no more than £50. There are effectively two classes of vehicle for which there may be small problems. First, there are the conventional HGVs—either articulated or rigid vehicles without a trailer. For them—a relatively small number of vehicles, perhaps 6,000 out of the 260,000 in the UK fleet—the maximum calculated loss is £79. Then there are a small number—about 7,000 of them on the road—of rigid vehicles with a trailer. Of those we estimate—the Department has done some analysis—that fewer than 50 will face potentially more than £300 extra in costs. There is, however, a relatively simple remedy for them—re-plating. I am sure that that can be explored further in Committee.

The Bill is not designed as a precursor to increased charges for businesses or road users more widely, as some have speculated. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, our intention is clear: it is to introduce legislation that will level the playing field in order to help UK hauliers.

I am delighted that the Bill has been received so positively today, because I think that it presents an opportunity to correct an injustice that has persisted for far too long; I am delighted with the support that we

have had from Members in all parts of the House; and I am delighted that the Bill is to be given a Second Reading today.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

HGV ROAD USER LEVY BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the HGV Road User Levy Bill:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 13 December 2012.

3. The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—(*Mr McLoughlin.*)

Question agreed to.

CIVIL AVIATION BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Civil Aviation Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 30 January 2012 in the last Session of Parliament (Civil Aviation Bill (Programme)), as varied by the Order of 25 April 2012 in that Session (Civil Aviation Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

1. Proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement at today's sitting.

Subsequent stages

2. Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

3. The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Mr Simon Burns.*)

Question agreed to.

Civil Aviation Bill

Consideration of Lords Amendments

Clause 1

CAA'S GENERAL DUTY

3.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Simon Burns): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments 2 to 72.

Mr Burns: In an increasingly globalised world, air travel is fundamental to the long-term competitiveness of the United Kingdom. However, much of the legislation that governs aviation dates from the 1980s, and it is therefore imperative for the legislative framework to be brought up to date. The Civil Aviation Bill introduces, and makes possible, reform in four key areas: the economic regulation of airports, the legislative framework of the Civil Aviation Authority, the air travel organisers' licence scheme, and aviation security. The Bill has secured wide support, and we have worked hard to address issues that have raised concern in this House, in another place, or in the industry.

The vast majority of the amendments made since the Bill was last in this House are minor and technical, including Lords amendments 23 to 27, 29 to 36 and 44 to 71. I shall refrain from entering too deeply into the details of those amendments at this stage; suffice it to say that they are predominantly concerned with improving the drafting, clarifying the wording, removing areas of ambiguity, or excluding doubt to ensure that our policy intentions are properly met and delivered in full.

Let me deal briefly with three notable issues on which amendments have been agreed in another place: the imposition of environmental duties on the CAA, the efficiency of the CAA, and the Secretary of State's powers to make regulations relating to the ATOL scheme.

The environmental impact of aviation has been raised during the Bill's passage through both Houses, and the Government take it very seriously. In particular, there has been a great deal of focus on giving the CAA additional duties to take account of it. Lords amendments 1 to 4 respond to that concern by giving the CAA a supplementary environmental duty to which it must have regard in performing its airport economic regulation functions. The amendments are intended to make clear that in conducting those functions, the CAA must have regard to the ability of the regulated airport operator to take reasonable measures to reduce, control or mitigate adverse environmental effects that are generated by the activity of the airport—and aircraft using the airport—to which the licence relates. For example, a reasonable measure could be a cost-effective energy saving investment project, such as the installation of solar-powered lighting in terminal buildings, which would lower the airport's future energy costs. Environmental issues in this context would include noise, vibration, emissions and the effects of works carried out at the airport. The amendments also provide clarity that reasonable costs of environmental

measures undertaken by licence holders may continue to be taken into account in the regulatory settlement, where the measures are in the interests of passengers and owners of cargo and to do with the provision of airport operation services.

We have always been clear that airport operators, whether or not they are subject to economic regulation, should be able to invest in appropriate environmental measures. For example, if an unregulated airport undertakes investment in environmental measures that benefit passengers, the Civil Aviation Authority will be able to look to this and approve a reasonable similar investment in the regulatory settlement at a regulated airport.

The Government do not believe that the absence of an environmental supplementary duty would prevent the CAA from approving environmental investment where that is in passengers' and cargo owners' interests. However, following detailed consideration of the matter, the Government decided there is a benefit to making this clear in the Bill. Certainly, the Bill should not be seen as placing a restriction on investment in environmental measures at licensed airports where they benefit passengers and freight owners in the provision of airport operation services.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am sure departmental officials will have briefed the Minister that we debated at length in Committee whether an environmental duty should be placed on the CAA in respect of the operation of airports. There was a subsequent debate about the suggestion of the Minister's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers), that such a measure would apply only to Heathrow. There is therefore a debate to be had about whether the environmental duty should cover all airports, or just Heathrow. Will the Minister confirm that the proposed CAA environmental duty that the Government have accepted will operate across the entire aviation industry?

Mr Burns: The hon. Gentleman is right: I have been extremely well briefed by some excellent civil servants, who have had to play catch-up, because I am a Johnny-come-lately to this debate as a result of the events of 4 September this year. I confirm that this duty will apply not just to Heathrow, but also to the other regulated airports of Gatwick and Stansted. I hope that reassures him.

A regulated airport should not be required to spend on environmental measures where a competitive airport would not do so, because that could create market distortions by placing greater burdens on regulated airports than non-regulated airports. Furthermore, not only have the Government sought to address these concerns through their own amendments, but on Report in another place Opposition amendments to the proposed Government amendments strengthening the wording of this duty were also accepted. I hope the House will recognise that as a genuine effort to reach an agreed position on including appropriate environmental considerations in the Bill. We are confident that we have struck the right balance on the environment, and that the CAA will be better placed than ever before to take environmental matters seriously.

On CAA efficiency, we agree with industry stakeholders that it is important to hold the CAA to account. There are a number of provisions in existing legislation that

require the CAA to carry out its activities efficiently. Lords amendment 22 inserts a new clause that will provide for greater transparency and accountability in the CAA's efficiency measures. Section 21(3) of the Civil Aviation Act 1982 already requires the Secretary of State to lay before each House of Parliament a copy of the CAA's annual report on its performance and its functions in that accounting year. If Lords amendment 22 is accepted, in future this annual report laid in each House will include an efficiency statement by the CAA and an assessment by the independent auditors of that efficiency statement. The provisions will give the CAA a further incentive to secure value for money and to be as efficient as possible in performing its functions. I am pleased to say that the amendment was welcomed in the other place, where the Opposition commended it, saying:

"This is an excellent proposal, which will guarantee that the efficiency of the CAA will be subject to scrutiny".—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 7 November 2012; Vol. 740, c. 1062.*]

I hope that the new clause will enjoy a similar level of support in this House.

Lords amendments 17 to 20 provide the Secretary of State with further powers to close down potential ways around the ATOL scheme. The Secretary of State already has the power to regulate businesses that make available flight accommodation and, under clause 94 of the Bill as introduced, will have the power to regulate businesses acting as an agent for the consumer. However, after the Bill was introduced, the Government and the CAA found possible loopholes that needed to be addressed in further powers.

The first loophole concerns a potential business model whereby a business argues that it is neither making available flight accommodation nor acting for the consumer but is instead merely facilitating making available flight accommodation. That business could then argue that it is not in the scope of either the existing ATOL regulation-making power or those in the Bill as introduced. Lords amendments 17 and 18 address that loophole by giving the Secretary of State powers to include businesses that facilitate making available flight accommodation in the ATOL scheme.

Secondly, amendments 19 and 20 give further necessary clarity to the regulation-making power in instances where goods and services sold alongside flights, such as accommodation or car hire, can be protected under the ATOL scheme. By closing potential avoidance approaches, those four amendments will help the Government meet our stated objectives of providing greater clarity for consumers about what holidays and flights are included in the ATOL scheme as well as a more consistent regulatory framework for businesses.

I have dealt with the main substantive issues covered by the Lords amendments. The remaining amendments, as I alluded to, are the majority and are technical and drafting amendments that clarify issues so that there is no shadow of a doubt about the Bill's intentions.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Like the Minister, we welcome the Bill and the Lords amendments. We supported much of the Bill in Committee and continue to do so today. This is my first opportunity to welcome the new Minister of State to his position and to face him across the Dispatch Box, so I wish him well in his new role. It is probably good to be meeting on relatively friendly terms on our first outing.

We are very pleased that the Government have accepted a number of amendments. In the other place, the noble Earl Attlee said:

"The noble Lord, Lord Davies of Oldham, is very insistent and persuasive. He is clearly convinced that his amendments will improve the Bill. My Bill team manager will probably kill me, but I can accept".—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 7 November 2012; Vol. 740, c. 1003.*]

Clearly, I need to take advice and lessons from my noble Friend on how to be insistent and persuasive, because we tabled those amendments, a number of which were accepted in the other place, in Committee and raised the subject again on Third Reading. We were spectacularly unsuccessful in persuading the Government to accept a single amendment, so we obviously need to speak closely to our colleagues in the other place to see how they were able to secure agreement.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): It might be some consolation to my hon. Friend if I say to him that it might not be his powers of persuasion. It sometimes takes time for things to sink in.

4 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his understanding of the difficulties that the coalition sometimes has, and I am sure coalition Members are also grateful for that empathy.

I will not speak for long. I know that there is an important debate on autism to follow, and that a number of colleagues want to get in on this brief debate. I refer specifically to amendments 1 to 4 and 22, which cover the environmental issues and the CAA duty of efficiency. It is disappointing that the eloquent Lord Davies was unconvincing on the issue of emissions, especially as the European Union emission trading scheme has folded. We had a discussion in Committee about emission targets. In his closing remarks the Minister might want to comment on where we go on that. Aviation emission targets were a matter of some concern, but the amendments in the other place were not accepted. There is also nothing on passenger welfare, which we pressed in a number of ways.

On amendments 1 to 4, we spent considerable time in Committee, from column 112 onwards in the *Official Report*, trying to persuade the Government of the merits of the environmental duties. Fortunately, they have seen some of the light. On amendment 22, at columns 343 and 344, we argued the case, for the aviation industry, that the Civil Aviation Authority should have a duty to operate efficiently.

In response to our requests, the Minister's predecessor said:

"Sadly, the shadow Minister will think me hard-hearted, because I cannot support new clause 2".

She went on to say:

"I can only re-emphasise that my understanding and interpretation of the Bill is that it does indeed require the CAA to act in an efficient way".—[*Official Report, Civil Aviation Public Bill Committee, 13 March 2012; c. 343-4.*]

Fortunately, it seems that she was wrong, and we welcome the Government's change of heart.

We welcome the Government amendments on ATOL and the opportunity to debate the subject, and the Government's intentions, more thoroughly in Westminster Hall on Thursday. As I said, this is essentially a good

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

Bill. It could have been even better, but as a result of the good sense of our noble Friends in the other place, it is at least in better shape now than when it left here, and we support the amendments.

Mr Alan Reid (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I welcome the Bill and the amendments before us today, particularly amendments 1 to 4, which deal with the protection of the environment. For the Liberal Democrats it is extremely important that a duty of care for the environment is written into the Bill, and the amendments achieve that. This was an issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert) raised on Second Reading and continued to raise as the Bill went through its Commons stages, so I am delighted that the Government have listened to him and to the Liberal Democrats and tabled their own amendments in the Lords.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I hate to disillusion the hon. Gentleman, but we had some good exchanges with his hon. Friend, who managed to wriggle out of supporting any of the environmental duty amendments that we tabled. I would have referred to him in my speech, but I had not given him advance notice and I would not do him the discourtesy. We give credit to the other place for the amendments, not to the hon. Member for Cambridge.

Mr Reid: An interesting intervention from the hon. Gentleman. I discussed the Bill with my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge before today, and I understand that he felt there were some technical deficiencies in the amendments tabled by the hon. Gentleman in Committee. It is important to stress that Liberal Democrats are in government, and we are able to influence the Government because we are part of the Government. It was the Government who tabled the amendments in the Lords. Having spent nine years on the Opposition Benches, I can understand the hon. Gentleman's frustration. Without civil service advice, it is difficult to get an amendment right. Being on the Government Benches, Liberal Democrats are achieving successes and this is one of them. As a result of our influence, care for the environment is now on the face of the Bill.

Huw Irranca-Davies: We are always willing to learn, so will the hon. Gentleman enlighten us about what those technical deficiencies were, so that in future we can table better amendments?

Mr Reid: The amendments in question are not on the amendment paper today. What we have before us today are the amendments made in the Lords, and I would probably be out of order if I spoke to amendments that have not been tabled. The hon. Gentleman could have tabled amendments to the Lords amendments, but chose not to do so, so we cannot discuss them.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I may be wrong, but I doubt I am. I quoted Earl Attlee accepting amendment 2 and adding:

"My Bill manager will probably kill me".—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 7 November 2012; Vol. 740, c. 1003.*]

Amendment 2 was tabled by Lord Davies and accepted by the Government. We tabled that amendment in Committee and on Report. The hon. Member for Cambridge had ample opportunity to table his own amendment, but nothing was forthcoming.

Mr Reid: My understanding is that amendment 2 was an amendment to a Government amendment and only worked because it was combined with the Government amendment.

I did not intend to speak for long, Mr Deputy Speaker, but have been waylaid by Opposition Members. I will conclude by saying that the Bill now focuses both on passengers and on the environment. I believe it strikes the right balance and I am pleased to support it today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Given that the Government have no plans to protect access to the hubs, I would like to ask a question in reference to clause 6. Access to the hubs of Heathrow and Gatwick is important for Belfast City airport and Aldergrove International airport. Ever mindful that air transport is a volatile business, the matter was debated in another place through an amendment tabled by Lord Empey. Referring to a report by Birmingham MEP Philip Bradbourn, the noble Lord said:

"It was drawn up in April this year and, I believe, was passed by the European Parliament in May. The report, 'considers it essential for regional airports to have access to hubs'.—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 9 November 2012; Vol. 740, c. 1252.*]

Lord Empey advanced that view in his amendment, which was not accepted.

I raise the point because on 6 November, Jim Nicholson MEP tabled two amendments to a proposed European regulation. I do not intend to read out the text of amendment 45 in its entirety, but it is about the slot allocation system established in 1993, and states in italics:

"In addition it is important that access to hub airports from regional airports should be maintained where such routes are essential to the economy of that region."

That amendment was adopted by the European Parliament, as was amendment 178, which, after the provision,

"The coordinator shall set up a pool, which shall contain all the slots. All new slot capacity determined pursuant to Article 3(3) shall be placed in the pool"

would add,

"This procedure shall be without prejudice to regional airports connectivity to hub airports. If such connectivity is undermined Member States shall be permitted to intervene."

After all that lead-in, my question to the Minister is quite simple. Will he assure this House that he will support those amendments, which will protect access to the hubs and give life and continuity to Belfast City and Aldergrove International airports, when they come from Europe to this House?

Mr David Ruffley (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I rise to speak briefly in this short debate. Amendment 3, which relates to clause 2, refers to

"the need to secure that each holder of a licence... is able to take reasonable measures to reduce, control or mitigate the adverse environmental effects of the airport to which the licence relates".

I would like to quiz the Minister on the meaning of "environmental effects", because I am a strong supporter of an estuary airport solution and very much opposed to the idea of a third, or conceivably a fourth, runway at Heathrow.

It seems fairly clear that aviation pollution from Heathrow, if the airport was extended, would compound an already poor state of affairs. There are about 50 early deaths a year as a result of pollution, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has calculated that the number could climb to 150 if a third runway is built. We also know that the prevailing winds at Heathrow are south-westerly and that pollution from the airport already spreads over a huge swathe of north London.

Finally, we also know that noise from Heathrow accounts for 95% of all the noise impacting people from London airports and that around 725,000 people live under the flight path and experience noise in excess of 55 dB. If Heathrow is extended, we can expect all those environmental impacts to be exacerbated. Will the Minister indicate whether the rather welcome amendment, which would require adverse environmental effects to be mitigated, will include the list I have just given?

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): There is not much more to say after that contribution, except that the key issues of noise and emissions pollution are absolutely critical to my constituents and, as the hon. Gentleman said, to a much wider area of the south-east. That is why I welcome the amendments, wherever they were drafted—I think forensics could prove where they come from.

The key issue for my constituents is how the targets will be set, monitored and reported. It would be useful if the Minister clarified what role this House will have in monitoring the implementation of this legislation. In the past we have received the CAA's annual reports and individual determinations but, given that the legislation represents a significant break, I think that a regular report from the Secretary of State would be extremely useful, even if it was only an annual report. We could then have a full debate on the Floor of the House to monitor issues such as the environmental impact.

Mr Simon Burns: It might be helpful at this point if I reassure the hon. Gentleman that, as I said in my introductory remarks, there is and will continue to be an annual report from the CAA, and it will be up to this House to debate it, in a variety of shapes and forms, at any time it wishes.

John McDonnell: That is incredibly helpful. I encourage Members to join me in ensuring that we have that annual debate, which we have not had up to now. The legislation places duties not only on the CAA, but on the Secretary of State. Therefore, I think that it is important that we have an annual report from the Secretary of State on the fulfilment of his or her duties that we can debate, because this is a critical piece of legislation for so many of our constituents.

Mr Burns: I intend to speak very briefly and not to detain the House for long, because I understand that many hon. Members wish to contribute to the important debate that will follow. I will deal briefly with some of the issues raised by hon. Members because, as those aficionados who attended Second Reading and Committee will know, there has been a thorough debate and considerable engagement between those with differing views and opinions, not least in another place.

[Interruption.] I will not get involved in the little squabble between the official Opposition and the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mr Reid).

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) mentioned the important matter of emissions. I do not want to get into an in-depth debate or to regurgitate what has already been said. On the question of the duty to work with others to meet the UK's emissions targets, we believe that the Opposition amendments are unnecessary, as was pointed out in Committee and on Report. That is because, as he will accept, this Government and the CAA already take environmental matters very seriously, and the Government's approach is to ensure that the aviation sector makes a significant and cost-effective contribution towards reducing global emissions. Moreover, the Opposition amendments were technically flawed, although I accept that that could have been remedied during the subsequent procedures in this House. We feel that our general approach, with the way in which we have listened to the arguments and the amendments that have been made, is the right way forward and that it gives the protections whereby the environmental issues will be taken very seriously.

4.15 pm

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned emissions and referred to what has happened in the past week or so with regard to the European dimension. The UK welcomes the Commission's proposal to, in effect, stop the clock in return for progress on global agreement in the International Civil Aviation Organisation. We think that it is right that we give the United Nations process time to make progress on a global deal, and we look forward to receiving more detail on the substance of its proposal, and sight of the formal legislative proposal, which is due, I believe, later this month. We hope that the constructive atmosphere in which Friday's international meeting took place can continue and that the UN is able to build on the current momentum to deliver a successful and ambitious outcome next year.

Jim Fitzpatrick *rose*—

Mr Burns: I am beginning to regret giving such a detailed response because it has invited an intervention, to which I am more than happy to give way.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the Minister. In the absence of the European emissions trading scheme and of an international agreement in the ICAO, but with ongoing dialogue, will the Government engage with the Committee on Climate Change to look at aviation and, for that matter, shipping emissions, because they are not incorporated into UK targets although people naturally feel that they are significant?

Mr Burns: We will engage wherever necessary to seek to reach solutions that are viable and will achieve the objectives set out, provided that they are the right course of action and the correct way forward.

Let me pick up the points made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Mr Ruffley), because I think that I dealt with the matter raised by the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) in my intervention. *[Interruption.]* Well, I thought I

[Mr Simon Burns]

did; I hope that he will be generous so that we can make progress. As the hon. Member for Strangford and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds will know, the context for dealing with the environmental issues surrounding Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted, for example, are all fully dealt with in the Bill.

I felt at times that the hon. Member for Strangford was going a little further on to the wider issue of hub airport status. I have to say to him, in the nicest possible way, that that is obviously beyond the scope of this Bill. However, I hope that he will take reassurance from the fact that in order to look at the whole area of the future of aviation policy, to meet our commitments and to protect our position as the significant hub airport presence for western Europe, we have set up, under my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, the Davies inquiry, which will look across the range at the best way forward on aviation policy, the best way to deal with capacity and connectivity issues—

Mr Brian H. Donohoe (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Burns: No, because I really do want to make progress.

The inquiry will report in due course, and it would be extremely foolish of me to try to prejudge or anticipate it, but no doubt the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse will, if he so wishes, be prepared to contribute to it by submitting his views on issues that he clearly holds to be very important, as indeed they are.

In conclusion, as the hon. Gentleman has said, this process, which started with the Bill's Second Reading in

January, has involved friendly, vigorous and constructive engagement between the Government and the Opposition. I pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers), for the way in which she led on the Bill until the final prize was taken from her grasp and given to me. I also pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and his colleague, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), for their constructive engagement in ensuring a strengthened and even better Bill at the end of the process than it was at the beginning. That is what Parliament is all about—making sure that we get the right answers to the questions posed. I think that the Bill as it was originally drafted was very good but, by listening and engaging, we have been able to strengthen it further, and this short debate has illustrated the co-operative way in which both sides have engaged in the process.

I could not finish without thanking those who are often the unsung heroes of the process of taking a Bill through Committee. Members in this House and the other place do not know their names and rarely see the hard work that they do day in, day out. They are, of course, the civil servants in the Department for Transport and its Bill team. They have worked extremely hard to ensure that our proceedings could go as smoothly as possible and that all the amendments were analysed properly, so that only those that merited it were accepted, even in modified form. I pay tribute to them and to all Members who have contributed so much to the Bill, both in this place and in another place, and I look forward to its becoming law, because it is badly needed to upgrade the existing legislation, which dates back to 1982.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 75 agreed to.

Backbench Business

Autism

4.22 pm

Mr Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of autism.

This is a wide-ranging topic for debate, but deliberately so. I hope that we will have time to discuss the varying aspects of this lifelong condition in relation both to children and young people and, of course, to adults.

As is now widely known, the term “autism” covers a range of conditions on the autism spectrum, including Asperger’s syndrome, with a hard “g,” if you please. In this, the 50th anniversary year of the creation of the National Autistic Society, which is now part of a thriving group of organisations and campaigning bodies, today offers an opportunity not merely to look back at the progress that has been made, but, most importantly, to look forward to improvements to the way in which we diagnose, educate and support people with autism.

I believe that I am correct in saying that this is the first time, apart from a 10-minute rule Bill that I introduced last year, that a specific debate on autism has been held on the Floor of the House during this Parliament. The last time that the issue was debated here was during the passage of what is now the Autism Act 2009. It is my pleasure to pay warm tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) for her redoubtable stewardship of a private Member’s Bill that, after initial opposition from the then Government, made its way, in amended form, on to the statute book. It required the Government to create an adult autism strategy and to set out guidelines for local authorities and health bodies in England to support adults with autism.

Mr Lee Scott (Ilford North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we should go down the route of finding work for young people who have autism, Asperger’s or any other special need and getting them into full-time employment when they finish formal education?

Mr Buckland: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I pay tribute to the work that he does in his constituency of Ilford North, through a joint initiative with local businesses, to obtain sponsorship and support to help young adults and adults with Asperger’s or autism into the workplace. We need to send out the message loud and clear that, far from looking at people with autism as a problem, we should be celebrating the great gifts that they have and their potential to be constructive members of the workplace.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I want to ensure that I did not misinterpret him when I heard him imply that the previous Government were forced to do something. There was a debate about the Bill promoted by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), but in the end she persuaded the Government and we brought forward the first autism strategy. That has led to improvements on the ground. It is important to say

that this has been a cross-party drive, and it is much-needed because there are huge gaps for children and adults with autism. I just want to be clear at the beginning that the right hon. Lady’s drive had full Labour party and cross-party support.

Mr Buckland: I want to ensure that today’s debate takes place in that cross-party spirit. Members from all parts of the House warmly supported the provisions of the 2009 Act. I appreciate that Governments have conflicting priorities and pressures on their time. It was through the support of all parts of the House that that private Member’s Bill became law. There is a common purpose in the Chamber today, in relation to both the progress that has been made and our aspirations for our constituents who have autism and their families.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman and others for securing this debate. Will he note that in Wales, the levels of employment among people with autism are worse, with 7% of those with autism being in full-time employment and a further 6% being in part-time employment? This House should join together in congratulating the Welsh Assembly Government, who have recently appointed an autism employment ambassador to champion the cause of those with autism in employment. That might be something that this Government would like to consider as well.

Mr Buckland: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. It is concerning to hear that the figures in Wales are dramatically lower than those in England. Clearly, the Welsh Assembly Government have to take their own course. Anything that is designed to promote the interests of young adults and adults with autism and their route into work has to be welcomed. It is early days and I very much hope that we will see a dramatic improvement in those concerning statistics.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one way to improve the employment situation for people on the autism spectrum, whether in Wales or here in England, is to create greater understanding among adults and among people’s peers at an earlier age? Will he therefore join me in supporting the Anderson Foundation schools challenge, which aims to improve awareness in schools? Will he encourage colleagues to get involved in that and to encourage schools in their constituencies to sign up to it in order to raise and widen awareness of what the condition means to those who suffer from it?

Mr Buckland: I welcome my hon. Friend’s intervention. I am, of course, happy to support the Anderson Foundation schools challenge. It is already yielding fruit. Special schools in my constituency are taking part. It seems to be a constructive and practical way not only to raise awareness of autism among the general public, but to engage children and young people with the condition in actively doing things that emphasise the positive aspects of life with autism.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate; he is generous in allowing interventions. Does he agree that although councils, local education authorities, primary care trusts or their successors mostly do a good job, they need to

[Mark Pritchard]

co-ordinate their activities a little more and work closely together to ensure that people with autism—especially teenagers who have autism and physical disabilities—and their parents and families, get all the support they need?

Mr Buckland: My hon. Friend touches on a number of themes that I will develop in my speech, but his point about the complexity of conditions with which people present to the authorities is important and does not affect only autism. Often, complex physical and other conditions will present with autism, and I cannot emphasise enough the need for joined-up commissioning and thinking.

I was talking about the adult autism strategy, which is due to be reviewed by the Government next year. It focuses on improved training, the development of local autism schemes, and a better way to plan and commission services for people with autism. Importantly, it emphasises the involvement of service users and their families—that perhaps sounds a bit trite, but it is often overlooked when services are developed. Services will be unhelpful if they are not developed with the full involvement and consent of those who use them.

Mr Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very constructive speech. When considering these problems as a whole, does he agree that more focus should be placed on the role of carers than has been the case so far? The National Autistic Society pointed out that only one in five carers has had the assessment involving local authorities to which they are entitled by law. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we must change that?

Mr Buckland: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman's tireless efforts for people with disabilities, including autism, over many years. He is right to say that we overlook the role of carers at our peril and we must all face up to and address the amount of work that carers do and the pressure they are put under, as well as the lack of support they have had to get used to. Comments about joined-up thinking immediately make me consider the role of carers, and when developing health and social care legislation we must remember that not only care for elderly people but lifetime care for people with disabilities cannot be overlooked.

I was talking about the review of the adult autism strategy and my message to the Department of Health, and the Minister responsible for that review, is that we must ensure the National Audit Office report that was published earlier this summer is fully addressed. Although that report noted encouraging progress in many areas of the adult autism strategy, it stated that much more needs to be done to improve access to diagnostic services, personal budgets and social care assessments for people with autism.

Let me set out some facts for the House. More than half a million people in this country have autism—about one in 100. If we include the families and carers of people with autism, more than 2 million people will be affected in some way. That is about 3,000 people in an average parliamentary constituency, according to studies by the Information Centre for Health and Social Care. As the parent of a child on the autism spectrum—like some other Members of this House—I am firmly in that category.

Perhaps I should pause a moment to share with the House some of my experiences as a parent that have driven me to do everything I can, while I have the honour of being a Member of this place, to campaign for the interests of people with autism. It took quite a while for us, as parents, to acknowledge that things were not quite as we had expected with our child. People go through denial, guilt, anger and shame. However, we went through the difficult process with a firm realisation that we would do everything we could for our child. Like millions of other parents, I have been through that mill and come out on the other side, but I am left with the feeling that the system does not work. We are still very much obsessed with process and not outcome, and we seemingly encourage the creation of categories to fit children into rather than the other way around. Until we nail that problem, I am not sure that any of the changes we make, however well intentioned, will bring real change.

Having said that, I remain an eternal optimist about our public services. I pay warm tribute to the legions of teachers, teaching assistants, speech and language therapists, health professionals, child psychologists and all the other people in the special needs field who work so hard day in, day out to help and support people who need their services. We are lucky in this country to have such a dedicated range of professionals.

An estimated 88,000 school-age children have autism in England alone—that is about 1% of the total school population. Autistic children form the largest group of children in receipt of statements of special educational needs. The proposals in the children and families Bill will therefore affect them significantly.

Stephen Metcalfe: Is that 1% increasing or decreasing? My understanding is that, with better diagnosis and better understanding of who fits on the spectrum, the number is increasing. It is therefore vital that we get those services right.

Mr Buckland: My local experience, which I am sure is shared by many hon. Members, is that the rate of diagnosis is increasing. Some years ago, when my daughter was diagnosed, I was startled to learn that, in certain parts of the country, there were no diagnoses of girls with autism. That was not because there were no girls with autism, but because the specialisations needed to make the diagnosis were not there. I am afraid that that patchiness applies today. We are at the early stages of fully identifying the range of needs. I accept that, at times, diagnoses are made in the wrong category and that children with other conditions are diagnosed as autistic, but that is inevitable when the system seeks to ensure that the needs of children are addressed in an increasingly sophisticated way.

I mentioned the need for parliamentarians and society to start viewing people with autism as people with huge potential. In a few years' time, I want to stand here in the Chamber—or anywhere—and say that, in this country, we have cracked the code and ensured genuine opportunity for all people with autism and autism spectrum conditions.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate—he does such good work in this field. He has spoken very eloquently of his experiences as a parent. I have lost count of the number

of parents who come to my surgery with an enormous folder after working so hard on behalf of their child. They are the ones with the sharp elbows, the time and the wherewithal to do all the reading and understanding, and to battle their child through the system. This debate is about the millions of children in this country who do not have such parental support, such as children in care, getting the same access to services as children whose parents can drive their way through the system.

Mr Buckland: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am reminded of the famous quotation from F. E. Smith about the world offering glittering prizes to those with stout hearts and sharp swords—I think “sharp elbows” was the phrase my hon. Friend used. He is absolutely right. We need to move to a system where parents do not need to shout at the top of their voice to obtain provision for their child, or bang on the nearest door as loudly as possible or kick out at the authorities to get what they believe is in the best interests of their child. He is absolutely right about that.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): Is it not a sad indictment that, in my experience and the experience of many who work in this field, our behavioural schools are packed full of children from families that do not have sharp elbows? Those children are labelled behavioural, whereas children from families that have the ability to get a diagnosis are labelled autistic.

Mr Buckland: The hon. Lady has great experience in this field and it has been a pleasure to work with her since we entered into Parliament together. She is right. The category of behavioural difficulty is so often used as a repository for children who, in another context, would be treated differently. That is why, when it comes to diagnosis and identification of need, we have to do it better. We have to get better and better to ensure that children are in the right stream, the right school and the right environment. My worry—I know that she shares it—is that in labelling too many children in a behavioural category, we end up with children side by side in an inappropriate environment and in an unsuitable way that can be damaging to the child. I am grateful for her intervention.

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. I just want to say that I am sorry that I cannot stay much longer, but I wanted to be here to show my support for what he has said.

Following on from the previous intervention, does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a role for educating health service practitioners to understand the early signs of autism, particularly Asperger’s? Is he as shocked as I am to hear of cases in my constituency of people being diagnosed with Asperger’s in their 50s, 60s, and even in their 70s? As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) said, that is an indictment of a system that is not working at the moment.

Mr Buckland: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. Like him, I know of many cases of people who have been diagnosed in late middle age. What a missed opportunity for those individuals. That is not just a waste for them, but a waste of resources when it comes to how Government agencies plan provision for autism and related conditions.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I join in congratulating my hon. Friend on securing the debate. The right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) is absolutely right to raise the issue of the definition of autism. Regarding the explanatory notes to the Autism Act, it is important to remember that part of the intention of the review process of the autism strategy was to deal with the definitional issue and keep it under continual review so that we could respond more quickly to new developments than if the definition was included in primary legislation. I hope my hon. Friend would support me in ensuring that the Government visit and revisit this, so that the issue raised by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) is considered seriously, and that we move on.

Mr Buckland: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. We should all acknowledge that with increasing expertise and medical evidence the definitions will change and the way we approach autism will alter. Therefore, a statutory instrument is a more flexible mechanism than having to use parliamentary time to deal with all the concomitant difficulties involved in enshrining definitions in primary legislation. Superficially attractive though that often is, it can be a disadvantage to those with the condition.

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way—he is being very generous with his time—and I congratulate him on securing this debate.

Moving away from the Autism Act but on to the subject of people diagnosed with autism at a later stage, one issue that comes up is access to benefits and people’s encounters with the benefits system. I would be interested to hear the hon. Gentleman’s thoughts on how that aspect of provision could be improved to reflect the needs of people with autism, particularly older people whose condition has been recognised late.

Mr Buckland *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before that intervention is answered by the hon. Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland), to whom I always listen with huge interest and respect, I know that he will not mind if I point out to him and the House that nine Back Benchers and a couple of Front Benchers are still to contribute. I am keen to accommodate as many people as possible, consistent with hearing the continuation and conclusion of his excellent speech.

Mr Buckland: I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that I am watching the clock anxiously, and I will now make progress. I am grateful to hon. Members for their interventions.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz) is right about the problem he illustrated: diagnosis is one thing but provision for older people with autism is another. Many older people to whom I speak tell me that, having had the diagnosis, they turn around and say, “Well, what now?” Very little happens after a diagnosis. Other speakers will deal with the point about assessment for benefits, but the message has to go out loud and clear that more training must be given to those responsible for conducting benefit assessments,

[*Mr Buckland*]

so that what I call invisible conditions, such as autism, are fully understood by those conducting the assessments. I am sure that he, like me, will have had cases where that invisible condition was not recognised.

I am grateful that the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mr Timpson), who has responsibility for the draft Children and Families Bill, is in his place. I want to highlight a report prepared last year by the all-party group on autism, which I have the honour of chairing. I know that he has been listening carefully to the points and recommendations made in the report, and I welcome his approach in listening to the points made and already making changes to some of the provisions in the Bill—for example, the inclusion of apprenticeships as part of the future education, health and social care plans. I approach my remarks today in that spirit of engagement and listening.

I mentioned the all-party group's report. Our inquiry included an online survey in which nearly 1,000 respondents took part. It is, I believe, an authoritative and useful source of information when it comes to the development of policy. Among other things, we recommended that local authorities establish local training needs for special needs and identify where specialist autism knowledge is available to local schools. The funding for specialist training programmes for teachers has to be an important part of that, and we look to the Government for their continued support.

We were concerned about the exclusion of children and young people with autism. They often result, sadly, in lives that turn into criminal justice issues, huge wasted opportunities and expensive mistakes that cost our country dear. We are concerned that schools with a high number of exclusions, permanent or fixed-term, should not be graded as outstanding or good in terms of behaviour, because we regard exclusions as a badge of failure. I say that with respect to all the professionals involved. I understand that it is often difficult to manage young people with autism and other conditions, but exclusions are not the way to deal with the problem. All they do is push the problem on to another agency. It is the equivalent of kicking the can down the road. That is a phrase we often hear here in this place, but it is what is happening to young people with these conditions far too often.

The all-party group also emphasised that the new system should ensure that all children with autism, whether they have a statement or not, have access to the necessary support, and that there be a lead teacher for autism in every school. We must not forget that children currently in receipt of help under the school action or school action plus schemes might not have needs that are acute enough to merit a statement or an education, health and social care plan, but their needs will remain none the less. I would be interested to hear the Minister's observations about children in that category.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Buckland: I am afraid I need to press on.

There is also a need for joint commissioning of services, which is something that other contributors have touched on. In Swindon, which I represent, joint commissioning

is already happening—we are seeing joined-up thinking, working and action—but in many places there remains a dislocation between health and education. Putting it bluntly, without the proper involvement of local health agencies, these reforms just will not work. The role of health and wellbeing boards, which were set up under recent health legislation, will be pivotal in ensuring proper joint working. I therefore urge my hon. Friend to do all he can as an Education Minister to ensure that other arms of government are doing all they can to ensure that education, health and social care plans knit together and provide a continuum of care.

I wanted to talk about accountability; very briefly, I will say this. Unless parents and carers feel that there are proper lines of accountability in decisions about their children, the system will not get the confidence it needs. Therefore, a proper and effective complaints system, encompassing all state-funded schools, must be put in place. I accept that school governors and Ofsted will have a role to play in the process, but personal action plans—agreements that will provide objective measurements of progress for parents to measure their schools against—are essential. This is not about bureaucracy for the sake of it; it is simply about ensuring that we can harness the earnest energy of parents to ensure the system works as best it can.

I welcome the proposals for local offers on SEN. I accept that local agencies will need to develop their own services, but I caution the Government in this respect. A national framework within which local offers can be developed will be necessary. The analogy I draw is between the system we have in health—where guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence provide a framework within which local commissioners can develop services—and a system that I believe could work well in education. Such a system would ensure that parents and carers knew there was a basic standard to which the local offer would be made.

We have already touched on the problems and challenges facing young adults with autism going into the world of work. We have heard some depressing statistics in Wales. In England, one in four children with autism obtains some form of education or training after leaving school. That means that three out of every four do not have those opportunities. Some 25% of graduates with autism are unemployed, which is the highest proportion among any disability group. Fewer than one in seven adults with autism are in full-time employment, which is why I am encouraged that the Government are to extend the regime of education, health and social care plans right up to the age of 25. That is vital and acknowledges the fact that many young people with autism develop very much at their own pace—in a way that does not conform to the primary, secondary and tertiary stages of education—and it does so in a way that will allow them to develop and mature into adulthood. However, we do not want to move the cliff edge from 19 to 25. We have to ensure that the transition into adulthood after 25—after the end of the plans—is smooth and planned, and inspires confidence not only among those young adults, but among their families and carers.

The age in which people with these conditions are categorised as needing to be dealt with in a little box in the corner has ended, but we are now in a transitional phase. We have not yet created the systems that will allow the integration of such people into the mainstream

of our national, social, economic and political life. I very much hope that today's debate will, in some small way, be yet another milestone along that important road, so that in the years ahead, we as parliamentarians can say that we did all that we could to ensure that a minority with so much to offer was allowed to play its part at the heart of our life.

4.55 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland) for securing the debate and for his fine speech. I should also like to say how much I value working with him on the all-party group on autism. For many people watching this debate on television, their usual view of Parliament will be the robust exchanges that they see on a Wednesday at Prime Minister's questions, and I confess that I play a part in that, as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader of the Opposition. For me, however, Parliament is more about debates such as this, when we come together across geographical and party lines to try to progress an issue of great importance to our constituents. Such debates reveal what this Parliament should be all about.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I have to declare an interest in that I have a son with autism. That explains much of my involvement in the issue and in the work of the all-party group. I would like to pay tribute to the work of the National Autistic Society for its campaigning and for the services that it provides, as well as for providing parents with hope and with help when they need it most. When a parent first becomes aware, perhaps through a teacher or through their own intuition, that their child might have autism, the resources of the National Autistic Society will invariably be the first that they access to learn more about it. The role that the society plays is vital.

I welcome the intentions of the Government, as revealed in their Green Paper. We all want a more joined-up system that is easier for parents to access and that makes it easier for young people with autism to get the support they need. I know that a lot of parents have concerns; I hear them from my own constituents as well as from people who contact me as an officer of the all-party group, and I would like to go into those in some detail. As I understand it, however, the Government's intentions are good.

At present, it is too much of a fight to get what our children need. Parents always tell me that local authorities are reluctant to give a statement, telling them that they do not need it, that they can have the same support without it, and that it is unnecessary because their child is doing fine. That is wrong. Too often, only those people who are really prepared or equipped to take on the system will get what they need, as the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) pointed out.

Mr Tom Clarke: My hon. Friend is making a very well informed speech. With regard to local authorities, does he agree that there are major gaps? For example, only 9% of people with autism are entered into the system for speech therapy, perhaps because their GP has recommended it. Local authorities ought to be defining these matters much more clearly, and we should encourage them in the debate today to take a proper role in these important issues.

Jonathan Reynolds: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. I also agreed with the hon. Member for South Swindon when he said that the current system was not working as it should. I understand why local authorities are reluctant to award legally binding entitlements. They are concerned about how they will pay for them. The underfunding of local authorities at the moment is a scandal, but that is another debate.

When a parent needs support for their child, nothing other than the support that they require will do, as I think we can all recognise. There is some wonderful specialist provision in this country—when it can be accessed. Last September, my son transferred from mainstream education to a special school that is outstanding. To know, as a parent, that one's child is finally getting the support that they need is an indescribable feeling, but our mission must be to ensure that more parents know that feeling.

The main point I want to raise concerns parents' rights, and I shall also talk about the length of time during which we support young people with autism. The Minister will be aware of the concerns raised by some parents that the draft Bill, rather than extending parents' rights, gives the impression of wanting to cut them. Parents need the continued right to request statutory assessments and to have statutory time scales for receiving them. I understand that the Government have given evidence saying that they do not want to diminish these rights, but feelings are running high on this issue. Rumours abound that, in some areas, local authorities are receiving training that might allow them to refuse assessments to children of average cognitive ability. This would completely exclude from the system children with Asperger's syndrome and those with dyslexia or visual or hearing impairments. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide some assurance on this matter and, ideally, tell us that the draft provisions will be amended to include these rights.

I would also be reassured to know that the new education and health care plans, which will replace statements of special educational needs, will carry the same legal force. This means making it a mandatory duty for a local authority to deliver what a child needs, and not simply to use "best endeavours" to secure appropriate provision. In the current funding climate, my worry would be that that will not be sufficient to get children what they need.

In addition, I would like it to be a requirement that parents will be informed of their right to appeal the results of a statutory assessment and will have some clarification of what the process will be. Is it correct, for instance, that the education part of the EHC plans will be appealed to the special educational needs and disability tribunal, but that the plan's health and social services provision can be appealed only by judicial review? It would seem odd to separate these two vital areas of provision when the plans are partly designed to integrate them. Again, this would mean added complexity for parents.

Finally, any new legal regime inevitably means that important points have to be fought over again, as new case law is required. For instance, are speech and language therapies educational or health provision? Where does something like physiotherapy count? All these issues could be made much simpler through Government guidance, reducing the amount of things parents have

[Jonathan Reynolds]

to fight over. I am sure that many charities and this House, through such groups as the all-party group, could play a role in helping to deliver some of that.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): There is often not much advocacy when it comes to the issue of funding for speech and language therapy. I know from my professional life as a solicitor that a disproportionate number of young people in the criminal justice system have autism. They are often not even able to communicate due to the lack of speech and language therapy and indeed to the lack of proper assessment and identification of the problem, particularly when they are in custody. Does the hon. Gentleman think that this is another issue in respect of which we need at the very least continuity of care when young people go into custody and also better identification of autism and better provision of speech and language therapy?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, and I absolutely agree with him. It reminds me of the previous point about how, because the system does not work adequately, so many young people—and older people too—have ended up in inappropriate areas, whether it be in the justice system or in behavioural therapies, when what they need is the right support: it may be available, but they have been unable to access it.

As I have highlighted a number of concerns about parents' rights, I would like to say how incredibly heartened I am—the hon. Member for South Swindon mentioned this, too—by the Government's proposal to increase the age at which we support young people with autism up to 25. Let us not stop that support for a young person when they leave school or further education; let us keep it there so a young person can still get support if they return to education after taking on an apprenticeship or employment.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend, and indeed the hon. Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland), for conveying their personal experience. I spent 14 years of my life as a teacher in special education and, as we have heard, many children have difficulties because they are on the spectrum. Is my hon. Friend aware that when people leave education formally—whether it be at 16 or 18—they immediately lose their disability living allowance and have to reapply for it as adults? Many people then become slightly alienated from parental help and other services. One service that he has not mentioned is social services. There should be not just health and education services, but social services and a statutory duty on the employment services to take on these people, with a duty of care, which does not exist at the moment in any department or any jurisdiction in the UK.

Jonathan Reynolds: Again, that is an excellent point. Outcomes and employment transitions for young people are hard for all young people, but they are particularly hard for young people with autism. Any extra support or assistance we can give to make that easier is definitely worth looking at.

On teacher training, I am always conscious that we ask teachers to be given training on so many issues, particularly those that interest us as parliamentarians. Ideally, we would get them to cover a huge amount of things, but that is not possible. However, there are a significant number of children with autism in the education system, and any additional training or guidance that could be given to teachers to increase their awareness not just of the condition itself but of its complexity, and the fact that it is different for every child on the spectrum, would be extremely advantageous. The work of the Autism Education Trust has already had a very successful impact, and I think we all hope that it will be possible for that work to continue.

We know that for too many of the families of people with autism the process of obtaining support is too hard, that we need to make it better, and that there are many organisations and bodies that could help us to do that. I welcome the Government's initial steps in that regard, but I hope that they will also take on board some of the points that I have raised, which I am sure will also be raised by other Members. If we can make access to support for young people with autism just a little bit easier, we will have done the right thing by those young people and done a great service to their families. We will also have done the right thing by the education system, and gone some way towards ensuring that every child has a chance to fulfil his or her potential.

5.5 pm

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), and I pay tribute to him for his speech. It is good to know that here in Parliament we do not always shout and bray at each other, but sometimes work together with a common purpose and for the common good. In the same spirit, I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mr Timpson), the children's Minister, to the Front Bench. I also welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker: you have taken a great deal of personal interest in this subject, and I pay tribute to you and your work in that regard.

Let me say to my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland) that I am delighted that this is the subject on which I am making my first speech from the Back Benches for a very long time. It is a subject close to my heart because of my Private Member's Bill, which was a truly co-operative affair involving Members in all parts of the House. However, the debate also gives me an opportunity to pay tribute to all the families and parents who sent the hundreds of e-mails that enabled us to secure a Second Reading for the Bill, and to put on the statute book what I think was the first, and is still the only, disability-specific piece of legislation in the country.

One of the hidden heroines of that process was my great friend Baroness Browning, who did so much to further the cause. I talked to her just before the debate. She continues to raise these matters regularly in the other place, and I want the Minister to know about an issue that is challenging her particularly at the moment. She is very concerned—as, I am sure, are many Members of this House—about the assessments that are being conducted for the Government, especially those conducted by Atos. I ask the Minister to acknowledge that concern,

and to ensure that people with enough experience of autism spectrum disorders are able to make the fair assessments that we all want.

That concern—along with many others that have been expressed in the two speeches that we have already heard—is reflected across the board. It is felt that there is still a great deal to be done. Research by many organisations, including the Back-Bench all-party group but also the National Autistic Society, indicates that people are still having to battle and fight to secure the right support for family members. This year the NAS celebrates 50 years of providing advice and support, and its research illustrates that ongoing battle. Nearly 50% of the parents who responded to a survey that it conducted recently said that they were still having to wait for more than a year to obtain the right support for their children, and 25% were having to wait for two years. That cannot be right in this day and age, given the knowledge of autism that we now have.

Delays in obtaining access to support can have a significant impact. Nearly 70% of those parents said that the progress of their children's education had suffered because of the lack of timely support, and I am sure that that is echoed in the experience of some of the parents of children with autism who are in the House today. I also think that such delays always result in poorer outcomes for children and young people with autism. My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon knows that only 15% of adults with autism are in full-time employment, but one of the statistics he gave was 1% short. In fact, the disability task group in Sheffield said 26% of graduates with autism are unemployed, and that is the highest rate for any disability group.

Angela Watkinson (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I know my right hon. Friend has long taken an interest in this subject, but may I recommend to her the ROSE—Realistic Opportunities for Supported Employment—project in my constituency, which transfers such students from further education colleges into employment, and provides support that is gradually withdrawn as they become more independent? That is an example of good practice which I am sure my right hon. Friend would like to see copied throughout the country.

Mrs Gillan: Certainly one way to maximise the potential of people with autism is to follow such examples of good practice. The all-party group might want to address these issues in the future. If we want to be hard-nosed about this subject, we could refer to a National Audit Office report published when the Autism Act 2009 was going through this House, which showed that if local services identified and supported just 4% of adults with high-functioning autism and Asperger's syndrome, the outlay would become cost-neutral over time, and if they did the same for just 8% of such adults, that could save the Government some £67 million a year.

I worked very closely with the NAS during the passage of the Autism Bill, so I know that it strongly supports the Government's proposed reforms to the special educational needs system. It especially welcomes the introduction of joint co-operation and commissioning duties, the extension of SEN law to cover academies and free schools, and the education, health and care plans for young people up to the age of 25, which will replace the statements.

The NAS has raised some concerns, however, and it speaks from a position of great strength. It runs seven schools for children with autism, and it is setting up an autism free school—in our area, Mr Speaker, of the Thames valley. The new NAS Anderson school in Bristol works with children to address the challenges they face, with the specific aim of helping them move back into community-based mainstream provision. The NAS knows from experience that these new schools are set up in response to great local need and are anchored in their communities. It is essential that children with complex needs can have access to such independent special schools, but I understand there is some concern that under the new system parents may not be able to express a preference for such schools in an education, health and care plan. I urge the Minister to ensure that such schools can be accessed by those who need them.

This debate has focused on the SEN reforms, but the Autism Act 2009 was borne out of a recognition that the specific needs of adults with autism were often overlooked by service designers at the local level and therefore they consistently missed out and did not get the help they needed. Unfortunately, that is reflected in recent NAS research. Some two-thirds of adults with autism are not getting the help they need.

It is vital that we get education provision right. Local authorities must ensure that they not only educate themselves, but implement the Department of Health adult autism strategy in a way that addresses local needs. In working with young people with autism and their families, local authorities must plan at the strategic level for local services and develop individually tailored plans to ensure that children with autism are supported into adulthood and can enter employment and live independently in our communities.

The adult strategy will be reviewed in 2013. That gives us an important opportunity to consider these matters. It also gives us a chance to celebrate improvements—there have been improvements—but we must not ignore the fact that there is still so much more that we need to do. I particularly urge the Minister to take on board the fact that he needs to work with his colleagues at the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions, and with many others, including Members of this House, to ensure that the proposals to reform SEN are fully linked to the work on the autism strategy.

Mr Tom Clarke: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, who has done so much in this field, for giving way. On that point, does she agree that there is something wrong? We have been reminded that only 15% of people with autism are in full-time jobs and only 6% are in part-time jobs, which represents a loss of talent that is wrong not only for the individual but for society.

Mrs Gillan: I am grateful for the intervention and am second to none in my admiration for the right hon. Gentleman, who has given far more to this matter over the years than I could ever hope to. His record speaks for itself.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. When I was preparing my Bill, I talked to an employer who employed high-functioning adults with autism and Asperger's. I asked how he coped with having employees with Asperger's, and he said he really liked it because he

[Mrs Gillan]

could be sure that they would do the same task and make the same check over and over again. Quality control was not needed at all because of the excellence of the work of those individuals. We need to recognise that people with autism can be a great benefit to a business or an industry and they are certainly not a liability or somebody who is just taken on to make up the numbers. The right hon. Gentleman's intervention was very valuable and I wish that more employers would take on people who are on the spectrum.

Finally, parents and people involved in autism often refer to reaching the transition age as falling off a cliff. In my experience, it was less like the romantic idea of falling off a cliff and more like falling into a dark black hole. The Government must continue the work carried out by the previous Government and ensure that the Department of Health and others make sure that when young people with autism reach adulthood their needs are planned for and met by other services so that the black hole does not simply move to the age of 25, as many people fear it might.

We have come a long way in understanding autism, but we have a long way to go in understanding the spectrum and the challenges it presents to Governments and to individuals and their families. The case of Gary McKinnon brought autism back to the forefront of people's minds and we must ensure that we do not forget the condition. It has been a Cinderella condition; this is the first debate on the subject in three years. We need to cast more light on it and to ensure that as a Government we gain lasting and positive change for people with autism so that they can achieve their full potential in our society. I very much look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

5.18 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland) for securing the debate and for the sterling work he and others do on the all-party group.

I came to this issue in the same way as most other Members of the House. After being elected in 1997, I dealt with case after case of families trying to fight their way through the statementing system. Families would come to me with packed files of different reports and threats of legal action. In addition, I was dealing with an adult aged 29 who had just then been diagnosed as being on the spectrum with Asperger's. I accept that Asperger's is a relatively recent diagnosis, but he had gone through school and into adulthood without any real support.

When I came to the House I sought the support of any other Member who had any experience, and the best advice I received was Angela Browning, now Baroness Browning. She befriended me and took me step by step through the processes to secure for my constituents at least some access to services and their rights. That is how I became engaged in the subject.

When the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) fought her sterling fight to enact the Autism Bill, I was put on the Committee. It was rare in those days for me to be on any Committee,

so it was clearly a subject on which I could not have done much damage. The right hon. Lady led a superb campaign that was subtle as well as incisive. It mobilised organisations and individuals across the country, the letters campaign worked, there were constructive discussions with Ministers and we managed to get a consensus across the House.

I want to touch on two points, one in relation to adults and the other in relation to children. The work that was done then has had a widespread effect on a large range of organisations, some of which would not be expected to engage on the subject. For the first time, the trade union movement has taken up the issue. The RMT is running a series of seminars on autism to support its members at work who are on the spectrum or who have family members who are on the spectrum—a major breakthrough. I pay tribute to Janine Booth, who is on the executive of the RMT. To give Bob Crow his due, the union has supported the seminars 100%. I attended the first one and the second is to be held tomorrow.

What has come out is a thorough discussion of the scale of discrimination encountered just to get into work and once people are in work. There are some appalling examples of people being ostracised. That is why the union now says that it has a role in ensuring that recruitment practices are fair and non-discriminatory, and in representing its members when they are in work to make sure they are not discriminated against. Those discussions have highlighted some real problems and the need to look into employment discrimination and perhaps to tighten the legislation to prevent discrimination.

I have to refer to the Atos system and applications for disability benefits that was set in motion by the previous Government. The Harrington reviews have been conducted, but the system is not working. Those turning up for Atos assessments are being assessed by people with no specialist knowledge of the subject area. That is causing immense distress and, yes, loss of benefit and loss of all income. We need to look again at that process. I have tabled various early-day motions. I am so frustrated by it that I think the system needs to be scrapped and that we should start again.

I pay tribute to organisations that are campaigning on the matter—Disabled People Against Cuts in this country, and Black Triangle in Scotland. It is worth reading the Spartacus report that was published two weeks ago, which gives individual examples. Large numbers of examples have been collected, showing how people have been treated and what they feel. In the cases I have been dealing with, many people who are on the spectrum are lost within the system and as a result lose benefit and are living in poverty. Often they are desperate to work.

The other issue is local authority cuts. In my area, speech and language therapy is being cut again and the local authority is no longer commissioning the service from the local health trust. That is having an impact. I have sat in on speech and language sessions over recent months. They are fundamentally important for early diagnosis and early intervention—pre-school intervention wherever possible. Children's centres identify children who may not have been picked up in the past. I am worried that the pressure on local authority resources is having an impact on such specialist services.

I echo what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds). I work closely with a group in my constituency, Hillingdon Autistic Care and Support. Some wonderful people set it up and worked with our local authority on a cross-party basis. They have taken over one of our children's centres and they bring parents together and provide direct services. They display a superb understanding and appreciation of families' individual needs. A couple of weeks ago, the group held a meeting where all the parents turned up to talk about the new legislative proposals and voice their concerns.

The existing system may have been difficult to battle through, and we were looking for reform to make it easier, but not to undermine some of the basic securities. At least when parents got a statement, they knew what rights they had, what was to be delivered and the time scales involved, and they could use that to enforce the supply of services. Exactly as my hon. Friend said, however, there is now confusion about whether there is still a real right to request an assessment, and anxiety about whether the "best endeavours" wording is specific enough to define the nature of the services that are to be provided, as of right, or the time scales on which they will be provided. There are real worries among families.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Edward Timpson): I will discuss that point in my response to the debate, but I think it will help Members if at this stage I clarify what I said to the Select Committee last week about the rights that parents now have in relation to statements and what flows from them, and what we aim to achieve with the new system. Let me make it absolutely clear that the rights parents have in the current system will flow through to the new system—in fact, in many areas they will be enhanced through the introduction of a longer transition up to the age of 25.

John McDonnell: I welcome—everyone welcomes—the longer transition, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde made that point. It would be useful to get it on the record that people want the specific right of the appeal that has existed since the Education Act 1981 to be endorsed in the new legislation as well. We need to give people security that that will happen, and if that is what the Minister is saying, that is incredibly helpful.

Mandatory mediation also came up in the group discussion. I have never known mandatory mediation to work in any walk of life. If people are not willing to go into mediation, it does not usually work. To have mandatory mediation that involves penalties as well is, I think, completely counterproductive, but it has worried people, and on that ground a rethink is needed, and perhaps further clarification about how that will be introduced is needed. The parents, who got a lawyer to take them through what they envisaged the new system would be, wrote to me to say that what they had seen was extremely complex. My hon. Friend made the point about the difficulty of knowing what is referable to a tribunal. Is it now only education matters? What about health and other matters—where can they be referred to and where can parents appeal? Getting some clarity and simplicity in the system is critical.

In some cases in my area we have had to resort to law, using legal aid. There is therefore some anxiety about some of the restrictions on access to legal aid. Some clarity about that would be extremely helpful.

Everyone has their own experience and some of these cases are the most distressing I have ever dealt with, but I read John Harris's piece in *The Guardian* a few months ago and recommend it to other hon. Members, because it summarised for me exactly what many of the parents in my area have gone through. They have been fighting their way through the system and then the Government come along and promise the opportunity of improving it, but now many fear that, in fact, we may be going backwards unless we get secure commitments from the Government.

Angela Watkinson: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that a problem for families who have a child on the autistic spectrum that often goes unnoticed or unmentioned is the financial burden. Often, because the child has poorly developed gross motor skills and co-ordination, there is lots of accidental damage in the home, with items such as televisions, washing machines and carpets having to be replaced quite frequently, so in addition to all the challenges he has just listed, there is also a hidden financial burden of which most people are unaware.

John McDonnell: I am glad that the hon. Lady makes that point, which I should have made earlier, because it is absolutely critical. We can get all these rights, but we need to be able to finance them, and it is not only local authorities and other services that provide that funding, because families often have to complement it. That needs to be taken into account in the benefits system.

I will give another example. When it comes to housing for families with a child on the spectrum—I have families in my constituency who have more than one child on the spectrum—one of the biggest clamours is for a garden so that they can play outside. I have dealt with one such family who were allocated a house by the local authority—it was in the private sector—that was on a busy road near a roundabout and had no front garden. That was a particular problem, because when the door was opened the child could run straight out on to the road.

There are many issues that must be dealt with when addressing the complex needs of individual families. That is why we had hoped that the new legislation would show a broad understanding and acceptance of the complexity of what individuals and families have to go through and at least have a faster and more simplified system that gave greater security. The message I am getting from the parents and local organisations I have met is that they are very fearful that their existing rights, limited though they may be, and the existing system, however difficult it may be, might be undermined and that everything we were hoping for in the new system will not be achieved.

I hope that, as a result of this debate—this is why I welcome it—we can improve some of the Government's proposals and that they can then take away some of the concerns that have been expressed today to ensure that we get the legislation we all need and want.

5.31 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland) on securing the debate. It is a subject that is dear to his heart and on which he has considerable knowledge and experience. I thank him for his very personal insights. I do not share his expertise—I make no bones about it—but I share his commitment when it comes to ensuring that the young people, in particular, in my constituency get the best possible deal from the upcoming children and families Bill.

Earlier this year I had the privilege of visiting the TreeHouse school in Muswell Hill, the home of the national charity Ambitious about Autism, to meet staff, volunteers and pupils and hear at first hand about the excellent work that goes on there. The school was set up in 1997 by a group of parents whose children had been diagnosed with severe autism. As they say, their ambition is to make the ordinary possible for more children and young people.

TreeHouse school provides children with specialist, intensive and integrated support to enable them to learn, thrive and achieve. It focuses on enabling communication and working with children with severe autism to give them a means of communicating with the outside world. It seeks to maximise their learning opportunities and, crucially, prepare them for a world outside school, one with employment opportunities, through the experiences of travel, recreation and enjoyment that every child deserves. I recall, in particular, the shop that had been set up within the school to enable pupils to experience both buying and selling everyday items, and I remember the hairdresser's and the dentist's, which encouraged young people to understand that what might currently be unfamiliar to them can be learned and, in time, accepted. I applaud the commitment and dedication of the staff, who strive to ensure the best outcome for every single pupil, however difficult the challenges.

My visit has since provoked a number of questions, because two aspects of the school have stuck in my mind. The first thing that struck me was how hard some parents had to fight—I use the word advisedly, as have many right hon. and hon. Members this afternoon—to get their child a place at TreeHouse school, having struggled with statements and funding, which invariably meant that their child's arrival at the school was delayed far longer than was good for them.

I asked the staff about children who did not manage to get a place at the school until they were 12, 13 or 14-years-old and asked whether they would have been better off had they arrived sooner. The staff spoke of their ambition to reduce the age at which they took children so that specialist help could be available far earlier, developmental delays did not happen and specialist help was available. That would mean that children would not spend years locked within themselves and unable to communicate with the outside world before ever being given the specialist therapies that enabled them to communicate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) spoke eloquently about the long and unacceptable delays which, in this day and age, we must do more to shorten.

The second question that my visit provoked was "What happens next?" When young, and indeed not so young, people with autism leave TreeHouse school,

what security is there for them? What help is there to support them to enable them to lead as independent a life as possible? Post-16 is a difficult time for any child, let alone one on the autistic spectrum. Equally, what help is there for their families and carers who also go through very difficult years? That is why it is absolutely imperative that we get the best possible outcome from the children and families Bill. It is so important that turning 16 should not narrow the opportunities for young people on the autistic spectrum. Their education, health and care plan must be able to include provision by independent specialists, voluntary and private training providers, and, importantly, apprenticeships and higher education institutions. I want sufficient flexibility within these plans to enable young people to re-enter training or education after a gap to facilitate the sort of transition to adult life that gives them maximum support and assistance. An annual review, even if they are not in education, would enable local authorities to monitor progress and ensure that all young people with autism are receiving the support to which they are entitled.

I welcome the extension of statutory duties up to the age of 25, but it is very important to have the structured support needed to make sure that the transition is as smooth as possible. That is why I applaud the work carried out at Squirrels, a residential unit in my constituency for young people aged between 16 and 25 with autistic spectrum disorders. Its focus is on precisely that period—the difficult transition from school to adulthood. It works with its residents to firmly establish the skills of looking after themselves, improving their social inclusion, and continuing their learning development. As at TreeHouse school, there is a particular focus on communication skills through intensive speech and language therapy, and an emphasis on self-management and independence in preparation for a future life in the community. That is a very significant role not only for Squirrels but for every single organisation working with young people on the autistic spectrum. In Chilworth, where Squirrels is located, the residents can often be found on accompanied trips into the village. I well remember last summer attending the fun day to mark the opening of the new play area and village green. Many residents from Squirrels were present, integrating into the local community and having a very good time. They often visit the local shop and the pub. Such time spent in the community is absolutely central to young people's development.

I am sure, Mr Speaker, that I do not have to tell you that tonight Ambitious about Autism celebrates its 15th anniversary. It describes itself as being 15 years young, and it has certainly been on an incredible journey filled with optimism and, as its name suggests, ambition. Its bold vision and determination continues to pioneer education for children with autism. This debate is therefore a timely opportunity to celebrate its commitment, its achievements to date, and, as with so many young people with autism, its future potential.

5.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland) for bringing this matter to the House and for the compassion and knowledge that he portrayed from his own personal experiences. It is good to have such debates because they focus a lot of attention on issues to which we can all relate—in my case, not necessarily as the hon. Gentleman

and the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) did but through interaction with my constituents and what they tell me.

I have been involved in the support of autism for many years in Northern Ireland, as have my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Dr McCrea) and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Our constituency work brought us into contact with those who have autistic children and those who care for them. The hon. Member for South Swindon neatly put the issue into perspective when he mentioned all the emotions that people go through, as do the constituents who come to see me. These wee boys and girls react in the same way as others except that they are a wee bit more energetic. That might simplify the situation but it is the way that I would look at it.

I want to give an example of one wee autistic boy whom I know very well. His parents do everything for him—they wash, cook, dress and feed him, and clean, bath and toilet him. The mum and dad do all of those things for their wee boy. They amuse him and hug, kiss and love him. He depends on his parents for his every need. When he is at school, they do the washing, ironing, cleaning and shopping, and they try to find time to work in order to pay the bills. That is what having an autistic child means—their parents have more to do than those of other children.

They love their son with all that they have—every bit of their love—and all that they are but, sadly, love is not enough to get the family through the sheer exhaustion and the emotional and mental strain. I have seen clearly the emotional and mental strain on those constituents I have spoken to and those parents of wee boys and wee girls whom I have met. There is a financial strain, an emotional strain and a physical strain, and all those things are sometimes overwhelming. That is why I am very pleased to be able to contribute to this debate. Perhaps, in a small way, it will lead to support for those people.

Every Member who has spoken so far has brought their knowledge and experience to bear. It is almost as if everybody has brought an ingredient to the master chef, the Minister, who will put them in a big pot, mix them all together and produce a lovely, palatable meal. I am sure that that is not how it will be done, but we look forward to his response. We as elected representatives can do many things to help young boys and young girls in our communities, but we also have to support them and offer them the best that our society can give to ensure that they do not reach the point of no return.

I do not know whether the Minister and other Members know about the Northern Ireland perspective, but if they do, that is good. I believe that we in Northern Ireland—I say this respectfully—lead the way on autism. The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), who has just joined us, was involved in the Northern Ireland Assembly's autism legislation, so the three of us—her, me and my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim—have an interest in the issue and contributed to that legislative change. The Assembly introduced the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which is the most comprehensive autism and single disability legislation in the whole of Europe. I do not say that lightly; if hon. Members check it, they will see that that is the case.

I want to explain how all three of us contributed to that development at the Assembly. The Act is the first piece of legislation in Northern Ireland that requires all Government Departments to plan and work together on the delivery of a strategy. The strategy is unique, because it addresses the challenge of a five-party, power-sharing Executive working together across the whole of society to try to introduce something that works. I have to say that that is not the case in this House, but I hope that it will be with the draft Bill. Perhaps the House could take that message on board. I think that legislation similar to that which exists in Northern Ireland should be implemented here, and I hope that it will be when the time comes to debate the draft Bill.

Although I am aware that Northern Ireland legislation is unique, this place has to consider it and its relevance to all the other countries that make up the United Kingdom. I am happy that Northern Ireland has seen the need for and led the way with ground-breaking legislation.

Autism NI was at the centre of the campaign for the 2011 Act and used a grass-roots campaign. There was no money or external lobby company, just hard work and determination to gain support from every Member of the Legislative Assembly. It approached that by having autism ambassadors and health and education spokespersons from all the parties in order to build up expertise on issues of concern and bring everything—the ingredients that I mentioned earlier and other contributions—together. It also formed a partnership with Autism Cymru, which was already working with the Welsh Government on implementing a Wales autism strategy, and that formed the foundations of the Celtic Nations Autism Partnership, which also includes Scottish Autism and the Irish Society for Autism. We cast our net wide to get all the information. That has led to initiatives in the USA, a visit by the partnership and MLAs to the US Congress, and a visit to the European Parliament to initiate a partnership with Autism-Europe and MEPs on the development of a European autism strategy.

Hon. Members have spoken about the statementing of children. Every week, somebody comes to my office to talk about statementing and the delays in the process. Northern Ireland now has a system that enables the process to run more smoothly than it did in the past. There are still hiccups in the system and wee problems to overcome, but the Northern Ireland Assembly has legislated to put a system in place, with all the parties and all the Government bodies working together.

Dr William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that it is vital for the Minister to liaise with Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive, not only to see what we have done, but to see whether there are things that are not working out as we thought they would?

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. We want to exchange our ideas and to ensure that if something is not working right, we do it better. Ministers in Northern Ireland would be more than happy to be involved.

I want to highlight some of the elements that must form the foundations of any autism legislation and that have been implemented in Northern Ireland. The Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, unlike the English autism

[*Jim Shannon*]

legislation, is equality driven and lifelong focused. We look at the child at an early stage and as they work their way through school and into jobs, which each of the Members who have spoken have mentioned.

The 2011 Act amends the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to include those with social communication disabilities such as autism. That supersedes the Equality Act 2010 in Great Britain, which provides recognition only in guidance, not in the primary legislation. We have taken that a stage further. The 2011 Act changes the definition of disability in the 1995 Act so that the entitlement to services of people with autism is no longer measured solely by their IQ or their physical ability. Some of the things that a child or young person is asked, such as whether they can walk from A to B, are ridiculous when trying to assess disability. Access to services and benefits also now relates to a person's level of social and communication impairment or function.

Previously, disability living allowance was disallowed because autism did not clearly fit into the protections and the definition in the 1995 Act. That is no longer the case. I suspect that all Members in the Chamber have fought DLA appeals for young people who have autism. Ten years ago, it was sometimes extremely difficult to explain to the DLA panel that a certain young fellow or girl needed more care and attention than their brother or sister who did not have autism. It is easier now, because there is a better understanding of autism. We have tried to address that issue in Northern Ireland.

We have placed a duty on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to act as the lead Government body in producing, reviewing and implementing a cross-departmental strategy for autism. Currently, cross-departmental co-operation is only discretionary. However, we have a strategy in place that brings all the Government bodies together and ensures that they all focus on what it is important to do. We have placed a duty on all Departments to agree a data-collection system to calculate the current and future need for services for people with autism and their families. That helps us to plan for the long term.

Angela Watkinson: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that any autism strategy should include respite care for the family?

Jim Shannon: Absolutely. Anyone who knows such families knows that that is critical. One just has to see the boisterousness of the young person and the distressed look of the mother to know that the mum just needs a bit of respite care to get a break for a wee while. That is an important factor that perhaps we have not mentioned. I thank the hon. Lady for raising it.

In Northern Ireland, we have also placed a duty on the DHSSPS to detail clearly how the needs of families and carers are to be addressed. There is a clear directive in the strategy on the development of family support services. We have placed a duty on the Government of Northern Ireland to implement an effective autism awareness campaign, for example using information websites and poster campaigns. It is important that we take the five points of that strategy together.

It is my belief that the rest of the UK should handle the issue of autism in a similar manner to Northern

Ireland. I urge the Minister to interact with Ministers in Northern Ireland to exchange ideas, understand how our system works and find out how the legislation can be improved. If we can do that, we will have achieved a lot.

I also believe that we should implore all those involved to look carefully at the work and outcome of the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. When the Government consider their draft legislation, to which the hon. Member for South Swindon referred in his introductory remarks, I believe there is no better system, at least to start with, than that in Northern Ireland.

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Figures indicate that the number of children with autism in Northern Ireland is rising—as in the rest of the United Kingdom—and we sense the effect that is having on society and individuals. It also impacts on people's financial circumstances as there is a drain on the moneys necessary to deal with this condition. We must prepare and set moneys aside for that purpose.

We all know families who are affected by this issue, and they do not ask for too much or more than they are entitled to. We are being asked to give only what they need and what we can provide, which I believe is support. Above all, we need to help those children and families to have an acceptable quality of life. That has not yet been achieved, but hopefully it will be once the draft legislation is introduced.

5.50 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): It is a privilege to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland) on persuading the Backbench Business Committee to allow it. Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I praise the hon. Members for South Swindon and for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) for their personal insights. Such insights are critical to the debate and warmly accepted by Members on all sides of the House.

Following the hon. Member for Strangford, I want to bring a Welsh perspective to the debate. In one sense, the hon. Gentleman has usurped me. I was going to say that Wales is leading the way through the development of its autism strategy, but sadly it seems that Northern Ireland is doing that. I hesitate to say that, however, because this matter is too important for one-upmanship. Nevertheless, I agree with the tone of his remarks because there are useful pointers and experiences from Northern Ireland, Wales and, no doubt, from our friends in Scotland as well to share with the Minister.

Jim Shannon: As I said in my introduction, the Northern Ireland Assembly has a close relationship with the elected Assembly in Wales. There is a real partnership together and a way forward.

Mr Williams: The hon. Gentleman is right and I suspect that our mutual friends in Autism Cymru, which is based in my constituency, and Autism Northern Ireland have given us a similar brief about the collaboration between those two groups. Sometimes devolution can be helpful to our colleagues in England if it involves sharing good practice. We do not always get it right, but in this instance we have good examples to share with the Minister today and, in that spirit, I will explain

some of those experiences. Like the hon. Member for Strangford, I can speak for my friends in Autism Cymru who would be more than happy to share some of their experiences with the Minister.

The Celtic nations partnership, which is made up of colleagues from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who work together on these matters, has said:

“Developing national autism strategies supported by ring-fenced Government funding for autism is proving vital to improve the lives of people with ASD, and their families.”

Wales has had an all-age strategy for autism for four years. Since it started in 2008 some £12 million has been committed by the Welsh Assembly Government to the implementation of that strategy and, critically, to research into autism. Wales is the only nation with a national autism research centre, and it is based in Cardiff.

All 22 Welsh local authorities have an autism spectrum disorder local lead, and some have specific leads for children as well as adults. A national co-ordinator sits in the Welsh Local Government Association, and a national ASD practice website gives examples and shares practice throughout Wales. In my part of Wales, services and information are provided in both English and Welsh. As part of that process, each local authority has a local stakeholder group, and we should not understate the significance of that. This is about service delivery, people's experiences and parents talking about their children. As the hon. Member for South Swindon said at the start of this debate, this is not about ticking boxes. Meetings and engagement with stakeholders are important. Every one of those authorities has had a local action plan in place since 2009. They are being reviewed and renewed depending on local need.

I hesitate to quote myself by saying that Wales is streets ahead, but I say that in the spirit of generosity to which I alluded at the beginning of my speech. The challenge is as great in Wales as it is in England, but we have the frameworks and structures in place to assist.

Dr McCrea: Does the hon. Gentleman take the point made by the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Angela Watkinson) on the necessity of taking respite into consideration as part of an overall package of care?

Mr Williams: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned the people he has met in his surgeries, and, as I have said, I have attended stakeholder meetings in Ceredigion. We have both heard from parents about the need for respite provision, so that they can recoup their energy and strength to be the parents they want to be.

I have two concerns about the UK situation. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), the former Secretary of State for Wales, and the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), have referred to Atos. That is an emerging situation. I should like to emphasise the difficulties encountered by many claimants with autism when dealing with the Department for Work and Pensions and other Departments. There are concerns that work capability assessments, which determine eligibility for employment and support allowance, fail at their core to recognise the difficulties that people with autism face when looking for work and accessing benefits.

Communication difficulties can make face-to-face assessments very hard. People with autism can misunderstand questions and fail to pick up on inference and assumption—they might answer questions only in their most literal sense. Furthermore, interaction is a key problem with autism, so the condition does not lend itself well to a call centre culture. One constituent went without the benefits to which he was entitled for a long time because he simply could not face direct, blunt questions on the telephone without support. I was pleased that the initial work undertaken by Autism Cymru, which is based in Aberystwyth in my constituency, included going independently to Jobcentre Plus in the town to offer support and advice to the DWP staff who give advice to address some of the problems—I appreciate the complexity of doing so.

I commend Autism Cymru for its work with police forces in Wales. Four or five years ago, it developed the ASD emergency card scheme. As we have heard, many individuals with autism have become involved in the criminal justice system as a consequence of their vulnerability or their social and communication difficulties. The idea, which was pioneered in north Wales and Dyfed-Powys and rolled out across Wales, is that somebody with autism produces a card when they come into contact with the emergency services. The card not only informs the emergency service that the person functions on the autistic spectrum, but offers pointers on how communication with them can be advanced.

There are approximately 88,000 schoolchildren in England and 6,000 in Wales with autism. The majority are in mainstream schools. Therefore, every teacher—I used to be a teacher—should expect to teach a child who is on the autistic spectrum. They should also be ready to teach with, or have access to, the appropriate level of expertise. However, the National Autistic Society in Wales tells me that only 47% of parents were satisfied with the level of understanding of secondary school subject teachers. As we have heard, early diagnosis, assessment and intervention are critical. As a former primary schoolteacher—admittedly, it was some time ago now—I remain concerned, like the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde, about the training available to class teachers.

I have not been involved in the all-party group on autism, but I very much endorse its call for a lead teacher in every school with specific responsibility for ensuring equality of access for children with autism. That goes beyond the requirements of a special educational needs co-ordinator. The demands on SENCOs are immense enough without the complexities and range of challenges faced by working with autistic children.

We need to give our teachers the support they need, and I am not convinced that we have done that. Anecdotally, I remember being summoned to the head teacher's office to be told that a new girl would be joining my class and that she was autistic. I can in all honesty say, having been a class teacher for three or four years, that I had not experienced that in any other classroom. In my years of postgraduate training, I had never come across the term autistic. In fact, special needs education training in those times amounted to four or five hours in one afternoon. Teachers are often aware that they can be failing the children in their care. It is not necessarily their fault—the training needs to be available to support them.

[Mr Mark Williams]

If the debate is characterised by anything, it is the need to raise awareness; awareness not only in Government agencies and education, and—I am pleased to report, like my friends in Northern Ireland—awareness of the progress in our countries as well. What I am sure we all agree on is that the lives of children and adults may only improve if society has a better understanding of the condition that, as we have heard, affects one in 100 children. Recent figures from the NHS Information Centre have confirmed a similar prevalence in adults.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Williams: I am coming to my last sentence. Very quickly.

Henry Smith: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way just before his last sentence. Does he agree that the private sector also has a role to play in expanding autism awareness? I was delighted to learn only today that my local cinema, Cineworld, is working with the Dimensions social care charity to ensure that autism friendly films will be shown at that cinema. We need to spread awareness across all sectors of our society.

Mr Williams: The hon. Gentleman illustrates how the issue transcends everything. We could compartmentalise the debate in terms of education or, as I have, in terms of benefit issues. However, it crosses every aspect of life and we need that recognition. The hon. Member for South Swindon has done us a great favour in securing the debate and I look forward to hearing from the Government. I encourage them to carry on with the steps they are embarking on.

6.3 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I welcome this debate. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland) on securing it and on giving such a powerful and insightful contribution in his opening speech. I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have contributed to what has been a very high-quality debate. It is obvious that a lot of sincere dedication has gone into raising the profile of this issue and into fighting for support. It is good that we have the opportunity to acknowledge that, and to take stock of what more there is to do.

As has been mentioned on a number of occasions, autistic spectrum conditions affect more than one in 100 people in the UK, and in some places more than one in 70, yet an understanding of the issues faced by those with the condition is still worryingly low. That lack of understanding puts major barriers in the way of gaining education, training or employment, or an independent life for those affected. That has an inevitable impact on families and carers, something set out passionately by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

I am proud of the excellent Thomas Bewick school in my constituency. It provides a specialised education for children and young people with autistic spectrum conditions, and is housed in a superb modern building

funded by the Building Schools for the Future initiative. On a visit, I saw the incredibly inspiring work that the teachers, teaching assistants and other support workers undertake, and the incredible nurturing that those children receive. The most recent Ofsted report found it provided a “good” education, but it has been graded “outstanding” for, among other things,

“effectiveness of care, guidance and support”,

with the sixth form rated as “outstandingly effective” across the board. It noted that the head teacher, Audrey Lindley, has

“instilled passion and commitment in the staff team”,

and that the parents of pupils were overwhelmingly positive about the school. I witnessed that for myself, talking to many of the parents.

The school is also an important resource for the wider autism community, with parents from across the north-east region accessing the National Autistic Society’s regional information centre based at the school. A user of the centre recently told me:

“My son is still in a mainstream school, but his Asperger’s syndrome has affected our whole family. The NAS information officer is knowledgeable, approachable and experienced. Her support has been invaluable as we have come to terms with his diagnosis and battled to get him the support he needs.”

Again and again, we hear words such as “fighting” and “battling”. We have all acknowledged the battle that parents face, and we will, I hope, take steps to make that transition easier for families.

With Newcastle City council facing cuts of £164 per person—more than 10 times more than in some wealthier local authorities—the continued funding and support for the school is a credit to council leaders. At the moment, that funding is not under threat, but across the country there are concerns about appropriate education for children with autism. That education has to begin in the early years. Clearly, language development in the early stages needs the proper support and provision, so that signs of the condition can be picked up at the earliest stage. That provision has been ably provided by Sure Start, among others, which is why it is more important than ever to fight for resources and to ensure that local authorities have what they need to keep these vital services open.

There are concerns that no assurances have yet been given that the two-year grant awarded in 2011 by the Department for Education to the Autism Education Trust will be renewed. I do not know whether the Minister can comment on that. The grant funds a training programme to instruct and train 5,000 school staff in understanding and working with children with autism. As hon. Members have said, that understanding is vital, if things are to improve. The extra training is particularly important given the brevity of the training given to non-specialists trainee teachers. The vast majority of the 88,000 school-age children with autism in the UK are in mainstream schools, so good understanding and awareness among teachers is crucial to their success. However, 84% of respondents to the all-party group on autism’s recent survey said that teachers were not given enough training to teach and support children with autism effectively. That statistic will inevitably cause concern.

The NAS has also called for a trained lead teacher on autism to be available in every school in order to co-ordinate

services, inform other teachers and ensure that all students with autism have access to the support they need. That could be just the factor that allows a child to stay in a mainstream school, when that is the most suitable option. I hope that the Minister will tell the House how that provision can be improved. There are also concerns about access to independent special schools, when that is the most suitable option. As it stands, the children and families Bill will leave something of a loophole, which could prevent parents from stating a preference for an independent special school for their child—even if that is the only suitable school available in the local area—because of the lack of a clear legal distinction between mainstream independent schools and independent special schools. That is a major problem, and I would like to hear from the Minister today what the Government will do to address it.

Once children with autism leave school, they still need support—a point that many hon. Members have addressed—yet the transition is not always well managed. That is why it gives me great pleasure that the Government have accepted the all-party autism group's recommendation that support for young people with autism should continue uninterrupted until the age of 25. That should bring improvements, but as hon. Members have said, 25 should not be a cliff edge. Support needs to be ongoing for as long as those young people need it. Under the draft provisions, the local authority's duties cease once a young person leaves school or further education—if they take up a training place, for example—and do not necessarily restart if they want to return to education. Ensuring continued support is vital for young people to make the transition to independent adulthood. The Bill should be amended to allow continued access to supported education under a specialised plan for people who leave education and then return, as well as for those who stay on.

I again pay tribute to Thomas Bewick school, and to specialist and mainstream schools up and down the country that work tirelessly to give children with autism the best education and preparation for adult life. They do a huge amount, and although we can always do more to improve, refine and ensure access to the best educational support for every child, we pay particular tribute today to those making such efforts for children with autism.

6.11 pm

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): May I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend—my very good friend—the Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland) on securing this debate? Indeed, this situation is pretty unique, because in 1995, when we were both doing our parliamentary selection board, we ended up doing a debate together. He opened for the then governing side and I closed the debate, but I never imagined that, somewhere in the region of 17 years later, I would find myself re-enacting the whole thing—albeit in much more august company than some of the people who were there on that occasion.

I initially became involved in the whole issue of autism in the 2010 general election, when I found myself receiving an enormous number of e-mails from people writing to me about it. I cannot say that I am particularly well informed about the subject, and I am sure that everybody else is much better informed—in fact I know

so, because I have listened to a number of people in this debate—but I want to make one or two points. According to the National Autistic Society's website, one in 100 people suffer from the condition. I am told that in Plymouth—which is obviously part of my constituency—there are an estimated 1,200 children who have some form of learning difficulty or are autistically challenged in one way or another. It is also interesting to note that the city council has absolutely no data whatever on those aged 18 to 25 who suffer from autism or Asperger's.

I am afraid I have now to tell the House an incredibly sad story, which I was deeply shocked by. In early September, one of my constituents came to see me at one of my weekly surgeries to talk about her 19-year-old daughter, who suffers from pathological demand avoidance, which I understand is known as PDA. It appears that in May the police were called to Marlborough street, in a deprived part of Devonport, as her daughter was behaving in a very aggressive manner. She was arrested, heavily restrained, completely stripped and put into a body suit. I find this all quite depressing. When her mother went to Charles Cross police station, which is the busiest police station in the whole of England and second only to Glasgow in the United Kingdom, she found her daughter in quite a state. She was banging her head against the wall.

My constituent was very concerned at the treatment that her daughter had received, and she duly wrote to the authorities, including the police and Plymouth city council, to ask why her daughter had not been sectioned under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983, as amended by the Mental Health Act 2007. The team manager of the city council's children's disability team replied, saying that

“the 2007 Mental Health Act makes provision in relation to mentally disordered persons found in a public place and that they may be removed to a place of safety and may be detained for up to 72 hours to be examined by a registered medical practitioner”.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) suggested that we should perhaps ensure that people with autism or Asperger's, whether they are teenagers or older, carry some form of identity card so that the police know who they are dealing with, rather than behaving in what I have to say can be a slightly offhand manner. I am sure that the police were doing everything they could, and in the best possible way, but this is none the less a shocking story. We need to ensure that our police officers are better and more regularly trained. We also need to ensure that mental health nurses are on duty in police stations when these kinds of issues arise, so that they can carry out an appropriate assessment.

The House last debated mental health on the Floor of this Chamber in September, during the debate on the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell). In the debate, I talked about how I had learned, during a recent visit to Charles Cross police station, that people with mental health problems quite regularly had to be put into the cells, rather than being sent up to the Glenbourne unit at Derriford hospital in line with section 136 of the Mental Health Act. Of course I am not suggesting that everyone with mental health problems who ends up in that police station suffers from autism or Asperger's; I am simply making this point.

It appears that the constituency case that I have described was not a unique incident. My local police

[*Oliver Colville*]

feel that this is an inappropriate way to deal with these people, and that it can in some cases make matters worse. I also understand that the custody officers have not received the necessary training. They would welcome a qualified mental health nurse being attached to their unit.

The team manager of the council's children's disability team also said:

"Police Officers regularly deal with violent and aggressive people and it is common for some of these people to suffer from a variety of conditions including autism."

He added that there was no standard practice for dealing for dealing with young adults who suffer with autism, and that each situation had to be handled by the police as they saw fit.

On 6 September, in the wake of my constituent coming to see me, I asked the Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), what training police officers receive on dealing with people with mental health issues. He replied that, on joining the police, all officers undertook a two-year initial police learning and development programme. However, the training does not appear to continue on a regular basis thereafter. On that programme, police officers and police community support officers are provided with training in dealing with people who are vulnerable.

I understand that the authorities are now taking action to provide the facilities that are needed in Plymouth. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the city council, the local police and Plymouth's health managers for listening to my pleas during the September debate and for taking action. In the run-up to today's debate, I was contacted by the National Autistic Society's public affairs people, who told me that they too were pressing for more training for our police officers. I hope that that request will be taken on board.

I congratulate the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). He is not a member of my political party, but when he spoke on BBC Radio 4's "The World this Weekend", he said that he was on a learning curve on this issue, and any politician who can admit to that deserves to be listened to. There was an issue, as some may have heard, about an 11-year-old child who ended up being taken into a custody suite, and the Health Minister said that there has to be much more co-ordination of health services, police and local authorities so that they work much more closely together. I agree with him that there are some limited circumstances in which a youngster, perhaps for their own safety, has to be placed somewhere, but this has to be the absolute exception rather than the rule. We need to ensure that they are put into the right places for youngsters of that age—not necessarily into an adult custody suite. Although it may be the case that this practice has always happened—that it has always been this way—frankly, I do not think it should be allowed to carry on. Earlier this year, the Minister said that £34 million was being spent over the four years to 2014-15 on better mental health care for our children and young people. I think that is very important.

Finally, I am aware that many parents who have autistic children—they may be teenagers, but they may also be in their 20s and 30s—and who are now retired

are very worried about the provision that is going to be made when they are no longer there to take care of their children. We must certainly try to ensure that we do not just ignore those autistic people and say, "I'm sorry, but you're now an adult, so you should be able to cope for yourself." I am afraid that that is not the case.

Those people who care for their children with Asperger's or autism are, I think, fantastically good carers, and they need to be rewarded in a fundamentally important way, but we need to make sure that they also realise that there is help for them. Some large teenagers and those who are a bit older can, unfortunately, just sit on their parents, which I think can be quite intimidating.

I very much welcome the call for a more joined-up approach and greater co-ordination between the authorities, such as our health services and our police, but we also have to ensure that there is a system in place to look after these autistic adults for all their lives, not just for when they are teenagers and youngsters.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am looking to start the winding-up speeches at 6.30 pm.

6.22 pm

Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con): I, too, wish to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland), who has been a champion for people with autism and their families. I thank him for the opportunity he has given us to raise issues of great importance to our constituents. His debate is timely, not just because of the anniversary mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), but because the Palace of Westminster is being visited today by PAWS—Parents Autism Workshops and Support—which was set up by Dogs for the Disabled to bring together parents and carers of children with autism to share their experiences and explore the helping potential that a dog might have within their family. I pay tribute to its work and to the work of all the volunteers, whether they be bipeds or quadrupeds.

High special educational needs are well catered for in my area, but middle to low need provision is much more patchy. Autism, Asperger's, pragmatic language disorders and dyslexia make up a huge amount of my casework. I have huge admiration for the parents who come to my surgeries and are fighting for their children against a system that sets their kids up repeatedly to fail before any help is at hand. The daughter of my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon is lucky to have him as her dad, as we all know that he has skills and is able to make the case against a local authority or other agency. Many of the parents we deal with are not similarly equipped, so it is great that we are speaking up for them.

Let me touch on some of the main challenges that parents present to me in my surgeries, many of them echoed in previous speeches. The first is getting a statement. It takes a huge amount of time, as the process is not synchronised with the school year or other events going on in the child's life. We need a much more pragmatic and flexible approach to the evidence we gather. The process of getting a statement sometimes seems to be an

excuse for doing nothing in the meantime. Considering that it can take 12 months or more in some cases, I think that is a scandal.

Secondly, there is a huge lack of information for parents out there. Local education authorities are supposed to publicise provision regardless of the sector in which it sits, but they certainly not do that in all cases. Often parents who are trying to establish what are the best options for their child will receive a letter from the LEA saying merely that their needs will be taken care of by school action plus. When they try to find out what that actually means—what practical stuff will be done, by whom and where—the only words that keep being sent back to them are “school action plus”.

Parents do not have enough clout. It does not matter what a tribunal says or whether they win an appeal, because too many local education authorities are still refusing to act. They have no say in budgets, and we have already discussed at length the problems of transition post-16 and post-18. This is not just a nightmare for the children and their families; it is also a really poor use of the education budget. A young boy in my constituency who should now be in his GCSE year has never obtained a secondary school place. A travel grant would have sorted that out, and it would have been peanuts in comparison with the cost of the interventions that will have to be made in that young man's life further down the road.

My office has done a lot of work on cost. When we were fighting to get children the school places that they needed—we dealt with many cases—we set up a bursary scheme, thanks to the generosity of some local charities and London livery companies. In one case, we paid for the first two years of a young girl's secondary school education. We worked out that there was an £180 difference between the per-pupil cost of sending her to the mainstream school to which the LEA wanted to send her for the remaining three years of her education and the cost of sending her to the independent school, which was the only school in the area that could cater for her special educational needs. That is a scandal in itself, but we then submitted a freedom of information request which established that the amount that the LEA had spent on the legal fees and officer time involved in the fight against sending the girl to the school to which her parents had wanted to send her outweighed the cost of sending her there in the first place many times over.

I am very pleased about the reforms that the Government are introducing. They address all the points that I have raised, they are long overdue, and I am sure that they will resolve many cases. However, I am still sceptical, and I hope that the Minister will understand why. I am not sure that we shall be able to get all LEAs to act, and to embrace those reforms. We know from our experience with the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence in the field of health care that the setting out of a clear vision of what people should have, and a constitution that enshrines what they are entitled to, is no guarantee that they will actually get it.

Perhaps the Minister will say whether he would be interested in looking at some of the cases with which I have been dealing. I think that they are very enlightening. Perhaps he will also say whether, if the education reforms are ignored, he will boot some of the LEAs up the backside when they consistently fail to do the right thing by our children.

6.28 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Mr. Speaker, given your keen interest and great work in this particular area of policy.

Let me begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland). I congratulate him not just on securing this important debate but, more widely, on the work that he has done, and continues to do, in raising the parliamentary profile of autism spectrum disorders through his excellent chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on autism. His personal testimony today, when he spoke as a parent, was particularly powerful. As a parent of a child with social educational needs, I could certainly identify with it, as, I am sure, could other Members in the same position. He is, of course, ably assisted in his stewardship of that very active all-party group by a number of Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), who also gave powerful personal testimony of his experiences as a parent.

In my capacity as a shadow Minister, I was delighted to be asked to take part in the all-party group's review of education for children and young people with autism. Sadly, my time slot for giving evidence was severely curtailed because the Minister's predecessor, the hon. Member for Brent Central (Sarah Teather), substantially overran in making her contribution—as, I have to say, was her habit. I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the Minister to his post, and I promise that I will not do that to him today.

The all-party group's review took place at about the same time as the Labour party's review of SEN policy, which I led. The all-party group was assisted in its work by the National Autistic Society, and we on the Labour panel were ably assisted in our review by a young man called Andrew Rhodes, who was one of the NAS young ambassadors, and who I am sure is watching our debate today.

I have read the all-party group's report and there is clearly a lot of common ground between our reviews, particularly on the need to support young people on the autism spectrum or who have other special educational needs in their transition into adulthood and helping those who, given the right support and opportunities, are capable of working.

The main statistic on which the National Autistic Society hung its “undiscovered workforce” campaign was that fewer than a quarter of people with autism are in work, with just 15% working full time, but four out of five people with autism who are reliant on benefits want to work, and believe they can do so. I know from my constituency postbag that the Government are very keen on telling people they are fit to work when they clearly are not; my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) addressed that subject. There are also, however, young people who are desperate to get out there and work, yet who are often not given the right support to overcome the challenges they face. They may also face discrimination from employers, who see their disability rather than their abilities.

There are, of course, exceptions to that rule. I had the privilege of visiting an organisation in Sunderland called Autism Works, which provides job opportunities and career guidance as well as support for young autistic

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

people in the local area. It provides a safe environment, where staff are confident about dealing with the changes in behaviour of some of the young people who work there. Chris Mitchell, who is on the spectrum himself, and the rest of the staff were keen to stress that, given the right attitudes and a degree of flexibility from colleagues and line managers, those young people can be a real asset to lots of organisations.

As the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) said in her customary well-informed speech, people on the spectrum are often particularly skilled in a number of areas, such as computers and science, which are highly valued in the modern work force, as well as repetitive tasks such as those the right hon. Lady highlighted. I am sure that many organisations are beginning to realise that—thanks in no small part to the work the NAS did as part of its “undiscovered workforce” campaign, as well as the excellent campaigns Members of this House have led over many years, including the first one I was involved in, as a signatory to the right hon. Lady’s private Member’s Bill, which has now become the Autism Act 2009. I am sure its provisions are making a real difference to the lives of young people and adults with autism.

I would like the Minister to say how the Government will support young autistic people into work, and how his Department, as well as the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Cabinet Office, can encourage employers, including the public sector, to look beyond the outward manifestations of conditions such as autism, and not deny so many people the opportunity to prove that they can be a valued part of their organisation.

Other issues with the transition to adulthood were discussed in an excellent Adjournment debate a few weeks ago, to which the Minister responded. Concerns focused particularly on opportunities for further education and training, and on young people on the autism spectrum having the same opportunities as other young people, which other hon. Members have mentioned.

In the time available, I want to consider the experiences that arise earlier than that and to talk about the school journey, which is ultimately the main determinant of a young person’s options at 16, 18, or 25. Another recommendation in the all-party group’s report that chimed with what came out of my review of SEN policy more widely concerned the need for teachers to know about high incidence special educational needs and disabilities, including ASDs, and to be equipped with the skills to adapt their teaching to get through to young people and manage certain behaviours. The issue has come up time and again while I have held this brief, and not just while I was conducting the review. It was also raised in a number of speeches from Members on both sides of the House today.

One in five young people is identified as having an SEND, so in every class there is likely to be at least a handful of people who require extra support. That means that every single teacher is a teacher of SEND pupils, as the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) highlighted powerfully from his personal experience. Not every teacher is given the skills to allow them to be a good teacher of SEN pupils, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine

McKinnell) said in her thoughtful speech. If we expect our teachers to be good teachers for every child in their class, as we should and we do, we must give them the skills and knowledge they need to live up to that expectation.

We are therefore considering how we can ensure that every new teacher undertakes a minimum module on SEND as a mandatory part of their initial training—not an optional part, as it is at the moment. It will cover identifying and adapting teaching for high incidence conditions and managing sometimes challenging behaviour in the classroom. We are also considering saying to schools that they need to give due prominence to special educational needs such as autism in their continuous professional development strategies. One in-service training day a year could be given over to promoting good practice on inclusive teaching, sharing best practice and experience, and refreshing knowledge on SEND. One in five of the training days for the one in five pupils with SEND seems fair to me.

Our plans are not about creating specialists, although some might decide they want to go on and do that. We certainly need specialists at a local level to drive improvements across a council area. They are about giving every teacher the best possible chance of being able to teach the class in front of them.

I also want to consider how to raise the status of SENCOs, which we heard about today. We need to look to them to lead and improve practice in their schools. We want the best teachers to aspire to take on the role, but anecdotal evidence suggests that that is not always the case. By raising their status, for example by saying that SENCOs should be part of the senior management team within a school, I believe we can positively influence the choice of individual to perform the role, incentivise good teachers to work towards becoming a SENCO and increase the clout they have in schools to drive improvements. I think that the combination of these measures will vastly increase the quality of provision for children and young people in mainstream settings.

Of course, there will be children and young people on the extreme end of the spectrum for whom mainstream classrooms will not at the moment be the best place for them to be educated. In many such cases parents look to the specialist expertise and facilities in our non-maintained and independent special school sector, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde spoke about movingly from his own experience. A major concern is that although the draft clauses in the Bill provide for non-maintained schools to be named on an education, health and care plan, they do not extend the same provisions to independent special schools, in which about 8,000 children and young people are currently placed. I believe that is because of concerns in the Department about how to define an independent special school, but in a written answer to me the Minister responsible for education and child care, the hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), stated that no work had been undertaken to try to devise one. The Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mr Timpson), had the opportunity to address these concerns at the Select Committee hearing a couple of weeks ago, but did not do so. I therefore give him the opportunity today to set people’s minds at rest. I urge him to devise a designation or approval system for

independent special schools, so that they can continue to provide the excellent support that 8,000 families currently rely on.

One aspect that is not always discussed when we debate provision for children and young people with additional needs is the needs, and indeed the competencies, of the wider family. This was powerfully expressed by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in his contribution. All hon. Members who have come along to this debate will probably know from personal experience, as we heard so movingly on a number of occasions today, or from constituency cases that having a child with a special educational need or disability, particularly where that manifests itself in challenging or aggressive behaviour, as in some cases of Asperger's or severe autism, such as in the second case that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colville) shared with the House today, can be extremely stressful for parents, siblings and other family members, and cause a number of problems, such as mental and physical health issues, or the inability to stay in or perhaps to take up work.

Supporting a child's family to understand how to cope with and cater for the child's SEN or disability is often the most cost-effective intervention, and should be encouraged, as the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) said eloquently in her speech. Early intervention in such cases saves money, whereas over-estimating a family's ability to support a child can be detrimental to all concerned. It can aggravate certain problems, negate efforts and resources spent elsewhere, contribute towards family breakdown, and increase the likelihood of the care system being involved.

We brought in short breaks, which can help families immensely, as we heard, and I welcome the Government's continued support for them. But as important and valued as they are, in the end they are just that—short breaks, in what can be and usually is a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week caring role. When all the professionals who we are promised will come together to draw up the education, health and care plans, it would surely be an effective use of their time together in one room to consider the needs of the whole family, rather than just the child as an individual.

That would mean assessing the family's resilience and ability to cope, which differs from family to family; providing or recommending support specifically for family members, where appropriate; and if there are siblings who are also in education, ensuring that their school gives them support to overcome the unique challenges that they may face at home, whether that is just the fact that they do not have a quiet place to do their homework, or the fact that they are fulfilling a caring role themselves and do not have the time or energy to do their homework.

I end my remarks by praising the hon. Member for South Swindon again for securing this important debate, which has been an excellent opportunity for hon. Members to emphasise the priority that we all place on improving outcomes for children and adults with autism. There will be many disagreements along the way, I am sure, but Labour will strive to work with the Government and all parties to ensure that the children and families Bill is the best Bill it can be, and that it will deliver real, positive change to provision for autistic young people and their families.

6.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Edward Timpson): This has indeed been a truly excellent debate. I join all those in the Chamber today in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland) on securing so much time in the main Chamber for what we all agree is a very important subject. As the parent of a child with autism, whom I was privileged to meet last week, my hon. Friend has championed the cause of all children and young people who are on the autistic spectrum with such diligence, passion and vocation. It is a testament to him that in his constituency the Swindon SEN Network is proving to be a real help to many children. I am pleased to be able to pay such a heavy tribute to him.

I should also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) for her work. She was instrumental—indeed, she played a pivotal role—in getting the landmark Autism Act 2009 on to the statute book. The impact of that Act continues to resonate to this day. I also pay tribute to you, Mr Speaker, for your work to make many more people aware of the plight of young people with autism. I am pleased to learn that, in Baroness Browning, the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and I have a mutual friend—not something I ever expected—and that we are both benefiting from her vast experience. Finally, I join others in praising the work of the all-party group on autism, its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon, and all the officers here today.

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed so constructively to the debate. It is heartening to hear that there is strong cross-party support for the general thrust and direction of our reforms. I shall endeavour to cover as many of the points made in the debate as I can, but if I fail to do so in the short time available to me, I shall of course answer in writing to the hon. Members who made them.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon spoke about his personal experience. He explained how he and his family had been through the mill because the system had not worked and how, like many parents, he felt that there was an obsession with process and categorisation, rather than with outcomes for children with autism. I shall try to answer that and many of the other points he made in the body of my speech.

The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) also spoke from personal experience of bringing up a child with autism. His was a powerful and thoughtful speech, and I shall pick up one or two of the points he made now, because they are important. He talked about parents' rights, and I intervened on the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington to clarify the point, which I also discussed with the Select Committee. The new system of education, health and care plans will carry through all the rights that parents have under the current statementing system—in fact, they will be extended in some circumstances. Young people will also have additional rights, such as to choose the type of further education establishment they attend, and we will also run pilots in which children have the right to take cases to tribunal. In no sense are we attempting to diminish the rights available to parents; instead, we are trying to enhance

[Mr Edward Timpson]

them. The legal force of an education, health and care plan will be the same as that of a statement. I hope that that gives the hon. Gentleman some reassurance.

Jonathan Reynolds: Parents across the country will be reassured by the Minister's statement. What form does he believe that provision will take? Will it be made by amending the Bill, or through secondary legislation and regulations? If that is the case, perhaps members of the all-party group could be part of the process, to help make the legislation as effective as possible.

Mr Timpson: The legislation we have is in draft form and is undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny. We are listening carefully to all the concerns raised by parents and others to make sure that, as all speakers have said this afternoon, we get it right. Where it is not clear, we are happy to look and to make sure that it is absolutely clear. Of course, with the code of practice and regulation to come, we have the opportunity to set out in more detail how everything will hang together and play out on the ground for parents. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) say that the Opposition want to play a role in developing that.

Mr Buckland: Will my hon. Friend carefully consider the point I made about the need to make sure that the code of practice is enshrined in secondary legislation, so that there can be both certainty and, if and when it needs to change, flexibility, as it will be a living document?

Mr Timpson: I understand my hon. Friend's point. He knows that the current code of practice, because of the parliamentary resolution required, has not been changed since 2001, and that creates anomalies—for example, it refers to agencies, such as the Learning and Skills Council, that no longer exist. To make it a living document, we need to be able to keep it up to date and in the proper form that reflects current practice. I shall consider his point and I am sure that we can take it up as the Bill goes through Parliament.

I was trying to give some impression of the thrust of individual Members' contributions. I want to address some of the points raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham, particularly in relation to independent special schools and the ability of young people and parents to have a preference in their plan. That was also raised by the hon. Members for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). As I told the Education Committee, we are working closely with independent special schools to try to get over the hurdle of the legal difficulties and the definition. We hope to resolve those difficulties, because there is a growing consensus that we should have as much involvement with all the schools that parents might want to send their children to as the most appropriate places for them to be educated and to have the support they need. We are hopeful about resolving that, so I hope that reassures hon. Members that it is something we are working on. As I have said previously, we want to ensure that we get that right and do not end up with

something that proves undeliverable, as that would not be in the best interests of the children we are trying to help.

In relation to the adult autism strategy, I again pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham for the work she has done. The review is coming up next year, between March and October, and I want to re-emphasise the importance of a cross-departmental effort to ensure that the strategy develops in as co-ordinated a way as possible across Government and that it is not simply taken up by one or two Departments. I am happy to talk with her about how we can achieve that and ensure that every Department plays its part.

Several Members, including my right hon. Friend, mentioned the work capability assessments and Atos. That is obviously something that has been running for some time. The third independent review of how the assessments are functioning has now been published by Professor Malcolm Harrington. It states that real progress on improving the assessment is

“beginning to change positively in the best interests of the individual”.

There are ongoing concerns, as hon. Members have mentioned, and I will be happy to write to the relevant Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions so that they can consider the points that have been raised. The health professionals recruited by Atos or Capita must demonstrate the appropriate skill in assessing people with conditions affecting mental health and intellectual and cognitive functions, and that includes taking into account their history and observing their ability to perform relevant tasks. That should also include those with autism. I take on board the point that has been raised and am happy to share that with the relevant Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions.

Mrs Gillan: Even during the course of this debate I have been tweeted by someone in Yorkshire who says that she is working with the Department for Work and Pensions on identifying hidden impairments. Will the Minister ensure that work is really co-ordinated across all Departments so that we maximise on this and do not consign people to the scrap heap because we have not had the right people in the right place making the right assessments?

Mr Timpson: I cannot resist offering my right hon. Friend the answer I gave earlier, which is that it is important that the Government work in a co-ordinated way across all Departments. Of course, I am sure that is something we can try to ensure through my correspondence with the Department for Work and Pensions.

The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington touched on a number of important issues in his contribution. It is good to hear that the trade union movement is stepping up to the plate and looking at the important role it can play in ensuring that autism is thought about carefully when the working environment is considered. On his point about appeals and whether there will be any dumbing down of the right to appeal through the tribunal process, we will in fact be widening the right to appeal. If he looks at clause 28 of the Bill, he will see that it is not just parents who will be able to appeal; young people over the compulsory school age with also

be able to. As I iterated only a few moments ago, we are piloting the role children might be able to play in challenging any decisions made on their behalf.

In relation to the restrictions on legal aid, the current arrangements will continue as before. I certainly remember that my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon was instrumental in some of the elements that ensured that legal aid will continue in this area. Over and above that, it will also be available to young people if they decide to take any of these cases to tribunal.

John McDonnell: Another point that I raised related to clause 39 on the responsibility on the local authority to use its best endeavours, which replaces the obligation on it to implement the statement. Will there be any discussion or reappraisal of that?

Mr Timpson: No. The “best endeavours” provision relates to the school as opposed to the local authority, which will still have the duty that exists now. I am happy to put that in writing for the hon. Gentleman, but I hope that that clarifies his point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) told us about her visit to TreeHouse school, which I understand has just received an outstanding Ofsted inspection rating, so I congratulate it on that. She also told us about the great work that Squirrels residential unit in her constituency is doing, and about the importance of ensuring that those who turn 16 do not have their opportunities narrowed as a consequence of their reaching that age.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who decided that I might have some culinary skills that I did not know existed, invited me to look carefully at how the reforms on autism are playing out in Northern Ireland. I am happy to do that, both in relation to how they have worked well and to how we can perhaps learn some lessons where they have fallen short of the expectations that were placed in the legislation.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for his contribution and for his invitation for me to look at what is happening with Autism Cymru and the all-age strategy for autism that has now been running for four years. His experience of teaching prior to coming into this House has clearly given us the benefit of his ability to be a strong contributor to the Bill as it moves forward, and I look forward to his future contributions.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) told us about Thomas Bewick school in her constituency and the inspiring work that it is doing for children with autism. She asked about the work of the Autism Education Trust. For the past two years, the Department has grant-funded the AET to the tune of £1.2 million, but I am pleased to say that there is now a further opportunity for it to apply for the grant that we have offered for the next two years as part of our voluntary and community sector grant funding, as well as a further contract for work with children with autism. I hope that the AET will look at that and see that it could put in a strong bid that we will be able to consider.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colville) told us about a troubling case in his constituency and the importance of training

police officers, which comes to the fore when they are dealing with people with mental health problems and those who may display behaviours which, if officers do not have awareness of the condition, may lead them to make a decision that is not based on the best interests of those individuals.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) told us about the parents autism workshops and support project, which I need to learn more about to hear about how it is helping many young people in a very innovative way. She asked whether I would like to hear more about the cases that she has raised. Yes, please; we are still at a listening stage in the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill, and anything that can enhance my knowledge and understanding of the effect of the current system on parents and young people can only help to ensure that we get the whole Bill right throughout its passage and into the implementation stage.

I thank the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West for her welcome invitation, as I see it, to work closely and collaboratively in trying to ensure that we get the Bill into the best possible state that it can be so as to help and benefit as many young people and children as possible all the way through from the ages of 0 to 25, as the new reforms will. I look forward to those discussions as we move forward. She is right that young people with autism are a huge asset to our society; they enrich it, and we should always remember that. We should not forget that they want to make a positive contribution, and we should do everything we can to make sure that they can do just that.

There are many more things that I wanted to say and I am sorry that I do not have more time to do so. I am pleased that the debate has managed to flush out many of the issues that are troubling parents as we move forward with the Bill, and that it has given me an opportunity to reflect on many of the excellent points made by Members across the House. As the Minister charged with reforming the SEN system, I am under no illusions about the importance of getting this right. I thank all Members for their excellent contributions and look forward to continuing our discussions as we move through the stages of the Bill. Finally, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon for his great work.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of autism.

Business without Debate

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)),

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

That this House takes note of European Union Documents No. 11112/12 and Addendum, dated 8 June 2012, relating to a Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Court of Auditors: Synthesis of the Commission's management achievements in 2011, and No. 11479/12, dated 15 June 2012, relating to European Court of Auditors' Opinion No. 4/2012 on the Commission's evaluation report on the Union's finances based on results achieved established under

Article 318 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union; considers the Commission's report to be disappointing, inadequate, and unfit for purpose; consequently welcomes the European Court of Auditors' critical analysis of the report and the constructive suggestions for improvement; agrees that a thorough analysis of results achieved against planned outcomes would be a useful focus for future reports; considers that useful and timely information on transparency, accountability and quality of European Union spend is essential to facilitate a better understanding on behalf of Member States, the public and other institutions of the performance of the Commission's management activities; agrees that a timely report is necessary to inform the annual Budgetary discharge process; and calls on the Government to make specific proposals which strengthen the independent external audit of the EU budget and programmes, improve procurement rules and ensure that experienced and qualified audit professionals implement an audit and inspection system geared to addressing risk and securing efficiency and added value in all EU expenditure.—(*Greg Hands.*)

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY

That the draft Community infrastructure Levy (Amendment) Regulations 2012, which were laid before this House on 15 October, be approved.—(*Greg Hands.*)

Question agreed to.

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

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft District Electoral Areas Commissioner (Northern Ireland) Order 2012, which was laid before this House on 15 October, be approved.—(*Greg Hands.*)

Question agreed to.

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

DISABLED PERSONS

That the draft Disabled People's Right to Control (Pilot Scheme) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012, which were laid before this House on 24 October, be approved.—(*Greg Hands.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Nippers Nursery, Leicester

7 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): I want to present a petition on behalf of almost 300 residents of the Leicester city area.

The petition states:

The Petition of staff and parents of Nippers Nursery, Saxon House, Leicester,

Declares that on 30 November Nippers Nursery will be closed by HMRC and that the reason given is that there is a declining number of children attending; further that the Petitioners believe that this is simply not true and that Nippers Nursery is a valuable, viable and well-loved local nursery used by staff of HMRC and local parents alike.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Her Majesty's Treasury to reverse the decision to close Nippers Nursery.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P001134]

Sergeant Nightingale

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Greg Hands.)

7.1 pm

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): In raising the case of Sergeant Danny Nightingale, it is a huge pleasure to see so many hon. Friends and hon. Members present. Indeed, some of them are hon. and gallant Friends. It is a particular pleasure to see on the Government Front Bench my hon. Friend the Solicitor-General, the Minister of State, Ministry of Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois)—both of whom are extremely dedicated Ministers—and my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mr Timpson), who is, of course, the relevant constituency MP, but who, as a Minister in another Department, cannot take part in the debate.

I want to make it clear that it is no part of my submission to suggest that special forces soldiers are in any way above or outside the law of the land. Instead, I shall argue that particular failings in this very hard case have led to a particular injustice. As a result, a dedicated and extremely brave man is in military detention, and his wife and small daughters face potential eviction from their family home, because they are unable to pay their mortgage.

Military justice was consciously modelled on civilian criminal justice. Originally, 12 officers echoed the 12 householders of repute on a jury, although the number became more commonly five 100 years ago. In the past 20 years, under pressure from the European Court of Human Rights, the system has been turned on its head and today a judge advocate chairs the court with up to five regimental officers who are no longer allowed to ask direct questions. My particular concern with regard to Sergeant Nightingale's case relates to a further problem resulting from the abandonment of the old military justice principle that the composition of the court should at least in part reflect any special circumstances of the prisoner wherever possible. For example, in an aviation case there should be at least one pilot on the court panel. In the case under discussion, nobody on the court panel had any connection to special forces, the relevance of which will emerge in a moment.

The facts are as follows: Sergeant Danny Nightingale was presented with a Glock pistol in Baghdad in 2007 by grateful Iraqi colleagues. He returned early to this country from operations, accompanying the bodies of two comrades killed in action. A comrade packed his kit and it was returned to the UK under the supervision of the military police, who have a specific duty to check that there are no weapons in the equipment. The locked kit box sat in a cage that was also locked for two and a half years in his barracks. It was eventually moved, in its container, to the Army accommodation that Danny Nightingale shared with another sergeant.

Meanwhile, in 2009, Danny collapsed on a marathon that he was doing for charity in south America, suffering from a tropical illness that damaged his brain, affecting his memory. In 2011, when he had somehow managed to talk his way back on to operations, now in Afghanistan, the police raided his military digs after a tip-off from the other sergeant's wife, who was in dispute with her

husband. During the search, the police uncovered the weapon belonging to Danny Nightingale, which was still in its container in a cupboard and a quantity of ammunition under his bed. I understand that the unit held an immediate weapons amnesty and that an embarrassingly large number of weapons turned up in the skip that was conveniently provided overnight.

Most parts of the Army have been engaged in dangerous and often bloody operations. Where special forces are different from the rest of the Army is that they do not leave that regime on coming back to the UK. Typically, as was the case with Sergeant Nightingale, they remain on very short notice to move for long periods, which entails keeping live ammunition in their kit. They are, of course, subject to the same law and the same internal rules as other parts of the Army, but the pressure and temptation on tired, overstretched men to take weapons and kit containing live rounds back to their accommodation is of a different order of magnitude. It is clear from the article by Sergeant Nightingale's gallant former commanding officer, Colonel Richard Williams MBE MC, that the amnesty revealed that a number of people in the regiment had got into bad habits under the extreme pressure of operational tours abroad and the high-readiness cycle at home.

Let us look for a moment at the military equivalent of a public interest case, the service interest, which should be of interest to the Solicitor-General. We can split the narrative in half, with a break at the point when the weapon went outside the wire. It is undisputed that the weapon and ammunition came back under the supervision of others and sat for two and a half years in a locked cage in the base. Given the amnesty, surely no one could believe that that alone passed the service interest test, or even the public interest test. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) has revealed outside this Chamber that when he was presented with a working sniper rifle in Northern Ireland, he put it in a safe place in a barracks and took two years to get around to making it legal.

That leaves the second half of the process: the moving of Sergeant Nightingale's kit and the depositing of it in his military digs a few months before he was redeployed. That occurred a long time after the incident in south America that had caused his brain damage, when he had somehow clawed his way back on to operations, dedicated soldier that he is.

At the heart of the transcript of the trial is a remark by the judge advocate:

"You say you forgot about it whilst it remained in your box in a cage. Whilst we accept that you gave little or no weight to it, we find it difficult to go on to accept it was out of your mind entirely. In 2009 you were involved in a very serious incident which resulted in serious injury, which we accept affected your memory to some extent. Nevertheless, mainly through your own determination, you had recovered sufficiently so that by October 2010 you were placed back on active service."

One would have thought that that would have scored some brownie points.

Danny Nightingale has compelling medical evidence to show that his memory was severely impaired. Do we really believe that the second half of the offence—the transfer of the kit, en masse, to military digs after he had suffered the memory damage and when he was under huge service pressures—passes the service interest test? Is this what the military covenant is about? Does this

[*Mr Julian Brazier*]

amount to paying fair regard to the particular pressures of life in special forces and their effect on a man whose memory had been impaired and who had made his way back into action?

In his testimony, DCI Barnes of West Mercia police said:

“Apart from the unlawful possession no criminal intent had been established nor, more importantly, was it suspected...The two suspects—”

I have not dealt with the other sergeant—

“had fully co-operated with the investigation and provided detailed and frank accounts. Neither had any criminal record that might otherwise have influenced my decision-making process.”

Before the trial, I am told that Danny Nightingale was threatened by the judge advocate, using powers under the new system, that if he did not plead guilty, he would face a five-year prison sentence. It was as though he seriously believed that this case did not involve exceptional circumstances as set out in law.

Under pressure, Sergeant Nightingale pleaded guilty. Yesterday I visited him in military detention—Colchester is the one part of the military justice system that works really well. I found him subdued and saddened, but still with an impressive quiet strength that comes from a remarkable character. The judge advocate said in his reasons for sentence

“you have an exemplary character...your offences come about primarily by way of your inaction.”

That is one way of putting it. This is a man who has served bravely for 17 years—the bulk of that time in the special forces—risking his life for his country again and again. As a medic he invented a new dressing, known as the Nightingale dressing, that is used in the British and American special forces and extensively in the NHS. He has never claimed a penny for it.

Sergeant Nightingale’s family are immensely grateful for the interest taken in this case by the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Defence and Members of this House. My hon. Friend the Solicitor-General has issued a statement, correctly stating that it would be improper for him to review a finished court case. I would be grateful if he would confirm whether, should an appeal be launched, it will be within his powers to discuss whether or not to oppose the appeal with the Service Prosecuting Authority. I urge him to review the service interest test for this case, and allow the planned appeal to go through unopposed.

7.11 pm

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier) on securing this debate, and thank him for allowing me to speak. I have sat on and remanded men for courts martial. I have allowed men to seek trial by court martial and I respect and understand the system. I see that it is not a normal court of law; it is not a judge and jury per se, but rather a panel of brothers, sitting in judgment on another brother, or indeed sister. My whole experience of courts martial has been one of admiration. I understand that Sergeant Nightingale has pleaded guilty to the charges laid before him, and that he has borne himself with dignity. I understand that his crime is a serious one. Paragraph 2.7 of the court-martial

sentencing guidance of October 2009 points to operational effectiveness. It states that the court martial must take into account what is in the best interests of the service.

I have no doubt that, as Sergeant Nightingale has pleaded guilty, he expects some form of penalty to be imposed. I suggest, however, that that will operationally affect not just our special forces but every soldier, sailor, airman and Royal Marine who puts his or her life on the line for their country and understands that the country owes them a debt of honour. I ask my hon. Friend the Solicitor-General that, should an appeal be submitted, he will not seek to oppose it.

7.13 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier) for permission to take up a small slice of his time. This is the third occasion on which I have addressed this subject on the Floor of the House. Quite apart from the shocking individual circumstances that have brought as many as three dozen hon. Members to this House for an Adjournment debate—an exceptional outcome as I am sure you will agree, Madam Deputy Speaker—one particularly disturbing part of this case has been the iniquitous effect of plea bargaining.

This was a man who believed he was innocent. He did not wish to plead guilty but did so in a plea bargaining process that led him to believe he would be given a light sentence, rather than face a heavy sentence of five years’ imprisonment—presumably without the 50% discount one gets in civilian jails in this country—if he continued to plead innocent but was found guilty. As a result, he was convicted, but unaccountably sentenced to 18 months, which, without remission, is equivalent to a three-year sentence given to someone in civil society.

I mentioned that I had raised the matter twice before on the Floor of the House. On the second occasion, I raised it with the Secretary of State for Justice, who wisely pointed out that, although it was outside the parameters of his normal area of responsibility, he would hope that a common-sense approach would be taken to such cases. He had the common sense to recommend common sense, which is what we are looking for from those on our Front Bench tonight. We are not looking for bone-headed rigidity, which can give not only military justice, but civil justice, an irreparably bad reputation in this country. When the appeal comes, it should not be opposed, and Sergeant Nightingale should be allowed to resume his career and his life with the honour he so richly deserves.

7.16 pm

Simon Reeve (Dewsbury) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier) for giving me the opportunity to speak.

Earlier this year, the court martial appeal court confirmed that the Attorney-General has a supervisory role as far as the Service Prosecuting Authority and the Director of Service Prosecutions are concerned. Ironically, it did so in a case when an unrelated search discovered trophy items and the SPA went out of its way to select charges that would protect the defendant from a draconian sentence at the end of his trial. The Attorney-General enjoys those powers because he has authority over anybody who prosecutes on behalf of the Crown.

Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker; I should have declared that I have practised in the military courts for 20 years.

In light of the significant public concern regarding the circumstances in which Sergeant Nightingale was prosecuted, and given recent questions of judgment at the very top of the Service Prosecuting Authority—the contract of the Director of Service Prosecutions is not to be renewed—it would provide reassurance for all concerned if the Attorney-General reconsiders his decision of this morning not to conduct a review of the application of the service interest test. The decision to prosecute Sergeant Nightingale in respect of the Glock pistol has led to the debate and the circumstances we are discussing. The concern of a great many people is that, although on a simple analysis an offence may have been committed, the service interest was not properly considered before a decision was taken to mount the prosecution. If the Attorney-General takes the view that that is not so, all matters raised in the debate are for the court martial appeal court, but if his view is that the service interest test was not met, he would doubtless ensure that a view is taken by the prosecution not to oppose the conviction appeal in respect of the Glock pistol. The ammunition is perhaps a different matter, but the sentencing powers for that are different.

There are wider concerns. There is suspicion among many that there has been a miscarriage of justice, but there is a wider undermining of the military justice system when there is public outrage, and when the public question whether an individual should ever have been prosecuted in the first place. The Attorney-General is entitled to deal with that as soon as he chooses.

7.18 pm

The Solicitor-General (Oliver Heald): The Attorney-General is unable to be in the House this evening owing to a long-standing prior speaking engagement elsewhere in the country. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier) on securing the debate. He has a great interest in defence matters and is respected in the House—he serves with great distinction on the Select Committee on Defence. I thank him for his work. He spent a number of years serving in the Territorial Army, and I am happy to reply to the debate.

In the light of public comments, it is understandable that colleagues are concerned. It is important that hon. Members know the facts. Sergeant Nightingale was charged with two offences: possession of a prohibited firearm, which is a serious offence, and possessing ammunition. At the hearing, he pleaded guilty to both offences. He was represented by a solicitor with considerable experience in this specialised field, and by an eminent Queen's counsel.

As has been said, in 2011 a search was conducted of a house rented by the military where Sergeant Nightingale was living. This was an ordinary house in an ordinary road. It followed an allegation made against another resident. During that search 336 rounds of live ammunition were found in a box under Sergeant Nightingale's bed. In the wardrobe was a Glock self-loading pistol—a prohibited weapon—which is designed to discharge 9 mm bullet cartridges from a spring-operated box-type magazine. There were three empty magazines. The gun,

and the ammunition for it, made a serious, dangerous and fully functional weapon. He was away from the house on operations and the weapon was not secure.

Sergeant Nightingale was interviewed by the police and explained that he had brought the pistol back on conclusion of operations in Iraq in 2007. He said that he had taken it from secured premises at his base to his home in January 2011. He accepted that he had obtained the ammunition in the course of his duties as a training officer and that he had not got around to handing it in, describing his administration and working practices as poor. It is right that he explained that the Glock came as a present from local nationals, that it was his intention to have it deactivated and mounted, and that he had not intended to keep the item in its present form.

Mr Brazier: My hon. Friend said that Sergeant Nightingale brought the pistol back from Iraq. He came back without his equipment, escorting the bodies of two comrades with his commanding officer, Colonel Richard Williams. His equipment came back separately—others packed it, under the supervision of the military police.

The Solicitor-General: I was describing what he said in an interview. Of course, it is true—he made this clear and it was not disputed, as far as I am aware—that the property was moved from secure military circumstances to his home and that he was aware of that.

On Sergeant Nightingale's state of health, it is right that in October 2009 he was conducting a jungle marathon and suffered a brain injury. That was serious and it is good that he was able to make a recovery and was declared fit for duty. The court martial set out the key facts, which it took into account in sentencing. That is a public document and is on the judiciary website www.judiciary.gov.uk. I suggest that people read the whole of the court's judgment. The judge advocate took into account the

“very great service over the years”,

and accepted a lot of what was said about the weapon and ammunition being kept in the mess and then moved to the home in January 2011, the point that my hon. Friend just made.

The reasons for sentence refer to the potential for very great harm when military weapons, especially combined with suitable ammunition, are kept in insecure accommodation. The court considered that he

“knew full well...that such items were never to be held insecurely at your home”.

The reasons for sentence are set out. It is important to bear in mind that with a prohibited firearm, which this was, Parliament has said that there is a minimum term of five years' imprisonment unless there are “exceptional circumstances”. The court found that there were exceptional circumstances and imposed the lesser sentence.

We have an independent system of prosecution and trial, both for civilians and for members of the armed forces. The decision to prosecute was taken by the Service Prosecuting Authority. In deciding whether to prosecute, the SPA considers first whether there is a realistic prospect of conviction—clearly there was in this case, because there were full admissions and a plea of guilty followed—and secondly whether it is in the public interest and the service interest for that to happen.

[*The Solicitor-General*]

Parliament has decided that this offence is so serious that a minimum term of five years must be imposed, except in exceptional circumstances. The more serious the offence, the more likely it is that the public interest will favour a prosecution. That is what the code for prosecutors states. It is difficult to see how the prosecutor could ignore this strong message, sent by Parliament, underlining the seriousness of the offence.

Dr Julian Lewis: Did the police not decide that they did not wish to see a prosecution because no criminal intent was involved? Why should the military authorities take a different view?

The Solicitor-General: There is a protocol that decides where these cases are tried. The advantage from the serviceman's point of view of being dealt with by court martial is that it often does not result in loss of rank or dismissal. In this case, the court martial said it hoped it would be possible, first, for the sergeant to keep his rank, and, secondly, that he would not be dismissed from the service. Had it wished, it could have recommended the loss of rank and service, but it did not. That was the decision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Simon Reeve) made a point about the role of the Attorney-General. In the case he referred to, it is true that the court said that if a judge was unhappy with a prosecution and felt it was not necessarily in the public interest, the judge could refer it and say, "Look, you should discuss this with the Attorney-General." But that is at the beginning of the case, before a conviction. In a case such as this, where there has been a conviction and the court has moved to sentence, the only way of challenging the decision is for the person concerned to appeal. Under this system, the sentence in the court martial is made not just by the judge advocate but by the five serving officers on the board. They all have an equal vote. It is worth making the point that there was Army representation and that two of the five were warrant officers.

Simon Reeve: I have the advantage of having been in the court at the time. On the court martial appeal, the court said, "The Attorney-General has a supervisory role, an example of which would be"—and it then gave that example. It was not a restrictive role in the way that might have been suggested.

The Solicitor-General: I have three minutes left, and superintendence is a complicated issue. There is statutory superintendence for the Serious Fraud Office and the Crown Prosecution Service, and there is a common law form of superintendence that applies to all prosecutions, but the Attorney-General cannot just say, "I'm stopping

this prosecution." The House would not want a situation where politicians can stop proceedings and where we move away from an independent prosecution service and an independent court system.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury, I hold our armed forces in extremely high regard. They regularly put their lives at risk for our country, and we only recently remembered their sacrifice. Sergeant Nightingale has given great service over the years to the Army and the country, but the case was dealt with in accordance with the procedures and laws that Parliament has passed regarding the seriousness of weapons.

I am sure that my hon. Friend, in view of his own military service—this will apply to other hon. Friends here today—will understand instinctively the need to maintain the security of weapons and ammunition. In this case, possession of the weapon was prohibited by law because of the very nature of the weapon. It was being held insecurely, together with a large quantity of live ammunition, in an ordinary house, on an ordinary road. The way to challenge the conviction or sentence is to follow the correct procedure, which is to appeal.

Mr Brazier: May I suggest that my hon. Friend focuses on the Llewellyn case in Cardiff court, from as recently as 2008, where the Crown Prosecution Service, with none of the same mitigating circumstances, decided not to pursue the individual concerned for the two firearms found in the house?

The Solicitor-General: There are a whole range of circumstances in which cases can appear, but—

Mr Brazier: There is a service interest.

The Solicitor-General: But the first point I would make is that this is a particular offence—that of possessing a prohibited weapon, which we have said as a Parliament is an extremely serious matter. There were exceptional circumstances in this case; this is an exceptional man. However, if we want to challenge the decision of a court once it has been made—not at the beginning, when deciding whether to prosecute, but when the court has found the man guilty and sentenced him to a period of detention in a military facility—then I am afraid that has to be an appeal. That is our process; that is what we do in this country. We do not have politicians telling the independent judiciary—or, indeed, the independent prosecuting authorities—what to do. Much as I have a great deal of sympathy and understand the situation with this officer, I personally do not think that we can go around breaking important rules of that sort in this country.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 November 2012

[MR JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

Local Government Spending (Floods)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—(Nicky Morgan.)

9.30 am

Miss Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Gray.

I am delighted to have secured the debate, although it concerns some distressing circumstances. After a severe flood, as we saw in North Yorkshire in September, the difficulty we face with clean-up operations is the split responsibilities between two or three lead Departments. I hope that the Minister, whom I welcome and congratulate on his new appointment, will clarify where we are in that regard.

In September, a massive and unprecedented amount of rain was dumped on North Yorkshire, primarily Richmondshire, and the southern part of County Durham. I want to put on record and pay tribute to the work done by the emergency services, in particular the fire service, the Environment Agency—which is very much becoming the fourth emergency service—and especially staff at every level of North Yorkshire county council. Working around the clock, they took swift action to secure the area and make people safe. There was isolated flooding of homes and properties, which I am dealing with separately through the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but the hallmark of the September flood was that most of the damage was effected by fluvial escape on to roads and bridges. Notably, the A1 was closed—for approximately 24 to 36 hours—which I do not recall happening before because of flooding.

We are undergoing climate change and extreme weather conditions, such as in Scotland and in south-west England today, and our hearts go out to all those so affected, but the Government response—under successive Governments—is hampered slightly by split departmental responsibilities. Obviously, the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which I have the honour of chairing, holds the Department to account and scrutinises its flood-related activities. From that privileged position, I understand that DEFRA is the lead Department, closely followed by the Department for Communities and Local Government, although the Department for Transport deals with roads and bridges, to which I want to refer first.

To set out the facts, the severe weather at the end of September had a significant effect on the local and strategic road network. At the height of the flood, approximately 79 local roads and bridges were closed, including a significant stretch of the A1, as I mentioned. I am sad to say that I was one of those who ignored the warnings not to go on to the A1. I thought that it could not possibly be closed, because it had never flooded before and was a new stretch of fast, good road, but I am afraid that I missed a funeral as a result. Many people were caught unawares.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Can my hon. Friend explain to the Chamber just how rural that part of Britain is? The area is among the most sparsely populated in England, and as a result the challenge for it was much greater.

Miss McIntosh: I shall first set the scene and make a little progress.

North Yorkshire county council had to pay for specialist drivers to carry out safety checks, for example, and a temporary bridge had to be installed on the B1263, near Scorton in Richmondshire. While the bridge in Tadcaster was out of action, a free bus service was provided to shuttle people across the town because, owing to its geography, the town was split in two. North Yorkshire county council is currently carrying out extensive inspections, assessments and repair works, as the severe weather affected more than half the county.

It will be a number of months before the full extent and cost of the damage incurred are known, but the latest estimate is approximately £1.8 million. That is made up of the initial clear-up, the jetting, sweeping, additional bus services, call-outs and so on, of some £250,000; repairs to infrastructure, including surveys and bridge inspections, of £405,000; temporary carriageway repairs of £5,000; temporary bridge repairs of £35,000; and staff time and design partners, costing £170,000. In addition, a capital spend of about £900,000 is expected, split between carriageway construction and bridge replacement.

I have lived in North Yorkshire more or less since my early years, having been to school there, and I represented the county through the Vale of York constituency and, currently, Thirsk, Malton and Filey. We have, I believe, the longest stretch of rural roads in the country. As was seen in our statistics last week, we have the highest figure for fatalities among young drivers, and the largest number of transit drivers through a county. I also understand that we have something in the region of 168 bridges, a far higher figure than most given the number of rivers and waterways that we have to cross, which lend themselves to the most beautiful and stunning scenery and geography but also to some extremely testing situations with regard to flood damage.

On the Bellwin scheme, I understand that, specifically, North Yorkshire county council is required to pay the first £1.4 million and 15p out of every £1 thereafter. There is a three-month deadline to make the claim, but bridge inspections, quite apart from road inspections, must of necessity be extensive, to test their current safety and to assess the level of damage.

I pause now to say that I wrote on behalf of North Yorkshire county council and my constituents to the Department for Communities and Local Government at the end of September or in early October. We are now approaching late November. In that time, I expected the courtesy of a reply from that Department—or from the Department of Transport if my letter had been passed on, as I understand that it was—to share with the council and my constituents. Such a late response gives the House of Commons a bad name. All of us aim to take up constituency concerns at the earliest possible opportunity.

Given that it is almost two months since I wrote my letter, that the initial deadline within which an application must be made is three months, and that there has been

[Miss McIntosh]

extensive damage, I hope that the Minister can comment on a number of factors in his reply. Given the 79 bridges affected and the huge mileage of roads to be assessed, and that many of the roads suffered extensive frost damage during the two hard winters of 2010 and 2011, is the deadline moveable? My main concern is that the county council has been told that we do not qualify under the Bellwin formula for capital expenditure on roads and bridges, but I know that that is not true. The *Official Report* of 21 July 2008, column 770W, and of 10 June 2008, column 768W, shows that the previous Government made substantive payments to Hull in particular, and to other parts of the country for damage to roads and other capital expenditure under the emergency highways capital maintenance scheme. I understand that that came from the Department for Transport, but the clock is ticking, and time marches on. First, is the three-month deadline completely immovable? Secondly, why has North Yorkshire county council been told that it cannot claim for capital expenditure, when clearly there is a history under the Bellwin formula of just such expenditure?

Emergency planning is directly within the responsibility of the Department for Communities and Local Government, and I pay tribute to the Emergency Planning College at Hawkhills near Easingwold in Thirsk, Malton and Filey, which looks at emergency planning measures for flooding. Has the Minister had the opportunity to visit the college, and to consider whether more could be done to bring all the emergency services together in such a scenario, which is becoming increasingly more common, to ensure that we are in the best state of preparedness should future flooding occur?

I want briefly to touch on insurance claims, and to ask what discussions the Minister has had with his colleagues in DEFRA, particularly about replacing the statement of principles, which is due to expire in June 2013. What are the implications for local authorities such as North Yorkshire county council in making insurance claims for otherwise non-recoverable costs? Again, the deadline is tight, because the statement of principles will expire in some eight months.

There is great concern about planning applications on floodplains. An application was made for 300 houses to be built on Muston road in Filey, which Scarborough borough council sensibly turned down, but was overruled by the Planning Inspectorate. Planning inspectors tend to be out of town and out of the immediate vicinity where the decision is made. There seems to be a conflict at the heart of Government policy. We are told that the Localism Act 2011 enables local people to decide planning applications—in this case the local authority turned down the planning application—but the Government now want to limit the terms in which judicial review may be brought.

My argument is that there will be serious implications for Government spending on local authority flood defences from the 300 houses being built in Filey. They will affect Filey town council, which has a limited amount of money, and especially North Yorkshire county council. The field on which the 300 houses are being built acted as an area to retain excess water in times of flooding. In 2007, I witnessed how that water had spilled over into Filey school, causing extensive damage, and into another new development on the other side of the field. Where

will that water go, and how will the county and the Environment Agency put in any flood defence to keep the school and the other development safe from future flooding? How can a planning decision be overruled by an out-of-town planning inspector when it will have enormous implications for flooding in Filey in the years ahead? That is just one isolated argument.

On flood resilience measures, who has the last word when a kitemarked product is used? In Pickering, a home owner spent £20,000 on installing a flood resilient product—a membrane—only to see in 2007 the water enter just as quickly as if they had not made that investment. Who has the last word in determining whether a product meets the kitemark and is indeed flood resilient? If such a product fails, will the Minister's Department step in, or should the local authority or DEFRA step in when someone has, in good faith, purchased and installed such a product, only to see the water enter just as quickly as before.

I understand that the Minister's Department also has responsibility for climate change and sustainable development. It was clear during the floods in September that no development should be built close to a water course that is liable to flood and could have enormous implications for existing residents. Future developments such as those I referred to in Filey should be carefully monitored. Will the Minister confirm that under the Localism Act 2011 the local planning authority should have the last say in that regard? What work has his Department done on building regulations to ensure that any houses in areas such as Muston road in Filey meet the most stringent criteria, and will he respond to my concern about the planning conflict at the heart of Government policy?

On the Bellwin scheme, will the Minister set out his specific role, and that of his Department in allocating the scheme? May I have an imminent reply to enable the county council to prepare to meet a three-month deadline, or might that deadline be removed? Will he confirm that local authorities such as North Yorkshire county council, the police, the fire service, and the national park authorities are eligible for Bellwin reimbursement in the circumstances I set out?

In a written statement, the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that the Government would

"reimburse local authorities for 100% of their eligible costs above threshold."— [*Official Report*, 9 July 2012; Vol. 548, c. 5WS.]

Will the Minister confirm that capital expenditure on roads and bridges, and the general clear-up, will qualify as eligible expenditure? How stringently are the eligibility criteria to be interpreted? Hull, Gloucestershire and other authorities have received capital funding under the Bellwin formula in the past, so will he confirm that North Yorkshire county council will also qualify? His ministerial predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), said that the Bellwin scheme would help councils to clear up streets by removing debris from roads and footpaths, shore up buildings and remove dangerous trees. Has there been a policy change since that statement to the House? Will the Minister confirm that the claims that North Yorkshire county council will make in good faith will be honoured?

This debate is timely. A number of issues remain outstanding from the 2000, 2001 and 2007 floods. With climate change, a massive amount of water can fall in

one place over 36 hours, causing extensive damage. My hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) referred to the area we represent and live in, which we like to believe is God's own county. We have the most extensive road network, and probably more bridges than anywhere else. We owe it to those living in North Yorkshire to make our roads and bridges safe from future floods. The Department for Communities and Local Government has a role to play in increasing flood resilience, ensuring that building regulations are in place, and ensuring that the Bellwin formula serves the purpose for which it was intended.

9.50 am

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Miss McIntosh) on securing what I agree is a very important and timely debate. She made a powerful case on her constituents' behalf and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the many questions that she asked.

I want to speak on behalf of my constituents in Newcastle upon Tyne North, who have unfortunately experienced a dreadful time since the deluge of rain in June this year in particular, and ongoing rainfall has compounded the issues and challenges that many people face. To set that in context, it comes as local authorities are experiencing cuts to their budgets that are deeper and faster than in almost any Whitehall Department. It is right and timely that we have this debate on the implications of the recent flooding for local government spending.

Many Members may have witnessed the devastating floods that hit Newcastle north. The images of the building at Spencer court in Newburn resting only on its stilts were used by many news stations to demonstrate the impact of the downpour not only in Newcastle, but nationally. I want to pay tribute to the area's residents who have suffered terribly from the damage that ensued following the rainfall, and also to clarify some related points that are separate from issues raised by the hon. Lady. What occurred in Newburn and Spencer court, leading to those shocking images, was caused by a culvert being damaged and the rain taking the land away with it. That, however, does not take away from the fact that, for an awful lot of families, it resulted in immense damage, suffering and hardship. Although the local authority and the emergency services had to step in and try to resolve the issue, the repair work, support and funding will have to come from the responsible parties, who are the landowners and developers. They are deciding among themselves whose insurance will need to come into play to resolve those issues. I want to recognise today not only the immediate impact and costs that Newcastle city council faced in dealing with that matter, but also the broader issues that the city has experienced, for which they have received no financial support so far.

To put what happened in context, during just two hours on 28 June, Newcastle experienced 50 mm of rainfall, which was the expected total rainfall for the entire month. It caused widespread, localised flooding across Newcastle, with the city's drainage system overwhelmed due to the unexpectedly high volumes of

water that fell in such a short period. The city's roads quickly became gridlocked and 200 homes were flooded, causing misery for many of my constituents.

Again, I must pay tribute to the heroic staff, particularly at Newcastle city council, and the emergency services—including the fire and the police services—as well as the Environment Agency, which, I agree has, certainly in my part of the world, become like the fourth emergency service. People worked throughout the evening and the night, and it is testament to their hard work and dedication that the majority of the city was ready for business the following day. However, I highlight again the part of my constituency that was not ready for business—down in Newburn and Spencer court—as well as the ensuing problems: the town below in Newburn was flooded, and it is just getting back on its feet after a traumatic few months for its residents.

Since that day, my constituents and Newcastle city council have been counting the costs. The council estimates that the flooding costs will be over £9.2 million. The majority of that—around £8 million—is due to works that have been or will need to be undertaken, such as repairing highways and pavements. Under the Bellwin scheme, the council is eligible for certain costs above an annual threshold of £853,509. Of the £9.2 million in costs incurred by the council during the flooding, only £328,000 can be reclaimed under the Bellwin scheme, and as that is under the annual threshold, the council has not received any financial support from central Government to deal with the aftermath of the devastating floods. That has been confirmed in writing in a letter to the council from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker).

The funding for dealing with the aftermath of the flooding will therefore have to come from Newcastle city council's capital allowance and further borrowing, with that being serviced through the revenue budget thereafter. As a result, the council will have to find additional funds from the revenue to service money that was borrowed to deal with the aftermath. That is a particular concern, given the importance of the city's focusing all its efforts on creating jobs and boosting growth in a part of the country that has been hit hard by the economic downturn. The situation is compounded further by the unprecedented and, I would say, disproportionate cuts that the council is facing, compared with many other local authority areas in the country.

The council faces cuts of £90 million imposed by the Government from an overall revenue budget of £266 million. That represents a cut of just over one third to the council's budget, or £164 per person. Compared with funding reductions that many Conservative-run councils are facing—more in the region of £16 per person—people can understand why residents in Newcastle and other similarly affected cities feel that there could be some political motivation for those deep cuts, the scale of which is disastrous. They will impact greatly on the services that the council can provide.

The Government gave warm words of support following the flooding, with the Prime Minister, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass), stating that the Government would,

“lend a very sympathetic ear to the local councils.”—[*Official Report*, 4 July 2012; Vol. 547, c. 918.]

[Catherine McKinnell]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government assured my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) that the Government would, with regards to an application from Newcastle,

“look at it most sympathetically in terms of the formula.”—[*Official Report*, 2 July 2012; Vol. 547, c. 582.]

Despite those warm words, Newcastle city council has not received any financial assistance to deal with the aftermath of the flooding on 28 June. Indeed, the council has had to borrow funds to do so, and again, that is happening on top of the already devastating cuts that it faces.

I hope to hear reassurances from the Minister today, particularly when he deals with the many questions asked by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton. Both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have said that they will look at cases sympathetically, and they have said specifically said that they will look at Newcastle sympathetically. Rather than give more such vague promises, will the Minister provide assurances that he will look again at Newcastle city council’s case, in order to ensure that the burden for the floods does not lie entirely with hard-pressed council tax payers in my constituency?

9.59 am

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Miss McIntosh) on securing the debate at a time when communities up and down the country are still reeling from the effects of the most recent flooding and face the prospect of more to come. In my constituency of West Lancashire, there are families who face months of living in short-term rented accommodation as the devastation and damage caused by the flooding are dealt with. I know that hon. Members intending to speak today have constituencies that have been left with massive clear-up costs due to the flood damage to their local infrastructure. Many hon. Members will argue the case that central Government need to provide more effective financial support in reaction to the damage caused by heavy rainfall and flooding, but in the light of the extensive cuts to local government budgets, they have left many authorities exposed to additional clean-up and repair costs once the flooding has subsided, without the necessary reserves to call upon.

In the few minutes of my contribution, I would like to focus specifically on the West Lancashire experience of flooding in September, which shows that the financial implications of flooding are increased due to operational and organisational failings and how, through more proactive management, we could minimise the clean-up costs of flooding in West Lancashire—I make no judgment on any other area of the country.

On 19 October, I held a meeting of the West Lancashire flooding forum to discuss the September flooding. The meeting brought together representatives of the Environment Agency, Electricity North West, Lancashire police, the Lancashire fire and rescue service, the National Farmers Union, United Utilities and West Lancashire borough council. Sadly, Lancashire county council, as

the lead flood authority, refused at the last minute to send a representative to attend the meeting, having initially accepted the invitation. At the meeting, there was general acceptance that weather patterns are becoming more extreme and that extreme weather incidents are occurring with greater frequency. When it rains, it rains with greater intensity, and we now have a one-in-30-year downpour every few years. I have been astonished by the number of times agencies have said to me after a flooding incident, “Ah, but this happens only once every few years”—two years later, there am I, listening to the same words over and over again.

The recent flooding in West Lancashire makes it clear that there must be changes in how we deal with the flooding of homes, transport networks and food-producing farm land—much-needed food-producing farm land. We need more significant investment in flood prevention measures in homes and a more general commitment to the principle of prevention. We must deal with the ongoing maintenance of watercourses and sewer systems, which has been cut back due to the squeeze on Environment Agency and local authority budgets. Although we have lead flood authorities, the emphasis of their role and responsibility is of course on post-flooding activity.

In West Lancashire, residents at risk of flooding could be eligible for grants to enable them to install flood prevention measures in their homes. That is easily said but very difficult to do because very few people know that that support exists and even fewer know how to apply for it. That includes the local authority, with which the bid to the EA needs to be made. I am weeks into it and I still do not have a clear pathway or a local authority that knows what it should do to get these bids made and the preventive measures installed in homes. Instead, we have been leaving people’s homes and streets to flood.

I ask the Government to encourage the Environment Agency and local authorities to make the schemes a priority and simple to apply for. That will prevent the misery of dealing with the aftermath of flooding. I have read all 76 pages of the Lancashire “Multi Agency Flood Plan”. It is supposed to set out how agencies respond to flooding incidents, yet the feedback from local residents was that they felt as though they had been abandoned. Residents rang agencies for help before their home was flooded, but were told that they could do something only when the water had breached their property.

West Lancashire borough council has a policy of not providing sandbags except for their own council properties. The council switchboard, when answering residents who were desperate because water was getting close to their homes, very helpfully listed all the local authorities nearby that do provide sandbags, but said that no, it did not do that. My local residents asked me on many occasions what they were paying their council tax for because help was not there when they needed it. Residents found themselves being passed from pillar to post in trying to find the right agency to help them. When the floodwaters were rising, we needed the agencies to spend far less time deciding who was responsible and where the source of the flooding was—and a lot less “Not us, guv.”

I absolutely accept that the environment agencies did what they could in very difficult circumstances. They reacted to the homes that were already flooded as a

priority. I acknowledge their work in visiting those homes and in having an information and advice day afterwards. However, residents did not want that to happen; they wanted help before it all happened. The police and fire services emerged with great credit because they acted beyond their remit.

We must also deal with insurance. I asked the Deputy Prime Minister a question about this a couple of weeks ago; it might even have been last week. The Government had promised to address the question of how people retain insurance after they have been flooded, but worried residents are still waiting to hear the results of the Government action. Perhaps the Minister can update us this morning.

We also have outstanding issues in the local plan. The future building of houses in certain areas of my constituency will only increase the huge flooding risks; indeed, some say that it is the equivalent of building homes on a floodplain. Who will protect the residents and taxpayers of West Lancashire from those horrific risks if they are not protected by the proper processes and the Government's ensuring that people are acting responsibly? In West Lancashire, there has been a failure to react effectively and efficiently in these situations. Surely, in the 21st century, that is not beyond the wit of man.

10.8 am

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship again, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Miss McIntosh) on a very passionate and well-argued speech, which set out admirably the difficulties that her constituents have faced as a consequence of the flooding earlier this year. She is right to refer to the impact of climate change, because we are seeing more and more freak weather patterns, which are affecting constituencies all over the country. It is just the luck of the draw whether her constituents or my constituents happen to be the ones facing this extreme and localised flooding. That needs to be set in the context of a Government decision to reduce significantly—by some 27%—the funding for flood defence work. This is work that had been envisaged up until 2010, but will now no longer go ahead. Indeed, 294 flood defence schemes around the country are still awaiting a start date. It is money well spent if the Government invest in flood defence work. According to the figures I have seen, for every pound the Government invest in flood defence work, they save £1. That seems to be extremely good value for money, so it is a mistake for the Government to cut flood defence work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) spoke passionately about the devastating floods to which her constituents were subject. She is right to highlight the consequences for her local authority of the unprecedented funding reductions by the Department for Communities and Local Government. Of all sectors, local government has seen by far and away the biggest share of funding reductions, even though it plays a vital role in people's everyday lives; dealing with the consequences of devastating floods is just one case in point.

My hon. Friend spoke eloquently about the difficult situation in which her local authority is being placed. Not only is Newcastle subject to significant funding

cuts but the level of cuts that it has to absorb is far greater than that in other parts of the country. How can that be fair? Of course, it is not the only local authority affected in that way. Newcastle faces, in a sense, double jeopardy; the unprecedented funding cuts are far greater than those in many other parts of the country and it is faced with such huge expenditure. How is it supposed to cope? Many other local authorities could face the same dilemma that Newcastle faces as a result of the floods and unfair funding reductions.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) made some excellent points, which I hope the Minister will respond to, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North and the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton. My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire said that some of her constituents understandably felt abandoned in the situation that they found themselves in. How can that possibly be acceptable in the 21st century in one of the richest nations on the planet? Constituents faced with such extreme circumstances feel abandoned, and that cannot be right, and cannot be justified. Their plight has been exacerbated by funding cuts.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the heroic work of the fire and rescue services, and I pay tribute to them and the water rescue and flood relief work that they do. I hope to hear from the Minister today how he intends to enable the fire and rescue service to respond to water rescue work this winter and beyond, in view of the likelihood of more severe weather and flooding in different parts of the country. It is not only local councils that are subject to swingeing and unprecedented funding reductions and uneven funding cuts; the fire and rescue service is similarly affected.

Metropolitan chief fire officers have pointed out that, unless the Government make more funds available or do not proceed with the further cuts, which are planned in years three and four of the budget cycle, a number of those metropolitan fire and rescue authorities will be unable to fulfil their statutory obligations. It is interesting to note that the role of the fire and rescue service in dealing with flood relief and water rescue work is not a statutory one. As a result of the funding cuts imposed on the fire and rescue service, some fire and rescue authorities might not be able to respond to severe flooding events this year and in future years. I hope that the Minister can reassure us and tell us how he intends to resource fire and rescue services appropriately to enable them to respond in the event of further extreme weather patterns later this year, this winter and in the years to come.

In a sense, local authorities and local people have had insult added to injury. As hon. Members have mentioned, the former Local Government Minister is on record as saying that local authorities would receive a 100% reimbursement for dealing with the impact of the floods:

"I know that many households and businesses have been disrupted by the floods that have affected parts of the country. That is why we have announced that we will reimburse councils 100 per cent of their costs under the Bellwin scheme".

The activation of the scheme was reaffirmed in a written ministerial statement by the then Environment Secretary, the right hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman):

"The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is activating the Bellwin scheme of emergency financial assistance to help local authorities with their immediate costs associated

[Chris Williamson]

with protecting life and property in their areas. Exceptionally, the scheme will reimburse local authorities for 100% of their eligible costs above threshold.”—[*Official Report*, 9 July 2012; Vol. 548, c. 5WS.]

And yet, as the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton mentioned, North Yorkshire county council somehow seems to have been bypassed by the Bellwin scheme. As I understand it, it has not received any money through the scheme as yet.

I do not understand what is happening. How can that possibly be? We had a ministerial statement. The Minister went on record to say that local authorities would receive 100% reimbursement, and North Yorkshire, which has had devastating floods, has not received anything. Gary Fielding, the authority’s corporate director for strategic resources, said:

“We wrote to the Department for Communities and Local Government...asking that they activate the Bellwin scheme. Unfortunately, the scheme is restrictive and does not help to meet the costs of capital...which includes infrastructure work...roads..., so the bridge which was swept away at Scawton and which will cost us £600,000 is not eligible. The CLG has declined any flexibility and has not activated Bellwin in any case.”

Local authorities are in an impossible position: the most extreme funding cuts are being inflicted on them and severe weather patterns result in extreme localised flooding. Local authorities and local people are left with an enormous clean-up bill, and local government is too enfeebled to respond to the needs of constituents. I do not envy any local councillor, or indeed MP, in that situation, when their constituents come to them for support and assistance, but no funding is available and the funding that was supposed to be available, and has been promised, has not been forthcoming.

I sincerely hope that, when the Minister responds, he will reassure hon. Members who have spoken today, those outside the Chamber this morning and, more importantly, the members of the public who have been subjected to floods. As we head towards the winter months—due to climate change, we see extreme weather and flooding in the summer months as well—people will be concerned about what assistance will be available should they be unfortunate enough to experience extreme flooding in their neighbourhoods. I hope that he will give reassurance that this shambolic state of affairs will be rectified, that the promised funding will be forthcoming and that the DCLG will look to assist local government flexibly, particularly because, as hon. Members have mentioned, it faces unprecedented cuts, so cannot respond as it would wish. Local government relies on central Government, and on the Minister, to give that reassurance and ensure that the funding will be forthcoming, so that we can protect the general public appropriately.

10.19 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Brandon Lewis): May I, too, say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray?

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Miss McIntosh) on securing the debate, not least because it gives me an opportunity to put on the record, as hon. Members have already commented,

the effective way in which emergency responders and local authorities reacted to flooding events across England this year. They did a fantastic job.

On behalf of the Government, I want to say how sorry we are for all the people who have had their homes or businesses flooded, sometimes more than once this year alone. As has been said, the effects of flooding are felt not just in the loss of family heirlooms or of a favourite armchair, but in the wait for one’s home to dry out before one can move back and live in it again. For the owners of businesses, it is equally devastating. It is a horrible time for all those affected.

I will touch on some general points about the Government’s response to flooding, before dealing with the specific issues that have been raised. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is the lead Department for flood prevention and for responding to emergencies that are beyond the capacity of local responders. The Department for Communities and Local Government leads on the recovery from high-impact, wide-area flooding emergencies. Other Departments, such as the Department for Transport in relation to highways, also contribute to that response.

Of course, we cannot prevent flooding completely. When the weather deteriorates, there are well-practised approaches to warning and informing emergency responders and the general public about what is likely to happen. The Flood Forecasting Centre issues flood guidance statements and alert levels, and weather forecasts give information to the public. On the ground, emergency responders forewarn such particularly vulnerable places as mobile home parks and camping sites about what is expected, enabling them to take sensible precautions. There are also local resilience forums—one for each police force area—that are responsible for identifying risks faced at the local level and drawing up plans to respond to them if they materialise.

If local responders are overwhelmed or an emergency affects multiple areas, the Government can support the response. As with all emergencies, the lead Department—in this case, DEFRA—is responsible for monitoring the situation on the ground, assessing what Government support, if any, is needed in the immediate aftermath, and ensuring that the Government as a whole respond as necessary. In the case of this summer’s flooding, the Department did exactly that, convening daily, and often twice-daily, to achieve it.

I want to be clear about what this Government have done to help communities recover from this summer’s floods. We have been there to warn people, through the Met Office and the Environment Agency, about the rain to come, and to inform them how to protect themselves and their property from flooding. We are continuing that effort by providing local emergency responders, through the local resilience forum, with a forward-look at the risk of severe weather.

We have been there when the rain came down and the rivers rose to ensure, through the Environment Agency, that water could flow freely through culverts and ditches to escape. We were also there in the aftermath, not simply to activate the Bellwin scheme of emergency financial assistance—I will come back to that scheme—but to increase the rate of assistance to 100% of eligible expenditure above the threshold for the June and July Bellwin schemes. We are also considering Bellwin support for the more recent flooding.

We have continued to work with local authorities in their transition from response to recovery, and my officials have called the chief executive of every local authority affected by the flooding, so that we can be clear about local impacts. The former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman) has visited Gateshead and Ottery St Mary, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has visited Calderdale, one of the areas affected several times by flooding.

I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton about the letter she mentioned. It is unacceptable to take too long to respond to any letter, and we will chase it up. The only one we have on record is dated October and had been passed to the Department for Transport, which we will chase up for a reply.

As I have mentioned, we put in place a Bellwin scheme to support the areas affected in June and July, but let me say more about such schemes. As most local authorities are aware, they are the means by which the Government can reimburse a local authority for the immediate, uninsurable clear-up costs following an emergency or disaster in its area. Named after the former DEFRA Minister Lord Bellwin, the scheme provides reimbursement for local authorities in relation to its costs incurred in, or in connection with, immediate action to safeguard life and property or to prevent suffering or severe inconvenience. The Bellwin funding scheme is well-recognised, long-used and respected. Local authorities have one month from the end of an incident to notify my Department that they intend to apply for the activation of a Bellwin scheme. The scheme's standard terms usually allow the Department to reimburse the authority for 85% of eligible costs above a threshold, which is 0.2% of the authority's calculated net revenue budget.

I can tell my hon. Friend that North Yorkshire county council has registered for Bellwin support. In such circumstances, there is no three-month cut-off for the receipt of an application. We are still willing to consider its Bellwin application, and we await its response to our questions.

Miss McIntosh: I am grateful to the Minister for that clarification. The chief executive and the leader of the council have been told, for reasons I cannot understand—perhaps it is a misunderstanding that we can clarify today—that it will not qualify for capital expenditure. Earlier, I referred to parliamentary answers showing that other local authorities have qualified for the type of claim that it is making. The Minister has responded on the three-month deadline, but will he clarify whether this business about their being told that the council's claim is not eligible is a misunderstanding?

Brandon Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I was about to turn to the difference between Bellwin schemes and capital expenditure. As I said, a Bellwin scheme covers only the costs of immediate action to safeguard life and property. Payments made under the last Administration—for example, in 2008—with which I think her local authority is making comparisons, were not Bellwin grants; they were to cover cost-recovery from an exceptional event. I will turn to that in a moment.

A Bellwin scheme typically covers the costs of evacuating people from dangerous structures, and works to make them safe following a disaster; temporary re-housing; and initial repairs to, and the clearing of debris from, highways, pavements and footpaths. Let me make it clear—this may provide clarification for my hon. Friend—that it does not usually cover capital expenditure; the normal wages and salaries of an authority's regular employees, whether diverted from their usual work or otherwise; and the standing costs of an authority's plant and equipment.

Although a Bellwin scheme is discretionary, it has a statutory basis. As a Department, we must therefore ensure that the terms of each scheme and the eligible costs comply with the legislation. In particular, the statute sets out that expenditure must have been incurred on, or in connection with, immediate action to safeguard life and property or to prevent suffering or severe inconvenience. The idea of a Bellwin scheme is to put local authorities in a position to take speedy emergency action, to protect people during and immediately after an incident and to deal with the immediate catastrophic consequences.

Clearly, the statutory basis of the schemes means that longer-term works of repair or restoration will be ruled out, because they fall into the recovery stage rather than into that of immediate action. Although Ministers have previously used their discretion to enhance some of the Bellwin scheme terms—indeed, we have done so in relation to these incidents by extending the percentage of grant payable above the threshold, as others have said—we must continue to have regard to the legislation. Permanent repairs to roads and bridges would not therefore be eligible, but initial repairs and patching up works are fine.

Chris Williamson: Will the Minister comment on the fact that, as he has conceded, the last Administration funded local authorities over and above the Bellwin formula? Given the parlous state of local government finance as a result of reductions in funding, does he not agree that it is even more imperative for his Administration to look sympathetically on local authorities facing such exceptional costs? They simply do not have the resources to meet such expenditure under their funding regime.

Brandon Lewis: I agree with the hon. Gentleman in the sense that it is a shame that we inherited the parlous economic state in this country, and have therefore had to make decisions about how to sort out the debt and deficit problems left by the last Labour Government. I will turn to the capital situation in a moment. We have sometimes faced calls for Bellwin schemes to be amended or refreshed, but we remain committed to the terms outlined in statute. The scheme has the necessary flexibility, and it continues to be well-known and well-used by local authorities.

Let me turn now to North Yorkshire. I am aware that the colleagues of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton from North Yorkshire county council registered a possible intention to apply for Bellwin support in September. My officials have requested further information to support a possible activation of the scheme and we await the council's response. I understand that the council now considers that it will not be eligible for the scheme because the costs will not be above the

[*Brandon Lewis*]

Bellwin threshold. However, as allowed under the Bellwin rules, we will record costs for any future claims if further flooding occurs later in the financial year.

I know that hon. Members are keen to understand why the Department has not considered launching a recovery grant scheme, which has occasionally happened in previous years, most notably following the significant and widespread flooding events of 2007. Let me be clear—I appreciate that this is not an easy message to relay to constituents—while the flooding incidents of this summer were locally significant, we did not witness the devastating effects of previous years. Despite the individual stories of loss that we have heard, and our sympathy for those affected, the flooding this year has been on a much smaller scale overall.

Let me put the matter in context. In 2007, 55,000 properties, both houses and businesses, were flooded compared with only 4,000 this summer. The events on those two occasions are not comparable and the response, therefore, must be proportionate. Although we have activated a Bellwin scheme, we have not considered the need for a wider recovery grant. None the less, I will, in a moment, touch on the capital expenditure for roads and highways.

Successive Governments have used the Bellwin scheme as a benchmark, and we are doing the same. If we were to experience flooding on a larger scale, we would doubtless consider further Government support. For now, the balance has been appropriately struck between our Bellwin scheme, boosted to 100% of costs above the threshold to reflect the particular circumstances of the June and July flooding, and local support.

Thanks to the Government's continued investment in flood defences, some 19,000 properties have been protected from flooding. In places such as Carlisle, the local authority has told us that the defences have saved some 2,000 homes from the summer flooding events. Despite the financial situation that we inherited, the Government have continued to invest substantially in flood defence, spending £470 million a year. I am sure that my hon. Friend appreciates that that has undoubtedly protected people's homes and kept businesses operating when, in the past, they would have been under water.

Chris Williamson: I am surprised that the Minister is eulogising the Government's continued investment in flood defence work when there has been a significant reduction in such work, as I pointed out in my opening remarks. Will he concede that there has been a 27% reduction in flood defence work?

Brandon Lewis: I was not eulogising the Government, but making the point that we are spending £470 million a year which, considering the economic mess that we inherited from the previous Labour Administration, is something that we should all know about.

Let me turn now to the role of local authorities. As ever, local authorities have been on the front line of the response to the flooding this summer. Of course, once flooding has subsided, recovery begins. Local authorities support such work from their reserves, which are there to help to meet the costs of emergencies, such as flooding. Of course, Bellwin is also in place.

I am sure that local authorities will look sympathetically at requests for hardship relief from business rates for businesses affected by the flooding. They were urged to do that quickly in the immediate aftermath of the event. If they grant such relief, Government will fund 75% of the cost.

Catherine McKinnell: The Minister spoke very quickly, so will he go back a sentence and repeat what he said? On what requests will the Government look sympathetically?

Brandon Lewis: I said that I was sure that local authorities will look sympathetically at requests for hardship relief from business rates for businesses affected by flooding. They were urged to do that immediately after the event. If they grant such relief, Government will fund 75% of the cost.

Aside from hardship relief, I am sure that local authorities will have taken advantage of the changes introduced by the Local Government Finance Bill to fund discounts for ratepayers as they see fit. Flooding would seem to be one of the circumstances for which the new power was designed.

Let me deal with transport. My ministerial colleagues at the Department for Transport recognise that many parts of the country have seen high levels of rainfall and significant local flooding incidents, which have impacted on residents, businesses and transport infrastructure. Like me, they pay tribute to the excellent multi-agency response and the ongoing work by local highway authorities to help those who have been affected.

However, local authorities have responsibility for the local roads in their areas and are best placed to determine their own priorities for funding, which include putting in place reasonable resilience measures and contingencies to deal with any incidents, such as flooding, that may occur from time to time.

The Department for Transport is providing more than £91.7 million to North Yorkshire for highways maintenance funding over the spending review period. For this financial year, we are providing more than £24 million. The Department allocated North Yorkshire a further £6.6 million in March 2011 for damage to its highways network caused by the severe winter of 2010.

Despite the current economic situation that we inherited, the Government will continue to provide £3 billion to councils for road maintenance over the next four years to 2015. The Department for Transport also provided a further £200 million in March last year as an exceptional payment to help with much-needed road repairs following the severe weather at the end of 2010.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton commented on the Emergency Planning College. The college is a Cabinet Office-sponsored facility. Given my responsibility for the Fire Service College, I warmly welcome it and look forward to paying a visit in due course. A great deal of work on interoperability is going on across Government at the moment, to which both colleges are contributing. The joint emergency services interoperability programme aims to deliver significant benefits in future emergency responses. My hon. Friend makes a good point. Over the past few weeks, I, too, have been talking about the facilities at the Fire Service

College. The more that we can get our emergency services working and training together in such environments, the better it will be for everybody on the ground.

On the planning case in Filey, I hope that my hon. Friend will appreciate that I cannot comment on individual cases. None the less, the Government have ensured, through the national planning policy framework, that new homes and other buildings will not be built in areas of high flood risk.

As for the comments made by the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), the climate change risk assessment identifies increased risk of flooding for the years ahead and informs flood defence investment. We cannot prevent all flooding, so the need to plan well locally is important. The hon. Lady's constituents who may feel abandoned need to make their councillors aware of their feelings and to demand improvements.

Rosie Cooper: Will the Minister comment on grants for individual prevention schemes, such as air brick blocking and the various other aids that can enable householders to prevent their homes from being flooded? Will he also give us some detail on how people can apply for such grants? The truth is that, after three weeks' work, including with the Environment Agency and the local authority, I still do not have a plan for how to apply for such grants that I can show my local residents. If the Minister does not have those details, will he write to me, setting out the steps, so that we can make some progress? Householders do not want to have to face the misery of their homes being flooded over and over again, especially if there are grants available.

Brandon Lewis: Either I or my colleagues at DEFRA will write to the hon. Lady with those details. If it is a local scheme through the local authority or Environment Agency, it will be a matter for them, but we will certainly have a look at the matter and give her some feedback.

As I said at the outset, flooding is devastating for those whom it affects. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to set out what the Government are doing.

Miss McIntosh: The Minister has given some full responses, but before he concludes, will he explain something he has just said? He told us that in future, no building will be allowed in areas of high flood risk. Muston road is an area of high flood risk. The buildings have gone ahead. There will be future flooding, which will have an impact on flood spending. Moreover, will he also comment on flood resilience products—who has the final word if they fail—insurance claims, the statement of principles and the implications for local authorities?

Brandon Lewis: I am sorry that I have not commented on those issues. As I said, I obviously cannot comment on particular planning cases. My comment about the national planning policy framework was to give my hon. Friend and her residents some confidence about where we are now and about the applications for the future. Regarding any particular product, again that is not something I can comment on here today.

However, with regard to the statement of principles, there are continuing discussions between the Government and the Association of British Insurers, and negotiations are going on at this time. The Department for Communities and Local Government is part of those negotiations. My hon. Friend will therefore have to bear with us before I can come back and give her a definitive position on that issue. As I say, the discussions and negotiations are ongoing, with all the parties very aware of the time scale that they are working to.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to set out what the Government are doing, through local authorities, to support those who are affected by flooding. We continue to invest in flood defence measures. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate.

10.40 am

Sitting suspended.

European Parliament (Two-seat Operation)

11 am

Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray.

In the week when the Prime Minister is at a special European Council meeting in Brussels to negotiate the multi-annual financial framework, with Europe on a precarious financial and social footing, the debate is important and timely. The subject goes to the heart of the European debate—the economic debate on how Europe spends its money, and a wider debate about what Europe was intended to be and what it has become. The issue is the ending of the two-seat arrangement of the European Parliament, which has become known, not inappropriately, as the Strasbourg circus.

The European Parliament is the only Assembly in the world with more than one permanent seat, and the only one that does not have the power to determine its own location. The two-seat arrangement was formalised in the 1997 treaty of Amsterdam, compelling the Parliament to sit in Strasbourg for 48 days every year, for 12 plenary sessions, in which legislation receives its final vote. For the rest of the year Parliament sits in Brussels, where virtually all the other institutions of the EU are based. The reason is symbolic: a sign of Franco-German reconciliation—a Parliament held on the fields of previous conflict.

As to the practical reality of that symbolism—it is expensive. Brussels is the place where Committee and political group meetings take place, and where Members of the European Parliament have their offices. It is where most other EU institutions, such as the Commission and the Council, are based, and where most of the staff live; so when the monthly plenary sessions take place thousands of people must decamp to Strasbourg: MEPs, their staff, civil servants, Government representatives and diplomats. Lorries are stacked up with office documents and papers, and hit the roads to France. Transport connections to Strasbourg are so bad that it is not possible to fly there from 21 of the 27 EU countries. That means that MEPs—including those from the UK—must take lengthy two to three-leg trips to get to Strasbourg.

The amazing thing is that all that happens so that people can travel to a replica of the Brussels Chamber, in Strasbourg. The part that would be funny, if it were not true, is that the Strasbourg Chamber is left empty for 317 days a year. It is Monty Pythonesque—the Monty Python Strasbourg circus; but it is not funny, because it is expensive. It costs about €200 million each year, which is about €1 billion over the seven-year budgetary period. Each year about 20,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide is released from the convoys of lorries, flights and cars transporting paper, politicians, officials and forms on the 500 km journey to France. Well over 100,000 tonnes of CO₂ is estimated to be emitted in that way over the seven-year budgetary period. Once, in 2008, the travelling circus was cancelled because the Strasbourg buildings were in need of repair and it was not possible to go there. On that one occasion €4 million was saved.

Let us not forget that what I have described is happening at a time when politicians across Europe are scrabbling for budget savings. They are cutting public services in a

desperate attempt to regain control of the continent's finances. If we want a simple way to save £1 billion over this budgetary period, with no cuts to public services and no extreme pain—no outcries across Europe, rioting on the streets of Greece or plastic bullets fired at students in Spain—I would suggest to the Minister, and to the Prime Minister, that surely this is it.

When we consider what we can do, things become a bit frustrating. The two-seat arrangement is embedded in treaties, which, of course, require all 27 member states to agree to an end to what is, frankly, a farce. My colleague Ashley Fox MEP has been doing a fantastic job gathering signatures to a petition in this country, to try to force a debate on the issue in Parliament. It can be found at www.stopthestrasbourgcircus.com. However, it is not only in the UK that a consensus is building, at a time of great financial difficulty, that this unfunny farce needs to stop. Through exceptional and quite historic work Ashley Fox has demonstrated that there is tremendous momentum and desire among a majority of MEPs to put an end to the situation. He has significant support from our European neighbours. He gathered the number of signatures necessary in the European Parliament to hold a secret ballot on just reducing the number of times the Parliament decamps to Strasbourg. Without the pressure of party Whips, what the French have called *l'amendement Fox* was carried by a majority of 104. That may seem a small step but it is significant in demonstrating that the will of the European Parliament is to do the sensible thing, and that the Parliament is being held back by an anachronistic, impractical, regulatory democratic deficit.

There is not just a little consensus. Ending the Strasbourg circus—the two-seat arrangement—was in the coalition agreement. Hon. Members will know that often there are not many questions to do with Europe on which the entire House will agree; but the two-seat arrangement is such a question. The coalition agreement pledges to end the Strasbourg circus. I have tabled an early-day motion which has support from across the political parties. We have support from our European neighbours as well. The change would save £1 billion in the next EU budget.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining the debate, which is important. Does she think that the scandal—and that is the only word for it—is made worse when the EU comes to us wanting to increase the budget, whereas we want to keep it the same or, ideally, reduce it? They could make an easy saving, and it rubs salt in the wound.

Charlotte Leslie: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a good point. One reason why so much social strife is erupting, and not only in this country—it is easy to think that it is only here that there is questioning of the way the EU holds itself together, and its value, but it is happening in other countries as well—is that people are having their pockets pinched, and their daily lives are becoming harder, while a global elite has an idea into which it is prepared to pump ridiculous amounts of money. There are benefits to be had from a Europe that speaks with one voice in an increasingly global, competitive world, and if the nations of Europe saw that the people governing it were representative of them, were careful with their money, and were concentrating on solving the practical realities,

they would be far more tolerant of the measures that Europe imposes on them. As my hon. Friend says, they are being imposed by an elite that still thinks that it is acceptable to waste £1 billion on some outdated symbolism. I thank him for raising the point, and could not agree with it more. It relates not only to making easy budget savings, but to the credibility of the entire European project.

With budget negotiations taking place, the two-seat arrangement should be exceptionally low-hanging fruit for the Prime Minister, and I hope that he will see that. There is consensus that it is a massive problem, which we must solve; but why has it not been solved? Why has it not been stopped, if the idea that the farce must end is so intuitive? What is in the way? It is—perhaps understandably, from their perspective—the French. They have taken l'amendement Fox, which gained a majority in the European Parliament, to the European Court of Justice, because they considered it raised some issues. We are still awaiting the outcome. I have previously discussed in this Chamber some of the Court's interesting decisions, such as the SiMAP and Jaeger rulings on the effect of the working time directive on the NHS. They did not set a great precedent for sensible rulings to benefit the member states of Europe, but we shall have to wait and see what the Court decides.

The French are loth to give up the tourism industry in Alsace, and I suppose that those who live in Alsace can understand that, but it seems an odd priority for the whole of Europe to adopt now. In addition—this is the point where the debate becomes a much wider one—the French are wedded to the symbolism of the two seats of the European Parliament: mended relations between the French and the Germans. Some might argue that the relations that needed mending, that have been mended and that could be mended further are the relations between the English and the Germans, but that is a debate for another time. There are also those within the European project who see £1 billion in symbolism as money well spent, which goes to the heart of the problem. The Strasbourg circus has become a symbol of European priorities and of why people are so fed up with an institution that is becoming out of touch.

What we do about the Strasbourg circus reflects a choice that Europe must make—and, I suggest, fast. It can remain a project built on anachronistic symbolism and an emotional commitment based on fear of the past and certain member states' shame about past actions, which were indeed abominable but which cannot be allowed to overshadow and rule the future. It can be willing to pump money that nobody has into maintaining anachronistic emblems of unity in a fast-fracturing world. I am not alone in thinking that that is nothing less than dangerous. Alternatively, Europe can get real. It can face practical realities and the differences among and diversity of its member states. It can celebrate and be stronger through diversity, instead of relentlessly homogenising through misled fear. It can put pragmatism above the fantasy of a perfect Europe dreamed up around the dining tables of the global elite. Ending the Strasbourg Circus is not only about saving, with minimal pain and disruption—

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case for ending the circus. The word that keeps cropping up is “elite”. Does not the

whole enterprise of shuffling around Europe highlight how out of touch the entire European project is with the people of Europe? It is evident from the headlines across Europe at the moment. Does she agree that the very least the European Parliament could do is to suspend that shuffling around for a couple of years while the financial position is particularly difficult?

Charlotte Leslie: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a sensible point, which returns to the idea of a global elite who are out of touch and have no connection with the people over whom they rule. It is not only Britain that is questioning its position in the EU; other countries are now doing so as well. It is dangerous for the global elite to ignore the concerns raised by the people. I do not think that institutions can govern and legislate a national attitude or a national psychology. Governments and regimes that try to legislate how people feel end up looking scarily like the communist and totalitarian regimes that we have been so proud to dismantle in Europe. If Governments cannot legislate national attitudes and how people feel, they must take account of them and construct political realities around the psychological realities of the countries that they represent.

If we cannot achieve a common-sense solution, we could at least push for a pilot on suspension. However, another issue is that Europe is very inflexible and rigid about what it sees as the right way and the wrong way to do things. The idea of pilots within Europe could be extremely useful. This is a diversion from the debate, but a pilot exemption from some EU social and employment laws would be useful. A pilot would be an interesting way forward if we cannot get a common-sense solution.

We face a choice, and we must make it fast. Ending the Strasbourg circus would send a signal that Europe puts facing facts and getting real above introspection about a dream. Persisting in symbolism in defiance of reality is what most threatens the dream of a harmonious Europe. As one of my heroes Muhammad Ali said, the best way to achieve a dream is to wake up. If we want to secure our own economy by stabilising Europe, ending the Strasbourg circus is a crucial step with a symbolism all its own. I hope that the Prime Minister can play a leading role in doing so this week.

11.14 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) for securing this debate. I would like to take this opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government to the points that she and other hon. Friends have raised.

As my hon. Friend has noted, the Government's position on the question of a single seat for the European Parliament is well known. As we outlined in the coalition programme for government, we are in favour of a single seat. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister reiterated that position recently in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West. It remains the Government's view.

The strong case in favour of a single seat for the European Parliament has been well made in this debate. As my hon. Friend set out, there are strong cost and efficiency arguments in favour. Many in the European Parliament agree. The single seat campaign in the European

[*Mr Hugo Swire*]

Parliament, run by a group of MEPs from a number of member states, makes the same points. The campaign has strengthened its case by attributing figures to the additional costs being incurred as a result of the dual-seat operation. The estimated additional cost, about €180 million per annum, is clearly difficult to justify in the current financial climate in the European Union.

Efficiency arguments in favour of a single seat are also persuasive. Moving away from a situation in which the European Parliament has staff in three different locations is likely to improve the efficiency of the institution as a whole and streamline its work. I agree wholeheartedly with the environmental arguments discussed by my hon. Friend in favour of a single seat. A shift to one location would save hundreds of hours of travel time and associated carbon emissions for Members of the European Parliament, their staff and national Government delegations. I congratulate the majority of MEPs who recognise that the current situation and the associated environmental costs are out of step with what is being asked of member states and their citizens to meet the EU's ambitious climate change targets. MEPs do not want to be seen to preach one thing and do another.

It is important for us to acknowledge the pressure that the European Parliament has increasingly been putting on the European Council about the question of a single seat. It is to be welcomed. Members of the European Parliament have taken steps to address the problems inherent in the current situation. In the name of efficiency, MEPs recently took a decision, initiated by Ashley Fox, MEP for the South West of England and Gibraltar, to host two of the requisite 12 plenary sessions in Strasbourg during one week in October. Hon. Members will be aware of the ongoing court case in the European Court of Justice concerning that decision. The move by MEPs is clearly indicative of a growing consensus in the European Parliament that the current situation must change.

I also note the votes in the European Parliament on 23 October on the question of a single seat, which were adopted by significant majorities, the largest of which was in response to a vote calling for immediate, concrete action towards a single seat. It was passed by a total of 432 MEPs in favour, with 218 MEPs against. Such pressure, coming as it does from the European Parliament itself, should help drive the issue up the political agenda throughout the EU.

Longer-term reform, however, including any potential move to a single seat, would, of course, require changes to the treaties underpinning the European Union. Hon. Members will know that a protocol appended to the European Union treaties governs the location of the seat of the European Parliament. It was agreed by member states at the Edinburgh European Council in 1992. Amending the protocol requires unanimous agreement among all 27 member states. The difficulty of doing that acts as an obvious constraint on action on the single-seat issue, but, in the meantime, we fully support the European Parliament's efforts to reduce the waste brought about by its two locations. We understand the frustration of MEPs that they are not free to decide the location of their sittings.

We will treat any proposal for treaty change on its merits. We have ensured that the UK is no longer liable to contribute to future eurozone bail-outs. Now, our

absolute priority is to address the crisis in the eurozone and to ensure that the single market is not damaged. That is critical because the single market is of such benefit to jobs and businesses across the country.

When the time comes to consider broader proposals for reform, tackling the waste of the European Parliament's two seats needs to be considered, too. I imagine that MEPs will be doing the same when the opportunity arises, not least on account of the pressure from the one-seat campaign, to which my hon. Friend alluded, and its recent petition that saw more than 1 million EU citizens sign up to its push for a single seat. Who knows? Having given out the campaign's web address, my hon. Friend might attract even more signatures.

Although resolving the dual-seat issue is tied to treaty change, our drive for greater efficiency in the EU and its institutions is not. My hon. Friend will be aware that the UK has a series of tough objectives for the negotiations on the multi-annual financial framework, which will be the focus of discussions at the upcoming November European Council.

In the discussions on heading 5, the administrative part of the multi-annual financial framework, the UK will push for significant savings. The UK has delivered 33% savings in administration in all Government Departments and expects the EU institutions to show similar efficiency and restraint.

We continue to stress to other EU members and those who lead its institutions that any suggestion of waste in the budget damages the standing of the institutions and of the EU as a whole. Examples such as the fact that the median basic salary of EU officials is more than €50,000 per annum more than that of UK officials, or the fact that last year the European Commission planned to spend more annually on its buildings than on measures to protect the environment or to promote justice and the rule of law, already have a negative impact on the EU's reputation as an organisation. The dual-seat issue only adds to perceptions of EU profligacy at a time of severe financial restraint.

My hon. Friend spoke of the position of the French Government, for whom the issue is understandably sensitive. The UK enjoys a strong bilateral relationship with France, and we co-operate on a wide range of issues. We are all conscious of the historical importance of the city of Strasbourg. The Strasbourg seat of the European Parliament dates back to 1952, when the decision on its location brought an important balance to post-war Europe, but the world has moved on. We are in a new century, and the case for two seats is becoming harder to defend and the practical arguments in favour of a single seat cannot be ignored.

The UK's position on the site of the European Parliament is well known among other member states, and as a Government we have reiterated that position on several occasions. As I have already made clear, a move to a single seat requires treaty change agreed unanimously by member states. We will continue to work with our European partners, as we must, to look for a more rational settlement that results in less waste, is less costly to European taxpayers and less damaging to the environment.

I thank my hon. Friend for requesting the debate and for tenaciously pursuing the issue, about which she rightly feels strongly. The current situation, in which the

European Parliament is based in three separate locations, is difficult to justify. The arguments in favour of a single seat, in terms of the associated cost savings and efficiency impacts, are difficult to ignore.

The Government will continue to support the notion of a single seat for the European Parliament, and to work with our European partners to pursue the coalition commitment to that end.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Overseas Aid (UK-based Consultants)

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): In the event of a Division, the sitting will be suspended for 15 minutes, but that 15 minutes will be added on to the time available for the debate.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I want to draw the House's attention to the growing phenomenon of wealthy UK-based management consultancies creaming off millions of pounds from the aid budget. We are seeing—the process has accelerated in recent years—the emergence of lords of poverty. People are building fat businesses and paying themselves fat salaries creamed from the budget of the Department for International Development. Lords of poverty, hardship tycoons, pinstriped famine magnates: whatever we call them, the phenomenon is growing, and I think the British public would deprecate it.

Let me say from the beginning that I support Britain's commitment to raise its aid budget to UN levels. I congratulate the Government on their willingness to ring-fence their aid budget. We are talking about some of the poorest people in the world. Those who would cut our aid budget are not just wrong; they are not considering how, in the 21st century, we are all our brothers' keepers. For a fraction of Britain's gross domestic product, why would we not take steps through aid and trade to promote stability in other parts of the world? It is not just about standards of living, happiness and health; it is also fundamentally about global stability, and I believe that an aid budget, correctly used, has a big role to play in that.

Aid is not just about a glow of virtue for western Governments and taxpayers; it is about building a world that is safe for all of us. This month's insurrection in the horn of Africa is next month's terrorist attack in western Europe.

Sir Tony Cunningham (Workington) (Lab): To add to the point that my hon. Friend is making, I wonder how many more entrepreneurs, researchers, top doctors, scientists and so on there would be if we lived in a fairer world.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The world as a whole would benefit if it were fairer and if the energies and talents of more people in third-world countries were directed into education, science and entrepreneurship. Tragically, in some cases, they are being directed into piracy and the drug trade.

This country has a proud record on aid, both in personal donations by the British public and in successive British Governments' commitment to aid. It is a known fact that the British public are among the most generous in the world when it comes to donating as individuals to disaster emergency appeals. It is also a fact that under different Governments—I want to be fair—we in this country have been fortunate to have some extraordinarily committed and charismatic Ministers for international development and aid. I am probably one of the few people in the Chamber who remembers Lynda Chalker, but anyone concerned with the future of Africa gives

[Ms Abbott]

her a huge amount of credit for being prepared in both good and bad days to fight the corner for the importance of aid and of work with Africa. She played a crucial role in international development when I first entered the House.

There was also my colleague, Clare Short, of whom even her enemies would say that her finest hours were spent as Secretary of State for International Development. She did a huge amount, with an increased budget, to drive the Department forward. Nobody can deny her commitment and her energy. Members from both parties have done a huge amount, often in adverse political situations within their parties, to drive forward the international development agenda. I believe that when it is presented to the British public in the right way, they feel a lot of support for a properly deployed aid budget that genuinely benefits the people. The British public have shown in their response to disaster appeals that they want to help.

We in this country have a proud record on aid and international development. I welcome the fact that this Government have been prepared to stick to the UN targets for aid and to ring-fence the budget, but in recent years—I am not suggesting that the process began in 2010—more and more aid has been diverted to management consultants at the expense of practical projects that might be of benefit to some of the poorest people in the world.

I draw the House's attention to a small British charity called Operation WellFound. WellFound requested £250,000—not much, as aid budgets go—to build wells and latrines for 60,000 people in Burkina Faso, one of the most impoverished nations on earth. WellFound put in a bid for funding to DFID, which then referred it to an organisation called Triple Line Consulting, a London-based company that advises on overseas aid, which examined it in detail. I will return to Triple Line Consulting. The application for just £250,000 was rejected in August.

WellFound—a tiny charity, but it does tremendous work—got an e-mail giving three reasons why it would not get the money. First, the bid was not considered sufficiently innovative. Digging wells may not be new, but there are millions of people all over the world for whom access to clean water is vital. One would think that the consultancy would have appreciated that. Just because something is not new does not mean that it is not relevant and important.

Sir Tony Cunningham: Does my hon. Friend also agree that clean water is the basis for almost everything else? Kids do not go to school if they are ill because they do not have clean water. It affects their health, education, time at work and so on. It affects everything. If people do not have clean water, everything else falls by the wayside.

Ms Abbott: Clean water may not be new or exciting, but it is the basis for many things. I have been fortunate to travel a bit around Africa—to Nigeria, Ghana and Uganda. Access to clean water is still a vital issue in such countries, yet that small charity had its application rejected.

Apart from the fact that the bid was not innovative, Triple Line Consulting went on to say that it did not explain how poverty would be alleviated. As my hon.

Friend just said, access to clean water means so much to communities' ability to move forward economically. The final reason why Triple Line was not prepared to approve the application was that poor WellFound did not provide evidence of how the work could be replicated on a larger scale. It seems to me that if one builds 25 wells, the way to replicate that is to build 50 and 75. I suspect that Triple Line just cut and pasted standard responses to that aid bid.

The decision came as a huge blow not just to the small team who run WellFound but to the villagers in Burkina Faso, where construction of the wells has had to be delayed. That experience, which is a microcosm of what seems to be going on in the world of international development, is far from unique.

The Sunday Telegraph, which I am not in the habit of quoting, did an analysis of DFID spending that showed that £29 million—take a deep breath—was paid in the past 12 months to Triple Line. It seems that the only thing that Triple Line triples is its own bottom line. Triple Line's main contract and the bulk of its work is to assess applications for grants from DFID's global poverty action fund. To be fair, the company passed on £27.1 million of this money to the aid providers that it vetted. However, it kept £1.9 million as a fee for its services. Had it been willing to shave a little bit off its fee, it could have handed the money to the little well project and the people of Burkina Faso could have had the wells.

The public will be baffled by DFID's outsourcing assessing a bid for aid to one mega-consultancy and then outsourcing it again to a different consultancy, a specialist branch of the accountants, KPMG. In the past 12 months, DFID has paid KPMG more than £35 million. Of course, KPMG says that a lot of that is passed on to aid providers, and perhaps it kept back £3.5 million as a fee. That will reassure the people of Burkina Faso.

Triple Line is typical of the sort of company that has emerged in recent years and is one of the lords of poverty that I am talking about. Triple Line is based in Putney in the UK and is owned by two directors who founded it in 1999: Lydia Richardson, a socio-economist—I do not know what that is—who lives with her husband in a £1 million house in Wimbledon, and David Smith, an economist, who lives just a few streets away. Triple Line's website says:

“We operate on the principles of openness, transparency, accountability and trust.”

However, it registers as a small company, meaning that it is not required to publish its accounts. That is how open, accountable and transparent it is. The owners refuse to disclose what their income or profits were last year or how much they were paid in salary or dividends. Apart from working with DFID, Triple Line lists 37 other clients on its website and states that its annual turnover is £2 million. So the £1.9 million it creams off DFID represents the major part of its turnover, which apparently it gets from cutting and pasting standard replies to small charities that want relatively small sums to do practical work.

That is just one company. It is important to look at the bigger picture. We know that last year alone DFID spent £500 million on consultants. The data compiled by a national newspaper show that the vast majority of

those contracts are going to UK-based companies. The share going to UK firms has risen in recent years. I will return to the point about how desirable it is to give an increasing proportion of our aid budget to UK-based firms.

Of the 117 major DFID contracts and procurement agreements worth nearly £750 million, as published on the Government's contracts portal since January 2011, only nine went to non-UK firms. Several of the best-paid consultants are former DFID officials, who appear to have gained substantial increases in their personal wealth since leaving the Department, even though they are still doing essentially the same work.

I am not the first person to notice this phenomenon. Earlier this year, a parliamentary report warned that the UK Government's drive to cut costs could make them over-reliant on contractors—like Triple Line—and could even put the effectiveness of their aid programmes at risk. Members of the Select Committee on International Development said that their concerns about DFID's use of contractors and other external partners were compounded by the lack of publicly available information on UK aid-funded contracts.

The Government have good intentions in seeking to maintain levels of and ring-fencing aid spending, but a public constituency for continuing high levels of aid cannot be built unless there is a measure of openness and transparency, which we have not seen to date.

The rise in the amount of money given to UK-based consultants is alarming, but before I speak a little bit more about that in general, let me mention another lord of poverty, creaming millions off the aid budget. Adam Smith International is the offspring of the think-tank, the Adam Smith Institute, which is probably better known to Government Members than to me. Adam Smith International has gone from strength to strength. It was paid a total of £37 million by DFID last year to promote the free market in the third world. Its total turnover that year was £53.6 million, with profits of £5 million, up 10% in 2010. Let us pause and think. We in this country, as a consequence of austerity, are seeing cuts in Government and at local government level. All hon. Members know that some measure of austerity would have had to happen, whoever was in government, but ordinary people are seeing cuts in their local government services and at Government level. Yet one of the lords of poverty is able to drive its profits up by 10% to £5 million.

It gets better. The managing director of Adam Smith International, which gets most of its money from DFID and therefore from the taxpayers—the same taxpayers who are seeing cuts to their local government services and cuts in Government—pays himself a salary with dividends that in 2010 totalled almost £1.3 million. The managing director of Adam Smith International trousers £1.3 million. Anything further removed from the public's idea of the kind of people who go abroad to help some of the poorest people in other countries could not be imagined. I repeat that, if we are going to build a constituency for continuing high levels of aid—in my view, it should increase—we have to examine this sort of abusive business activity, with people running what are supposed to be aid organisations and paying themselves salaries in the millions.

William Morrison, another member of Adam Smith International, earned £200,000 from that firm and collected dividends worth £1.06 million from its parent company,

Amphion Group, which is wholly owned by him and three of his fellow directors. Amphion Group's accounts state that its purpose is to act as a holding company for Adam Smith International. Mr Morrison's salary rose by a quarter last year, to £253,000. He and his three fellow directors shared dividends of £7.5 million—almost £1.9 million each—which they paid to the Amphion Group. The directors collected salaries averaging £125,000 each. A director of Adam Smith International and Amphion, Peter Young, justified the payments, saying,

“If you want to get a good job done, you have to get people who know what they're doing.”

With the greatest respect to Adam Smith International, I must say, as someone who has travelled in Africa and travelled extensively in the Caribbean, where my family originate from, that the idea that one cannot get the skills to improve and strengthen the government and economic structures of third-world countries without paying UK-based directors £125,000 each is risible. There are so many people of Nigerian, Afghan, Caribbean or horn of Africa origin with the skills, ability and talent, but they are unable to break into this sort of work because companies such as Adam Smith International have a death grip on it. They use the size of their organisations to squeeze out smaller and aspirant organisations.

Sir Tony Cunningham: Does my hon. Friend agree that if we use, for example, African consultants in Africa, not only do they have a better idea of what is happening on the ground but the money that they receive is spent in their own country, so we achieve a double benefit for the people who live there?

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point, which I was coming to. I am concerned about aid as a British parliamentarian, on behalf of the British taxpayer, and as someone with an interest in global realities and the important role that aid can play in creating global stability, and as one who one wants to help the poorest people in the world. I am also concerned about aid because, having personal contacts in some of the countries where it is dished out, I know that it causes huge frustration to see UK-based consultants flying out for a week or a month, staying in four-star hotels, going around in 4x4 vehicles, sending a few e-mails, writing reports that simply regurgitate known facts and then flying back to the UK, when there are local people who have a better understanding of the conditions. Whether it is in Afghanistan, west Africa, the Caribbean or the horn of Africa, local people could do those jobs just as well.

Furthermore, as my hon. Friend pointed out, if we employ locally based consultants, first, we help to build the knowledge base and infrastructure of those countries and, secondly, we pump money into their economies. If the only hope that people in third-world countries have when faced with those bloated UK consultancies is to get a job as a driver, a cook or a nanny, and if in the 21st century we are not prepared to start to shift funding to the skills and talent that we know exist in some of those countries, it is no wonder that the question of aid has become a talking point not only in the UK—often among people who are opposed to the principle of aid in the first place—but in Africa. How much good has that aid really done? Part of the reason people query

[*Ms Abbott*]

how much aid we give to Africa and the third world—we can all see the statistics—is that they see that the money is paid to UK-based consultants and has a minimum practical effect in the local economies.

To return to the lords of poverty, there are dozens of staff in UK-based development consultancies—substantially funded by DFID—who pay themselves six-figure salaries. At Hertfordshire-based HTSPE, which got a third of its turnover from DFID last year, the highest paid director is on £144,000. The company earned £12.1 million in 2010-11 and is currently involved in the Department's numerous programmes. GRM International received large sums of money from DFID but managed to pay only £47,000 in tax in Britain last year—possibly a debate for another time. GRM International was bought out by managers in 2009 and has since merged with another aid giant, Futures Group, and secured massive contracts from the US and Australian Governments. The firm was paid £67.7 million in management consultancy fees for aid delivery to the poorest communities in Zimbabwe in August 2011. Last year, the highest-paid director in Oxford Policy Management, which runs the DFID oil sector transparency initiative—I wonder if they have heard about that in the Nigerian delta—and several other programmes, earned £125,000, up 25% in a year.

No one says that people working for such companies should not get a living wage, to coin a phrase, or competitive rates. If we look at the absolute poverty in the countries that they are working in and recognise the possible effect on local economies if we were more willing to give money to local consultants, however, we have to query such massive salaries, profits and turnover, from DFID expenditure and with no real clarity about the outcomes.

The new Secretary of State for International Development has announced an inquiry into the use of such consultants, and we welcome that. Will the Minister tell us when to expect that inquiry to be completed and made available for public discussion? A review of Britain's multilateral aid programmes, to assess the effectiveness of 43 aid organisations receiving UK money, was concluded to have contributed significantly to improving transparency and achieving value for money. The internal review of the Department's spending on technical experts ought, therefore, to have similarly benign results, although when we want to review the use of consultants and technical experts we find ourselves in a hall of mirrors. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact, the UK aid watchdog, has also announced plans to examine DFID's use of contractors, but those plans have stalled because many of the people involved are themselves big aid consultancy organisations.

There is immense good will in this country for the concept of giving money, whether from an individual's pocket or from the Government, to help some of the poorest people in the world. That good will, however, is being strained by the rising amount that is going to British-based consultancies and by the difficulty of seeing their out-turn. I am concerned that, in DFID's efforts to cut staff, it has outsourced work such as assessing aid bids that properly ought to rest within DFID and could certainly be done a lot cheaper in

DFID, rather than by KPMG with its profit margins—nor is there any reason to think that an international accountancy company knows more about aid than people who have worked in DFID on the matter for all of their careers. Yes, we are on the right track with the overall sums of money, which it is important to ring-fence, but the trend, since 2010 in particular, has been to give the money to UK-based consultants.

When I refer to UK-based consultants, let me be clear that some are expert in house building or malaria nets, for example. One of the most successful pieces of aid to the Caribbean was when Metropolitan Police officers were seconded to the police in Jamaica. Jamaicans appreciated that, because the police brought real expertise and it was a real skills transfer operation. Frankly, it also enabled the politicians of the time to bypass some of the alleged corruption in the Jamaican police department. That aid was valued, so I am not saying that in all times and in all places there is locally based expertise that DFID should pay for. What I am saying is that generalised management consultancies, such as Adam Smith International, to name but one, send young people with no background in aid or development to Nigeria. They fly business class and stay in four-star hotels, earn considerable sums, and then fly back, while Nigeria continues much as before.

Sir Tony Cunningham: Is my hon. Friend suggesting that the transformation to a huge increase in consultants is ideologically based?

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I was anxious to strike a non-partisan note, so I avoided that subject. However, any objective observer who sees the money going to generalised management consultancies with no specialist knowledge of the practical aspects of aid might think that there was an ideological motivation. We are discussing some of the poorest people in the world, and it is wrong that mere ideology should mitigate using money in the fairest and most effective way.

We need to know when the internal inquiry is due to report. The Department for International Development must consider whether some of the simple work of assessing bids for aid—there is a habit of sending out expensive management consultants—could be done more cost-effectively in-house. I urge the Government to look at some of the margins and massive profits that some organisations are making—the salaries that bosses pay themselves, and the millions of pounds of turnover—from DFID money. They must examine whether some of those margins can be shaved. Everyone else is practising austerity, so why should the lord of poverty not do so? Why is it necessary to pay people hundreds of thousands of pounds to prevail upon them to take up work to help some of the poorest people in the world?

Above all, we must consider using more local experts and consultants. Everyone who is concerned about aid agrees that that provides better value for money, and the people involved understand local conditions and are in it for the long term. If I were a young man working for Adam Smith International, I might fly out to Nigeria for a couple of months, and in 12 months' time I might be in Afghanistan or somewhere in eastern Europe. Would I have a long-term concern that people in Nigeria will be better off in the long run as a consequence of my

activities? No, because I would get on a jet plane and leave it all behind. Local advisers, consultants and technical experts live in those countries and will do so for the foreseeable future, so they have a genuine interest, which UK-based consultants may not have, in ensuring that what they are doing will have a long-term effect and make their country a better place to live in.

Just this morning, we heard about the millions of pounds being spent on an education project in Nigeria. It sounds like an excellent project, but the report that was published this morning queries its effectiveness, and says that children leave the school without mastering basic educational skills. That brings the whole issue of aid and development into disrepute. In these times of austerity, British taxpayers are entitled to know that aid money is being well spent and not top-sliced by overpaid, UK-based management consultancies. The very poor people we want to help need to know that the UK Government are straining every sinew to ensure the best value for money from their expenditure.

I go to Jamaica most years, and apart from UK policemen on secondment, people there and in other Caribbean countries have no idea where aid money for the region goes to, because so much of it is spent on UK-based consultants who mix in an exclusive social circle in the capital. They train, and write reports and e-mails, but they do not interact with people.

Aid has a purpose, because in a 21st century global economy, I am my brother's keeper. It has a purpose, because it is the right thing to do, and promotes global stability. The aid we give to countries such as Afghanistan and Palestine should build general relationships with this country. If it is trousered by UK-based consultants, and people in those countries do not see its practical benefits and believe that the only beneficiaries are those consultants who jet in and out, far from helping to build relationships, that aid raises a question mark at the very least.

For the whole time I have been a Member of Parliament, this country has had one of the best records for aid, including individual donations, of any country in Europe. It has had a great record under some Conservative Ministers and some Labour Ministers. We have every reason to be proud of that. The new phenomenon of increasing amounts of money going to UK-based management consultancies—some people say it is an ideological move, but I would not—far from building a constituency in this country for high and continuing levels of aid, bids fair to undermine it. We are a better country because we meet our commitments on aid. The very least the Government can do is to ensure transparency and accountability, and to assure the British public that they are receiving the maximum value for every penny of that aid.

In a world where small, vulnerable island states are buffeted by climate change, small countries in Africa are at the mercy of the commodities markets, and China, sometimes unscrupulously, is moving into areas where Britain was once the most influential foreign donor and partner, ensuring that our aid budget is spent effectively could not be more important. I urge the Government to examine the issues, and to introduce an internal inquiry, and I assure the Minister that I will return to the subject over the course of this Parliament.

3.8 pm

Sir Tony Cunningham (Workington) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Howarth for chairing the debate; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) for introducing the subject and for the passion that she always brings to such debates. It is a pleasure to sit alongside her.

With our economy suffering, value for money has never been so important to taxpayers. Understandably, there was some confusion and great concern about the revelation that the Department for International Development had spent more than £500 million on UK consultants. It is hugely important to raise the issue here today.

I want to make a number of points about value for money, the use of the private sector and the use of UK companies, rather than companies from developing countries. Last March, the International Development Committee released its annual report. Even then, there were concerns about the effectiveness of aid and the possibility that it was being undermined by the use of UK consultants. In particular, the Chair of the Committee, the right hon. Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce), highlighted plans to reduce DFID's operating costs to 2% and cut administrative costs by a third, from £128 million to £94 million. Does the Minister believe those plans are hampering our aid programme? We understand that the measures have been implemented to reflect similar cuts at other Departments, but it is concerning that, although the Department's budget is increasing, its capacity could be decreasing. We believe that that has led to an increase in the number of UK firms and consultancy agencies receiving money from the taxpayer.

I was not fully aware of all the figures my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington referred to, but it seems that people are making salaries of £1 million and £1.5 million at the expense of some of the poorest people in the world.

Ms Abbott: The fact is that people who would regard themselves as middle income in the countries that these people are allegedly flying off to to help would not earn the sums we are talking about in a year. DFID should pause and think about whether it is right to drive a system that encourages people to cream off money in this way.

Sir Tony Cunningham: I totally agree. Does the Minister feel that that approach represents true value for money for the British taxpayer? Can she demonstrate that it is the most effective approach to reducing poverty? If DFID is about anything, it is about reducing poverty among some of the poorest people in the world.

The British public—my hon. Friend touched on this—are compassionate, caring and extremely generous, and we have only to witness some recent examples to see that that is true. I could cite Haiti, because of the disaster that struck it. It is not in the British Commonwealth, and it is not a country that DFID deals with; indeed, it was suggested that, because it was a French colony, France would lead the way in dealing with the disaster there. However, the British people showed huge generosity; they did not care whether Haiti was a French colony or a British colony—they cared for the people of Haiti and gave enormously generously.

[Sir Tony Cunningham]

It is vital that we can show people that their money is going to help millions of families—women and children around the world—and that it is not being wasted by large consultancies in the UK. In the light of that and the Department's recent announcement that it will investigate where its money is spent, may I, in the spirit of transparency, pick up on my hon. Friend's comments and ask the Minister yet again when the internal report will be published in full? Interestingly, I asked that question at DFID questions recently. The Secretary of State—I appreciate that she is new to her post—gave me the longest answer in the whole Question Time, but did she tell me when the report will be produced? No. We need to know when it will be produced and whether it will be produced in full. We have a right to know where the money is being spent.

I hope the Department will be open and transparent about how British taxpayers' money is spent and where it is going. The Secretary of State is relatively new, but I hope she will get to grips—people keep using that term—with how money is being spent in her Department, because the £500 million given to UK consultants represents 8% of the DFID budget. We also hope that the report will shed light on other funding streams. What struck me about my hon. Friend's comments was the fact that a small non-governmental organisation that was digging wells for poor people was refused £250,000 when we are spending 8% of the budget on consultants.

The coalition Government have sought a different style of development. I do not want to get into an ideological argument, but there seems to be an increased emphasis on the private sector and on a more—I choose my words carefully, and I should when I am looking at my hon. Friend—paternalistic approach to the way we deal with the developing world. That approach ideologically favours the private sector, and we have seen examples of that.

I am not saying that I am against the private sector, which is hugely important. Let me give one example. Recently, I was in Nairobi, and I went to look at private schools. Now, private schools in Nairobi are not like the private schools we would imagine in other parts of the world. Kibera is the largest slum in Nairobi—one slum, one million people. There are a handful of schools on the outskirts. If local people want their children to have an education, they have no choice but to pay a relatively small amount to allow their children to go to school. The amount they pay for their child to go to school for a month is the same as the cost of a bottle of beer in one of the top-class hotels in Nairobi that some of the consultants we are talking about might stay at. People do not have a choice about making such payments, but this is more a social enterprise than anything else, so I am not against everything that is private.

Ms Abbott: Does my hon. Friend agree that, although no one in the 21st century objects in principle to money going to the private sector, being spent in-house by the Government or being spent by aid organisations, the watchword has to be whether it is spent effectively? Is the maximum benefit going to the recipients of aid? We do not take a position as between private, public, Oxfam or whatever; the issue is effectiveness and whether we are helping the people we seek to help.

Sir Tony Cunningham: I totally agree. There are two things: effectiveness and value for money—value for money for the British taxpayer and for the developing country.

The aid process was supposed to encourage developing countries to be involved in their own development. Untied aid—we have a proud record on untying aid—offers an excellent example of partnership with developing countries. By hiring agencies in developing countries, we make development more accountable to local people, and I made that point very clearly earlier. That uses local expertise, builds capacity and provides job opportunities.

I want to make a little point about capacity. I was in Zambia not too long ago. One company—I am told it is British—owed £70 million in unpaid tax. Some £70 million should have been paid to the Exchequer in Zambia, but it was not, and part of the reason for that is that Departments there do not have the capacity—lawyers, accountants, tax experts and so on—to get the money. Surely aid could be used to help countries help themselves.

In using local expertise, we ensure that value for money and effectiveness are our criteria. That is an example of how the private sector can be used effectively alongside development. The Government have been vocal in their support of partnership over aid, but by not using consultants from developing countries they appear to be squandering an excellent opportunity to engage with developing countries on an equal footing.

There is, understandably, some resistance to aid in the press and some parts of society. It is therefore imperative that the Department is open about its spending. The public should understand why the Department has chosen to select 92% of contractors from Britain, rather than from the developing world. I want to give the Minister quite a bit of time to answer the questions we have raised.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right: aid is about our effectiveness in helping people in developing countries, and if we waste huge amounts on consultancies in this country, we have to ask whether that is value for money for the British taxpayer and right for the people of the developing world.

3.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Lynne Featherstone): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) for calling a debate on such an important topic. As she and the hon. Member for Workington (Sir Tony Cunningham) said, it is important that we deliver effective aid and get value for money—something the Government have made their watchword in relation to development aid. I was a little disappointed in a way to hear terms such as trousering money, creaming off the aid budget, lords of poverty and hardship tycoons.

I think that the hon. Lady did her case a disservice, because the real test is whether there is value for money. As to what those lords of poverty get, if the sum delivers the aid and it is effective, the quantity is not the issue. The issue is whether it is effective and whether we get value for money, as both Opposition Members who spoke said.

Ms Abbott: The Minister may think that I sound a little harsh about the lords of poverty, but she needs to hear a rising class of intellectuals in Africa, the Caribbean and the far east talking about those same people. They are more than harsh; they are scathing. They query the value of aid altogether. If the Minister is concerned about my tone, she needs, on her travels abroad, to meet some of those rising young intellectuals and hear their critique.

Lynne Featherstone: I assure the hon. Lady that I do meet and will meet members of the rising intellectual classes, or whatever she termed them, and that I would give them the same answer: the point is whether aid is effective and whether the British taxpayer gets value for money. That is important.

The good part of what the hon. Lady said was that the Opposition are committed to the 0.7% aid target, or are glad that the coalition have made that commitment. We will be the first country to deliver that, as set out in our manifesto and the coalition agreement, in 2013. She is right in what she says, in the sense that that is the percentage that we as a first-world developed country should give, not just because it is right, but because it is smart. It is a wise and good thing to do because it helps us and others. I am glad that both sides agree about that. The hon. Lady spoke of safety for all, and that is part of it.

There have been political shenanigans to do with aid recently, and as the hon. Lady has taken to reading *The Daily Telegraph*, she will have noticed that it often levels a salvo or two at the 0.7% target, and not only at the consultants. However, the whole point of a percentage is that it is geared to the fortunes of the country as they go up or down. We can maintain our commitment to the figure, because it is geared to our economic fortunes.

I want to put the debate in context. When the coalition Government came to power in 2010 we made it clear that we would ensure maximum development impact on the ground, and full accountability to British taxpayers, so that their money would be well spent. We have done much to improve value for money for UK taxpayers, and for the poor people who receive our aid and development assistance. As the hon. Lady mentioned, that has included, through the bilateral and multilateral aid reviews—which are revered across the development spectrum throughout the world for the work they have done in examining value for money—a full assessment and analysis of where and how we spend the aid budget to ensure that it gives maximum value for money. That has adjusted the focus so that it is now on a smaller number of countries, and funding to some poorly performing international agencies has been cut, in a move that gets life-saving help to many more people.

I prefer the term “suppliers” for those to whom the hon. Lady refers as consultants, because, as she said, while a global figure is given to them, only a percentage of it is administration, and the vast majority of it is for delivering the programme in-country. It is important to recognise that the direct engagement of contractors, or suppliers, is only one of a number of channels that we use to deliver development assistance on the ground. We strengthened the business case process in January 2011, to ensure that there would be good decision making about when and how to use contractors in our programmes, and we must also acknowledge that the

suppliers engaged by DFID undertake a wide range of activities to support the delivery of the development programme. The majority of those suppliers’ contracts are managing the delivery of programmes, or managing the distribution of funds to deliver programmes on behalf of DFID. Those were some of the examples that the hon. Lady raised.

Sir Tony Cunningham: I understand the point that the Minister makes, but I wonder how she can justify salaries of £1 million or £1.5 million to some of those people.

Lynne Featherstone: The proof of the pudding is in the eating: it is a question of what they delivered, whether it was value for money, whether it could have been got cheaper elsewhere, what the processes were, whether they were rigorous and whether the arrangement delivered, on the ground, the enormous programmes that we are carrying out throughout the world, in-country, across Africa and Asia. As to the suppliers we use, yes, UK firms win a significant proportion of our work, and the vast majority—90%—of the larger contracts. Technical capacity is one of the major deficits in the poorest countries, and the market for professional services and technical assistance in developing countries runs to tens of billions of pounds a year. British firms have strong expertise in the area and compete effectively in that big, global market—including for contracts awarded by DFID, but also right across the world.

UK aid is, as the hon. Member for Workington said, untied, and almost all our contracts are subject to competitive tender. When UK firms win contracts from DFID it is because they have offered value-for-money solutions to the requirements in the contract. We encourage firms from developing countries to compete for DFID business. However, local markets often lack the capacity, especially for programmes where specialist skills and experience are required to maximise results. That is particularly relevant as we have increased our focus on working in fragile and conflict-affected states. However, it is important to note that local firms and staff benefit from DFID contracts when our suppliers establish local teams in-country to deliver the programmes and to advise, just as we employ members of the local community to work in DFID offices, for the very reasons that the hon. Lady gave: they have local knowledge and experience. However, often it is not possible for local firms to mount the sorts of applications that can deliver.

Ms Abbott: The reason the firms in question can compete is their size, which is due to the bloated DFID contracts. The Minister seems to infer that the work goes to UK-based consultancies because the skills and knowledge are not available locally. I remind her that there are in her constituency, as in mine, thousands of people from the same areas of the world to which she dispatches UK-based consultants, and that they have the relevant skills, knowledge and potential; but nothing in DFID policies encourages them to go home and set up the consultancies that could meaningfully bid for the contracts.

Lynne Featherstone: The contracts and tenders are open and anyone can compete for them. If there is a fair process that encourages local employment I do not see how the hon. Lady can argue that it is not a fair and due

[Lynne Featherstone]

process. However, it is true that 90% of the larger contracts go to UK contractors, who have a lot of experience in the field. That is not to say that others could not make a bid that would beat them; but the percentages are the way it is. That is the result of the tenders.

Suppliers such as Population Services International can deliver significant results and value for money. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo—and not everyone knows how to work and deliver in such fragile states—97% of the population live in areas with high rates of malaria, and the prevalence is as high as 80%. The hon. Lady raised the question of bed nets: a supplier contracted by DFID is providing and distributing bed nets. That will provide more than 4 million bed nets to people in remote locations and educate the recipients to ensure that they are used effectively. Such programmes, although a British company may contract them, will be delivered locally.

The challenge for us and our suppliers is to ensure that we maximise the results achieved and the overall return on investment from each contract, and on every programme. With that in mind, we want our suppliers, in some priority areas, to do more to support our goals. We want them to reflect our objective of building local capacity by ensuring that programmes develop sustainable solutions and encourage self-sufficiency, and we are looking for that in those bids. Given our change in focus towards fragile and conflict-affected states, we increasingly look to our contractors to develop the capability to deliver effectively in more challenging environments.

The hon. Lady raised the question of transparency. It is of course hugely important to us. We want contractors to operate transparently and to reflect that important principle in the programmes that they run for us.

Ms Abbott: The Minister has admitted, or confirmed, that 90% of the contracts go to UK-based consultancies.

Lynne Featherstone: The larger contracts.

Ms Abbott: To avoid doubt, is the Minister saying that she is happy with that high proportion, and that she has no plans over time to try to bring it down? I want to be clear about that.

Lynne Featherstone: I have the ambition of delivering value for British taxpayers' money. That is the objective. Within that, we want more of our contractors to show us how they will use local people, and we want that to be encouraged and embedded. DFID is a great skills educator, in terms of the work that it does in-country to educate and train people to take on roles and become more experienced, so that in time, they will be able to win a larger proportion of those contracts.

On improving value for money overall, we want our contractors to recognise more explicitly and to reflect more clearly our common objective of reducing poverty. We want them to take action to demonstrate that: for example, by focusing on value for money and by sharing with others their learning and knowledge of what works, in order to improve the effectiveness of our development work. It is an iterative process.

I want to try to answer some of the hon. Lady's specific points. I agree that the British public are generous. They are proud of both our record on international aid and development and the work that we do, and they look to support us. That is why in DFID, and as a coalition Government, we make such strenuous efforts to deliver value for money and aid effectiveness. As she said, there are political and dark forces out there that might wish to destabilise that commitment, but only by delivering effectively and ensuring that we provide value for money for the British taxpayer can we defend ourselves and the work that we do.

The hon. Lady said that she was not going to raise issues about decisions being ideologically driven—I think she was inferring that there was a switch to private contractors. I want to ask, however, whether she and perhaps more directly, the hon. Member for Workington, were ideologically opposed to the use of contractors, because in my book, it is about whoever delivers the best results.

The hon. Lady asked about Triple Line Consulting's assessment of the application for £250,000. Triple Line manages the global poverty action fund on behalf of DFID. Applications are reviewed in accordance with criteria set by DFID to maximise the effectiveness and value for money from the budget, in line with the Department's policy priority. Most of the money that goes to Triple Line is passed through to fund projects, as we have said. It was interesting that the hon. Member for Workington said, in questioning whether we have value for money, that poverty reduction should be looked at as one of the criteria. However, one reason for rejecting WellFound's application was that it made no mention of poverty reduction; it did not demonstrate to Triple Line's satisfaction that poverty reduction could be delivered.

I actually thought that the argument that clean water and sinking wells should be enough, and that we should not seek anything to do with innovation or new thinking, was quite poor. The sum of £250,000 is a lot of money, and in any contract that DFID lets, or that goes through any funds that are managed for us, we want to see how that thinking can develop and how it can be scaled up. It may not be a matter of just doubling wells, as the hon. Lady suggests. It is dangerous to go into the detail of how or why things were rejected and whether they should have been, when neither she nor I have the details of the bid in front of us. We cannot just look at the broad picture—"We will sink wells"—and then criticise the bid's rejection, because three things were asked for, one of which was how poverty demonstrably would be reduced. If that was not in the bid, I cannot see why that should not be a reason to reject it, when the hon. Gentleman made such a point of its being a critical criterion for DFID to consider.

Ms Abbott: For clarity, I am not saying that digging wells and innovation are mutually exclusive. My point was simply that DFID refused to dig the wells, which would have cost a mere £250,000, but the people who managed that refusal process took a profit of £1.9 million. The public cannot understand that.

Lynne Featherstone: As I said, Triple Line is in charge of the whole global poverty action fund, and an administration fee is not that unusual. The real question, as both Opposition Members said, is whether effective aid is delivered.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of the scale and size of projects excluding small firms from competing, and asked whether we wanted to reduce the current 90% of large contracts that are contracted to the UK. We would like to use local staff and firms more, but we need to recognise that some of that will be achieved through contracts directly awarded by DFID. We also need our large suppliers to do that down their supply chain, and we are pressing them to do so. I shall move on to what we are looking at in future in due course.

The hon. Lady asked about transparency. Future contracts are all published on the Her Majesty's Government's Contracts Finder website to provide suppliers with the opportunity to bid. I asked about that the other day, as I was inquiring how people anywhere would know that a contract was out that could be bid for. They are all published on that website. All payments over £500 are published, as are business cases for the programmes and the details of the contracts awarded. We want to use it to improve the way we do things, and transparency is very important to us.

The hon. Lady also raised the issue of former DFID staff becoming contractors or suppliers. The Department's staff are loyal, passionate and committed, and they develop massive expertise, so it is not surprising that after five, 10, 15 or 20 years with DFID, they then move on within the industry or market. Some movement between staff and organisations is to be expected and salary levels are determined by the labour market. I do not seriously think that she would say that someone who worked in DFID for 10 or 20 years, and is committed and passionate, should not then go on to use that expertise in the industry. The Department has business rules in place covering the appointment of civil servants when they leave, and there are controls on conflicts of interest. New controls have been introduced to ensure the appropriate tax treatment of interim staff, and the new PEAKS framework—professional evidence and applied knowledge services—will strengthen controls on the engagement of short-term specialist contractors. If I have misinterpreted what the hon. Lady said, I am sure that she will tell me.

Ms Abbott: I do not doubt that many people in DFID are committed and passionate. Years ago, when I was a graduate trainee with the civil service, the most committed and passionate people chose DFID, for example, over the Treasury. I would argue, however, that in the countries that we are trying to help, there are committed, passionate and knowledgeable people, some of whom have to migrate overseas in order to gain employment opportunities. We could do so much more for those countries if we were committed to a policy of developing the capacity of local people, rather than shovelling money at Adam Smith International.

I have listened carefully to what the Minister said about transparency, but how does she explain that the International Development Committee raised concerns about DFID's use of contractors and external partners and that it has complained about the lack of publicly available information? If the information is available, clearly the Committee does not know about it.

Lynne Featherstone: I will return to that issue in due course. The hon. Lady keeps returning to the point about local employment and local opportunities, but we

agree about that. It is a question of making it happen and encouraging that, but I have explained to her how that is being done.

On the implication that somehow a tsunami of contracts is now going to management consultants, there is an increase, but there is an increase to what we are doing in all our areas. There is an increase in what we are doing through budget support. There is an increase through sector support. There is an increase to NGOs and there is an increase in the use of suppliers. That is because, as we build towards the 0.7% figure, we are having to scale up and ensure that we deliver. Having different channels through which we deliver is probably the best way forward. A mixed economy of development assistance ensures that we are working and firing on all guns.

Of course DFID's use of suppliers has grown in recent years. That is because our overall programme has grown and because we are doing more in fragile and conflict-affected states, where the risks are such that we have to retain more control ourselves, rather than channelling money through Governments. In some places, it is just not possible to work through the Government system, and NGOs are not always in place, so we have to work through those with specialist expertise, who can work in these very difficult circumstances. We do that by using suppliers who are accountable to us; it is to us that they are accountable.

We have asked ICAI to review the use of consultants. It is in the early stages of conducting a review of DFID's use of suppliers to deliver programmes. The report is due in May 2013. The scope of the review is such that it will examine how DFID uses contractors. I am referring to the make-or-buy decision in relation to the business case: how do we decide whether we are going to do something ourselves or whether we need to buy in the service? The review will examine how we select contractors and secure value for money in the procurement process and how we hold them accountable—the contract and supplier management. The ICAI methodology for the study is to select and review a sample of five or six contracts as case studies to identify whether DFID is achieving impact and value for money in its use of contractors.

Sir Tony Cunningham: Will the Minister commit to publishing the report in full?

Lynne Featherstone: I am coming back to that report. The ICAI report will be published in May 2013.

In terms of the response to the IDC, I do not have the information to hand. I shall have to write to the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington on that point.

The hon. Lady referred to the lack of clarity about outputs from DFID programmes. In terms of how we ensure that UK aid money is spent effectively, the main tools are the new business case process, which has brought value for money and results up front in the design of all programmes; annual reviews, which enable us to monitor the value for money of programmes during implementation; and research and evaluation to identify what works best and to learn lessons both from our own projects and from those of others.

In terms of measuring value for money, the value-for-money framework ensures that the value for money of a programme is assessed at various stages of the programme cycle, from business case to DFID's annual review

[*Lynne Featherstone*]

process, and projects are then scored on whether they are achieving value for money. DFID has also invested heavily in building the evidence base and conducting research and evaluations of programmes to learn lessons about impact and drive greater value for money in future programmes. That is one of the biggest changes in aid and development assistance since the days of the Government whom the hon. Lady supported. There has been a shift in focus on to the evidence base and an insistence that almost everything can be measured and we can look to outputs. The evidence base is critical to evaluating what works, so that when we spend more money, we ensure that we spend it in the most effective way.

There was an assertion from the hon. Lady that consultants add little real value and do not do real work. Contractors actually perform a very wide role. Most of the supplier contracts are buying people and services that support delivery, either by managing the implementation of programmes or by managing the distribution of funds. Sometimes that includes in-kind aid distributed by suppliers. Examples include bed nets and cash—the 40p or 50p a week given to extremely poor people by suppliers contracted by DFID. We also use contractors to provide technical assistance to country Governments to support them in the development of local capacity. Others are used to undertake monitoring and evaluation of programmes or to conduct research to help to improve the effectiveness of our aid. Many of these suppliers play a key role in DFID delivering tangible development outcomes in the world's poorest countries. I have made clear the importance that we attach to value for money, but also the importance of delivering for the poorest.

I do not have a date for when the report commissioned by the Secretary of State will be finished. I know that the Secretary of State has announced the details of the actions being taken as a result of the review. The recommendations of the report—so it must have been finished—are still being considered, and work is ongoing to plan for implementation. The reason why the report is not in the public domain is that it comes under advice for Ministers and it includes commercially sensitive information, but what the Secretary of State is doing as a result of the report will be published; in fact, I think it has been published already.

The hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington asked why some of the suppliers working for DFID do not appear to pay enough UK tax.

Sir Tony Cunningham: The hon. Lady suggests that the report cannot be published because it contains sensitive material. Is she prepared to produce and provide this information? She can redact the delicate, sensitive information. We want information that is as full as it can be in order to prove that the Department is as transparent as it should be.

Lynne Featherstone: I am afraid I have forgotten the point that I was addressing to the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, because the intervention came then.

Ms Abbott: Tax.

Lynne Featherstone: I shall come back to tax. I am coming to the response to the report. There was a freedom of information request, which was answered in the same way—that advice to Ministers is exempt from FOI. However, I will come on to what the Secretary of State is proposing to do, in due course.

In terms of tax, which I have now lost the sheet about—I shall come back to that as well. I am sorry; I have managed to juggle the sheets and where I have put down that one I do not know.

Ms Abbott: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lynne Featherstone: Let me progress, because as hon. Members have seen, it is better to let me speak all in one go.

The information on tax has come to hand. Almost all large supplier contracts are awarded following an open and competitive tender process under standard HMG rules. DFID clearly states in the invitation to tender terms and the contract terms that the supplier is responsible for meeting its requirements for Government tax. If a company is found not to be meeting its tax requirements, it will be excluded from tendering for future DFID contracts. The amount of tax that an individual supplier pays will depend on its corporate structure. For example, one of our suppliers has advised that it is set up so that it pays tax in the countries where it operates. That is an argument that it has made, but as I said, if a company is found not to be meeting its tax requirements, it will be excluded from tendering for DFID contracts. Right now, we are looking at the way in which a number of corporations pay tax—not particularly in DFID but across the board. That is at the top of everyone's agenda because we all think that it is unfair and inappropriate.

The questions raised by the Opposition were mainly about value for money and whether the money going to suppliers where there is an administration fee is well spent or is creamed off. That was the inappropriate—I hope—language used by the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington. Our new Secretary of State has made it clear that this is a top priority and has further increased the focus on it in the Department. As well as lowering the threshold at which projects come to Ministers for approval from £40 million to £5 million, the Secretary of State is reviewing DFID's use of contractors to see how we can improve value for money. She has taken action, further to having brought down from £40 million to £5 million the threshold at which projects must have ministerial approval, by introducing new controls so that ministerial approval is now needed for all supplier contracts worth more than £1 million. She is writing to our top suppliers to reinforce to them the importance of ensuring value for money in their work for DFID. She will also meet them to tell them that the Department will look for even better value for money when deciding to award new contracts in future. Our suppliers will have to show that they are not in it only for the money; we want evidence of their commitment to poverty reduction and to the cause of development assistance.

The Secretary of State is also taking steps to introduce tougher monitoring of the performance of supplier contracts, to enable us to review value for money throughout contract delivery and take action accordingly. Instead of having wide gaps in the contract, we will be able to

bring up issues at any point and as often as necessary. We will look carefully at our future outsourcing strategy, including the choice of delivery channels and our make-or-buy decisions. The hon. Lady asked about what we do in-house as opposed to what we contract out.

Ms Abbott: The Minister has been generous in giving way. I want to remind her of a point I made: concerns about the efficacy of aid are not confined only to the TaxPayers Alliance in the UK. A *New York Times* bestseller by Dambisa Moyo, a Kenyan former Goldman Sachs trader, called “Why Aid is Not Working and How There is a Better Way for Africa”, points to £1 trillion of development-related aid over 50 years and little to show for it. I am pleased to hear about what the Secretary of State is planning, but if she does not move forward as the Minister indicates, there is a danger that scepticism here will be matched by scepticism abroad and the weakening of the international commitment to aid.

Lynne Featherstone: There is no weakening of our commitment to aid. It is important to send that message loud and clear. I do not agree that there is little to show for aid; the hon. Lady prays in aid a book. Even Opposition Members will agree that since the coalition came in, a vast amount has been done to ensure value for money, such as the multilateral and bilateral aid reports and the review work we are doing now.

The hon. Lady mentioned the report on schools programmes in Nigeria. In a sense, the report seems to demonstrate that we spent all this money and have very little to show for it—that is the link I am making—but it was a very limited inquiry. The team visited only 1% of the schools, most of which were in only one state, and they did not take into account the most recent evidence of the projects’ progress. We will obviously review the report’s recommendations and respond in due course.

On that point, I want to say something more generally about the millennium development goals, one of which was about getting children, particularly girls, into primary education. It was a simplistic goal, but it sure focused the world’s attention. Of course, enrolment has been successful, but development is more sophisticated and complicated than that, because it also requires completion, and it requires us to ensure that children learn while

they are in school. When the millennium development goals came in, we all said, “We will put a proportion of our money into that.” The programmes are now much more sophisticated and we look at development more broadly. We will obviously look at the report and at what happened in Nigeria.

The whole world has grown up in terms of aid; it is no longer about giving money in the traditional, old-fashioned way to starving poor people, but about working in countries to enable them to become sustainable and look after themselves. That is the point of development aid. To say that we have little to show for the work we are doing is an insult.

Ms Abbott: I did not say that, the writer said it.

Lynne Featherstone: Whoever said it, it is an insult to the work going on to change people’s lives, deliver on the ground and make future prosperity sustainable.

The private sector is part of the solution. A growing economy that can lift its people out of poverty, as well as the technical assistance that more developed countries can offer, is important.

Sir Tony Cunningham *rose—*

Lynne Featherstone: I will not give way, because I am coming to my peroration.

In conclusion, contractors can perform an important role supporting the delivery of programmes that make a difference on the ground. They can, and do, deliver impressive results, often in incredibly challenging environments, but we look to them to do more. If they read the debate, they will know that they need to think about how they bid, knowing that our focus will be even sharper and our demand for value for money even greater. Our demand that they put more emphasis on how they will encourage local people along their supply chain to bid for work for them and for us is important. I am adamant that we will strive to maximise value for money, results and impact in every possible way. I am acutely aware of how important that is to those whose lives we seek to improve, as well as to UK taxpayers.

3.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Thameslink and Crossrail Contracts

4 pm

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Howarth.

Bombardier is the last train-making company left in the United Kingdom. We have got to this state, frankly, if we go back into relatively recent history, because of the privatisation of the rail industry, which has led to an unco-ordinated approach to the procurement of trains and much short-termism. The train manufacturing industry in this country is left hanging in the balance.

As a result of the Government's decision last year to appoint Siemens as the preferred bidder for the Thameslink contract, 1,440 jobs at the Derby Bombardier factory were lost. Some 1,600 remain, and 12,000 people work in the supply chain in the rail industry, which accounts for some 900 companies. Bombardier is therefore still a significant player, even though it is the last remaining train maker in the UK.

I want to set out what I believe have been fundamental errors in the Thameslink procurement process. I also want to make the point—I hope the Minister agrees—that it is not too late to correct those errors. I hope, too, that he will give an assurance that the mistakes made in the Thameslink process will not be repeated in future contracts, particularly in the Crossrail contract that is due to come up in the next few years.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman not want to look forwards, rather than totally backwards, and be positive? Does he not agree that further contracts, such as for Crossrail, are coming up, and that we should be careful not to jeopardise that by ranting on too much about the past. We should look forwards for Bombardier and ensure that we do everything, on a cross-party basis, to get it the contract for Crossrail.

Chris Williamson: Of course, we need to look forward, and I shall come to that, but it is also important to look backwards for a while, because it is not too late for the Government to do the right thing. There are problems with and delays in the Thameslink contract, so it is appropriate to take that historical context into account.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate, which, as chairman of the all-party group on the Thameslink route, I particularly welcome. When he looks back, will he consider the previous Government, who designed the tendering process, and acknowledge the role that they played in this fiasco?

Chris Williamson: There is clearly a problem, and whoever is responsible is, in a sense, not really the point. I accept that there were clearly faults with the process designed by the previous Administration, but in taking account of the comment made by the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), it is important to look forward, while also acknowledging the impact of what we have seen over the past 18 months or so.

Time is short, so I will try to motor along. I have a lot to say, and I want to give the Minister an opportunity to respond to my points. I was about to make the point

that we were told 18 months ago that preferred bidder status for the Thameslink contract had been conferred on Siemens. Before the 2011 summer recess, I was told by the then Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), that the contract would reach financial close by the end of that year. She said that the Department could not countenance any further retendering of the process, because that would build in far too long a delay, which would impact on the infrastructure project. However, here we are, some 18 months later, and we do not seem to be that much closer to a final decision or the financial close on the award of the contract.

In answer to a parliamentary question that I tabled, the Minister of State, Department for Transport, said that the DFT is now looking

“to secure financial close early in the new year.”—[*Official Report*, 25 October 2012; Vol. 551, c. 1005W.]

That will be well over the 18 months and getting on for two years, so I am not sure that the arguments made in the first instance hold any water.

I have several questions that I hope the Minister will respond to if he gets the chance. Is he confident that the timetable will not slip yet again, because it has slipped time and again? Will he explain why the forecast date continues to slip, which is rather curious and which I do not understand? Will he tell the House whether he or the Department is aware of any problems with the proposed deal? Is the slippage caused by Siemens asking for more time, or are the delays caused by problems in his Department? Will he confirm that there will be no further slippage in the time scale? In which month in the new year will financial close eventually be reached? Will it be spring or earlier?

I want to go through some of the series of errors in the Thameslink tendering process, if I may. The contract is clearly a Government one, but the DFT has not managed it as though it were. Furthermore, the tender evaluation was discriminatory. The EU's Commissioner for the single market, Michel Barnier, has said that, as far as the Commission is concerned, the Thameslink contract is being undertaken by a contracting authority; in other words, it is a Government contract. The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, no less, has said that the consequence of the process “was bound to lead to the outcome it did.”

The fact is that the Department is bound by regulations. As this is a Government contract, regulation 23 of the Public Contracts Regulations 2006 is relevant. It stipulates:

“Subject to paragraph (2), a contracting authority shall treat as ineligible and shall not select an economic operator in accordance with these Regulations if the contracting authority has actual knowledge that the economic operator or its directors or any other person who has powers of representation, decision or control of the economic operator has been convicted of any of the following offences”—

including, among others—

“(a) conspiracy within the meaning of section 1 of the Criminal Law Act 1977... ; (b) corruption within the meaning of section 1 of the Public Bodies Corrupt Practices Act 1889... or... ; (c) the offence of bribery”,

as well as various other offences.

Paragraph (2), which is referred to, states:

“In any case where an economic operator or its directors or any other person who has powers of representation, decision or control has been convicted of an offence described in paragraph (1), a contracting authority may disregard the prohibition described there if it is satisfied”—

this is the key point—

“that there are overriding requirements in the general interest which justify doing so”.

I would be grateful if the Minister explained what “overriding requirements” led the Department to disregard the fact that Siemens has fallen foul of sub-paragraphs (b) and (c)—in other words, corruption and bribery. I believe it is common knowledge that it has been found guilty of those offences in America and in its home country, Germany.

Siemens AG is part of the Cross London Trains consortium, so the Department should have taken into account its obligations as set out in the regulations. Let me stress that I have nothing against Siemens per se, but I want to ensure that the law is applied appropriately and that the best interests of the United Kingdom, and of my home city and constituency of Derby, are served by the Government’s decision.

On the discriminatory nature of the matter, the process of evaluation is separated into four distinct component parts, or stages, which do not seem to be related to each other, and each part has to be satisfied in its own right. Once a bidding company has passed a stage, that stage is not referred back to, and it seems not to have any relevance to the next stage. I say that the process is discriminatory because, as experts agree, credit ratings are the key to the decision at the fourth, most important stage of the evaluation process; the quality of the product and the deliverability of the trains are utterly irrelevant. That process gave Siemens an unfair commercial advantage because it had a superior credit rating. The Department for Transport should urge the Minister, even at this late stage, to terminate the process and retender it on the basis that it was discriminatory and unfair.

Another reason that the Department should consider terminating the process and starting again is that a number of civil servants who were suspended over the west coast main line debacle were also involved in the Thameslink process—that was confirmed in responses from Ministers to written parliamentary questions that I tabled. That also flags up another significant question mark over the validity of the decision to award the contract to Siemens.

Will the Minister give an unequivocal guarantee that Crossrail is being taken forward correctly? Are the obligations placed on contracting authorities being observed by his Department and by Transport for London? Will he confirm that the Crossrail tender evaluation criteria will be non-discriminatory and will not give an unfair financial advantage to any bidder based on their credit ratings? Moreover, will he assure us that the socio-economic factors have been included in the Crossrail invitation to tender, and if they have, how have they been included? Will he give us some information in relation to the proposed eVoyager contract, which is also really important to the future of the Bombardier factory in Derby?

Will the Minister put in place an independent inquiry to consider the workings of the Department for Transport with regard to the procurement of trains? From what we have seen over the past 18 months or so, it seems pretty obvious that there has been a problem with the way the Department for Transport approached the process.

I have further questions for the Minister. What alternatives are being considered if Siemens is unable to reach financial close? In response to a written parliamentary

question, the Minister said that the Department was assessing other options in the event of it being unable to reach financial close with Siemens. What are those options?

Dr Offord: In the next few moments, I will give the hon. Gentleman an opportunity to catch his breath and focus on some of his comments. He has presented an eloquent case for his constituents, and I would not take that away from him. None the less, I hope he agrees that I present an equally valid case on behalf of my constituents, who want a speedy resolution to the Thameslink project. That project is vital to them as it runs through the constituency.

The hon. Gentleman started by saying that there were flaws in the process. So far, he has identified issues that he considers unfair; perhaps he is questioning their validity and clarity.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. An intervention should be just that, not a mini-speech. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is coming to the close of his intervention.

Dr Offord: Of course, Mr Howarth. My point is that the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) has not identified any flaws in the tendering process. Will he address that matter, before the Minister rises to speak, by describing those flaws?

Chris Williamson: I am sorry if the hon. Gentleman has not followed my contribution, because I outlined what I consider flaws in the process. First, this is a Government contract and it has not been treated as such; it has been treated differently. Secondly, it is discriminatory, because it gives an unfair advantage to one of the bidders for the contract. The Government are under an obligation to ensure that there is a level playing field for bidders for such a significant contract, especially when the unfair advantage is given to a foreign competitor against our own British-based train-making company. Those are the flaws. Regrettably, we do not have time to go into further detail. If we had a longer debate, perhaps we could do so. I hope that the Minister will deal with those specific points.

Let me return to the final few questions that I have for the Minister; I hope he will give them some attention. If the Department for Transport is unable to reach financial close with Siemens—there seems to be a large question mark over that—will Bombardier, as the reserve bidder, be automatically awarded the contract? Do alternatives that the Department is considering include allowing Siemens to build the trains and other organisations to provide the funding and finance? If Siemens fails to deliver on the Thameslink contract, will it be excluded from further bidding for the Crossrail contract? We deserve a response to that question, because there has clearly been a significant delay in the process. It would be inappropriate if Siemens were allowed to bid for another contract if it were unable to deliver on this one.

If Siemens is eventually awarded this contract, will the Minister give a commitment and assure us that we will not see a repeat of what happened under the Intercity Express Programme contract? In that case, the Bombardier consortium and the Hitachi-led consortium put in bids on one basis under the original tendering process. After preferred bidder status was conferred on the Hitachi consortium, there was substantial and significant

[Chris Williamson]

change to the design of the IEP contract trains. That seems unfair, because, as I understand it, the design is now very similar to the offer that could have been delivered by Bombardier in the first instance, although it was not allowed to put that alternative design forward at that point.

Time is short and the Minister has only 11 minutes left, although there are still quite a few questions that I would like to ask. I hope he can answer some of my questions, especially the one about considering putting in place an independent inquiry to look at the workings of the DfT in relation to the procurement of trains.

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Norman Baker): Thank you very much for calling me to speak, Mr Howarth. I will do my best in the 10 minutes or so available to try to answer as many points as I can.

First, I welcome this debate on Thameslink and Crossrail, two schemes that are of great importance to this country's rail industry and, more widely, to supporting growth and jobs. I know that the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) has been an active campaigner on behalf of Bombardier, which is natural, as it is situated in his constituency and city, and the company of course plays a key role in Derby's economy. I am pleased to respond to this Adjournment debate on a subject that I know is of great importance to him and his constituents. I am especially pleased to do so in the week after Southern announced that it intends to exercise an option for 40 new Electrostar carriages from Bombardier, which I am surprised he did not mention.

Let me start by saying that rail is a success story and this coalition Government is committed to continuing to invest in the success of rail. Since the 1990s, both the number of passenger miles and passenger journeys on rail have nearly doubled. In the same period, use of rail freight has expanded by more than 60%, and in the past decade we have seen significant increases in passenger satisfaction and train punctuality. However, this Government requires, and is driving, even more improvement. We are investing £18 billion in this spending review period alone on a programme of rail improvements as large in scale as anything seen since the 19th century.

In Derby, the Department for Transport is investing in transport improvements, including investing £4.9 million from the local sustainable transport fund; more than £2 million from the better bus area fund; more than £8 million in highway maintenance and pothole repairs; and more than £9 million as part of the integrated transport block. We have also provisionally approved a £4.4 million contribution to a replacement road-over-rail bridge over the Derby to Birmingham railway line.

Thameslink is an urgently needed programme that will provide additional capacity for key London commuter routes and relieve overcrowding on the London underground. It includes major infrastructure works at key London stations, including the complete modernisation of London Bridge station and the procurement of next-generation rolling stock. In time, it will include changes to franchise arrangements to support delivery of the service.

Thameslink is already making a difference to passengers. Farringdon and Blackfriars stations have been transformed, platforms along the route have been extended to support new 12-car services, and enabling works have begun on the reconstruction of London Bridge station and its approach tracks. I take this opportunity to commend the industry, and especially Network Rail, for the work that has been done to upgrade Blackfriars, which was unique in scale and difficulty. I saw that work at first hand and thought that they did a fantastic job.

As the hon. Gentleman highlighted, there have been delays in awarding the Thameslink rolling stock contract. The Thameslink train order is a significant investment and the detailed contract terms need to be right, so that we can meet the demanding customer and performance requirements of this next-generation rolling stock. The contract places much greater responsibility for the train's performance in service on the train manufacturer and maintainer than has been the case traditionally. That is the right thing to do, and given the size of this order, it takes time to get the detailed contract documentation completed. The Government is confident that it is very close to final agreement of these commercial arrangements, and we expect to be able to conclude the associated documentation by the end of this year.

As the hon. Gentleman stated, we recently revised our target date for achieving financial close to early in the new year. Of course, agreement on financing has to come after agreement on commercial arrangements, and we have to allow a proper period for the rating agency and banks to perform their due diligence. As he will appreciate, the lending environment remains challenging for all projects. Notwithstanding that background, Siemens remains confident that the funds can be secured for Thameslink.

Members will know that the Government has recently paused existing franchise procurements, including for the new Thameslink franchise, while reviews take place of the serious errors that were uncovered on the west coast main line franchise competition. The Government is wholly committed to learning the lessons from that episode, but Members will appreciate that I cannot pre-empt the findings of the independent inquiries looking into those matters.

Regarding train fleets, however, I am quite clear that the key features needed by the new Thameslink trains are those that support the demanding performance requirements needed to operate a high-frequency service through the central core between Farringdon and St Pancras of up to 24 trains per hour in either direction. Those are very different train performance requirements from those needed by trains on other routes operated by Southern. Hence, a different train fleet is required for Thameslink.

There has been some question whether there will be sufficient electric trains from the existing Thameslink programme to support all the announced electrification schemes; I think the hon. Gentleman has raised that issue in parliamentary questions. Let me be clear that the Government's electrification programme covers both regional and commuter services, alongside long-distance, high-speed services for passengers and freight. The existing Thameslink rolling stock will be cascaded to regional and commuter lines, the very uses that it was designed to be suitable for. Overall, there is sufficient cascaded stock available to meet the needs of the electrification

programme. We are working with our industry partners to ensure that that rolling stock is made available in time for the electrification of the routes.

Thameslink is also good news for jobs. The rolling stock contract will support the creation of an estimated 2,000 jobs in the UK, supporting manufacture of train components, construction of depots and subsequent maintenance of the new fleet of trains.

Chris Williamson: Will the Minister give way?

Norman Baker: I will give way shortly.

In addition, at the peak of construction activity, we expect an additional 3,000 people to be employed directly on the Thameslink infrastructure works as a whole, with as many people again employed in related jobs in the wider community. I am happy to give way now to the hon. Gentleman, but he asked me a lot of questions and left me only 10 minutes to respond.

Chris Williamson: I beg the Minister's pardon, but will he concede that the 2,000 jobs that he referred to a few moments ago would be created whoever won the contract, including Bombardier?

Norman Baker: Of course—I am absolutely happy to accept that. I welcome new jobs wherever they are created in this country. These are train-related jobs that help both the rail industry and the wider economy.

At this point, I will try to answer some of the questions that the hon. Gentleman put. Some were related to the past, and I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) that the hon. Gentleman's speech was largely about the past, rather than the future.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about Siemens and read out extracts from the legislation relating to the position that he thinks applies in this case. I should make it clear that for convictions to give rise to the requirement to exclude Siemens plc from the Thameslink rolling stock project, those individuals involved in the activities that resulted in convictions would need to be in a position of power, representation, decision or control of Siemens plc. The Department investigated the position at the pre-qualification stage and was satisfied that that was not the case. Consequently, we can reiterate that the Department does not consider there were grounds to exclude Siemens plc from the Thameslink rolling stock contract.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned Crossrail, of course, as he looked to the future. Before discussing Crossrail, I should finish talking about Thameslink by referring to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon in an intervention on the hon. Gentleman. My hon. Friend's point was that Thameslink was largely done and dusted by the time that this Administration came to power and, to use the phrase that I think my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence used at the time, when he was Secretary of State for Transport, all he did was "open the envelope". That is the consequence of that particular process.

Moving on to Crossrail, the £14.5 billion Crossrail project will create vital new transport infrastructure to support economic growth. The project will deliver a 74-mile railway; 13 miles of new tunnels under London; new, expanded or upgraded stations along the Crossrail route; and a new fleet of trains. When the project is complete, Crossrail services will run from Maidenhead and Heathrow in the west to Shenfield and Abbeywood in the east. For the millions of people who will use its services, Crossrail will deliver faster journey times and better connectivity, while reducing overcrowding on other services. Overall, it will provide a 10% uplift in London's rail transport capacity. Crossrail is not only great news for passengers, but good news for the economy, as it will support growth and the UK's long-term competitiveness. Crossrail will provide 14,000 jobs at the peak of construction and is predicted to facilitate employment growth of up to 30,000 jobs by 2026.

The Government, working with Transport for London as its co-sponsor, established Crossrail Ltd as a single-purpose delivery body for the Crossrail project. Crossrail Ltd is responsible for procuring the many contracts needed to deliver the project, the largest of those being the contract for an initial order of around 600 new carriages—the exact number is a matter for the bidders—and a new depot at Old Oak Common. The contract is expected to be worth in the region of £1 billion and is likely to include options to allow TfL to expand the fleet in future years to accommodate demand and respond to possible changes, such as High Speed 2. The procurement of Crossrail's rolling stock marks the beginning of Crossrail's transition from Europe's largest engineering project to an operational, world-class railway. These will be modern, high-capacity trains that replace many older, inner-suburban trains that run into Paddington and Liverpool Street.

Our priority is to deliver that new railway, which so many people are looking forward to, on schedule and to ensure that we do so as efficiently as possible, with value for money for the taxpayer and future fare payers always in mind. We are clear that we want to secure the right train at the right price to deliver the benefits of Crossrail to London and the south-east. The only way to achieve that is through a strong and fair procurement policy. Four bidders—Bombardier, CAF of Spain, Hitachi and Siemens—submitted first-round bids by the deadline of 29 October. I have no knowledge of what is in the bids, but I hope that Bombardier, along with the other bidders, has submitted a strong, competitive bid that meets the exacting requirements of Crossrail. I am sure that the hon. Member for Derby North would like us to follow proper EU procurement policy and rules.

Those first-round bids are being assessed by Crossrail Ltd. It expects to be in a position to shortlist bidders next spring, so as to move to the next stage of the competition. It is hoped that a preferred bidder will be announced later next year, with the project moving to financial close in 2014. The first train is expected to enter service between Liverpool Street and Shenfield—the first section of the Crossrail route that will be operated by TfL—in 2017. The full Crossrail service is expected to be fully operational in late 2019, with the central tunnel section opening in advance of that.

Welsh Language (Non-devolved Departments)

4.30 pm

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Howarth. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss Welsh language provision in non-devolved areas. Before we enter into the substance of the debate, it is worth taking a quick historical overview of the development of Welsh language policy and rights in Wales. After all, it could be argued that until 1967, few rights were afforded to the Welsh language, a situation that has been tremendously transformed subsequently.

The Welsh Language Act 1967 was welcomed. It conferred upon the Welsh language and Welsh speakers certain rights that did not previously exist. My father-in-law would still say that one of his claims to fame was that he was involved in the first ever Welsh Language Society protest at Pont Trefechan back in 1963. I emphasise that there have been significant changes.

Today, I want to concentrate on the Welsh Language Act 1993, which was a tremendous and significant step forward, and on the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011, which is moving the 1993 Act forward positively in many areas. However, I have some concerns that I want to articulate today, and I hope that the Minister can respond to and lay to rest some of my concerns.

The 1993 Act was a significant breakthrough for the status of the Welsh language in Wales. It was a cross-party effort, and there is no doubt that we owe a degree of gratitude to my predecessor in the Conwy constituency, Wyn Roberts, now Lord Roberts. He, with the support of the leaders and members of all political parties in Wales, ensured that that Act came into being with the support of the vast majority of the population of Wales. Far too often in the past, the language has been a divisive issue. A success of the 1993 Act was to introduce some rights for Welsh speakers without in any way creating a feeling that they were being imposed on non-Welsh speakers in Wales.

Another huge success of the 1993 Act was the creation of the Welsh Language Board. In a spirit of cross-party co-operation, it was initially chaired by Lord Elis-Thomas, a previous Member of Parliament for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy. There was a time when the board, working under the 1993 Act, moved the agenda forward quite significantly. The first concern about its future and possible changes to 1993 Act came in 2004, when a bonfire of the quangos was announced by the then Welsh Government. It was an ill-thought-through, back-of-the-envelope decision in relation to many public bodies in Wales, not least the Welsh Development Agency, the abolition of which many of us still believe was a huge mistake. Comments were made at the time that the Welsh Language Board would in due course be dissolved. That did not happen for a long time, because the legislation was far more complicated than had been envisaged. However, part of the "One Wales" agreement in 2007 was that there would be a new Welsh language Measure, which came into being in 2011.

My concern about the 2011 Measure relates not so much to the content, which I believe to be fairly reasonable and to be moving the agenda forward in reflecting the fact that we have an increasingly bilingual Wales. The number of young people in the valleys, Cardiff and

south Wales who take advantage of Welsh medium education has increased dramatically, and we should welcome that. The 2011 Measure looked at and tried to respond to those changes, but there were concerns, expressed at the time by some members of the Conservative party and by members of the Welsh Language Society, that some of the changes in that Measure had been rushed through and were possibly ill considered. Whether that is fair or not, my significant concern today relates to the impact of the 2011 Measure on the operation by non-devolved Departments of their Welsh language policies and working in partnership with the Welsh Language Board.

We are aware that the provisions of the 1993 Act do not apply to Crown bodies. It was based on a process of good will and co-operation. While not all non-devolved Departments co-operated and played the game, as it were, in the way that they should have, the vast majority did. Looking at the work of the Department for Work and Pensions and of the Treasury, there are examples of good effort and good will in trying to provide services in Welsh. They were neither perfect nor always to the satisfaction of many people in Wales who would have liked those services to be of a higher standard, but Welsh language schemes were in place in those Departments, and they were monitored for compliance by the Welsh Language Board. There was a relationship between the board and the non-devolved Departments, which seemed to create some accountability and acceptance that there was, first, a need to provide services through the medium of Welsh when they were demanded and desired and, secondly, an understanding that there would be a degree of compliance to ensure that the Welsh language schemes adopted were implemented.

I speak with some experience, because before I was elected, I was, on numerous occasions, responsible for Welsh language compliance visits on behalf of the Welsh Language Board, so I express an interest in the field. One of my funniest experiences happened when I conducted an overview of the services offered by the Post Office through the medium of Welsh. One of the things that we had to undertake was a mystery customer effort to see to what extent the Post Office offered services in Welsh. I turned up in a village not far from Monmouthshire where, as agreed in the strategy adopted for the compliance report, I asked for six first-class stamps in Welsh. The postmaster immediately turned round and said, "Aha, mystery customer." Obviously, they were quick to spot the fact that not many Welsh speakers would turn up in a post office in Monmouth.

It should also be noted that, before I was elected, I came down to London on more than one occasion to conduct a compliance report on Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, on the way in which the tax credit system was not succeeding in delivering Welsh language forms to people who were trying to adopt, and trying to work through the medium of Welsh when making claims. While there was non-compliance on that occasion, it reflected more on HMRC's computer system than on its willingness to try to make the system work. I therefore bring a degree of personal experience to the table.

We had a relationship with non-devolved areas and a system of compliance and working together. A relationship was being built and developed, and it ensured that there was understanding of the need for non-devolved Departments to deliver services in Welsh.

Mr Elfyn Llwyd (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I do not want to show my age, but I served on the Standing Committee that considered the 1993 Act. I confirm that Lord Roberts of Conwy played a huge part in getting that Bill through, and we need to thank him for that.

The hon. Member for Aberconwy is making a valid point. I found that, in the old days, Home Office documents, however large, were translated into Welsh. That is not the case now. If his point is that we need to get some better co-operation between our friends in Wales and the people here, I am fully with him.

Guto Bebb: That is the intention of this debate. It is to examine what sort of co-operation is now required and how that can be moved forward. My concern is the extent to which the Welsh Assembly, when it looks at how it can legislate, has concentrated on devolved areas, and possibly the baby was thrown out with the bath water in relation to non-devolved areas.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to associate myself with an issue that I have previously raised in the Chamber. We know that we had a pretty close escape with the ballot papers for police and crime commissioners. It is vital that the commitment to bilingualism is as great here in Westminster as it is in Cardiff. That is what my hon. Friend is asking for, and I fully support what he is doing.

Guto Bebb: I welcome my hon. Friend's intervention.

My specific concerns relate to the fact that I represent a constituency where about 40% of the population are first-language Welsh speakers. I would be the first to admit that not enough of those constituents who are first-language Welsh speakers demand services in Welsh, but there have been occasions since I was elected in May 2010 when I have communicated by letter with various Westminster Departments to highlight concerns about the non-provision of services through the medium of Welsh. In response, I again received examples of willingness to co-operate, but it is worrying that a Department stated in a letter quite recently that it is willing to co-operate through its Welsh language scheme and that it will consult the Welsh Language Board on how that relationship may be further developed. I wish that Department good luck, because the Welsh Language Board, as we well know, has been abolished.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Section 43 of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 is extremely important. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, were the Secretary of State for Wales to give a statement of intent to do so, there would be no barrier to ensuring better Welsh language services in Whitehall Departments? Will he also join me in calling on the Secretary of State to give his section 43 consent?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Lady jumps ahead of me, because I will mention section 43 later in my speech, but, yes, it is an important part of the legislation.

There are concerns, because some of the services offered to the people of Wales by non-devolved Departments are crucial: we all know how important the benefits system is; and we all know the pressures faced by constituents who have to go through the Atos

health care system, and for them to be able to do that in the language of their choice is important. The Department for Work and Pensions has made it categorically clear that anyone wishing to undertake such a review through the medium of Welsh can do so, but we need to ensure that we hold the Department not only to its good intentions but to its promises.

Some of the other services offered by Westminster Departments are also crucial for the recognition that the language has equal status. In that respect, I congratulate the Department for Transport, which has recently given the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency licensing contract to the Post Office. As I have said before, I have been involved in the compliance efforts of the Post Office, which is an organisation that works extremely hard to ensure a bilingual service. Having those DVLA forms available in both languages in post offices across my constituency and across the constituencies of other hon. Members is a major step forward.

Why do I raise the issue now? We are in a transitional period and are slowly moving from the Welsh language schemes that existed under the 1993 Act to the new system of standards. Obviously, for those standards to be imposed on non-devolved areas, co-operation is needed between the Secretary of State for Wales and the newly created Welsh Language Commissioner. I have concerns, because we need that co-operation to be strong, but it needs to work both ways. I am quite confident that there is good will, and that willingness to work exists in the Wales Office, but I want to ensure that that is put on record today.

As the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) stated, one of the key points is that the 2011 Measure categorically states that the Secretary of State can ensure that there is an agreement for services to be provided by Ministers of the Crown in Welsh, where that has been discussed and developed in a co-operative fashion. I would argue, therefore, that we need to ensure that that process is addressed and articulated in the open, because transparency is always a good thing if there is some concern that that is not being provided, or that there is a lack of understanding of the requirement. The key issue is the lack of understanding of what can and what should be expected of the non-devolved Departments. I have no doubt that co-operation will be forthcoming from the Wales Office. We have seen that the intention is to work with the Welsh Language Commissioner, and I am sure that the Minister will confirm that my understanding is correct, but I will wait for his comments.

It is also crucial to state that, in addition to co-operation and agreement from the Secretary of State for Wales, we need to address the Welsh Language Commissioner being a post and an organisation created by the Assembly. We need the credibility that the Welsh Language Board used to offer as a board established by an Act of Parliament. That credibility will be forthcoming if there is a positive and strong working relationship between the commissioner and the Secretary of State for Wales. The Secretary of State for Wales should not simply sign off an order and leave it at that; there should be an ongoing process of co-operation between the Welsh Language Commissioner and the Wales Office. I ask the Minister to comment on any developments and discussions on the way in which such co-operation might happen.

[Guto Bebb]

If we accept the argument that there is a need for the Wales Office to be involved in the way in which the Welsh Language Commissioner and its powers are implemented in relation to the Welsh language, and I think we do, we have to ask the key question of who will scrutinise that involvement. It is perfectly clear and correct that the Welsh Assembly will scrutinise the work of the Welsh Language Commissioner. That is what I expect to happen. The Welsh Language Commissioner is a body created by the Welsh Assembly, so it should be accountable to the Welsh Assembly. If the intentions behind the 2011 Measure are to be realised by co-operation and co-working between the Wales Office and the Welsh Language Commissioner, there is a question about who will scrutinise that work.

It is important that all Departments are held to account. We often hear the claim that the Wales Office has much less to do now than it did previously. This is one area where the Wales Office should be leading the charge, but there is a need for scrutiny. Have there been any discussions with, for example, my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) on the possibility of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs taking an interest in scrutinising potential co-operation between the Welsh Language Commissioner and the Wales Office? There should be accountability in the performance of any duties that affect the public. We are all clear that accountability for devolved areas will be undertaken by the Welsh Assembly, but there is a role for the Welsh Affairs Committee in monitoring the work undertaken by the Wales Office in partnership with the Welsh Language Commissioner, if that is the way forward.

I have raised my concerns because I see a disconnect between the aims of the 2011 Measure and what is happening on the ground. I do not claim that the 1993 Act was perfect, but I am concerned that the way in which it had bedded in and reached the point where it was accepted by most of the non-devolved Departments may be lost. If we lose that, it would be to the detriment of Welsh speakers in all parts of Wales, not least in my constituency.

I believe that the structures can be created in partnership between the Wales Office and the new Welsh Language Commissioner, but that has to be open and transparent, and subject to accountability through scrutiny by elected Members here in Westminster. I can see no better way of doing that than through the offices of the Welsh Affairs Committee.

I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stephen Crabb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

It is also a pleasure to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) defend the Welsh language, as he does like no one else. He has a fantastic reputation as a defender of the Welsh language, and he comes from a constituency that has an illustrious history of producing defenders of the Welsh language. I recall his maiden speech, shortly after he was elected in 2010, in which he paid tribute to his constituency. He mentioned Bishop William Morgan, who, of course, translated the

Bible into Welsh in the 16th century. He paid tribute then, as he and other hon. Members have today, to Lord Roberts, who comes from his constituency, for his fantastic work in defending the Welsh language.

This afternoon is a good opportunity to update hon. Members on the work of the Wales Office across non-devolved areas to deliver services in the Welsh language. My hon. Friend spoke of the significant breakthrough that was the Welsh Language Act 1993. In fact, the Act was a milestone in the modern history of the Welsh language, and of course it established the Welsh Language Board to promote the language and gave Welsh speakers the right to speak Welsh in court proceedings.

The Act also obliged public sector organisations that provide services to the public in Wales to treat Welsh and English on an equal basis, and to implement Welsh language schemes for carrying out some or all of their business in the Welsh language. Importantly, the Act enabled the Secretary of State for Wales to choose whether to adopt a Welsh language scheme for any Crown body, which, of course, includes Departments of the UK Government. Most, but not all, Government Departments introduced Welsh language schemes in respect of their services in Wales, and in so doing agreed to be subject to the same compliance requirements as other public bodies subject to the Act.

Mr Llwyd: Just as a matter of information, there has been a right to use Welsh in courts in Wales since the 16th century.

Stephen Crabb: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that update. I bow to his superior knowledge of the history of Welsh language use.

In recent years, there have been a number of developments in the legal framework to support the Welsh language, as hon. Members have mentioned. The Welsh language is one of the 20 areas devolved to Wales, and the Welsh Assembly is responsible for the legislative framework relating to the language. The Assembly passed the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 under powers conferred on it in 2009 through the now infamous, tortuous and bureaucratic legislative competence order process put in place by the last Labour Government. The 2011 Measure established the independent Welsh Language Commissioner to promote the language, replacing the Welsh Language Board, and provides for the introduction of duties whereby organisations comply with statutory standards relating to the Welsh language in delivering services to the public in Wales.

The Welsh Government's thinking in moving from Welsh language schemes, which are specific and bespoke to each organisation, to generic Welsh language standards has been to establish a more consistent approach to Welsh language service provision. Welsh language standards will replace Welsh language schemes over time, so that Welsh speakers will be clearer about the Welsh language services they should expect to receive. Organisations subject to the Measure will understand the levels of service in the Welsh language they are expected to provide, and the regulatory framework applied by the Welsh Language Commissioner will be simpler than at present.

The Welsh Language Commissioner consulted on proposed standards this summer, and I understand will shortly make recommendations to Welsh Ministers on

what those final standards should be. The standards decided by the Welsh Ministers will be subject to final approval by the Assembly.

On the role of the Wales Office, we acknowledge from the outset that there is certainly room for improvement in the quality of Departments' Welsh language services. As I have said, not all Departments have developed Welsh language schemes, and there have been instances in which we have been open to criticism. The Welsh Language Commissioner is, of course, a position created by the Welsh Assembly, so my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy is right to note the limitations of the post in respect of non-devolved areas.

It is important that sufficient support should be given to the Welsh language in non-devolved as well as devolved areas, and I assure my hon. Friend that the Wales Office is ready to provide the leadership and support to do so within Government. Since his appointment, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has underlined the role of the Wales Office as the lead Department on Welsh language issues. Indeed, he made clear at Welsh questions last month that we in the Wales Office are fully committed to the Welsh language in non-devolved areas as they apply to Wales. We want to ensure that Departments deliver the consistently good-quality Welsh language services that Welsh language speakers need, where there is demonstrable demand for them.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the fact that Welsh language standards would apply to Crown bodies only with the consent of the Secretary of State, but I do not necessarily share his pessimism and concerns that protection for Welsh language provision in non-devolved areas will be reduced as a result. On the contrary, the Wales Office intends to undertake a review of Departments' Welsh language services to examine their capacity to meet Welsh language standards. We are working closely with the Welsh Language Commissioner to prepare for the review and hope to secure a secondee from the Commissioner to support the work.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I applaud the action that the Government are taking. In the partnership that the Secretary of State and the Wales Office are seeking to develop with the Welsh Language Commissioner, can I ask that consideration be given to the style and mode of translation? Efforts to reduce costs sometimes lead different elements of different documents to be translated by different people in different parts of the country. That approach does not lend itself to an easy-flowing translation style, which can increase some people's reluctance to use the language.

Stephen Crabb: That is an excellent point. It is exactly the kind of point worth making when we begin the review, hopefully after the arrangements are in place for the secondee from the Welsh Language Commissioner's office.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy said that he wanted positive and strong co-operation. I absolutely assure him that that is what we intend. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has a close dialogue with the Welsh Language Commissioner on matters relating to the Welsh language in general and Government services delivered in the Welsh language in particular. Indeed, the Wales Office has always maintained a good working relationship with the commissioner and her predecessor body, the Welsh Language Board. That close relationship continues as we plan the review. We can only set about the task once we know for sure what the Welsh language standards will be, but we hope to be in a position to do so as soon as the final standards are confirmed.

In conclusion, I assure hon. Members from all parties that the Government are fully committed to the Welsh language, that the Wales Office is taking the lead in ensuring adequate Welsh language provision in Government services in non-devolved areas where needed and that we will consider carefully UK Departments' capacity to meet the new Welsh language standards.

Guto Bebb: I am pleased with the response that I have heard. My concerns were not that the Wales Office was not positive about the language; they had more to do with the fact that some of the provisions of the Welsh Language Act 1993 might have been lost as a result of the change to the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. Before the Minister finishes his response, will he comment on the possibility of scrutiny by the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs?

Stephen Crabb: It is the duty of all Select Committees to scrutinise and monitor the activities of relevant Departments, and the Welsh Affairs Committee has the role of monitoring everything that we do in the Wales Office. I do not think that it is appropriate for me or my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to recommend or suggest to the Chairman of the Welsh Affairs Committee subjects that the Committee should investigate; that is entirely a matter for the Committee itself. However, we would naturally expect and hope that some of that scrutiny work will be done by the Committee.

My hon. Friend said that he wanted the Wales Office to lead the charge. I leave him and other hon. Members here with the assurance that we will indeed lead the charge in defending and promoting the Welsh language across non-devolved departmental areas.

Question put and agreed to.

4.57 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Ministerial Statements

Tuesday 20 November 2012

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Serious Fraud Office

The Attorney-General (Mr Dominic Grieve): I am today publishing a report carried out by Her Majesty's chief inspector of the Crown Prosecution Service into the quality of case management at the Serious Fraud Office (SFO).

Tackling economic crime and complex fraud must be a priority and I wanted to ensure from the outset that the work of the SFO should be subject to independent inspection and that processes and practices are continually improved. I am grateful to the former director, Richard Alderman, for inviting the inspectorate into the department and for the current director, David Green CB QC, for taking the majority of the review work forward.

The report identifies a number of areas for improvement, and makes some very useful recommendations as to how casework can be handled more effectively to avoid problems that have been encountered in the past.

I am pleased that the director has accepted all of the recommendations and that the inspectorate will be returning to assess progress on implementing changes in early 2014.

However, I am also encouraged that the inspection team found that the SFO does many things well and that the direction in which the SFO is now headed is the right one. I agree with the chief inspector's conclusions that with the new director's focus on skills, quality assurance and mending stakeholder relations,

"the ground has been laid for the SFO to improve significantly the quality of its casework in the next two years."

A copy of the report has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and can also be found on the HMCPSI website at: <http://www.hmcp.si.gov.uk>.

TREASURY

ECOFIN (Budget)

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Clark): The Economic and Financial Affairs Council—Budget, was reconvened in Brussels on 13 November, following the suspension of talks on 9 November.

In the Council's Session, Member states were asked to agree to fund Draft Amending Budget 5, an application to the EU solidarity fund to provide €670 million in post-earthquake assistance to Italy, with fresh payments from member states. For the UK, I made clear that the bill should not be met by increasing contributions from

member states, but by finding redeployments in the budget. However, the Draft Amending Budget 5 was formally approved with a qualified majority, despite the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands voting against.

At the Conciliation Committee, the European Parliament refused to enter into further negotiations with the Council on Draft Amending Budget 6 or the 2013 budget. The European Parliament walked away from the negotiation arguing that the Council had not made enough progress on Draft Amending Budget 6.

The 21-day conciliation period for agreeing the budget has now expired and the scope for negotiations on the basis of the current Commission proposal on the 2013 Budget has ended. The next step is for the Commission to come forward with a new proposal for the 2013 annual budget.

In the Council, the UK has made it very clear that the Commission and the European Parliament should not be asking taxpayers for extra funds when spending in member states is being reduced. We will continue to work with like-minded countries to press for budget discipline and fairness for taxpayers in the UK and Europe.

Financial Restrictions (Iran) Order

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Clark): My noble Friend the Commercial Secretary to the Treasury (Lord Sassoon) has today made the following written ministerial statement.

The Government have today laid before Parliament an order under the Counter-Terrorism Act 2008 containing a direction requiring UK credit and financial institutions to cease all business with banks incorporated in Iran and their branches and subsidiaries, wherever located, including the Central Bank of Iran.

The direction is in the same terms as that given by the Treasury on 21 November 2011, which ceases to have effect after one year. UK credit and financial institutions continue to be prohibited from entering into transactions or business relationships with banks incorporated in Iran and their branches and subsidiaries unless they are licensed to do so by the Treasury.

The Treasury is satisfied, as required by the Act, that activity in Iran that facilitates the development or production of nuclear weapons poses a significant risk to the national interests of the United Kingdom.

Reports by the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (the UN body charged with monitoring Iran's activities and ensuring that no nuclear material is being diverted to non-civilian applications) highlight the reasons for the Government's serious and ongoing concerns about Iran's nuclear activities.

The IAEA report of 30 August 2012 sets out the agency's concerns about,

"the possible existence in Iran of undisclosed nuclear related activities involving military related organisations, including activities related to the development of a nuclear payload for a missile."

In particular, the information available to the agency indicates that Iran has carried out activities that are relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device. The Government view these developments with the utmost concern.

The case for action is underlined by the recent calls from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for countries to apply effective counter-measures to protect their financial sectors from money laundering and financing of terrorism risks emanating from Iran. The FATF (the global standard-setting body for anti-money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism) reaffirmed these calls on 19 October 2012 and stated that it remained,

“particularly and exceptionally concerned about Iran’s failure to address the risk of terrorist financing and the serious threat this poses to the integrity of the international financial system.”

In light of these risks to the UK’s national interests, I consider it a proportionate response to require the UK financial sector to cease all business relationships and transactions with Iranian banks and their branches and subsidiaries, including the Central Bank of Iran.

Iranian banks play a crucial role in providing financial services to individuals and entities within Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programmes as companies carrying out proliferation activities will typically require banking services. Any Iranian bank is exposed to the risk of being used by proliferators in Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. Experience under existing UN and EU financial sanctions against Iran demonstrates that targeting individual Iranian banks is not sufficient. Once one bank is targeted, a new one can step into its place.

As they relate to an important global financial centre, UK restrictions have an impact on the options available to Iranian banks. This will continue to make it difficult for Iranian banks to utilise the international financial system in support of proliferation-sensitive activities. It will protect the UK financial sector from the risk of unwittingly being used to facilitate activities which support Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. UK action of this nature signals to Iran and the international community that we consider this risk to be significant.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Private Security Industry Regulation (Consultation)

The Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice (Damian Green): My hon. Friend the Minister of State for criminal information, Lord Taylor of Holbeach, has today made the following written ministerial statement:

I am today launching a consultation inviting views on the Government’s preferred option for reforming how the private security industry is regulated—a transition to a business regulation regime.

The current arrangements for the regulation of the private security industry in the United Kingdom are set out in the Private Security Industry Act 2001. Responsibility for delivering regulation lies with the Security Industry Authority (SIA), a

non-departmental public body accountable to the Home Secretary. Following the public bodies review in 2010, the Government concluded that the SIA’s functions should be reformed. The consultation provides a detailed proposal for a new regulatory regime for the private security industry.

We would welcome a wide response to the consultation to help ensure that we have identified all the relevant issues, so that the proposed reforms are implemented in an effective and efficient way. We particularly seek the views of those across the UK who work within the industry, those who buy, supply and rely on the provision of private security, as well as law enforcement partners.

A copy of the consultation document has been placed in the House Library and is available on the Home Office website at:

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/private-security-regulation/>.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Work Capability Assessment

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Mr Mark Hoban): I am pleased to announce that today Professor Malcolm Harrington’s third independent review of the work capability assessment (WCA) will be published. This is the third of five independent reviews as required by the Welfare Reform Act 2007.

As part of the Government’s ambitious welfare reform programme, we are keen to ensure the WCA is as fair and accurate as possible. Those who are assessed by the WCA and found fit for work or with the potential to return to work will be given support to help them do so; those who are unable to work will continue to receive full support.

With this in mind, Professor Harrington has made a further set of recommendations to enhance the experience of those that undertake the WCA.

Professor Harrington made 48 recommendations across his first and second independent reviews and the Government have accepted all of them. In his third year review, Professor Harrington has made a further six recommendations. The Government’s response to Professor Harrington’s review will also be published later today, and we have accepted or accepted in principle all of his recommendations this year.

We welcome Professor Harrington’s assessment that the WCA has improved further over the last year. However, we also recognise that there is more to do and we are committed to improving the system.

This is Professor Harrington’s third and final independent review of the WCA. I would like to thank him for all the work he has done to improve the assessment. Professor Harrington’s successor will be appointed shortly.

Petition

Tuesday 20 November 2012

OBSERVATIONS

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Educational Provision

The Petition of teachers and pupils of St. Patricks and St. Brigid's Primary School, Ballymena Primary School and Moorfields Primary School in the constituency of North Antrim,

Declares that the Petitioners believe that the promise made in 2000 to get every child into school by 2015 should be fulfilled; notes that with just three years left before the deadline, a surge of new energy is needed to give 67 million children the chance of an education; further notes that at the start of the race over 110 million children were missing out on school and although by 2008 this had dropped to 75 million, in 2012 the race has stalled; further notes that the number of children out of school has stayed at 67 million for two years; and that this number has fallen by 50 million over the last 10 years, but if we continue at the current rate of progress 48 million children will still be out of school by 2015; and notes that from those currently missing out on an education, one third of the children have a disability, 60% are girls and half of the world's "out of school children" live in communities where the language used in schools is different from that used at home.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Prime Minister and the UK Government to raise educational provision with other world leaders at forthcoming international meetings and to make suggestions for further action before time runs out on the promise made in 2000 to get every child into school by 2015.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Ian Paisley, *Official Report*, 17 September 2012; Vol. 550, c. 752.]

[P001119]

Observations from the Secretary of State for International Development, received 19 November 2012:

Although significant progress has been made on the education Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) since 1999, it is a tragedy that 61 million children around the world are still out of school. Investing in education is vital, as education provides children with the best route out of poverty, giving them the power to improve their own lives and the lives of others in their community. This is particularly true for girls.

The UK Government are committed to helping meet the MDGs for education. In 2010 the UK pledged to support at least 9 million children in primary school, over half of whom will be girls, and two million children in secondary school, by 2015. We made this pledge in our document, "UK Aid: Changing Lives, Delivering Results", which can be found on the DFID website at: www.dfid.gov.uk/aidreviews. Improving the quality of learning is crucial and all our programmes are expected to measure learning, in particular improvements in reading fluency in the early years.

We are playing our part in helping to achieve the MDGs of universal primary education and gender equality in education for all children. The Department for International Development's 2012 Annual Report shows that UK is currently supporting 5.3 million children in primary school (2.5 million girls) and 600,000 children in secondary school of whom 260,000 are in lower secondary. The quality of education remains very low in many countries, we are therefore prioritising quality as well as access to education in all our programmes, and committing to measuring reading fluency in the early years. We have helped to train 90,000 teachers to improve the quality of education and assist children's learning.

The UK Government are working hard to deliver a better future for every child but more needs to be done and this is a shared responsibility. We are working with others in many of the countries furthest from reaching the goal of universal primary education. In many of these poor countries, people with disabilities are among the very poorest and many are the hardest to reach children. In order to ensure that all children have equal access to education in the future it is vital that by 2015, the international community keeps its promise to achieve the internationally agreed target to support all children, boys and girls alike, to complete primary education.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 20 November 2012

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Affordable Housing

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what steps he is taking to encourage the building of affordable housing. [128213]

Mr Prisk: Through the Homes and Communities Agency's Affordable Homes Programme we expect to provide up to 170,000 new affordable homes by 2014-15 with investment of nearly £4.5 billion. The total investment including funding from providers is some £19.5 billion. Nearly 55,000 affordable homes have been delivered against our ambition of 170,000 over the four years 2011-15. This represents some 32% of the overall target.

In September we also announced a package to increase private investment in the sector with the support of debt guarantees of up to £10 billion for the delivery of both new market rented housing and affordable housing. We will also invest another £300 million to supply new affordable homes and bring empty homes back into use.

Architects Registration Board

Neil Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what assessment he has made of the Architects Registration Board as established by the Architects Act 1997; and if he will make a statement. [128997]

Mr Foster: The Architects Registration Board was reviewed as part of the Cross Government Arms Length Body Review in 2010. Like all arm's length bodies, Architects Registration Board is subject to the triennial review process.

Council Housing

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many of the people who live in council housing have a combined household income over £100,000 per annum. [128329]

Mr Prisk: We set out an estimate of the number of social tenants earning over £100,000 per annum in our recent "Pay to Stay" consultation, available at:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/2160581.pdf>

That estimate was for up to 6,000 households.

The estimate was based on the incomes of the household reference person and partner, and used data from the Family Resources Survey 2008-09, and the English Housing Survey 2008-09 and 2009-10.

Tim Farron: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what estimate his Department has made of the number of former local authority homes that are now available for private rent. [128557]

Mr Prisk: This information is not available centrally.

Fire Services

Richard Harrington: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how his Department assesses the effect of reductions in funding on fire and rescue services. [128590]

Brandon Lewis: It is for each fire and rescue authority to determine the operational activities of its fire and rescue service through its integrated risk management plan, which is subject to consultation with the local community. Fire and rescue authorities should be making sensible savings without impacting on the quality or breadth of services offered to their communities.

Housing

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what steps he is taking to increase the quality of housing stock. [128226]

Mr Prisk: Over the current spending review the Government has allocated £1.6 billion in Decent Homes funding to help refurbish council homes.

We are providing incentives for landlords to improve the energy efficiency of their properties. From next year, the Green Deal will enable all consumers to install energy efficiency measures at no upfront cost. Householders (whether owners or tenants) will repay the cost of the measures through their energy bill savings.

As we made clear in the housing strategy, published last November, the Government is committed to improving the quality of new homes. The National Planning Policy Framework, published in March, also emphasises the importance of well-designed new homes and neighbourhoods and of working with communities early in the development process to achieve that.

In addition, the Building Regulations already set national minimum standards to ensure our buildings do not have an adverse impact on the health, safety and welfare of the people who live and work in them. They also address wider sustainability issues, not least in setting minimum energy and water efficiency standards in new homes. The Government committed earlier in the year to further improvements in those energy efficiency standards.

Where affordable housing is funded by the Homes and Community Agency, new affordable homes are required to be built to Code Level 3 of the Code for Sustainable Homes. The Code for Sustainable Homes is the national standard for the sustainable design and construction of new homes.

Housing: Construction

Mr Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley of 22 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 627W, on housing: construction, what estimate he has made of the number of dwellings with planning permission where development had yet to start on 30 June (a) 2011, (b) 2010, (c) 2009 and (d) 2005; what the total estimated value was; and if he will make a statement.

[128750]

Nick Boles [*holding answer 19 November 2012*]: The number of large residential sites (those with more than 10 dwellings) and associated units with detailed planning consent that had not started on site is estimated as follows:

<i>As at June each year</i>	<i>Sites</i>	<i>Number Units</i>
2010	3,657	240,882
2011	4,200	238,012
2012	4,155	225,797

This information is based on Glenigan data provided to the Homes and Communities Agency. The data provided do not include information relating to the total estimated value, and coverage is available only from 2010.

We are undertaking a series of initiatives to help kick-start development on stalled sites, including the £570 million Get Britain Building fund and our reforms to unlock economically unrealistic section 106 agreements.

These are part of our broader policies to support house building as outlined in the written ministerial statement of 6 September 2012, *Official Report*, columns 29-34WS, and November 2011's Housing Strategy.

Housing: Sustainable Development

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (1) what recent discussions he has had with his European counterparts on sustainable housing;

[128223]

(2) whether he has had discussions with his European counterparts on measures to increase affordable housing.

[128227]

Mr Prisk: The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr Pickles), and his ministerial team routinely discuss a range of issues with European counterparts.

Internet

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what the average number of hits is that his Department's website receives per day.

[128220]

Brandon Lewis: In the period November 2011 to October 2012 the Department for Communities and Local Government website:

www.gov.uk/dclg

received an average of 54,489 page views per day. The average number of unique visitors per day was 14,175.

Page views

Highest number of page views: 134,960 (Monday 21 November 2011).

Lowest number of page views: 447 (Tuesday 27 December 2011).

Unique visitors

Highest number of unique visitors: 37,250 (Monday 12 March 2012).

Lowest number of unique visitors: 156 (Tuesday 27 December 2011).

From 15 November the Department's content was published on the Inside Government section of GOV.UK and the DCLG website archived.

Mortgages: Government Assistance

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (1) what support his Department offers to young people seeking their first mortgage;

[128214]

(2) what steps he is taking to enable young people to step onto the housing ladder.

[128218]

Mr Prisk: This Government is committed to supporting buyers get on to, and move up, the housing ladder. High deposit requirements are a barrier for people who want to own a home.

The FirstBuy equity loan scheme will help up to 27,000 aspiring home owners in England by March 2014 with joint investment from Government and house builders of over £900 million. House builders have found significant interest from first time buyers, reporting over 8,500 reservations by eligible applicants. Official statistics published by the Homes and Communities Agency in November show that there were 6,780 sales in the first 13 months of the scheme.

In March 2012, we launched the NewBuy Guarantee scheme, which enables first time buyers and others to purchase a new build property with only a 5% deposit. On 7 November the Home Builders Federation estimated that 2,000 reservations have been made in the scheme. Our reinvigorated Right to Buy programme with an enhanced discount of up to £75,000 also provides support to first time buyers.

In addition, shared ownership (part buy/ part rent) units will make up 20% of the Government's Affordable Homes Programme, which will deliver 170,000 homes by 2015.

We are also committed to a major increase in the supply of new homes. On 6 September 2012, we announced a range of housing and planning measures, which supports up to 70,000 new homes across a range of tenures.

Private Rented Housing

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government if he will take steps to encourage people who can afford it to rent privately.

[128224]

Mr Prisk: We are keen to support and champion home ownership and are doing so through the reinvigorated Right to Buy and the FirstBuy and NewBuy schemes for new build housing.

We are also keen to support those who prefer to rent, which is why we are taking action to expand the choice of private rented housing on offer. In particular, we have recently set out our plans to increase the supply of private rented housing through a £200 million equity fund and up to £10 billion in debt guarantees.

Temporary Accommodation: Greater London

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many families were housed in temporary accommodation in each London borough in (a) 2009, (b) 2010, (c) 2011 and (d) 2012 to date; and whether the location of that accommodation was (i) in that borough, (ii) in another London borough and (C) outside London. [129021]

Mr Prisk: A table has been placed in the Library of the House, which shows the number of homeless households with dependant children and/or pregnant woman with no other dependants from each London borough and the City of London placed in temporary accommodation at 30 June in (a) 2009, (b) 2010, (c) 2011 and (d) 2012.

Across London as a whole, the number of statutory homeless households in temporary accommodation is lower than under the last Administration, with 37,190 households in Q2 2012, compared with 45,740 at the same point in 2009, 53,870 in 2008, 59,130 in 2007, 62,020 in 2006 and 62,640 in 2005.

The Department does not collect information, on the location of such families. Although it collects figures for the total numbers of households placed in temporary accommodation within another borough, separate figures are not collected for the number of families in such circumstances.

Statistical releases on Statutory Homelessness are available both in the Library of the House and via the DCLG website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-communities-and-local-government/series/homelessness-statistics#publications>

From 9 November, local authorities have had new powers under the Localism Act to end the main homelessness duty by arranging an offer of suitable accommodation in the private rented sector, without requiring the applicant's agreement. This will mean shorter waiting times for homeless households and less time spent in expensive temporary accommodation.

JUSTICE

Alternatives to Prison

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many women were sentenced to a community order or a suspended sentence with a structured supervision for women requirement in the last year; and how many such women have been found to be in breach of that requirement. [128344]

Jeremy Wright: The tables show the number of female offenders starting community orders and suspended sentence orders with a specific 'supervision' requirement attached between July 2011 and June 2012 (the latest date for which this data has been published).

From the data held centrally, it is not possible to identify separately all those offenders who breached

supervision, but the proportions of court order terminations shown in the table for 'failure to comply with requirements' and 'conviction of an offence' will include those offenders who breached their orders and eventually had them terminated for these reasons.

Female offenders starting probation supervision between July 2011 and June 2012 with a specific supervision requirement attached to the order, England and Wales

	Number
Community order	9,921
Suspended sentence order	4,529

Court orders given to females with a specific supervision requirement attached which terminated for negative reasons between July 2011 and June 2012, England and Wales

Reason for termination	Percentage/Number	
	Community order	Suspended sentence order
Failure to comply with requirements (percentage)	12	10
Conviction of an offence (percentage)	10	13
Total number of terminations	10,773	4,428

These figures have been drawn from administrative IT systems which, as with any large scale recording system, are subject to possible errors with data entry and processing.

Bill of Rights Commission

Mr Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what recent assessment he has made of the work of the Commission on a Bill of Rights. [128862]

Damian Green: In line with its terms of reference, the Commission on a Bill of Rights is expected to report by the end of 2012. Recent work includes publication of its second consultation in 11 July 2012; this closed on 30 September 2012 and the responses will feed in to the final report.

Burglary

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what proportion of (a) men and (b) women were found guilty of burglary in the last year for which figures are available; and what proportion of such people were sent to prison. [127709]

Jeremy Wright: The conviction ratio for burglary offences by gender in England and Wales in 2011 can be viewed in Table 1.

The conviction ratio is calculated based on findings of guilty at all courts as a proportion of all proceedings at magistrates courts in a given year for selected offences.

Sentencing is entirely a matter for the courts, and they will take account of all the circumstances of the offence and the offender in determining the appropriate sentence in each case.

The custody rate for burglary offences by gender in England and Wales in 2011 can be viewed in Table 2.

The custody rate is calculated based on persons receiving a custodial sentence as a proportion of all persons sentenced at all courts in a given year for selected offences.

Table 1: Conviction ratio and custody rate for burglary offences by gender, England and Wales, 2011^{1, 2}

Outcome	Percentage	
	Males	Females
Conviction ratio ³	76.9	68.4

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ The conviction ratio is calculated based on findings of guilty at all courts as a proportion of all proceedings at magistrates courts in a given year for selected offences.

Source:

Ministry of Justice, Justice Statistics Analytical Services.

Table 2: Proportion of offenders sentenced who receive custody and further sentence outcomes for burglary offences by gender, England and Wales, 2011^{1, 2}

Outcome	Percentage	
	Males	Females
Custody ³	48.9	35.8
Community sentence	34.5	43.4
Suspended sentence	10.9	14.8
Fine	1.6	0.8
Other ⁴	4.2	5.3

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ The custody rate is calculated based on persons receiving a custodial sentence as a proportion of all persons sentenced at all courts in a given year for selected offences.

⁴ 'Other' includes absolute and conditional discharge, one day in police cells; disqualification order; restraining order; confiscation order; travel restriction order; disqualification from driving; recommendation for deportation; and other miscellaneous disposals.

Source:

Ministry of Justice, Justice Statistics Analytical Services.

Drugs: Sentencing

Nick de Bois: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice (1) how many individuals convicted of the unlawful importation of (a) Class A, (b) Class B and (c) Class C drugs received (i) an absolute discharge, (ii) a conditional discharge, (iii) a fine, (iv) a community rehabilitation order, (v) a supervision order, (vi) an attendance centre order, (vii) a curfew order, (viii) a

reparation order, (ix) a community order, (x) a youth rehabilitation order, (xi) a suspended sentence and (xii) immediate custody in each of the last five years; [125577]

(2) how many individuals convicted of the unlawful exportation of (a) Class A, (b) Class B and (c) Class C drugs received (i) an absolute discharge, (ii) a conditional discharge, (iii) a fine, (iv) a community rehabilitation order, (v) a supervision order, (vi) an attendance centre order, (vii) a curfew order, (viii) a reparation order, (ix) a community order, (x) a youth rehabilitation order, (xi) a suspended sentence and (xii) immediate custody in each of the last five years; [125578]

(3) how many individuals have been convicted for dealing drugs covered by a temporary class drug order since the inception of that order; [125579]

(4) how many individuals convicted of the possession of controlled (a) Class A, (b) Class B and (c) Class C drugs with intent to supply received (i) an absolute discharge, (ii) a conditional discharge, (iii) a fine, (iv) a community rehabilitation order, (v) a supervision order, (vi) an attendance centre order, (vii) a curfew order, (viii) a reparation order, (ix) a community order, (x) a youth rehabilitation order, (xi) a suspended sentence and (xii) immediate custody in each of the last five years; [125581]

(5) how many individuals convicted of the possession of controlled (a) Class A, (b) Class B and (c) Class C drugs received (i) an absolute discharge, (ii) a conditional discharge, (iii) a fine, (iv) a community rehabilitation order, (v) a supervision order, (vi) an attendance centre order, (vii) a curfew order, (viii) a reparation order, (ix) a community order, (x) a youth rehabilitation order, (xi) a suspended sentence and (xii) immediate custody in each of the last five years; [125582]

(6) how many individuals were convicted of the importation of (a) Class A, (b) Class B and (c) Class C drugs in each of the last five years. [125766]

Jeremy Wright: Data for the requested convictions and sentencing disposals for unlawful importation of, unlawful exportation of, possession of and possession of with intent to supply Class A, B and C drugs can be viewed in the tables, which has been broken down into annual summaries of offence and disposal types, for England and Wales, for 2007 to 2011.

The Youth Rehabilitation Order came into force on 30 November 2009. The first temporary class drug order took effect on 5 April 2012. As such no proceedings would have taken place until 2012. Court proceedings data for 2012 are planned for publication in spring 2013.

Defendants found guilty and sentenced at all courts for selected drug offences, with selected sentencing disposals, in England and Wales, 2007^{1, 2, 3}

Offence description	Total found guilty	Total sentenced	Of which:				
			Absolute discharge	Conditional discharge	Fine	Community rehabilitation order	Supervision order
Unlawful importation - Class A	483	528	—	3	7	—	—
Unlawful importation - Class B	38	23	—	3	2	1	—
Unlawful importation - Class C	216	247	—	3	6	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class A	26	24	—	1	2	—	1
Unlawful exportation - Class B	1	1	—	—	—	—	—

Defendants found guilty and sentenced at all courts for selected drug offences, with selected sentencing disposals, in England and Wales, 2007^{1, 2, 3}

<i>Offence description</i>	<i>Total found guilty</i>	<i>Total sentenced</i>	<i>Of which:</i>				
			<i>Absolute discharge</i>	<i>Conditional discharge</i>	<i>Fine</i>	<i>Community rehabilitation order</i>	<i>Supervision order</i>
Unlawful exportation - Class C	5	6	—	1	1	—	—
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	13,383	13,280	41	2,767	4,939	32	58
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B	3,234	3,208	27	897	1,327	7	23
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	14,994	14,971	295	3,600	7,141	43	207
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	3,500	3,473	5	21	39	13	25
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	308	302	—	8	6	—	—
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	1,645	1,671	1	25	56	12	14

<i>Offence description</i>	<i>Of which:</i>					
	<i>Attendance centre order</i>	<i>Curfew order</i>	<i>Reparation order</i>	<i>Community order</i>	<i>Suspended sentence</i>	<i>Immediate custody</i>
Unlawful importation - Class A	—	—	—	7	7	503
Unlawful importation - Class B	—	—	—	3	3	11
Unlawful importation - Class C	—	—	—	5	15	218
Unlawful exportation - Class A	—	—	1	1	—	16
Unlawful exportation - Class B	—	—	—	—	—	1
Unlawful exportation - Class C	—	—	—	—	3	1
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	27	74	12	3,516	413	902
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B	5	11	10	540	65	127
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	148	105	130	1,298	106	196
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	—	16	—	304	473	2,469
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	—	—	—	44	101	139
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	1	12	2	372	516	520

“—” = Nil

¹ The figures given in the table 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.

² 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.

³ The number of offenders sentenced can differ from those found guilty as it may be the case that a defendant found guilty in a particular year, and committed for sentence at the Crown court, may be sentenced in the following year.

Source:

Justice Statistics Analytical Services—Ministry of Justice

Defendants found guilty and sentenced at all courts for selected drug offences, with selected sentencing disposals, in England and Wales, 2008^{1, 2, 3}

<i>Offence description</i>	<i>Total found guilty</i>	<i>Total sentenced</i>	<i>Of which:</i>				
			<i>Absolute discharge</i>	<i>Conditional discharge</i>	<i>Fine</i>	<i>Community rehabilitation order</i>	<i>Supervision order</i>
Unlawful importation - Class A	432	532	—	3	1	—	—
Unlawful importation - Class B	24	23	—	—	2	—	—
Unlawful importation - Class C	168	197	—	3	5	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class A	18	19	—	1	1	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class B ⁴	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class C	6	6	—	—	—	—	—
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	14,599	14,516	33	2,470	5,739	26	53
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B	3,310	3,320	13	834	1,375	3	20
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	20,157	20,157	324	4,361	9,739	67	229
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	4,010	3,972	5	20	18	13	38
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	389	407	1	8	3	—	1
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	1,998	1,984	—	25	57	11	31

<i>Offence description</i>	<i>Of which:</i>					
	<i>Attendance centre order</i>	<i>Curfew order</i>	<i>Reparation order</i>	<i>Community order</i>	<i>Suspended sentence</i>	<i>Immediate custody</i>
Unlawful importation - Class A	—	—	—	2	—	525
Unlawful importation - Class B	—	—	—	1	1	19
Unlawful importation - Class C	—	1	—	6	13	169
Unlawful exportation - Class A	—	—	—	2	—	14
Unlawful exportation - Class B ⁴	—	—	—	—	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class C	—	—	—	—	—	6
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	16	59	8	3,794	401	985
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B	8	14	9	589	59	114

Offence description	Of which:					
	Attendance centre order	Curfew order	Reparation order	Community order	Suspended sentence	Immediate custody
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	190	165	182	1,910	148	316
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	—	29	—	273	488	2,913
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	—	1	—	74	117	190
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	2	21	2	509	648	552

“—“ = Nil

¹ The figures given in the table 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.

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³ The number of offenders sentenced can differ from those found guilty as it may be the case that a defendant found guilty in a particular year, and committed for sentence at the Crown court, may be sentenced in the following year.

Source:

Justice Statistics Analytical Services—Ministry of Justice

Defendants found guilty and sentenced at all courts for selected drug offences, with selected sentencing disposals, in England and Wales, 2009^{1, 2, 3}

Offence description	Of which:						
	Total found guilty	Total sentenced	Absolute discharge	Conditional discharge	Fine	Community rehabilitation order	Supervision order
Unlawful importation - Class A	497	539	—	—	3	1	—
Unlawful importation - Class B	97	92	—	2	3	—	—
Unlawful importation - Class C	86	93	—	—	—	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class A	18	28	—	—	1	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class B	4	5	—	—	1	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class C	4	4	—	—	—	—	—
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	13,730	13,659	28	1,848	5,886	15	44
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B ⁵	21,766	21,589	241	3,833	11,174	44	268
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	5,794	5,796	76	1,136	2,863	22	53
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	3,675	3,696	1	10	14	6	19
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	1,184	1,182	2	14	71	6	12
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	1,437	1,456	—	12	45	3	7

Offence description	Of which:					
	Attendance centre order	Curfew order	Reparation order	Community order	Suspended sentence	Immediate custody
Unlawful importation - Class A	—	—	—	2	4	528
Unlawful importation - Class B	—	—	—	6	7	74
Unlawful importation - Class C	—	—	—	4	7	82
Unlawful exportation - Class A	—	—	—	1	1	25
Unlawful exportation - Class B	—	—	—	—	—	4
Unlawful exportation - Class C	—	—	—	—	—	4
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	11	49	8	3,837	364	775
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B ⁵	169	164	135	2,547	171	371
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	32	48	30	745	84	127
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	—	29	—	250	456	2,835
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	2	13	—	290	306	368
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	—	8	—	369	503	451

“—“ = Nil

¹ The figures given in the table 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.

² 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.

³ The number of offenders sentenced can differ from those found guilty as it may be the case that a defendant found guilty in a particular year, and committed for sentence at the Crown court, may be sentenced in the following year.

⁴ The Youth Rehabilitation Order came into force on 30 November 2009. Figures prior to 2010 are recorded as Community Orders.

⁵ Cannabis was re-classified as a Class B drug on 26 January 2009

Source:

Justice Statistics Analytical Services—Ministry of Justice

Defendants found guilty and sentenced at all courts for selected drug offences, with selected sentencing disposals, in England and Wales, 2010^{1, 2, 3}

Offence description	Of which:						
	Total found guilty	Total sentenced	Absolute discharge	Conditional discharge	Fine	Community rehabilitation order	Supervision order
Unlawful importation - Class A	394	406	—	—	1	—	—

Defendants found guilty and sentenced at all courts for selected drug offences, with selected sentencing disposals, in England and Wales, 2010^{1, 2, 3}

<i>Offence description</i>	<i>Total found guilty</i>	<i>Total sentenced</i>	<i>Absolute discharge</i>	<i>Conditional discharge</i>	<i>Of which:</i>		
					<i>Fine</i>	<i>Community rehabilitation order</i>	<i>Supervision order</i>
Unlawful importation - Class B	124	121	—	2	1	—	—
Unlawful importation - Class C	23	26	—	—	—	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class A	14	14	—	—	—	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class B	6	7	—	—	—	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class C	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	12,254	12,175	30	1,781	5,423	9	4
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B	29,450	29,251	369	5,681	15,724	10	25
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	1,687	1,708	21	471	797	1	2
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	3,753	3,687	1	9	12	5	6
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	3,104	3,069	—	41	96	5	9
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	446	457	—	14	19	1	—

<i>Offence description</i>	<i>Attendance centre order</i>	<i>Curfew order</i>	<i>Reparation order</i>	<i>Community order</i>
Unlawful importation - Class A	—	—	—	1
Unlawful importation - Class B	—	—	—	4
Unlawful importation - Class C	—	—	—	1
Unlawful exportation - Class A	—	—	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class B	—	—	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class C	—	—	—	—
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	7	18	1	3,026
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B	31	42	135	3,074
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	—	3	1	212
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	—	22	—	274
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	—	13	—	820
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	—	—	—	113

<i>Offence description</i>	<i>Youth Rehabilitation Order⁴</i>	<i>Suspended sentence</i>	<i>Immediate custody</i>
Unlawful importation - Class A	—	7	397
Unlawful importation - Class B	—	7	107
Unlawful importation - Class C	—	5	20
Unlawful exportation - Class A	—	—	14
Unlawful exportation - Class B	—	1	6
Unlawful exportation - Class C	—	—	—
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	82	338	779
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B	584	302	500
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	7	33	60
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	47	419	2,779
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	52	992	907
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	5	173	121

¹ “—” = Nil

¹ The figures given in the table 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.

² 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.

³ The number of offenders sentenced can differ from those found guilty as it may be the case that a defendant found guilty in a particular year, and committed for sentence at the Crown court, may be sentenced in the following year.

⁴ The Youth Rehabilitation Order came into force on 30 November 2009. Figures prior to 2010 are recorded as Community Orders.

Defendants found guilty and sentenced at all courts for selected drug offences, with selected sentencing disposals, in England and Wales, 2011^{1, 2, 3}

<i>Offence description</i>	<i>Total found guilty</i>	<i>Total sentenced</i>	<i>Absolute discharge</i>	<i>Conditional discharge</i>	<i>Of which:</i>		
					<i>Fine</i>	<i>Community rehabilitation order</i>	<i>Supervision order</i>
Unlawful importation - Class A	431	436	—	1	1	—	—
Unlawful importation - Class B	159	157	—	1	2	—	—
Unlawful importation - Class C	29	28	—	—	2	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class A	15	15	—	—	—	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class B	12	12	—	—	2	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class C	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	10,514	10,419	27	1,491	4,708	1	—

Defendants found guilty and sentenced at all courts for selected drug offences, with selected sentencing disposals, in England and Wales, 2011^{1, 2, 3}

<i>Offence description</i>	<i>Of which:</i>						
	<i>Total found guilty</i>	<i>Total sentenced</i>	<i>Absolute discharge</i>	<i>Conditional discharge</i>	<i>Fine</i>	<i>Community rehabilitation order</i>	<i>Supervision order</i>
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B	30,133	30,039	369	5,809	16,369	2	—
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	1,575	1,588	16	433	779	—	—
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	3,194	3,173	—	10	1	1	—
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	3,330	3,261	—	35	92	—	1
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	310	306	—	6	10	—	—

<i>Offence description</i>	<i>Attendance centre order</i>	<i>Curfew order</i>	<i>Reparation order</i>	<i>Community order</i>
Unlawful importation - Class A	—	—	—	1
Unlawful importation - Class B	—	—	—	1
Unlawful importation - Class C	—	—	—	2
Unlawful exportation - Class A	—	—	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class B	—	—	—	—
Unlawful exportation - Class C	—	—	—	—
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	2	9	—	2,637
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B	27	21	63	3,142
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	—	2	—	164
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	—	1	—	205
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	2	7	—	872
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	—	1	—	109

<i>Offence description</i>	<i>Youth Rehabilitation Order⁴</i>	<i>Suspended sentence</i>	<i>Immediate custody</i>
Unlawful importation - Class A	—	7	426
Unlawful importation - Class B	—	13	137
Unlawful importation - Class C	—	7	17
Unlawful exportation - Class A	—	—	15
Unlawful exportation - Class B	—	1	9
Unlawful exportation - Class C	—	—	—
Possession of a controlled drug - Class A	95	286	602
Possession of a controlled drug - Class B	723	334	566
Possession of a controlled drug - Class C	18	28	77
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class A	77	311	2,489
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class B	68	1,089	993
Possession of drugs with intent to supply - Class C	4	99	74

“—“ = Nil

¹ The figures given in the table 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.

² 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.

³ The number of offenders sentenced can differ from those found guilty as it may be the case that a defendant found guilty in a particular year, and committed for sentence at the Crown court, may be sentenced in the following year.

⁴ The Youth Rehabilitation Order came into force on 30 November 2009. Figures prior to 2010 are recorded as Community Orders.

Prison Accommodation

Kate Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many people in each prison in England and Wales are accommodated in cells designed for (a) one person but occupied by two and (b) two people but occupied by three. [128251]

Jeremy Wright: The following table shows the average number of offenders held in a cell designed for one prisoner but occupied by two in each establishment in 2011-12, the most recent year for which figures have been published. This is known as 'doubling'. Alongside these the table shows for the same period the average number of prisoners held in a cell designed by two but occupied by more than two. This is known as 'trebling'.

The Government is committed to providing safe, decent and secure places for those in custody and continues to meet this commitment despite crowding.

Crowding occurs when cells are modified to hold more prisoners than they were originally designed for in order to manage the population. It is not a reflection of the quality of the accommodation. Accommodation that does not conform to published minimum standards will not be certified and cannot be used to accommodate prisoners.

There are two measures of estate capacity: certified normal accommodation is uncrowded capacity; and operational capacity is the maximum capacity based on published accommodation standards, as well as the provision and operation of appropriate regime facilities and the needs for order and control.

No prisons are operating above their operational capacity across the prison estate.

Figures for the percentage of prisoners in overcrowded and doubled accommodation for 2012-13 will be published in the Prison Performance Digest on the Justice website in July 2013.

<i>Average number of prisoners held, April 2011 to March 2012</i>		
<i>Establishment name</i>	<i>Two to a cell designed for one</i>	<i>Three to a cell designed for two</i>
Albany	0	0
Altcourse	704	110
Ashfield	0	0
Askham Grange	0	0
Aylesbury	14	0
Bedford	276	19
Belmarsh	0	351
Birmingham	659	0
Blantyre House	0	0
Blundeston	28	74
Brinsford	0	0
Bristol	162	0
Brixton	250	0
Bronzefield	0	0
Buckley Hall	55	0
Bullingdon	416	0
Bullwood Hall	26	0
Bure	38	0
Camp Hill	292	0
Canterbury	203	0
Cardiff	508	0
Channings Wood	63	0
Chelmsford	310	0
Coldingley	2	0
Cookham Wood	0	0
Dartmoor	32	0
Deerbolt	0	0
Doncaster	707	0
Dorchester	161	0
Dovegate	178	0
Dover	0	0
Downview	0	0
Drake Hall	0	0
Durham	637	0
East Sutton Park	0	0
Eastwood Park	68	0
Elmley	356	274
Erlestoke	0	0
Everthorpe	143	0
Exeter	411	0
Featherstone	27	0
Feltham	0	0
Ford	0	0
Forest Bank	579	0
Foston Hall	6	0
Frankland	0	0
Full Sutton	0	0
Garth	34	0
Gartree	0	0
Glen Parva	429	0
Gloucester	170	0
Grendon and Spring Hill	0	0
Guys Marsh	92	0
Haslar	0	0
Haverigg	28	0
Hewell	313	0
High Down	186	0
Highpoint	45	1
Hindley	0	0

<i>Average number of prisoners held, April 2011 to March 2012</i>		
<i>Establishment name</i>	<i>Two to a cell designed for one</i>	<i>Three to a cell designed for two</i>
Hollesley Bay	0	0
Holloway	0	0
Holme House	308	0
Hull	468	0
Huntercombe	47	0
Isis	206	0
Kennet	332	0
Kingston	0	0
Kirkham	0	0
Kirklevington Grange	0	0
Lancaster Farms	87	0
Latchmere House	0	0
Leeds	499	0
Leicester	318	0
Lewes	79	0
Leyhill	0	0
Lincoln	463	0
Lindholme	83	0
Littlehey	116	0
Liverpool	351	0
Long Lartin	0	0
Low Newton	45	0
Lowdham Grange	64	0
Maidstone	60	0
Manchester	629	0
Moorland and Hatfield	52	0
Morton Hall	0	0
Mount	50	0
New Hall	45	0
North Sea Camp	74	0
Northallerton	140	0
Northumberland	0	0
Norwich	260	16
Nottingham	608	0
Onley	0	0
Parc	283	0
Parkhurst	92	0
Pentonville	654	0
Peterborough	226	0
Portland	0	0
Preston	685	0
Ranby	368	0
Reading	178	0
Risley	36	0
Rochester	0	0
Rye Hill	0	0
Send	0	0
Shepton Mallet	47	0
Shrewsbury	318	0
Stafford	0	0
Standford Hill	0	0
Stocken	118	0
Stoke Heath	92	0
Styal	18	0
Sudbury	0	0
Swaleside	0	0
Swansea	370	23
Swinfen Hall	68	0
Thameside	0	0
Thorn Cross	0	0
Usk and Prescoed	248	2
Verne	68	0
Wakefield	0	0

Average number of prisoners held, April 2011 to March 2012

Establishment name	Average number of prisoners held, April 2011 to March 2012	
	Two to a cell designed for one	Three to a cell designed for two
Wandsworth	957	0
Warren Hill	0	0
Wayland	108	0
Wealstun	37	0
Wellingborough	0	0
Werrington	0	0
Wetherby	0	0
Whetton	60	0
Whitemoor	0	0
Winchester	402	0
Wolds	108	0
Woodhill	366	0
Wormwood Scrubs	124	0
Wymott	134	0

Probation

Mr Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice (1) on how many occasions a probation trust submitted moderation proposals in respect of the Probation Trust Rating System during 2011-12; [128282]

(2) how many probation trusts received an annual appraisal rating of (a) Band 1 - Serious Concern about Performance, (b) Band 2 - Requiring Development, (c) Band 3 - Showing Good Performance and (d) Band 4 - Exceptional Performance in 2011-12; [128283]

(3) what indicators are contained in the Probation Trust Rating System; [128284]

(4) what the average performance outcomes are for performance trusts in England and Wales for each of the 12 indicators in the Probation Trust Rating System in 2011-12. [128285]

Jeremy Wright: Moderation proposals were submitted by two probation trusts in 2011-12, namely South Yorkshire Probation Trust and Northumbria Probation Trust.

The annual Probation Trust Ratings for 2011-12 were published on the Justice website on 24 July 2012:

<http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/statistics/prison-probation/prison-probation-performance-stats/probation-annual-performance-ratings-2011-12.pdf>

They are reproduced in the following table:

Table 1: Annual probation trust performance ratings 2011-12

Probation Trust	Performance Rating Band
Avon and Somerset Probation Trust	3
Bedfordshire Probation Trust	3
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Probation Trust	3
Cheshire Probation Trust	3
Cumbria Probation Trust	3
Derbyshire Probation Trust	3
Devon and Cornwall Probation Trust	3
Dorset Probation Trust	3
Durham Tees Valley Probation Trust	4
Essex Probation	3
Gloucestershire Probation Trust	3
Greater Manchester Probation Trust	3
Hampshire Probation Trust	3
Hertfordshire Probation Trust	3
Humberside Probation Trust	4
Kent Probation	3

Table 1: Annual probation trust performance ratings 2011-12

Probation Trust	Performance Rating Band
Lancashire Probation Trust	3
Leicestershire and Rutland Probation Trust	3
Lincolnshire Probation Trust	3
London Probation Trust	3
Merseyside Probation Trust	3
Norfolk and Suffolk Probation Trust	3
Northamptonshire Probation Trust	3
Northumbria Probation Trust ¹	4
Nottinghamshire Probation Trust	3
South Yorkshire Probation Trust	3
Staffordshire and West Midlands Probation Trust	3
Surrey and Sussex Probation Trust	3

¹ Level 4 awarded following moderation.

The 12 measures which are included in the Probation Trust Rating System are set out in the following table alongside the average performance outcome for each measure where applicable.

Table 2: Indicators included in the Probation Trust Rating System and National Average Performance Outcome 2011-12

Indicators included in the Probation Trust Rating System (PTRS) 2011-12	National Average Performance Outcome (percentage)
The percentage of offenders in accommodation at termination of order or licence	86
The percentage of offenders in employment at termination of order or licence	49
Offender Assessment System (OASys) Quality Assurance	90
Offender Management Feedback Survey	76
Offender Management Inspection: Likelihood of Reoffending	74
Offender Management Inspection: Risk of Harm	75
Offender Management Inspection: Assessment and Sentence Planning	77
Offender Management Inspection: Compliance and Enforcement	79
Offender Management Inspection: Interventions	78
Orders and Licences Successfully Completed	76
Rate of Reoffending (January to December 2011)	9.8
Victim Feedback Survey	98

Performance outcomes by trust for each of the indicators contributing to the ratings are available on the Justice website, along with background guidance on the rating system, data sources and indicator definitions:

<http://www.justice.gov.uk/statistics/prisons-and-probation/prison-probation-performance-info>

Sentencing: Females

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice pursuant to the contribution by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice of 16 October 2012, *Official Report*, columns 50-1WH, which of the statistics used by the hon. Member for Shipley in his Westminster Hall debate on sentencing of female offenders on 16 October 2012 he (a) accepts as accurate and (b) believes are inaccurate. [126128]

Mrs Grant: The Ministry of Justice's Analytical Services Directorate provides statistics, research and analysis to underpin evidence based policy and delivery across the Department.

The Ministry of Justice is required to ensure that all statistics produced by the Department are produced according to the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. Its statistical publications are independently assessed by the UK Statistics Authority to ensure they meet the standards expected for official statistics. This helps maintain public confidence in the robustness, quality, integrity and impartiality of statistical publications.

All research undertaken by the Department adheres to the Government Social Research code. This ensures it is generated, handled and released in a way which maintains public trust in its robustness, integrity and impartiality. Maintenance of high standards is ensured through rigorous quality assurance processes, including internal and external peer review. Research outputs are published on the Ministry of Justice website.

The statistics and research published by the Ministry of Justice are accurate to the best of our knowledge.

TREASURY

Banks: Loans

Justin Tomlinson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he plans to take to ensure that banks and building societies pass on cheap finance from his Funding for Lending scheme to (a) mortgage prisoners, (b) first-time buyers with limited deposits and (c) other consumers who most need assistance. [127867]

Greg Clark: The Funding for Lending scheme is designed to boost the incentives for banks to increase lending in aggregate. The resulting support is not targeted at particular sectors of the economy.

Child Benefit

Nick Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how he plans to raise public awareness of the changes to child benefit entitlement from 7 January 2013, including the claw-back of child benefit paid via tax returns. [128153]

Mr Gauke: HMRC are writing to around 1 million taxpayers who may be affected by the high income child benefit change. In addition, HMRC will be using wider communication channels and media advertising so that everyone affected by the change knows about it.

Mr Woodward: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people were in receipt of child benefit in (a) St Helens South and Whiston constituency, (b) the North West, (c) England and (d) the UK in each of the last five years; and how many people received such benefits for each number of children. [129069]

Mr Gauke: This information is published in the yearly HMRC publication "Child Benefit Statistics Geographical Analysis". The publication for the years 2003-11 can be found here:

http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/child_benefit/geographical.htm
Data for 2012 is not currently available.

For convenience the data for the previous two years has been re-produced as follows.

Number of families in receipt of child benefit in 2011 by number of children

	<i>St Helens South and Whiston</i>	<i>The North West</i>	<i>England</i>	<i>UK</i>
Total	13,315	895,670	6,606,285	7,884,760
1 child	6,720	434,305	3,097,540	3,720,160
2 children	4,765	322,675	2,473,090	2,940,120
3 children	1,400	100,575	758,735	902,250
4 children	340	27,500	202,020	236,890
5+ children	90	10,615	74,900	85,340

Number of families in receipt of child benefit in 2010, by number of children

	<i>St Helens South and Whiston</i>	<i>The North West</i>	<i>England</i>	<i>UK</i>
Total	13,390	894,940	6,562,705	7,841,675
1 child	6,655	431,275	3,051,980	3,671,115
2 children	4,860	324,695	2,473,415	2,942,985
3 children	1,425	101,075	761,550	906,310
4+ children	445	37,895	275,765	321,265

Numbers were only provided for four or more children before 2010.

Customs: EU Action

Chris Bryant: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on how many occasions HM Revenue and Customs worked with the customs services of another EU member state as provided for in the Naples II Convention on mutual assistance and co-operation between customs administrations in (a) 2012 to date, (b) 2011, (c) 2010 and (d) 2009. [128709]

Mr Gauke: The totals for Naples II Convention customs co-operation requests specific to HMRC were:

	<i>Total</i>
2009	1,518
2010	1,209
2011	1,329
2012 (11 months)	1,144

Debts: Argentina

Steve Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer with reference to the recent decision of the higher court of New York, what discussions he had with his G20 counterparts on Argentina's international debt obligations; and if he will make a statement. [128030]

Greg Clark: Treasury Ministers have discussions on a wide variety of topics with G20 counterparts as part of the process of policy development and delivery. As has been the case with previous Administrations, it is not the Government's practice to provide details of all such discussions.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr Cash: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what steps he plans to take to follow through in the European Court of Justice the legal reserve in relation to the fiscal compact; [127532]

(2) what steps he plans to take in respect of the unlawfulness of the fiscal compact. [127533]

Greg Clark [*holding answer 8 November 2012*]: The position remains as set out in the letter from the Government's Permanent Representative to the EU to the Secretary General of the Council of the European Union, dated 22 February.

Mr Cash: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether he intends to issue a legal reserve in relation to the unlawfulness of EU Regulation 13683/12. [127534]

Greg Clark [*holding answer 8 November 2012*]: The Government's position is as set out on the Floor of the House during the debate on banking union on 6 November.

Employment Agencies

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on the use of offshore employment companies in the supply of public sector workers in his Department and its associated public bodies. [128728]

Sajid Javid: Her Majesty's Treasury is implementing the recommendations of the Government's review into the tax arrangements of senior public sector appointees.

When awarding contracts to employment companies, the Treasury complies with the European Public Procurement rules, implemented in the UK by the Public Contracts Regulations, 2006, which open up the public sector markets to competition within Europe.

EU Budget

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with his European counterparts on the level of the EU Budget in the next seven years; and if he will make a statement. [126907]

Greg Clark: The Chancellor meets regularly with his European counterparts on a variety of issues, including the EU budget.

HM Treasury will continue to update Parliament via ministerial statements, on the outcome of Council meetings.

Excise Duties: Beer

George Freeman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much of the revenue raised from beer duty was from (a) rural and (b) urban areas in each of the last five years. [128423]

Sajid Javid: The information is not available. Data on revenue from beer duty is not broken down to the level required to identify the amount of beer duty raised from (a) rural and (b) urban areas. This is due to the duty being payable once the beer is cleared for consumption onto the UK market, rather than at the point of sale.

Income Tax: Bournemouth

Conor Burns: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in Bournemouth West constituency have been taken out of income tax due to recent increases in the personal allowance. [128903]

Mr Gauke: By April 2013, the cumulative effect of the Government's increases in the under 65s personal allowance since 2010-11 will lift 2 million people out of the income tax system.

These estimates are based on the 2009-10 Survey of Personal Incomes, projected to 2013-14 using economic assumptions consistent with the Office for Budget Responsibility's March 2012 economic and fiscal outlook.

Reliable estimates are not available at parliamentary constituency level due to greater uncertainties in making projections for small geographical areas.

Infrastructure

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on the use of covered bonds to finance infrastructure development; and if he will make a statement. [128707]

Danny Alexander: The Government are committed to supporting the development of a strong covered bond market in the UK. The Government conducted a review of the UK's covered bond framework in April 2011 and made a number of changes to the UK regime to make it more transparent and comparable with other European frameworks. These changes come into force on 1 January 2013 and will help banks and building societies make best use of covered bond funding to support lending to the real economy, including financing infrastructure development.

Macquarie Group

Simon Hughes: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many times staff of his Department have met representatives of the Macquarie Group in the latest period for which figures are available. [127381]

Greg Clark: Treasury Ministers and officials meet with, and receive representations from, a wide range of organisations and individuals in the public and private sectors as part of the usual policymaking process. As was the case with previous Administrations, it is not the Treasury's practice to provide details of all such representations.

Pay

Mr Raab: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many employees in his Department are paid in excess of (a) £80,000 and (b) £100,000. [128561]

Sajid Javid: 55 current Treasury employees are paid an annual salary in excess of £80,000. Of those, 26 are paid over £100,000. Information on HM Treasury salaries is published in the HM Treasury organogram which can be found at:

http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/about_hmtgroup_organogram.htm

Public Finance

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the International Monetary Fund's recent report commenting on the UK's structural deficit. [126566]

Greg Clark: The Government notes that the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in their recent World Economic Outlook publication, have revised their estimates of the UK's structural deficit upwards for the last decade compared to their previous publication back in April 2012. The IMF now believe that the pre-crisis structural deficit left by the previous Government in 2007 was larger at 5.2% of GDP, the largest in the G7.

Revenue and Customs: Washington (Tyne and Wear)

Mrs Hodgson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what representations his Department received on the closure of Weardale House in the last 12 months; [128966]

(2) if he will place in the Library a copy of the feasibility study considered by Ministers in respect of the decision to close Weardale House; [128967]

(3) if he will place in the Library a copy of the Equality Impact Assessment conducted to inform the decision to close Weardale House; [128968]

(4) what assessment he has made of the ability of nearby offices to accommodate house staff working in Weardale House after it has closed; [128969]

(5) what estimate he has made of the economic effect on the surrounding area of the closure of Weardale House. [128970]

Mr Gauke: In the past 12 months the following MPs have all written to lend their support to a PCS Union campaign against the closure of HMRC offices in Sunderland and Washington, some more than once: Graham Morris (Easington), Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South), Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow), Ian Mearns (Gateshead), David Miliband (South Shields), Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham), Phil Wilson (Sedgefield), Dave Anderson (Blaydon) and Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West).

There are no plans to publish or release the findings of HMRC's feasibility work into the closure of Weardale House in the form of either a study or a report. HMRC will be publishing some information from its feasibility findings on the Department's intranet site.

There are no plans to place a copy of the equality impact assessment conducted to inform the decision to close Weardale House in the Library. HMRC does plan to publish the equality impact assessment on its internet site in the near future.

Before taking the decision to close Weardale House in Washington HMRC carried out a full assessment which took account of current and future business plans for its north east estate. This included an analysis of how HMRC will use its office accommodation efficiently to deliver its full operational commitments. HMRC constantly reviews its office requirement as its business activities alter so that it can continue to accommodate the right number of people in the right locations.

In HMRC's assessment any economic effect on the surrounding area arising from the closure of Weardale House is likely to be minimal and temporary, lasting until such time as the building receives a new tenant.

Sick Leave

Chris Ruane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to the answer of 7 November 2012, *Official Report*, column 656W, on sick leave, what assessment he has made for the disparity between Grade B absences and SCS; and what assessment has been made of the use of mindfulness-based interventions in reducing the number of absences. [128496]

Sajid Javid: HM Treasury is firmly committed to the wellbeing of its staff. The Department regularly monitors sick absences across the organisation and the reasons for them particularly if a clear pattern emerges. Interventions will be considered on a case by case basis and this includes an assessment of all the core data.

Although we do not currently use any mindfulness-based interventions in dealing with sick absence cases, there is guidance on wellbeing available for staff, for example on managing stress in the workplace, and support available through an Occupational Health service and an Employee Assistance Programme.

Universal Credit

Mr McCann: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how the qualifying conditions for each passported benefit for which he is responsible will change under universal credit. [128332]

Mr Gauke: The administration of passported benefits is the responsibility of a number of Government Departments and the devolved Administrations. We are currently working across Government to ensure that we introduce universal credit in a way that works smoothly with all passported benefits while ensuring that these benefits continue to be available to the families that need them most.

We will announce our eligibility criteria in due course.

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Adult Education: Hampshire

Mr Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many students in (a) Southampton and (b) Hampshire aged (i) between 18 and 24 and (ii) over 25 years olds (A) began and (B) completed Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications in (1) the latest period for which figures are available and (2) each of the last five years. [128644]

Matthew Hancock: I am placing in the Libraries of the House data to show government-funded further education and skills participation and achievements by age and level in Hampshire and Southampton local education authorities. Final data are shown for the 2006/07 to 2010/11 academic years and provisional data are shown for the 2011/12 academic year. Figures are not produced for the number of learners who began these qualifications each year broken down in this way.

Provisional data for the 2011/12 academic year provide an early view of performance and will change as further data returns are received from further education colleges and providers. They should not be directly compared with final year data from previous years. Figures for 2011/12 will be finalised in January 2013.

Information on further education and skills participation and achievements by age, level and geography is published in a supplementary table of a quarterly Statistical First Release (SFR). The latest SFR was published on 11 October 2012:

http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics/statisticalfirstrelease/sfr_current

http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics/statisticalfirstrelease/sfr_supplementary_tables/further_education_skills/

Foreign Investment in UK

Karen Lumley: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how his Department plans to assess the long-term effect of the London 2012 Olympic Games in promoting foreign investment to the UK. [128634]

Michael Fallon: The Games were a unique opportunity to promote Britain as a place to do business, and we expect the benefits of this opportunity to be delivered both this year and in the years to come including attracting new and retaining current foreign direct investment and infrastructure investment.

UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) is targeted with attracting £6 billion of foreign direct investment and infrastructure investment stimulated by the 17 British Business Embassy Global Business Summits, held at Lancaster House, and that attracted over 4,000 business leaders, global figures and international decision makers.

UKTI has established strategic relationship management in order to establish an excellent, whole-government relationship with major wealth creators to raise investment and exports, thereby increasing growth and jobs. UKTI are undertaking a follow up exercise with all potential and current investors that attended the British Business Embassy to ensure that every opportunity is followed through to successful conclusion.

An Annual Investment Report covering the period 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013 will collate all foreign direct investment and infrastructure investment into the UK. Annual Investment Reports will also be produced in forthcoming years.

Additionally, UKTI is developing with No.10 the GREAT campaigns that will continue to promote the UK in overseas markets.

Green Deal Scheme

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what investments (a) UK Green Investments and (b) the Green Investment Bank have made to support the Green Deal. [128670]

Michael Fallon: UK Green Investments and, since it became fully operational on 29 October 2012, the UK Green Investment Bank have been exploring in detail proposals to support the financing of the Green Deal, including with the Green Deal Finance Company. The Department of Energy and Climate Change is currently seeking state aid approval for the financing of the Green Deal. Any investment by the Green Investment Bank to support the Green Deal would need to be consistent with the terms of that approval.

New Businesses: South Yorkshire

Dan Jarvis: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what support he is providing to entrepreneurs in (a) Barnsley Central constituency and (b) South Yorkshire who want to start their own business. [128711]

Michael Fallon: We want to make the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business, and for the next decade to be the most entrepreneurial and dynamic in Britain's history. The Government's vision is for many more people in the UK to have the opportunity, aspiration and motivation to use their talent and initiative to be enterprising.

Global Entrepreneurship Week (GEW) took place last week (12-18 November 2012) and given the current economic conditions, we believe that it continues to be crucial to take steps to create a more entrepreneurial UK. The 2012 campaign has been built around the message: "Pass it on!"—passing on the practical help and support needed by early start-ups and individuals.

In January, the Prime Minister launched "Business in You", a major campaign to inspire people to realise their business ambitions. We have changed the way that we help entrepreneurs access the information, guidance and advice they need to start and grow a business. We have put in place a range of services including:

The new home for Government services and information online: www.gov.uk

has been built to make it simpler and faster for people to find what they need from Government. To help those that cannot use internet services, we will continue to offer support through the Business Link helpline (on 0845 6009006).

A mentoring portal: www.mentorsme.co.uk

providing an easy route to find experienced business mentors.

A new three year Growth Accelerator programme which will provide high quality coaching support for up to 26,000 small businesses with high growth potential.

The Government are also ensuring entrepreneurs can access the finance they need by:

In September, we announced a new Government-backed business bank, including new Government funding of £1 billion. It will aim to attract private sector funding so that, when fully operational, it could support up to £10 billion of new and additional business lending. More detail on the design of the bank and the types of interventions it will support will be provided later in the autumn.

In July, the Government and Bank of England launched the Funding for Lending Scheme (FLS), which allows banks and building societies to borrow at cheaper rates from the Bank of England for periods of up to four years. The FLS creates strong incentives for banks to increase lending to UK households and businesses by lowering interest rates and increasing access to credit.

In May we launched a new £10 million Start-Up Loan Scheme aimed at 18 to 24-year-olds.

We have increased the funds available to invest through the Business Finance Partnership (BFP) to £1.2 billion. Government will allocate £100 million of the BFP to invest through non-traditional lending channels that can reach smaller businesses.

The Enterprise Finance Guarantee (EFG) scheme will continue until 2014/15, providing, subject to demand, over £2 billion of additional lending.

We have established a £50 million Business Angel Co-Investment Fund to encourage Business Angel investment.

We are increasing our commitment to our Enterprise Capital Funds programme by £200 million, providing for more than £300 million of venture capital investment to address the equity gap for early stage innovative SMEs.

Local Support

The Government has also worked with Local Enterprise Partners (LEPs) to ensure they understand the availability of Government's support to business. Many LEPs have the promotion of enterprise, access to finance and business growth as key strategic priorities. The Leeds and North Yorkshire LEP, for example, runs a mentoring programme via the Leeds, York and North Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce.

Overseas Trade: Fiji

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what the value was of UK (a) imports from and (b) exports to Fiji in each of the last five years. [128408]

Michael Fallon: The value of UK exports and imports of goods, to and from Fiji, in the last five years is given in the following table. The data are sourced from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) Overseas Trade Statistics database and are publicly available on the UK Trade Info website:

www.uktradeinfo.com

	£ million	
	UK imports of goods from Fiji	UK exports of goods to Fiji
2011	54.65	4.74
2010	31.17	5.12
2009	79.55	6.17
2008	85.70	6.42
2007	62.46	4.86

Source:

HMRC Overseas Trade Statistics

Public Houses

Toby Perkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills whether as part of the review into the self-regulation of the pub industry the following organisations have been contacted (a) CAMRA, (b) Fair Pint, (c) UNITE the Union, (d) the Independent Pub Confederation, (e) the GMB union, (f) the Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers, (g) the Guild of Master Victuallers, (h) the Society of Independent Brewers, (i) the Forum of Private Business and (j) the All Party Save the Pub Group. [128495]

Jo Swinson: In the first instance, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Vince Cable), has contacted a number of the organisations to ascertain the facts of how the self-regulatory approach is working. These organisations are the members of the Pubs Independent Rent Review Scheme (PIRRS) Board that oversees the Pubs Independent Conciliation and Arbitration Service—which includes the Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers and the Guild of Master Victuallers—and the Independent Pubs Confederation, of which most of the other organisations named above are members. We are happy to receive evidence from the organisations

named above as to the facts of how the self-regulatory approach is working, and any further comments they wish to submit.

The Chair of the All Party Save the Pub Group has been informed of the review.

Regional Growth Fund

Mr Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills pursuant to the answer of 29 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 115W, on Regional Growth Fund, how many (a) face to face meetings and (b) telephone conversations he and his officials have had with the 30 projects that withdrew from the Regional Growth Fund prior to their decision to withdraw. [128752]

Michael Fallon [holding answer 19 November 2012]: Information on the exact number of meetings and telephone conversations held with Regional Growth Fund applicants prior to their decision to withdraw is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost in terms of staff hours spent checking case records. However we can confirm that very extensive discussions are held with each and every bidder during the contracting phase and every effort is taken to rescue a troubled project before a withdrawal occurs.

Mr Umunna: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills pursuant to the answer of 8 November 2012, *Official Report*, column 697W, on Regional Growth Fund, how many Regional Growth Fund (a) round one and (b) round two bids were withdrawn due to (i) withdrawal of support from the parent company, (ii) inability to secure matched funding, (iii) failure to get planning permission, (iv) change in market conditions and (v) other reasons. [128757]

Michael Fallon: In my answer to the hon. Member of 8 November 2012, *Official Report*, column 697W, I gave these categories as examples of reasons why bidders have withdrawn from the Regional Growth Fund. These companies withdrew without prejudice. To be more specific about reasons for withdrawal would not be appropriate or fair to the bidders concerned as it could undermine future commercial interests. I am, therefore, not able to expand upon my answer of 8 November 2012.

South East

Mr Mike Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many awards have been made from the regional growth fund since it was launched in the South East. [128475]

Michael Fallon: The Regional Growth Fund (RGF) supports the Government's ambitions to make the UK the best place in Europe to start, finance and grow a business as well as encouraging investment and exports: the fund's objective are to help rebalance the economy by supporting those areas and communities dependant on the public sector. 11 awards in Rounds 1 and 2 have been made to projects and programmes in the South East since the launch of the RGF (to a value of

£80.9 million); two have withdrawn (to a value of £13 million). Furthermore, six projects or programmes have been selected to go forward in Round 3.

UK Trade and Investment

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills whether there are minimum revenue or profit requirements before UK Trade and Investment will help small businesses seeking to grow. [128919]

Michael Fallon [*holding answer 19 November 2012*]: UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) does not insist on minimum revenue or profit requirements before helping small businesses to grow. There is a range of information and support available to every business. The majority of companies supported by UKTI's regional network are small companies with less than 10 employees.

However for certain programmes, UKTI will seek to satisfy itself on a case by case basis that any individual company has the management and financial capability to undertake trade development activity given the challenges and resources required to win business in overseas markets.

EDUCATION

Children in Care

Mr Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education when he plans to publish the recommendations of the task and finish group on out of borough placements. [126806]

Mr Timpson: The Out of Area Placements Task and Finish Group has been focusing on how to improve arrangements, and the quality of care and support, for looked after children placed 'out of area' by their local authorities. This is part of the wider work announced by Ministers in July to reform children's residential care. The group has comprised senior expert representation from children's services, local authorities, providers, Ofsted and others. It has met frequently over the summer.

The Task and Finish Group has been working in parallel with two other expert groups established to take forward work on the reform of children's residential care: a group focusing on improving data about looked after children who go missing from care, and a further group with a broad remit to consider how to improve the overall quality of children's residential provision.

We are considering the Task and Finish Group's proposals alongside those made by the other expert groups, and will announce the action we intend to take in due course.

Andrew Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Education how many and which (a) primary and (b) secondary schools had more than five per cent of pupils in care in each local authority area in the most recent year for which figures are available. [128097]

Mr Timpson: In 2011 (the latest year for which data is available), there were 25 state-funded mainstream primary schools with more than 5% of pupils looked after. Of these schools, 23 are small primary schools. These schools have a small number on roll and, as such, even one or two looked after pupils will result in the school having more than 5% of pupils looked after.

To protect the confidentiality and identity of these vulnerable pupils we have not named the schools in this response.

The following table shows the local authorities where these schools are located. There were no state-funded mainstream secondary schools with more than 5% of pupils looked after.

Number of primary schools where more than 5% of pupils are looked after children¹ by local authority - 2011

	Number
Bradford	1
Cheshire East	1
Cheshire West and Chester	1
Cornwall	1
Cumbria	1
Devon	2
Durham	2
Gloucestershire	1
Herefordshire	1
Lancashire	2
Leicestershire	1
Lincolnshire	2
Norfolk	1
North Lincolnshire	1
North Yorkshire	2
Northumberland	1
Somerset	1
Suffolk	1
Worcestershire	2

¹ Based on children looked after continuously for six months at 31 March 2011 matched to their School Census return for January 2011.

Children in Care: Missing Persons

Mr Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education when he plans to publish the recommendations of his Department's Expert Data Group in respect of children missing from care. [126805]

Mr Timpson: The Expert Data Group has been chaired by the Department and includes representatives from the Association of Directors of Children's Services, police organisations, the Children's Society and Ofsted. It has met frequently since July to consider how to safeguard looked after children who go missing, or are at risk of going missing, by developing improved local and national data collection arrangements, and strengthening practice amongst carers, children's homes, local authorities and the police.

The Expert Data Group is working alongside two other expert groups established to take forward work on the reform of children's residential care: a group focusing on how to improve arrangements, and the quality of care and support, for looked after children placed 'out of area' by their local authorities; and a further group with a broad remit to consider how to improve the overall quality of children's residential provision.

We are considering the Expert Data Group's proposals, alongside those made by the other expert groups, and will announce the action we intend to take in due course.

Children: Abuse

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what assessment he has made of the incidence of sexual abuse of children in England in each year since 2000; and if he will make a statement.

[127984]

Mr Timpson: The Department does not hold information on all incidences of child sexual abuse in England. However, the Department does have information available on the number of children who became the subject of child protection plans each year where the initial category of abuse was 'Sexual Abuse'. These numbers are shown in the table.

Child protection plans beginning with a recorded initial category of abuse of 'Sexual Abuse', in England, 2000-12²

Year ending 31 March:	Number
2000	33,600
2001	33,200
2002	2,800
2003	3,000
2004	2,800
2005	2,700
2006	2,600
2007	2,500
2008	2,300
2009	2,200
2010	2,500
2011	2,700
2012	2,700

¹ Where a child has become the subject of a plan more than once in a year then each instance will be counted.

² Figures for the year ending 31 March 2000 to 31 March 2009 are taken from the CPR3 return, figures for the years ending 31 March 2010 onwards are from the Children in Need census.

³ From 2002, only the main category of abuse was recorded. Where multiple categories were present, the category of abuse was recorded as "multiple". It is not possible to tell incidence of sexual abuse from the multiple category. Prior to 2002, all categories of abuse were recorded, so in these years, sexual abuse is included as the main or additional category of abuse hence the apparent higher numbers in these years.

Source:

Child Protection and Referrals 3 (CPR3) and Children in Need (CIN) census

The latest figures on children who were the subject of a child protection plan were published in Statistical First Release (SFR) 27/2012 'Characteristics of Children in Need, in England, 2011-12', available at the following link:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001095/index.shtml>

Gavin Shuker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what statutory requirements there are for local authorities to report instances of child sexual exploitation.

[128989]

Mr Timpson: While there are no statutory requirements for local authorities to report instances of child sexual exploitation in particular, it is the responsibility of all public bodies and organisations working with children to have a clear child protection policy and know how to raise concerns with the relevant bodies, including the police.

Guidance was also issued to local authorities on 19 April 2007 in Local Authority Circular 2007(25) giving details of the arrangements for local authorities

to provide Ofsted and the Department for Education (from 1 October 2010) with statutory notifications of incidents affecting children; this can include incidents of child sexual exploitation.

Children: Human Trafficking

Robert Flello: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what recent discussions he has had with the Children's Improvement Board on creating a programme of work to support local authorities to meet the needs of trafficked children through child protection frameworks.

[127942]

Mr Timpson: The Department has had discussions with the Children's Improvement Board about support for local authorities to meet the needs of trafficked children, particularly in relation to child sexual exploitation, as part of wider discussions with the CIB about its annual programme of work.

GCSE: Children in Care

Andrew Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Education pursuant to the answer of 24 September 2012, *Official Report, House of Lords*, column 1428, on children: looked-after children, how many and what proportion of children in care who attended schools classified as (a) inadequate, (b) satisfactory, (c) good and (d) outstanding achieved (i) five GCSEs at grade A* to C, including English and mathematics but excluding equivalents, (ii) grade A* to C in English GCSE, (iii) grade A* to C in mathematics GCSE, (iv) a grade A* to C in both English and mathematics GCSE and (v) grade A* to C in English, mathematics, two sciences, a foreign language and history or geography GCSE in each local authority area in the most recent school year for which figures are available.

[128109]

Mr Timpson: Tables have been placed in the House Libraries showing the number of looked-after children eligible for key stage 4 who attended a school classified as inadequate, satisfactory, good or outstanding according to Ofsted inspections in each local authority in England, and the number and percentage of these children who achieved GCSEs. The figures relate to children who have been looked after continuously for 12 months up to 31 March 2011 and their GCSE achievement in 2011. Ofsted inspection data relate to the latest inspection in the period before March 2011.

Offences against Children: Kirklees

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education when he plans to publish the full serious case review first produced by Kirklees Safeguarding Children Board relating to the case of child SM from February 2008.

[127589]

Mr Timpson [holding answer 8 November 2012]: The Department has been working with Kirklees Local Safeguarding Children Board on the publication of the Family M serious case review. This is currently subject to legal proceedings relating to publication of the report on which the Department is unable to comment further at this stage.

The Government is fully committed to the publication of serious case review reports. We are determined to foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement in all organisations responsible for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, and the publication of serious case review reports plays an important part in this.

Physical Education: Curriculum

Sir Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education whether it is his policy to maintain a compulsory minimum amount of two hours each week to be spent on physical education in (a) primary and (b) secondary schools as part of the National Curriculum. [128288]

Mr Timpson: The previous Government's targets for physical education were wholly aspirational and not compulsory. Indeed, the law specifically prevents the Secretary of State from telling schools how much time they should devote to PE, or to any other National Curriculum subject. That is for schools to decide.

PE will remain a compulsory subject at all four Key Stages following the review of the National Curriculum. The draft National Programme of Study for PE will be sent out for consultation in the new year. It will place a greater emphasis on competitive sport than previous versions and will retain the requirements relating to swimming in primary schools.

Primary Education: Speech and Language Disorders

Andrew Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Education how many and which primary schools had more than five per cent of pupils in (a) reception, (b) year 1 and (c) year 2 with speech, language and communications difficulties in each local authority area in the most recent year for which figures are available. [128018]

Mr Timpson: In January 2012, there were:

2,815 state-funded primary schools where more than 5% of pupils in reception had speech, language and communications difficulties.

3,421 state-funded primary schools where more than 5% of pupils in year 1 had such difficulties.

3,058 state-funded primary schools where more than 5% of pupils in year 2 had such difficulties.

Lists of these schools and their local authority area have been placed in the House Libraries. Schools can appear in more than one list.

The latest special educational needs information is published in the 'Special Educational Needs in England, January 2012' Statistical First Release at

<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001075/index.shtml>

Schools: Sports

Sir Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what the cost was of the annual PE and Sport Survey in each year from 2003-04 to 2009-10. [128286]

Mr Timpson: Information for 2003/04 is unavailable. The contracted costs of the PE and Sport Survey from 2004 to 2010 were as follows:

	£
2004/05	157,100
2005/06	211,325
2006/07	221,220
2007/08	202,198
2008/09	242,938.00
2009/10	338,150

In addition to these costs, completing the survey each year placed a considerable burden on schools.

Social Work

Lisa Nandy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education whether the new Chief Social Worker for Children's Services will be recruited by his Department or the Department of Health. [127973]

Mr Timpson: The Chief Social Workers for both Children and Families and Adult Social Work will be recruited in a joint exercise by the Department for Education and the Department of Health.

Special Educational Needs

Charlotte Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for Education how many children in each local authority area (a) are on school action, (b) are on school action plus and (c) have a statement of special educational needs. [128175]

Mr Timpson: The requested information has been placed in the House Libraries.

The latest special educational needs information is published in the 'Special Educational Needs in England, January 2012' Statistical First Release at

<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001075/index.shtml>

Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what estimate he has made of the number of children currently in receipt of a statement of special educational need who will be eligible for an education, health and care plan; and if he will make a statement. [127538]

Mr Timpson: As at January 2012 there were 230,155 children with statements of special educational need (SEN) maintained by local authorities. In September 2012, the Government published draft provisions on reforming support for special educational needs, for pre-legislative scrutiny. Under the draft provisions, any child or young person who would be eligible for a statement of SEN currently would be eligible for an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in future. The Government is considering possible arrangements for transition of those with statements of SEN to EHCPs in future, learning from the SEND pathfinders.

Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education how many children currently placed on the School Action programme (a) will and (b) will not be eligible for the new education, health and care plan; and if he will make a statement. [127539]

Mr Timpson: Under our Green Paper proposals for Special Educational Needs, reflected in the draft legislation currently subject to pre-legislative scrutiny, any child or young person who would be eligible for a statement of SEN currently would be eligible for an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in future.

School Action is not a centrally stipulated programme and the classification is used by different schools and local authorities in different ways. It is not formally a precursor to a statement, and many pupils with SEN will have their needs met while supported under School Action or School Action Plus without needing a statement. However, the majority of children with statements will have originally been on the School Action or School Action Plus as, in line with the SEN Code of Practice, local authority guidance to schools usually specifies that in most cases support under School Action or School Action Plus should have been tried before requesting a statement.

This is expected to continue under our new arrangements, and we are also looking at how to bring together the School Action and School Action Plus categories to help secure better teaching and support for those that do not have an EHCP. Any child that would have gone on to have a statement after being supported under School Action would in the future go on to have an EHCP.

Mrs Hodgson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education with reference to his draft Children and Families Bill, whether he proposes to transfer funding from the Education Funding Agency to local authorities to administer the education of young people aged 16 to 25 years old with a disability or learning difficulty. [127728]

Mr Timpson: From April 2013 the Department will be transferring funds from the Education Funding Agency to local authorities' Dedicated Schools Grant allocations to enable them to pay for the additional education support costs of those students, aged 16 to 25-years-old, with high level learning difficulties or disabilities. The Department has consulted on regulations which will continue to allow local authorities to use this grant for costs and overheads associated with the administration of funds in support of these young people. These regulations are planned to take effect from next April. Local authorities will continue to be funded directly to cover the costs of assessing children and young people where necessary and developing an EHCP under the new arrangements.

CABINET OFFICE

Big Lottery Fund

Rehman Chishti: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many (a) successful and (b) unsuccessful applications for Big Lottery funding were received from (i) Gillingham and Rainham constituency, (ii) Medway and (iii) the UK in each of the last five years. [128629]

Mr Hurd: This information is owned by Big Lottery Fund. The following tables provide the number of awards made and the number of unsuccessful applications received from the Gillingham and Rainham constituency, Medway, and the UK in each of the last five years. The figures refer only to full applications and include applications that were withdrawn by the applicant.

Gillingham and Rainham

Financial year	Number of awards	Number of unsuccessful applications
2007-08	7	10
2008-09	9	12
2009-10	13	9
2010-11	7	9
2011-12	7	9

Medway

Financial year	Number of awards	Number of unsuccessful applications
2007-08	21	35
2008-09	24	46
2009-10	15	37
2010-11	24	43
2011-12	22	31

UK-wide

Financial year	Number of awards	Number of unsuccessful applications
2007-08	14,231	19,037
2008-09	12,345	13,527
2009-10	13,984	13,437
2010-11	11,880	17,476
2011-12	12,376	14,315

Military Medals Review

Nicola Blackwood: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will publish the names and qualifications of the members of the Independent Military Medals Review panel. [128160]

Mr Hurd: Sir John Holmes GCVO KBE CMG is leading the review supported by Brigadier (Retd) Brian A. H. Parritt CBE. Sir John Holmes' qualifications are detailed in Annex J of his Military Medals Interim review at:

www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Medals-Interim-Report-July-12.pdf

Brigadier Parritt served for 37 years in the British Army, culminating in five years as Director of the Intelligence Corps. Throughout Brigadier Parritt's service he held a variety of senior Intelligence and Security appointments all over the world, including Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Malta, Libya and Cyprus. He is a graduate of Hong Kong University in Chinese (Mandarin) and the Staff College, Camberley; he is a Freeman of the City of London and from 1981 to 1985, was an Aide de Camp to Her Majesty the Queen. In 1986 he was appointed Honorary Colonel of the Intelligence Corps Volunteers and in 2001 was appointed to be the first Deputy Colonel Commandant of the Intelligence Corps. He was Chairman of the Intelligence Corps Museum Board of Trustees for 20 years and remains a Trustee. In 2008 he was presented with the "Annual Award for Distinguished Service to the Intelligence Corps".

Procurement

Jon Trickett: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the staffing to spend ratio for procuring services is in his Department. [128254]

Mr Hurd: The Cabinet Office has a small core team of procurement officials to run and manage procurement for the Department. The Cabinet Office also uses the Government Procurement Service's Spot Buying Team to procure goods and services.

Details of spend on goods and services are published on the Cabinet Office website at:

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/business-plan-quarterly-data-summary>

PRIME MINISTER

Cabinet: Bristol

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what criteria were used to determine the venue for the Cabinet meeting which took place in Bristol on 12 November 2012; [128694]

(2) from which budgets expenses for travel for (a) himself and (b) each other member of Cabinet to attend the Cabinet meeting in Bristol on 12 November 2012 were drawn; [128695]

(3) whether he (a) sought and (b) received advice from the Cabinet Secretary on the appropriateness of the venue and timing of the Cabinet meeting held in Bristol on 12 November 2012; [128696]

(4) on what date it was agreed to hold the meeting of the Cabinet which took place in Bristol on 12 November 2012; [128697]

(5) what the cost to the public purse was of the Cabinet meeting held in Bristol on 12 November 2012. [128698]

The Prime Minister: Regional Cabinets and associated visits allow Ministers to hear at first hand the views of people in different areas of the country. The region, timing and venue of the Cabinet meeting were decided in consultation with the Cabinet Secretary.

There was no cost for using the venue. Departments and agencies will have incurred costs in terms of travel, staff time and other support. The cost of any security provided by the police is a matter for the relevant police force.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Green Deal Scheme

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what criteria he used to assess which cities should receive part of the £12 million green deal pilot funding announced by his Department on 21 September 2012. [128651]

Gregory Barker: The cities awarded funding were those that had been identified as part of the Cabinet Office's City Deal's programme. Funding to support Green Deal related work was allocated based on the cities' Green Deal bids and the populations these covered.

The Department remains in discussion with Liverpool regarding funding its plans to test key elements of the Green Deal.

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change pursuant to the oral answer of 1 November 2012, *Official Report*,

column 357, on Green Deal, how many telephone calls have been received by the energy saving advice service helpline since its launch. [128652]

Gregory Barker: The Energy Saving Advice Service (ESAS) helpline has answered 79,029 calls since the service started on 2 April 2012 until the end of October 2012.

The average calls ESAS answered per week in April were 2,807 whereas in October they were 4,484.

Local Government

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change pursuant to the answer of 7 November 2012, *Official Report*, column 635W, on Local Government, for what reasons his Department has not yet facilitated meetings between the Local Government Association and other Government Departments. [128653]

Gregory Barker: The Local Government Association meets regularly with other Government Departments, and it has not been necessary for DECC to facilitate them.

Natural Gas

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what (a) information his Department has received from OFGEM and (b) discussions he has had with OFGEM on steps taken by OFGEM since 2005 in relation to reports of misconduct in the UK gas market. [129008]

Mr Hayes [holding answer 19 November 2012]: Ofgem and the Financial Services Authority (FSA) are currently analysing information received in relation to allegations of price manipulation in the gas market. It is important not to pre-empt the work of the enforcement agencies whilst they assess the detail.

I am not aware of any conversations that the Department has had with Ofgem in relation to reports of misconduct in the UK gas market since 2005.

Pay

Mr Raab: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many employees in his Department are paid in excess of (a) £80,000 and (b) £100,000. [128558]

Gregory Barker: The Department of Energy and Climate Change has (a) 21 employees who are paid in excess of £80,000 and (b) 13 employees who are paid in excess of £100,000.

This information is accurate as of 30 September 2012.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Dyslexia

Andrew Stephenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what support his Department provides to help people with dyslexia find employment. [128934]

Esther McVey: DWP Jobcentre Plus advisers focus on providing a personalised, flexible service. This approach recognises that individuals may have conditions or circumstances that require different levels of support. They will discuss with the claimant how significantly they are affected by their disability, in relation to employment. They will also help the individual to agree job goals and the best way forward into employment, which may include whichever 'Get Britain Working' measures are offered locally, or referral to contracted programmes, such as the Work programme or other non contracted provision, if appropriate.

Anyone who requires more specialist help, because of their disability, will be able to see a disability employment adviser, who can identify suitable job opportunities, support the completion of job application forms, while acting as an advocate for the individual, in approaches made to potential employers. They will also aim to identify work solutions, overcoming or minimising any difficulties, relating to a claimant's disability. If they are having difficulty in identifying work solutions, they will seek help from a DWP work psychologist. They will be aware of appropriate local support organisations, where they are available.

DWP also chairs the Hidden Impairments National Group which is working to help overcome barriers to employment, including Dyslexia.

Disability employment advisers are also able to refer claimants to the Work programme. However, the Work programme may not be the best option for all disabled customers. Work choice and residential training sits alongside the Work programme, helping disabled people who face the most complex barriers, to finding and staying in employment.

When the individual finds a job, the disability employment adviser can signpost them to access to work, a specialist disability service, which is delivered by Jobcentre Plus, providing practical advice and support to disabled people and their employers, helping them overcome work-related obstacles, resulting from disability.

Employment and Support Allowance

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people were receiving incapacity benefit but, following a medical, were no longer entitled to employment and support allowance in (a) 2010-11 and (b) 2011-12. [128205]

Mr Hoban: On 6 November 2012 the Department for Work and Pensions published official statistics on the reassessment of incapacity benefits claimants for employment and support allowance (ESA). The report and its supplementary tables can be found at:

http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/workingage/index.php?page=esa_ibr

Personal Independence Payment

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what consideration was given to Atos' record in respect of the work capability assessment before awarding it the contract for the personal independence payment assessment. [128587]

Esther McVey: Atos were successful in Lots 1 and 3 following an open and fair competition and were assessed against established and published selection criteria. The full criteria, scoring methodology and specification were published on Business Link's Contract Finder website.

<http://www.contractsfinder.businesslink.gov.uk/>

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what criteria his Department used to award the contract for the personal independence payment assessment in south England. [128646]

Esther McVey: The providers in each lot were successful following a robust, open and fair competition and were assessed against established and published selection criteria. The criteria for each of the lots were the same. The full criteria, scoring methodology and specification were published on Business Link's Contract Finder website.

<http://www.contractsfinder.businesslink.gov.uk/>

Sheila Gilmore: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions whether his Department plans to undertake a public consultation on any guidance to be issued to assessment providers for personal independence payments; and when he expects to publish any such guidance. [128713]

Esther McVey: The guidance on carrying out personal independence payment will be subject to ongoing update and refinement. While we do not intend to run a formal public consultation on the guidance, we will publish it and will consider any comments received from interested parties. We also expect assessment providers to work with organisations of and for disabled people as they develop their own, more detailed guidance and training products.

Social Security Benefits: Disability

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what recent assessment he has made of The Tipping Point report produced by the Hardest Hit campaign; and if he will make a statement. [128647]

Esther McVey: No formal assessment of the "Tipping Point" report has been undertaken but the Government welcomes any views from disabled people or their representatives regarding the changes we are introducing.

Our welfare reforms will ensure the billions we spend, better reflect today's understanding of disability and offer the targeted support disabled people need to live independent lives.

Sheila Gilmore: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what guidance his Department has issued to Atos and Capita on the active gathering of written evidence about the disability of a claimant with (a) autism and (b) any other life-long condition before arranging a face-to-face assessment; [128708]

(2) what guidance his Department plans to issue to providers of the personal independence payment assessment process on (a) the role of the provider in collecting written evidence relating to the claimant's disability and (b) the determination of claimants to be invited for a face-to-face consultation. [128712]

Esther McVey: As part of the personal independence payment assessment we intend to make greater use of appropriate evidence to support claims. Evidence may be sent in with the claim form or requested by the provider where appropriate.

Further evidence will not be requested in all cases. Health professionals should seek additional evidence, where they believe that it would help inform their advice. The decision to request further evidence should consider the circumstances of the individual case and whether further evidence is likely to add value to the assessment process.

Health professionals will carry out assessments on the basis of paper evidence in cases where they believe there is sufficient and robust evidence to provide advice on how the assessment criteria relate to the claimant.

If there is insufficient evidence for a paper-based assessment, a face-to-face consultation will be necessary to accurately assess the claimant.

While face-to-face consultations will be an important part of the assessment for many individuals, allowing an in-depth look at their circumstances, they will not be appropriate in every case. For example, we will not be requiring people claiming under the terminal illness provisions to attend face-to-face consultations.

We will give providers guidance on carrying out personal independence payment assessments, including carrying out paper-based assessments, inviting claimants to face-to-face consultations and on the collection of evidence.

The guidance will not advise on whether further evidence should be sought or when a face-to-face consultation will be appropriate in relation to specific health conditions or impairments. Health conditions and/or disabilities can affect people in very different ways and all decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis.

Universal Credit

Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will discuss the implementation of universal credit with the Business Application Software Developers Association. [128588]

Mr Hoban: We remain committed to keeping Parliament updated on universal credit implementation and will, of course, listen to any representations from organisations such as the association mentioned.

Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of the number of employees who earn less than the lower earnings limit and do not fall within the PAYE scheme; and how such employees will establish their entitlement to universal credit. [128589]

Mr Hoban: It is estimated that there will be approximately 600,000 working individuals on universal credit once it is fully implemented earning less than the lower earnings limit and we only expect a small proportion of these to not be in PAYE schemes.

Claimants whose earnings are not made available through the RTI system, including those that are below the lower earnings limit, will establish entitlement by self-reporting their earnings.

Work Capability Assessment

Mike Crockart: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many appeals have been made by claimants deemed fit to work as a result of the work capability assessments for employment and support allowance in the latest period for which figures are available; and how many such appeals have resulted in the claimant being placed in the (a) work-related activity group and (b) support group. [128611]

Mr Hoban: The Department regularly publishes official statistics on employment and support allowance (ESA) and the work capability assessment (WCA). The latest report was published in October 2012 and can be found at:

http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/workingage/index.php?page=esa_wca

Comparing table 1a against table 4 in the supplementary tables of the publication mentioned above shows how many appeals have resulted in the claimant being placed in the work-related activity group and support group.

TRANSPORT

High Speed 2 Railway Line

Andrea Leadsom: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many properties situated (a) 100 metres or less and (b) over 100 metres from the route of the proposed HS2 line have been accepted onto the Exceptional Hardship Scheme. [128703]

Mr Simon Burns: The Department does not publish information relating to the distance from the line of route of successful applications to the HS2 Exceptional Hardship Scheme. There is no set distance within which properties qualify and the distance criterion is only one of five criteria assessed as part of an application. We do not believe it would be in the public interest to release this information as it risks providing misleading information to potential applicants that would undermine the effective working of the scheme.

West Coast Railway Line: Franchises

Mr Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to the answer of 24 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 897W, on West Coast Railway Line: franchises, what costs were incurred by his Department for consultancy services relating to the cancelled InterCity West Coast franchise competition. [128176]

Mr Simon Burns: The Department paid WS Atkins £471,080 (excluding VAT) for technical advisory services relating to the InterCity West Coast franchise competition.

The Department paid Eversheds LLP £340,859 (including non-recoverable VAT) for legal advisory services relating to the InterCity West Coast franchise competition.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Elected Office: Disabled People

6. **Amber Rudd:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what progress he has made on his proposals for additional support for disabled people to achieve elected office. [128853]

Miss Chloe Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to her by the Deputy Prime Minister at topical questions earlier today.

Voting Reform

9. **Dan Jarvis:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to reform voting methods for general elections. [128856]

Miss Chloe Smith: The Government has no further plans for changing voting methods for general elections but keeps all matters relating to the conduct of elections under review.

The Government has brought forward provisions in the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill to extend the timetable for UK parliamentary elections from 17 to 25 days. This will improve the service that is provided to voters, particularly overseas and service voters based abroad.

Individual Electoral Registration

10. **Jonathan Ashworth:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what his policy is on individual electoral registration; and if he will make a statement. [128857]

Miss Chloe Smith: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to questions 3 and 4 at oral questions earlier today.

Devolution: England

11. **Iain Stewart:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent progress the Government have made on devolution in England; and if he will make a statement. [128858]

The Deputy Prime Minister: The coalition agreement set out the Government's commitment to devolving power to the most appropriate level and there are many ways we are delivering this. We have created Local Enterprise Partnerships to drive growth; we are putting greater financial powers in the hands of local authorities through local government finance reforms; we have given local authorities a general power of competence; we have agreed one wave of city deals to hand over real powers and resources; and in October, the Government invited a second wave of cities to take part in a City Deal. We are also now considering the review from Lord Heseltine, who has brought forward many innovative recommendations to devolve powers to localities.

Parliamentary Boundaries

12. **Kevin Brennan:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent discussions he has had with the Boundary Commission on parliamentary boundaries. [128859]

Mr Betts: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent progress has been made on the review of parliamentary boundaries. [128855]

Miss Chloe Smith: The Boundary Commissions are continuing with the boundary review in accordance with the legislation which requires them to report before October 2013.

Flexible Parenting Leave

13. **Andrea Leadsom:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what role he envisages for flexible parenting arrangements as part of the social mobility strategy. [128860]

The Deputy Prime Minister: Good parenting has a crucial influence on child development, ensuring that children gain the cognitive and social skills they need to do well.

The Social Mobility Strategy set out our intention to help parents better balance work and home life. Last week I announced a range of new family-friendly policies, including flexible parental leave, which will do just that: replacing the outdated and inflexible system of maternity, paternity and adoption leave with a system which gives families the rights they need to choose what works best for them.

Trade Unions: Political Party Funding

14. **Mr David Amess:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what representations he has received on the role of trade unions in the funding of political parties. [128861]

Miss Chloe Smith: Cross-party talks on the reform of party political funding are ongoing. Reform is best achieved as far as possible by consensus, and the Government hopes agreement will be reached swiftly.

Lobbying

Jon Trickett: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) how much money his Department has spent on the lobbying reform agenda since January 2012; [128255]

(2) how many civil servants have been working on the lobbying reform agenda since January 2012; [128256]

(3) what external advice he has received on the lobbying agenda; how much such advice cost; and from which organisations such advice was sought. [128257]

Miss Chloe Smith: A variety of officials within the Cabinet Office dealt with lobbying reform as part of their duties. It is not possible to distinguish between the time they spent on lobbying reform and other issues. Other costs, from January to October 2012, were principally for the publication of the consultation document and totalled £1,391. Ministers paid for no external advice on the lobbying agenda, although a range of views have been received as part of the usual consultation process.

DEFENCE

Canada

Jim Shannon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many (a) Challenger tanks, (b) small armoured vehicles, (c) lorries and (d) Land Rovers were repaired at BATUS in Canada in each of the last five years; and what the total annual cost of these repairs was. [128442]

Mr Dunne: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Jim Shannon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress is being made on replacing the Gazelle helicopter at BATUS in Canada. [128448]

Mr Dunne: The British Army's Gazelle fleet, which is currently operated in the United Kingdom and at British Army training Unit Suffield (BATUS) in Canada, is due to be withdrawn from service in 2018. Options to provide the capability currently provided by the Gazelle Fleet beyond 2018 are being considered and a decision will be taken in due course.

Defence Information Infrastructure

Alison Seabeck: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library the findings of Project Embrace. [126657]

Mr Dunne: The document has been placed in the Library of the House.

Libya

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for which enduring tasks the Royal Navy was required to withdraw assets during the Libyan operations. [128706]

Dr Murrison: During the operations in Libya the Royal Navy reprioritised a number of its assets, some of which were nominally allocated to standing or contingent enduring tasks. A range of mitigation measures were put in place to manage any resultant impact on operations.

Marchwood Military Port

Dr Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the (a) current and (b) planned future duty roster is for protecting the Sea Mounting Centre at Marchwood on (i) weekdays and (ii) weekends of the (A) Defence Fire Service and (B) Hampshire Fire and Rescue; and if he will make a statement. [124617]

Mr Dunne [*holding answer 24 October 2012*]: The current arrangements at the Sea Mounting Centre Marchwood provide for a 24 hours seven days a week operational Fire and Rescue Service, consisting of one fire appliance and a minimum crew of 5 fire-fighters provided by the Defence Fire Risk Management Organisation (DFRMO).

The planned future arrangements will provide for an operational Fire and Rescue Service provided by DFRMO consisting of one fire appliance and a minimum crew of five fire-fighters during normal site operating hours only, primarily Monday to Friday working days; exact timings are yet to be agreed. In the event that higher risk activities are undertaken outside of normal site operating hours DFRMO will provide additional fire cover for the duration of the activity. Higher risk activities may include the loading and unloading of munitions or other hazardous cargo.

This decision follows a DFRMO risk assessment which identified areas where reductions in onsite fire and rescue services would not compromise Defence assets, public safety or prevent high risk activities from being undertaken.

The onsite fire cover arrangements identified are in addition to the normal Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service predetermined response to the site, which is considered to provide suitable response in line with the level of risk identified.

Military Aircraft

Mrs Moon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the ability of the RC135 Airseeker aircraft to meet the Military Aviation Authority's certification and release to source processes as required by the European Aviation Safety Agency Part 21 regulations; and if he will make a statement. [127981]

Mr Dunne: Ministry of Defence specialists are working closely with their counterparts in the US Air Force to ensure that the RC-135W aircraft will meet UK certification criteria and gain a Release to Service before it enters service in late 2014.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Algeria

Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when refugee camps in Tindouf province in Algeria were last visited by officials of his Department. [128276]

Alistair Burt: Officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office took part in the last annual World Food Programme/United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees donor mission to the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, in the second quarter of 2011. The 2012 visit has not yet taken place.

Eritrea

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received concerning human rights in Eritrea; what representations he has made to the Government of Eritrea; and what sanctions are in place. [128925]

Mark Simmonds: Eritrea's human rights record remains deeply concerning and this is reflected in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Human Rights Report. We closely monitor the human rights situation in Eritrea and our ambassador reports regularly on specific areas of concern. We also receive reports from other sources including the Diaspora and non-governmental organisations such as Reporters Without Borders and Human Rights Watch.

We regularly raise human rights issues with the Eritrean Government. Most recently, our ambassador raised human rights with President Isaias on 22 October. I also raised human rights with the Eritrean Presidential Advisor on 25 September. In July the UK supported the UN Human Rights Council Resolution which strongly condemned human rights abuses in Eritrea and called for the appointment of a Special Rapporteur.

In July, the UK supported UN Security Council Resolution 2060 which extended the mandate for the UN sanctions regime. We believe the sanctions, which include an arms embargo, are appropriate, proportionate and carefully targeted to prevent any negative humanitarian impact.

Iran

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects the next meeting of the E3+3 and Iran to be held. [128522]

Alistair Burt: The E3+3 have not yet set a date for their next meeting with Iran. E3+3 Political Directors will meet on 21 November to consider next steps. Iran needs to engage seriously if negotiations are to progress.

South Korea

Mr Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the Republic of Korea conducting whaling for scientific purposes; what his policy is on such activities; and what representations (a) he and (b) other Ministers have made on that subject. [128269]

Mr Swire: On 4 July 2012 at the Annual International Whaling Commission Meeting, the Republic of Korea announced it was considering plans to undertake whaling for scientific research in the future.

The UK believes lethal research on whales is unnecessary and undermines the International Whaling Commission's moratorium on commercial whaling.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), has not had any discussions with the Republic of Korea on conducting whaling for scientific purposes.

However, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Natural Environment, Water and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), made the UK's opposition to 'scientific' whaling clear at the International Whaling Commission meeting. On 17 July, he also wrote to his counterparts in the Republic of Korea, Mr Oh Jung-kyu, Vice Minister for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery, and Mr Bark Tae-ho, Minister for Trade, urging them to reconsider their plans.

The UK Government will continue to make our opposition to commercial and scientific whaling known at every appropriate opportunity.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Hillsborough

Stephen Pound: To ask the Attorney-General what progress he has made on preparing an application to the High Court for a new inquest into the Hillsborough disaster. [128880]

The Attorney-General: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the oral question from my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) today.

Mr Anderson: To ask the Attorney-General if he will expedite the inquest into the death of Kevin Williams who died in the Hillsborough disaster. [128456]

The Attorney-General: My role in relation to an inquest into the death of Kevin Williams is restricted to the powers given to me by section 13 of the Coroners

Act 1988 which is to apply to the High Court to quash the original inquest and order a new inquest to be held. The Court will do so if it is satisfied that the evidence before it makes a new inquest necessary or desirable in the interests of justice. I am in the process of preparing such an application for all the inquests into the deaths of all the victims of the Hillsborough disaster and expect to do so in December. If new inquests are ordered, the timing of the inquests will be a matter for the coronial process.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Broadband

Graham Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport on what date she was informed that the introduction of the 4G spectrum would adversely affect television reception in certain areas. [128701]

Mr Vaizey: The Government has been aware of the potential impact of 4G mobile services in the 800 MHz band on digital television reception in certain areas for some time. Ofcom's technical analysis indicates that around 2.3 million households could be affected, of which 900,000 are likely to rely on digital terrestrial television for their primary viewing. Ofcom held public consultations on the matter in June 2011 and February 2012. The Government wrote to Ofcom in July 2012 to set out its position on the mitigation of interference into the digital television service at 800 MHz and the support that will be offered to consumers, details can be found using the following link:

www.culture.gov.uk/news/news_stories/9193.aspx

4G mobile services are important for economic growth and are likely to add £300 million p.a. to UK GDP.

Graham Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what consideration her Department gave to notifying people in potentially affected areas of the adverse effect of 4G spectrum services on television reception. [128702]

Mr Vaizey: My letter of 10 July 2012 to the Chief Executive of Ofcom, details available here:

www.culture.gov.uk/news/news_stories/9193.aspx

makes clear that I will require the new 800 MHz licensees to take steps to mitigate interference for the 900,000 households that are likely to be affected and rely on digital terrestrial television for their primary viewing. This includes informing the public, providing filters to mitigate interference free of charge, providing specific support for vulnerable consumers and, where necessary, delivering platform changes. These conditions will be included in the 800 MHz licences which Ofcom will award to successful bidders next spring and the performance of the licensees monitored by an independent Oversight Board currently being established by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Graham Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what steps she plans to take to ensure that those people who will lose television reception as a result of the launch of the 4G mobile telephone spectrum are informed of available compensation schemes. [129091]

Mr Vaizey: The Government has made clear that it is the responsibility of the new 800 MHz licensees, who will be providing 4G mobile services which can interfere with the reception of digital terrestrial television, to take steps to mitigate interference, so that viewers do not lose access to television services. This support will be focused on the estimated 900,000 households who are likely to be affected and rely on digital terrestrial television for their primary viewing. This support will include informing the public, providing filters to mitigate interference free of charge, providing specific support for vulnerable consumers and, where necessary, delivering platform changes. These conditions, which include a requirement that the successful licensees fund, own and operate a joint company to deliver this support, will be included in the 800MHz licences which Ofcom will award to successful bidders next spring, and the performance of the licensees will be monitored by an independent Oversight Board currently being established by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Direct Selling

Oliver Colvile: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what steps her Department is taking to strengthen guidance to Ofcom aimed at stopping cold telephone calls. [120327]

Mr Vaizey [holding answer 10 September 2012]: Unsolicited telephone calls are a nuisance for consumers and are prohibited under the Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations (PECR) 2003 where made to a consumer who is registered with the Telephone Preference Service (TPS) and where the caller does not have prior consent for such calls. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has responsibility for enforcing the TPS and has powers to issue a fine of up to £500,000 for the most serious breaches of the regulations.

My Department is working to combat this problem and I met with ICO, Ofcom and TPS to press for further action in this area. As a result measures have been introduced that will help to provide more effective protection for consumers. To improve access to information for complaints Ofcom set up new website pages on 1 October at:

<http://consumers.ofcom.org.uk/tell-us/telecoms/privacy>

that provides clearer advice on nuisance calls, texts and e-mails and it also published a new Consumer Guide, which provides clearer information and signposts the correct place to make a complaint:

<http://consumers.ofcom.org.uk/2012/10/tackling-nuisance-calls-and-messages>

Employment Agencies

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what her policy is on the use of offshore employment companies in the supply of public sector workers in her Department and its associated public bodies. [128740]

Hugh Robertson: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport only uses centrally let Government Procurement Service contracts to procure contingent labour, which do not use offshore employment companies.

Music

Dan Jarvis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what the name is of each music hub in England supported by her Department. [128710]

Mr Vaizey: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) does not deliver the Music Education Hubs programme. The programme is administered by Arts Council England (ACE) on behalf of DCMS and the Department for Education. The information requested is available on the ACE website.

The following hubs started operating in September 2012.

<i>Music hub name</i>	<i>Area</i>
ArtForms	North
Arts First CIC	London
Barking and Dagenham Community Music Service	London
Barnet Music Service	London
Barnsley Music Service	North
Bath and North East Somerset Council	Midlands and South West
Bedford Borough Council	East and South East
Berkshire Maestros	East and South East
Bexley Music Service, Bird College	London
Birmingham Music Services	Midlands and South West
Blackburn with Darwen Music Service	North
Blackpool Music Service	North
Bolton Music Service	North
Brent Music Service	London
Brighton and Hove City Council	East and South East
Bristol City Council	Midlands and South West
Bromley Youth Music Trust	London
Buckinghamshire County Council	East and South East
Calderdale Council	North
Cambridgeshire County Council	East and South East
Camden Music Service	London
City of York Council	North
Cornwall Learning	Midlands and South West
Performing Arts Service	Midlands and South West
Croydon Music and Arts	London
Cumbria Music Service	North
Derbyshire City and County Music Service	Midlands and South West
Devon LDP Music Service	Midlands and South West
Doncaster Music Service	North
Dorset Music Service	Midlands and South West
Dudley Performing Arts	Midlands and South West
Durham Music Service	North
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	North
East Sussex County Council	East and South East
Herefordshire Council	Midlands and South West
Enfield Arts Support Service	London
Essex County Council	East and South East
Forest Arts (Walsall)	Midlands and South West
Gateshead Council	North
Gloucestershire Music Service	Midlands and South West
Greenwich Music Services	London
Hampshire County Council Music Service	East and South East
Haringey Music and Performing Arts Centre	London
Harrow Music Service	London

<i>Music hub name</i>	<i>Area</i>
Hertfordshire County Council	East and South East
Hounslow Music Service	London
Hull Music Service	North
Inspiring Music	East and South East
Isle of Wight Music Service	East and South East
Kensington and Chelsea	London
Kent Music	East and South East
Kingston Music Service	London
Kirklees Music School	North
Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council	North
Lambeth Music Service	London
Lancashire Music Service	North
Leicester And Leicestershire Arts In Education	Midlands and South West
Lewisham Music Service	London
Lincolnshire Music Service	Midlands and South West
Liverpool Music Support Service	North
London Borough of Ealing	London
London Borough of Hackney	London
London Borough of Havering	London
London Borough of Hillingdon	London
London Borough of Redbridge	London
London Borough of Southwark	London
Luton Lifelong Department—Emt	East and South East
Manchester City Council	North
Medway Council Unitary Authority	East and South East
Merton Music Foundation	London
Milton Keynes Music Service	East and South East
Music and Arts Service	North
Music and Performing Arts Service	North
Newcastle City Council	North
Newham Music Trust	London
Northamptonshire M & P Arts Trust	Midlands and South West
Norfolk Music and Education Service	East and South East
North Lines Music Support service	North
North Somerset Music Service	Midlands and South West
North Tyneside Music Service	North
North Yorkshire County Music Service	North
Nottingham City Council	Midlands and South West
Nottinghamshire County Council	Midlands and South West
Oxfordshire County Music Service	East and South East
Peterborough City Council	East and South East
Plymouth Youth Music Service	Midlands and South West
Portsmouth Music Service	East and South East
Richmond Music Trust	London
Rotherham Schools' Music Service	North
Sandbach School	North
Sandwell Music Service	Midlands and South West
Sefton Council	North
Sheffield Music Service	North
Shropshire Music Service	Midlands and South West
Slough Borough Council	East and South East
Solihull Music Service	Midlands and South West
Somerset County Council	Midlands and South West
SoundStorm	Midlands and South West
South Gloucestershire Council	Midlands and South West
Southampton City Council, Southampton Music Services	East and South East
Southend-On-Sea Borough Council	East and South East
St Helens Council Music Service	North
Staffordshire Performing Arts	Midlands and South West
Suffolk County Music Service	East and South East
Sunderland City Council	North

<i>Music hub name</i>	<i>Area</i>
Surrey Arts (Surrey County Council)	East and South East
Sutton Music Service	London
Swindon Music Service	Midlands and South West
Tees Valley Music Service	North
Telford and Wrekin Music	Midlands and South West
Thurrock Music Services	East and South East
Torbay Music Service	Midlands and South West
Tower Hamlets Arts and Music Education Service (THAMES)	London
Uppingham Community College	Midlands and South West
Wakefield Music Services	North
Wandsworth Schools' Music Service	London
Warks Arts and Cultural Education	Midlands and South West
Warrington Borough Council	North
West Sussex County Council	East and South East
Wiltshire Music Service	Midlands and South West
Wirral Local Authority	North
Wolverhampton Music Service	Midlands and South West
Worcestershire County Council	Midlands and South West

Social Networking: Advertising

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport if she will ask the Advertising Standards Authority to investigate the use of advergames targeted at young people in relation to the marketing of high fat, sugar or salt foods to children. [127947]

Mr Vaizey: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) on 13 November 2012, *Official Report*, column 117W.

HEALTH

Autism

Mrs Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the level of services received by people with autism and families caring for people with autism. [128556]

Norman Lamb: The review of the 2010 adult autism strategy “Fulfilling and Rewarding Lives”, which will take place from April to October next year, is an opportunity for Government to take stock and consider where further action is required to realise the vision of improving the lives of people with autism. As part of the review, we will listen to the voices of those best qualified to give us their perspective on the services they receive. In a memorandum to the Committee of Public Accounts of 17 July 2012, the National Audit Office stated that considerable progress had already been made in the two years since the strategy was published.

Carbon Monoxide: Poisoning

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department has taken to make the public aware of the symptoms associated with carbon monoxide poisoning; and whether he plans to take further steps to raise public awareness. [128971]

Anna Soubry: The Department seeks to raise the awareness of the symptoms associated with carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning by raising medical professional

and general awareness of CO. As part of that process the then interim Chief Medical Officer and Chief Nursing Officer published updated guidance on the diagnosis of CO poisoning on 11 November 2010. This is available at:

www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Lettersandcirculars/Professionalletters/Chiefmedicalofficerletters/DH_121502

Furthermore an estimate of 4,000 patients per year attending accident and emergency departments and diagnosed with CO poisoning was published in November 2011 to highlight the serious health impact of CO poisoning as well as the symptoms and effects of CO poisoning. This is available at:

www.dh.gov.uk/health/2011/11/co-poisoning/

NHS Choices also provides comprehensive information on CO poisoning and its symptoms and a NHS leaflet is also available. These are available at:

www.nhs.uk/conditions/Carbon-monoxide-poisoning/Pages/Introduction.aspx

and;

www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_090124

The Department has also included CO awareness messages in this year's Cold Weather Plan for England, where CO safety is given as a top tip for staying healthy in winter and in the Keep Warm Keep Well leaflet. These are available at:

<http://www.dh.gov.uk/health/2012/10/cwp-2012/>

and;

www.dh.gov.uk/health/2012/11/keep-warm/

As part of its ongoing activities to raise awareness of CO poisoning and its symptoms the Health Protection Agency will be publishing a press release at the start of CO Awareness Week to raise awareness of CO through the national media. The Department is also preparing information to be published on the Get Ready for Winter web page. This site encourages individuals, families and communities to think about what winter preparations they can make to help them stay warm, healthy and safe.

Health Services

Mr Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) by what date he expects joint strategic needs assessments of health and wellbeing strategies for local authorities to be complete; [128683]

(2) which bodies will be responsible for the publication of joint strategic needs assessments of health and wellbeing strategies for local authorities outside London. [128684]

Norman Lamb: Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs) and Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategies (JHWSs) are continuous local strategic planning processes, and from 1 April 2013 will be an integral part of clinical commissioning groups and local authority commissioning cycles. Local authorities and clinical commissioning groups have a duty to undertake JSNAs and JHWSs, although they must be discharged by the health and wellbeing board established in every upper-tier local authority.

Under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, the commissioning intentions of local authorities, clinical commissioning groups, and the NHS Commissioning

Board must be informed by relevant JSNAs and JHWSs. However, there is no nationally set deadline or timetable for JSNAs and JHWSs—health and wellbeing boards will need to decide for themselves when to update or undertake fresh JSNAs and JHWSs in line with local commissioning cycles and to ensure that they are able to inform local commissioning plans over time.

Under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, JSNAs and JHWSs must be published by the responsible local authority.

Homeopathy

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many London primary care trusts and commissioning bodies have contracts with the Royal Homeopathic Hospital; and what advice his Department gives on homeopathic treatments. [128923]

Anna Soubry: The Royal Homeopathic Hospital (now known as the Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine) is part of the University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (UCLH). NHS London has advised that three primary care trust clusters in London currently have contracts with UCLH.

The Department does not maintain a position on any particular complementary or alternative medicine treatments including homeopathy. It is the responsibility of local national health service organisations to make decisions on the commissioning and funding of any healthcare treatments for NHS patients, such as homeopathy, taking account of issues to do with safety, clinical and cost-effectiveness and the availability of suitably qualified/regulated practitioners.

Mental Health Services

Chris Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of expenditure by his Department on the NHS was spent on mental health services in each of the last 10 years. [128790]

Norman Lamb: Comparable figures for the period requested are not available. However, the following table shows expenditure on mental health as a proportion of overall health service expenditure from 2003-04 to 2010-11. This data includes estimates of expenditure by the Department of Health and NHS (including primary care trusts, strategic health authorities and special health authorities).

	<i>Mental health expenditure (£ billion)</i>	<i>Total expenditure (£ billion)</i>	<i>Mental health expenditure as percentage of total expenditure (percentage)</i>
2003-04	7.39	67.60	10.9
2004-05	7.91	71.92	11.0
2005-06	8.54	80.19	10.6
2006-07	9.13	84.19	10.8
2007-08	10.28	93.18	11.0
2008-09	10.48	96.81	10.8
2009-10	11.26	103.97	10.8
2010-11	11.91	107.00	11.1

Chris Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number and proportion of people with mental illnesses who have received treatment for their condition in each of the last 10 years. [128791]

Norman Lamb: The exact information is not held centrally. However, the following table shows the available

information on the number of people using secondary mental health services.

Number of people using adult and elderly NHS secondary mental health services by highest level of care, 2003-04 to 2010-11

	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Total number of people	1,079,016	1,132,434	1,149,472	1,151,260	1,190,542	1,222,365	1,270,731	1,285,594
Admitted ¹	113,772	114,435	111,088	106,561	105,719	102,571	107,765	104,645
Non-admitted ²	814,252	916,534	930,374	936,629	982,704	1,026,366	1,078,091	1,094,138
No care ³	150,992	101,465	108,010	108,070	102,119	93,428	84,875	86,811

¹ Identifies records that included in-patient care.

² Identifies records that included a recorded contact, attendance or review with out-patient or community services.

³ Identifies records that show no evidence of services in contact with the person during the reporting period.

Note:

In the above table, individuals are counted only once during a single year.

Source:

Health and Social Care Information Centre Mental Health Minimum Dataset 2003-04 to 2010-11 annual returns

Musculoskeletal Disorders

Andrew Gwynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the needs of people with musculoskeletal conditions in relation to personal health budgets. [128535]

Norman Lamb: The personal health budgets pilot programme ran from 2009 to 2012 and the results of the final evaluation of the pilot will be published later this year. Five interim evaluation reports have been published, which can be found at:

www.phbe.org.uk

The programme did not specifically include a cohort of people with musculoskeletal conditions, but the interim evaluation reports make clear that many people involved in the pilots had additional health conditions such as arthritis, osteoporosis, and back and joint problems.

Departmental officials have worked with organisations concerned with musculoskeletal conditions, including Arthritis Research UK, who produced a report in July 2012 entitled 'Personal health budgets: perspectives from people with arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions'.

The Mandate from the Government to the NHS Commissioning Board, published on 13 November, sets a clear objective that patients who could benefit—which could include people with musculoskeletal conditions—should have the option to hold their own personal health budget, subject to the evaluation of the pilot programme.

Andrew Gwynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the provision of aids and adaptations for people with musculoskeletal conditions. [128536]

Norman Lamb: The Department has not assessed the provision of aids and adaptations for people with musculoskeletal conditions. However, national health service aids and adaptations are funded free of charge for NHS patients who need them.

NHS: Private Finance Initiative

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list all private finance schemes approved by the NHS in London in (a) 2009, (b) 2010, (c) 2011 and (d) 2012 to date, by the value and repayment term of each. [128924]

Anna Soubry: Information on the capital value and estimated annual revenue payments for the lifetime of each signed national health service private finance initiative (PFI) contract can be found on HM Treasury's website at:

www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/pfi_current_projects_list_march_2012.xls

These are the latest estimates collected from each Department for end of March 2012; the health sector schemes are clearly marked "Department of Health" and then "DH-Acute (i.e. Hospitals)". Schemes approved by NHS bodies in London are identified by 'London' in Column G; the year the schemes were approved is identified by 'Date of Financial Close, in Column K (no new PFI scheme has been signed, since February 2010); the initial capital cost of each scheme is shown in Column R; and the estimated annual revenue payment in the columns headed 'Unitary Charge Payment'.

The revenue payment figures include not just the financing costs for initial construction but also the costs of all the other services such as building maintenance and support services (cleaning, catering, portering etc) provided over the lifetime of the contract. The payments are subject to meeting agreed performance and quality standards and include an annual uprate assumption for inflation of 2.5%.

NHS: Staff

Rosie Cooper: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what information and assurance he has received from the leadership of (a) the NHS Commissioning Board, (b) Health Education England, (c) Public Health England, (d) the NHS Trust Development Agency, (e) Monitor and (f) the Care Quality Commission that the workforce, including senior management, will be diverse and proportionately representative of the communities that they serve; [128584]

(2) what steps he has taken to ensure that the current reorganisation of the NHS does not result in a disproportionately negative outcome for existing NHS staff in the groups protected by the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty; [128585]

(3) what steps he has taken to ensure that after the current reorganisation of the NHS, the composition of both management and frontline staff in the NHS reflects the communities that they serve; [128586]

(4) what directions he has given to the chief executives and boards of (a) the NHS Commissioning Board, (b) Health Education England, (c) Public

Health England, (d) the NHS Trust Development Agency, (e) Monitor and (f) Care and Quality Commission on (i) diversity in general, (ii) groups protected by the Equality Act 2010 and (iii) the Public Sector Equality Duty; [128649]

(5) what steps he has taken to monitor the diversity of the organisations which will assume responsibility for the oversight of the NHS workforce development and national and local commissioning decisions from April 2013 for the purpose of ensuring that the NHS reflects the communities that it serves. [128650]

Anna Soubry: The HR Transition Framework, published in July 2011 sets a duty on employers to pay due regard to relevant employment law, equality legislation, and the public sector equality duty to ensure that decisions made during the transition that affect staff are fair/transparent, accountable, evidence based and consider the needs and rights of the workforce. In addition, the proposed changes offer a real opportunity for employers to put the advancement of equality and fairness at the heart of decision-making, demonstrating their commitment to diversity and ensuring the skills and competencies reflect the organisation's future needs. To further support the national health service and new organisations during the transition period, the Department provided bespoke Equality Protocol guidance to complement existing Equality legislation. A copy of this has been placed in the Library.

Under the public sector Equality Duty, public authorities are required to publish information to demonstrate their compliance with the public sector Equality Duty at least annually. This information must include, in particular, information relating to people who share a protected characteristic who are its employees (public authorities with fewer than 150 employees are exempt); and people affected by its policies and practices. Equality objectives must be published every four years, and be specific and measurable.

The Department and the former Equality and Diversity Council have actively raised awareness of and provided information about the Equality Act 2010. This includes the publication of the Equality Delivery System (EDS) in 2011, a tool kit developed by the NHS to support NHS organisations to meet the public sector Equality Duty of the Equality Act.

The quality of care is closely related to how well organisations engage, manage and support their own staff. The NHS Constitution includes important pledges to staff who provide NHS care, and the NHS Commissioning Board (NHS CB) is required to promote the NHS Constitution in carrying out its functions. The NHS CB also has a statutory duty to promote education and training, to support an effective system for its planning and delivery. The NHS CB should support Health Education England in ensuring that the health workforce has the right values, skills and training to enable excellent care.

As part of the authorisation process for Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), CCGs must declare that they will be compliant with the public sector equality duty and can demonstrate the use of the Equality Delivery System or equivalent to help attain compliance and ensure good equality performance. The NHS CB has published supporting information for CCGs about this.

The NHS Operating Framework 2012-13 also made clear, that all NHS organisations must comply with the Equality Act 2010 and the public sector Equality Duty. NHS Employers has also made guidance on the Act, including information on employment issues, available to NHS bodies.

David Behan, the then Director General of Social Care, Local Government and Care Partnerships at the Department of Health, wrote to Senior Responsible Officers for the Transition Programme on 23 May 2012 outlining the need to ensure Equality and Diversity was embedded within their respective programmes. He also offered guidance, support and training from the Department's Equality and Inclusion team to assist in the compliance of their respective programme with Equality legislation.

The Department has also issued information to support NHS bodies to implement the ban on age discrimination in health and care services, which came into force in October 2012.

Palliative Care

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent steps he has taken to promote hospices and palliative care. [128211]

Norman Lamb: The Government confirmed its commitment to improving quality and choice in palliative and end of life care in the White Paper 'Equity and excellence: Liberating the NHS'.

The Department's 'End of Life Care Strategy' provides a blueprint for improving these services for adults. The Strategy's 'Fourth Annual Report', published in October 2012, sets out the latest progress in implementing the strategy. The report is available on the Department's website at:

www.dh.gov.uk/health/2012/10/end-of-life-care-fourth/

We recognise the important role that hospices play in delivering quality end of life care services. Following a commitment in the coalition agreement, we are working to develop a new per-patient funding system for palliative care, which will apply to all providers, including hospices. Working through pilots, we are collecting a range of data to help us develop the new funding system, which we aim to have in place by 2015.

In addition, we are making £60 million capital funding available to improve the environment in which adult and children's hospices provide care. Successful applicants for this fund will be notified in March 2013 and the scheme will complete in March 2014.

Specifically for children's services, the Department announced on 7 November the awards from the £721,000 funding made available to new children's hospices. This is in addition to the annual £10 million for established children's hospices. Information is available at:

www.dh.gov.uk/health/2012/11/hospice-grant/

Prostate Cancer

Laura Sandys: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the amount of Government funding specifically for prostate cancer has increased in real terms in the last five years. [128635]

Anna Soubry: The vast majority of funding for prostate cancer is allocated to primary care trusts (PCTs) as part of their annual allocation. It is not ring-fenced as it is for individual PCTs to assess their populations' health needs and to allocate their resources to meet those needs.

The only funding specifically set aside for prostate cancer is for the Prostate Cancer Risk Management Programme (PCRMP). Since 2002, the PCRMP has been in place to ensure that men over 50 without symptoms of prostate cancer can have a prostate specific antigen (PSA) test free on the national health service after careful consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of PSA testing and after a discussion with a general practitioner.

NHS Cancer Screening Programmes (NHS CSP) is responsible for the management of the PCRMP and funding provided to NHS CSP for the PCRMP in each of the last five years was £232,000. It is for NHS CSP to determine the final amount needed to deliver the PCRMP.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Africa

Mr Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the contribution of the International Labour Organization's CoopAfrica programme in developing and updating co-operative policies and legislation in eastern and southern Africa; and if she will make a statement. [128583]

Lynne Featherstone: Following the Bilateral Aid Review in 2010, the Department for International Development (DFID) decided not to support the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) CoopAfrica programme into a second phase. Since then, the Secretary of State for International Development has not made any further assessment of the contribution of the International Labour Organisation's CoopAfrica programme in developing and updating co-operative policies and legislation in eastern and southern Africa.

While DFID no longer supports the CoopAfrica programme, DFID is supporting producers and others working in co-operatives through organisations such as the Fairtrade Foundation.

Mr Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment she has made of the effects of the withdrawal of funding for Phase 2 of the CoopAfrica Programme; and if she will make a statement. [128648]

Lynne Featherstone: Following the Department for International Development's (DFID) decision not to support a second phase of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) CoopAfrica programme, the Secretary of State for International Development has not made any further assessment of the programme.

Following the Multilateral Aid Review (MAR), DFID decided to cease voluntary contributions to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and does not plan to assess the ILO in the forthcoming MAR update.

Bangladesh

Mrs Main: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development pursuant to the answer of 22 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 724W, on Bangladesh, how the project increased accountability between the government and poor people. [128192]

Mr Duncan: The project contributed to the enactment and implementation of the Right to Information Act which allows the public to examine the extent to which officials' actions match their responsibilities and so hold them to account.

Mrs Main: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development pursuant to the answer of 22 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 724W, on Bangladesh, what technical assistance was provided with the drafting of the bill. [128193]

Mr Duncan: Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and speech and freedom of the press. To ensure the new Right to Information Act reflected international standards, the civil society organisation, Article 19, undertook a legal analysis of the draft and provided comprehensive suggestions to the Law Commission and the relevant stakeholders. The majority of the recommendations from the legal analysis were adopted.

Mrs Main: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development pursuant to the answer of 22 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 724W, on Bangladesh, which independent evaluation found that the project had made a far-reaching contribution. [128194]

Mr Duncan: All projects funded under DFID's Civil Society Challenge Fund (CSCF) project are required to commission an independent evaluation of the project. The evaluation is reviewed by the CSCF fund manager as part of DFID's assurance and learning process.

The independent evaluation for project titled, 'Access to Information for Greater Participation and Government Accountability', was done by a team of three independent evaluators in February 2010.

Mrs Main: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development pursuant to the answer of 22 October 2012, *Official Report*, columns 720-21W, on Bangladesh, whether any officials were removed from their posts for corruption as a result of Transparency International Bangladesh's project. [128348]

Mr Duncan: None. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) does not claim to have had Bangladeshi political or government officials removed from their posts as a direct result of its work. It works for improvements in the systems to prevent, detect and prosecute cases of corruption.

One of TIB's priorities between 2003 and 2008 was the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). TIB drafted the Bangladesh Anti-Corruption Act of 2004, which led to the set-up of the ACC. Since 2004, the ACC has lodged corruption cases against

approximately 1,500 high-level politicians, officials and business persons, of whom 237 have been convicted. This is an indirect result of DFID's support to TIB between 2003 and 2008.

Mrs Main: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development pursuant to the answer of 22 October 2012, *Official Report*, columns 720-1W, on Bangladesh, what figures her Department holds on the improvement in outcome produced by the Committees of Concerned Citizens that Transparency International Bangladesh established. [128349]

Mr Duncan: From 2003 to 2007, Committees of Concerned Citizens (CCCs) worked to improve systems to prevent corruption in 36 local government bodies (Districts or Municipalities), 36 hospitals and 36 schools.

As a result, more people were able to obtain cards entitling them to state benefits; advice from CCCs helped local government bodies to close tax loopholes and improve local revenue collection, to invest in public services, hospital patients saved money on "unofficial fees" and were able to see doctors and obtain medicines from the hospital more regularly, and student attendance at the targeted schools improved.

Mrs Main: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of Harewelle International's distribution of her Department's aid in Bangladesh on the Economic Empowerment of the Poorest project. [128350]

Mr Duncan: DFID undertakes mandatory independent annual reviews of the programme and the managing agent's performance. The geographical distribution was in keeping with the programme design. The programme has also fully complied with all financial management requirements.

Mrs Main: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the Extreme Poverty Action Research Group in the Economic Empowerment of the Poorest Project programme in Bangladesh. [128351]

Mr Duncan: The 2011 annual review of the Extreme Poverty Action Research Group in the Economic Empowerment of the Poorest Project programme concluded that the Extreme Poverty Research Group produced important research findings on both the characteristics and the dynamics of extreme poverty. It also noted that the Extreme Poverty Research Group provides robust evidence to support advocacy work on extreme poverty issues in Bangladesh. To date 10 policy papers have been produced and published.

Mrs Main: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the Stimulating Household Improvements Resulting in Economic Empowerment project. [128353]

Mr Duncan: DFID has assessed the Stimulating Household Improvements Resulting in Economic Empowerment programme through three annual reviews since 2009. The 2011 review concluded that the programme was helping 347,900 people which exceeded the milestone of 254,800 for that period. This help included, for

example, increasing the extreme poor's assets through providing them with livestock and improving their skills to help increase their income and for better and more secure livelihoods.

Burma

Dr Offord: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether her Department has considered directing bilateral assistance to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. [129080]

Mr Duncan: DFID does not provide bilateral funding directly to assist the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. DFID does provide core contributions to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which manages the official camps, and to other organisations that provide support including the European Commission. We have raised the plight of the Rohingyas and their status with the Government of Bangladesh, both bilaterally and in concert with European Union partners.

DFID has allocated £2 million of bilateral funds for humanitarian relief for victims of violence in Rakhine state in Burma. This includes the supply of emergency water, sanitation and health care to more than 58,000 people affected by the outbreak of violence in Rakhine State.

Consultants

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much her Department has spent on consultants who were based in the UK since May 2010. [128187]

Mr Duncan: DFID is not required to hold information on where consultants are based for the purposes of reporting Admin Consultancy to the Cabinet Office.

DFID's total spending on Admin Consultancy for financial year 2011-12 was £675,291, down from £19.1 million in 2009-10. This reduction in spending was due to the Department's implementation of central Government controls on spending from May 2010 onwards.

Developing Countries: Land

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what preparations her Department is making to promote measures for greater governance and transparency in large-scale land acquisitions in developing countries during the UK's G8 presidency. [128232]

Justine Greening: The coalition Government recognises the need for good governance and transparency in investments involving large-scale land acquisitions and we continue to discuss the issue with non-governmental organisations for investments to protect the legitimate rights of local people and not to undermine local food security.

When done well, commercial investments in agriculture have the potential to be transformational. But it is vital that the rights and interests of the people living on the land are taken into account, which increased transparency can support.

The Prime Minister will announce his priorities for the UK's G8 presidency shortly. But he made clear in an article on 1 November that the golden thread themes of transparency and accountability will be at the heart of the UK's G8 presidency.

Developing Countries: Water

Joan Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which projects are delivering the Government's commitment to ensure access to water and sanitation to more than 60 million people, made at the Sanitation and Water for All High Level Meeting in Washington on 20 April 2012. [128162]

Lynne Featherstone: Our current or planned programmes that will contribute to meeting this target include:

1. Programmes managed by our offices in countries in Africa and Asia. We currently have water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programmes in 15 countries and these are the principal routes through which we will deliver our results. We are currently assessing the potential to expand our existing programmes and have already identified additional results to be achieved in Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. We are also exploring the potential to do more in a number of other countries.

2. Existing partnerships with a range of organisations such as the Water and Sanitation Program, Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor and WaterAid.

English Language

Mrs Main: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the English Language Teaching Improvement Project; and whether that assessment was used to inform the English in Action project. [128157]

Mr Duncan: The end of project review completed in April 2002 of the English Language Teaching Improvement Project found the scale of the project too modest in that it was limited to secondary school teachers.

Based on these findings the coverage of the English in Action Project was expanded to improve the language skills of 25 million people (2008-17) thus increasing employment opportunities. The beneficiaries include primary and secondary school teachers.

Mrs Main: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much and what proportion of the English in Action project's funding is being spent on (a) teacher training, (b) adult learning, (c) English television and (d) English radio. [128158]

Mr Duncan: English in Action (2008-17) allocates approximately £19.5 million (39% of total cost) on teacher training, and approximately £20 million (40% of total cost) for adult learning which includes English lessons through television, mobile phones, and online courses. English in Action does not fund radio programmes.

Food Supply

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what information her Department holds on the proportion of the money pledged by each G8 government under the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative that will be disbursed by the (a) end of 2012 and (b) 2013 G8 Summit. [128719]

Lynne Featherstone: The G8 Camp David Accountability Report published in May 2012:

<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/189889.pdf>

provides the latest official information on G8 Government disbursements against the money pledged under the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative. Updated information on G8 member disbursements, including until the end of 2012 where available, will be presented in the 2013 G8 Accountability Report.

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) when the UK will meet its financial commitments under the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative; [128762]

(2) what proportion of the UK's financial commitments under the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative (a) has already been disbursed, (b) will be disbursed by the end of 2012 and (c) will be disbursed by the 2013 G8 Summit. [128763]

Lynne Featherstone: The UK has met its financial commitments under the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative in full, disbursing over £1.1 billion between 2009 and 2012. The Department for International Development has supported food security and agriculture programmes in over 20 countries. For example, programmes in Ethiopia, Sudan, Malawi, Uganda and Rwanda are helping smallholder farmers access seeds and fertilisers, supporting the installation of efficient irrigation systems, and developing conservation agriculture to save water and reduce carbon emissions.

International Year of Co-operatives

Mr Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps (a) her Department and (b) the bodies for which she is responsible have taken to mark UN International Year of the Co-operatives 2012; and if she will make a statement. [128645]

Lynne Featherstone: DFID continues to engage with co-operative organisations in various ways—as financial intermediaries, in agriculture and as members of the private sector. We do not have a separate strategy for working with co-operative organisations; Government engagement on the International Year of the Co-operative was co-ordinated by the Mutuals Taskforce in collaboration with Cabinet Office.

DFID is committed to working across the spectrum of relevant organisations, and works hard to engage in both the public and private sectors. Our main focus of engagement with UN agencies is to increase the performance and results that they deliver as set out in our Multilateral Aid Review.

Kashmir

Simon Danczuk: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much aid to (a) India and (b) Pakistan was spent in Kashmir in the latest period for which figures are available. [129081]

Mr Duncan: UK aid to India and Pakistan supports national programmes that work in, and benefit Kashmir.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Luton South (Gavin Shuker) on 8 November 2012, *Official Report*, column 669W.

Somaliland

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to promote good governance in Somaliland.

[128404]

Justine Greening: The Department for International Development is supporting, in conjunction with six other donors, the Somaliland local council elections which will take place at the end of this month. Support has been provided for election operating costs, civic and voter awareness campaigns and training for youth and women candidates, as well as to help build the capacity of the Election Commission which will run the election.

Parallel support has been provided to civil society groups which have helped draft a party code of conduct, are training party staff and which will undertake election monitoring. DFID has engaged with the President and Minister of Interior to encourage them to do everything possible to ensure that elections are free, fair and do not result in violence. The democratisation process in Somaliland has seen steady progress, including five sets of credible elections, and the forthcoming elections are expected to continue this trend.

The Department for International Development is also developing a programme to build the capacity of the police, including the development of community policing approaches and the establishment of oversight mechanisms. These will improve community-police relationships and enhance policing standards and the accountability of the police force.

St Helena

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to promote environmental awareness in St Helena.

[128394]

Mr Duncan: The White Paper on the OTs published in June this year emphasises the Government's commitment to environmental issues. We recently established the Overseas Territories Environment and Climate Fund. This will bring together all existing UK Government funding for environmental management in the OTs and will make the fight against climate change in the Territories more effective.

DFID is also supporting the Government of St Helena's efforts to improve environment policy on the island. An Environmental Management Directorate was established in St Helena last year to which DFID is providing financial and technical support. We are also ensuring that the airport construction adheres to best practice in terms of its environmental impact.

West Africa

Mr Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment she has made of the regional effects of illegal fishing in West African waters on (a) economic development and (b) food security; and if she will make a statement.

[128563]

Lynne Featherstone: West African governments suffer a significant loss of revenue due to illegal fishing. Alongside the impact of the losses to economic development, illegal fishing in west Africa threatens the livelihoods and thus food security of coastal communities. The Environmental Justice Foundation estimates that west African waters have the highest level of illegal fishing in the world as a proportion of the region's catch.

The Department for International Development is supporting the Stop Illegal Fishing Network in its efforts to combat illegal fishing in west Africa. This is part of the International Partnership for African Fisheries Governance and Trade Programme. The programme has established and maintains an up-to-date list of fishing vessels that African governments can use to identify vessels that are fishing illegally.

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 20 November 2012

TRANSPORT

West Coast Railway Line: Franchises

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport for how many hours work Eversheds LLP charged his Department in respect of work relating to the West Coast Mainline franchise; and at what hourly rate.

[122726]

[Official Report, 17 October 2012, Vol. 551, c. 338W.]

Letter of correction from Simon Burns:

An error has been identified in the written answer given to the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on 17 October 2012.

The full answer given was as follows:

Mr Simon Burns: In total, Eversheds LLP charged the Department for 420 hours work relating to the Intercity West Coast franchise competition. For reasons of commercial confidentiality, we are unable to disclose the hourly rates that were charged.

The correct answer should have been:

Mr Simon Burns: In total, Eversheds LLP charged the Department for **1,164** hours work relating to the Intercity West Coast franchise competition. For reasons of commercial confidentiality, we are unable to disclose the hourly rates that were charged.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 20 November 2012

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY-GENERAL	434	DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER	421
Deferred Prosecution Agreements	436	Constitutional Reform	421
Hillsborough	437	Individual Electoral Registration	425
Jimmy Savile	440	Recall of Members	423
Law on Contempt	439	Royal Succession	426
Prisoner Voting Rights	438	Topical Questions	427
Serious Fraud Office	440		
Specialist Rape and Child Abuse Prosecutors	434		

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Tuesday 20 November 2012

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY-GENERAL	27WS	TREASURY	27WS
Serious Fraud Office	27WS	ECOFIN (Budget)	27WS
		Financial Restrictions (Iran) Order	28WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	29WS		
Private Security Industry Regulation (Consultation)	29WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	30WS
		Work Capability Assessment	30WS

PETITION

Tuesday 20 November 2012

	<i>Col. No.</i>	<i>Col. No.</i>
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	5P	
Educational Provision	5P	

WRITTEN ANSWERS

Tuesday 20 November 2012

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY-GENERAL	461W	COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT— <i>continued</i>	
Hillsborough	461W	Mortgages: Government Assistance	416W
BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS	438W	Private Rented Housing	416W
Adult Education: Hampshire	438W	Temporary Accommodation: Greater London	417W
Foreign Investment in UK	439W		
Green Deal Scheme	439W	CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	462W
New Businesses: South Yorkshire	440W	Broadband	462W
Overseas Trade: Fiji	441W	Direct Selling	463W
Public Houses	441W	Employment Agencies	463W
Regional Growth Fund	442W	Music	464W
South East	442W	Social Networking: Advertising	466W
UK Trade and Investment	443W		
CABINET OFFICE	449W	DEFENCE	458W
Big Lottery Fund	449W	Canada	458W
Military Medals Review	450W	Defence Information Infrastructure	459W
Procurement	450W	Libya	459W
		Marchwood Military Port	459W
COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	413W	Military Aircraft	460W
Affordable Housing	413W		
Architects Registration Board	413W	DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER	456W
Council Housing	413W	Devolution: England	457W
Fire Services	414W	Elected Office: Disabled People	456W
Housing	414W	Flexible Parenting Leave	458W
Housing: Construction	415W	Individual Electoral Registration	457W
Housing: Sustainable Development	415W	Lobbying	458W
Internet	415W	Parliamentary Boundaries	457W
		Trade Unions: Political Party Funding	458W

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER—continued		INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT—continued	
Voting Reform	457W	English Language	477W
EDUCATION	443W	Food Supply.....	477W
Children: Abuse	445W	International Year of Co-operatives.....	478W
Children: Human Trafficking.....	446W	Kashmir	478W
Children in Care.....	443W	Somaliland.....	479W
Children in Care: Missing Persons	444W	St Helena	479W
GCSE: Children in Care	446W	West Africa	480W
Offences against Children: Kirklees	446W	JUSTICE	417W
Physical Education: Curriculum.....	447W	Alternatives to Prison.....	417W
Primary Education: Speech and Language Disorders	447W	Bill of Rights Commission.....	418W
Schools: Sports	447W	Burglary	418W
Social Work.....	448W	Drugs: Sentencing.....	419W
Special Educational Needs.....	448W	Prison Accommodation	427W
ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE	451W	Probation.....	431W
Green Deal Scheme.....	451W	Sentencing: Females.....	432W
Local Government	452W	PRIME MINISTER	451W
Natural Gas	452W	Cabinet: Bristol.....	451W
Pay.....	452W	TRANSPORT	456W
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	460W	High Speed 2 Railway Line	456W
Algeria	460W	West Coast Railway Line: Franchises.....	456W
Eritrea.....	460W	TREASURY	433W
Iran	461W	Banks: Loans	433W
South Korea.....	461W	Child Benefit	433W
HEALTH	466W	Customs: EU Action.....	434W
Autism	466W	Debts: Argentina.....	434W
Carbon Monoxide: Poisoning	466W	Economic and Monetary Union	434W
Health Services	467W	Employment Agencies.....	435W
Homeopathy	468W	EU Budget	435W
Mental Health Services	468W	Excise Duties: Beer	435W
Musculoskeletal Disorders.....	469W	Income Tax: Bournemouth	435W
NHS: Private Finance Initiative	469W	Infrastructure.....	436W
NHS: Staff	470W	Macquarie Group	436W
Palliative Care.....	472W	Pay.....	436W
Prostate Cancer.....	472W	Public Finance	436W
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	473W	Revenue and Customs: Washington (Tyne and Wear)	437W
Africa.....	473W	Sick Leave	438W
Bangladesh.....	474W	Universal Credit.....	438W
Burma.....	476W	WORK AND PENSIONS	452W
Consultants.....	476W	Dyslexia	452W
Developing Countries: Land.....	476W	Employment and Support Allowance	453W
Developing Countries: Water.....	477W	Personal Independence Payment.....	453W
		Social Security Benefits: Disability.....	454W
		Universal Credit.....	455W
		Work Capability Assessment.....	456W

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Tuesday 20 November 2012

	<i>Col. No.</i>
TRANSPORT	3MC
West Coast Railway Line: Franchises	3MC

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 20 November 2012

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 421] [see index inside back page]

Deputy Prime Minister
Attorney-General

Middle East [Col. 443]

Statement—(Mr Hague)

Representation of the People (Members' Job Share) [Col. 472]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(John McDonnell)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

HGV Road User Levy Bill [Col. 478]

Motion for Second Reading—(Mr McLoughlin)—agreed to
Programme motion—(Mr McLoughlin)—agreed to

Civil Aviation Bill [Col. 499]

Programme motion (No. 3)—(Mr Simon Burns)—agreed to
Lords amendments considered

Backbench Business

Autism [Col. 509]

Motion—(Mr Buckland)—agreed to

Petition [Col. 552]

Sergeant Nightingale [Col. 553]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Local Government Spending (Floods) [Col. 79WH]

European Parliament (Two-seat Operation) [Col. 97WH]

Overseas Aid (UK-based Consultants) [Col. 104WH]

Thameslink and Crossrail Contracts [Col. 125WH]

Welsh Language (Non-devolved Departments) [Col. 133WH]

Debates on motion for Adjournment

Written Ministerial Statements [Col. 27WS]

Petition [Col. 5P]

Observations

Written Answers to Questions [Col. 413W] [see index inside back page]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 3MC]
