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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 7 January 2016**



# House of Commons

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Fuel Poverty

2. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What steps she is taking to reduce the level of fuel poverty. [902819]

**The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd):** A reformed domestic supplier obligation—ECO, or energy company obligation—from April 2017, which will run for five years, will upgrade the energy efficiency of more than 200,000 homes per year, tackling the root cause of fuel poverty. Our extension of the warm home discount to 2020-21 at current levels of £320 million per annum will also help vulnerable households with their energy bills. We intend to focus our efforts through ECO and the warm home discount more effectively on the fuel poor, and will be consulting on our future approach this spring.

**Marion Fellows:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Fuel poverty is a sign of inequality. New research by the national charity Turn2us has found that one in two low-income households are struggling to afford their energy costs, despite being in work. Many of these households rely on in-work social assistance. Has she or her Cabinet colleagues made an assessment of the effect of welfare reform on low-income households judged to be in fuel poverty?

**Amber Rudd:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. My Department works closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that the support we give goes to the most vulnerable. Energy costs are always at the centre of our minds in this Government, in order to make sure we put as little pressure as possible on hard-pushed households, and that will remain so.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): When Hastings, Motherwell and the rest of the United Kingdom vote to leave the European Union in the referendum, we will be able to abolish the 5% VAT on domestic fuel bills, which will really help those suffering from fuel poverty. Would my right hon. Friend welcome that?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend will be aware that this Government are always focused on ensuring that bills are kept down for householders in all constituencies. I would tactfully suggest that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor might have something to say about reducing VAT income on such a service.

**Mr Mark Williams** (Ceredigion) (LD): Evidence has suggested that rural communities are disproportionately adversely affected by fuel poverty. One way of combating that is through the development of domestic energy syndicates and the collective purchasing of oil. What proactively could and should the Department be doing to support such initiatives?

**Amber Rudd:** The hon. Gentleman is right in what he says, and we do ensure that there is a focus, through ECO, on rural areas, which often face the largest problem with fuel poverty. My Department works closely with various community energy schemes to ensure that we assist them, be that in group buying or in setting up their own renewable energy schemes, and we will continue to do so.

**David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con) *rose—*

**Mr Speaker:** David “Top Cat” Davies. [*Laughter.*]

**David T. C. Davies:** That’s fine by me, Mr Speaker.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that renewable energy sources are two to three times more expensive than fossil fuels and therefore the more renewables we use, the more fuel poverty we will create?

**Mr Speaker:** The explanation should be intelligible to the people beyond, and the explanation is that the middle initials are T. C. My apologies to the hon. Gentleman, who seems duly delighted.

**Amber Rudd:** I do not share my hon. Friend’s view. I think it is essential that energy supplies are a mix, and that means a combination of fossil fuels, for now, and renewable energy. Investing in renewable energy is an essential part of energy security, as well as of decarbonising and meeting those targets.

#### Paris Climate Conference

3. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the outcomes of the COP 21 climate conference in Paris. [902820]

18. **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the UK’s contribution to achieving the goals on limiting global warming set out in the Paris agreement on climate change. [902835]

**The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd):** We are currently considering the implications of the Paris outcome domestically and with our EU partners. Our 2050 target of at least an 80% reduction in emissions from a 1990 baseline is already set in statute. We are committed to meeting it, and I look forward to setting out this Government’s proposals and policies for meeting our carbon targets later this year.

**Debbie Abrahams:** The floods over the past few weeks are a reminder of the effects of climate change and, as we have known for a while, these extreme weather events are here to stay. Given the Government's proclaimed UK ambition at the Paris climate change talks, why at the same time were they undermining policies on, for example, subsidies for renewables and low-carbon technologies?

**Amber Rudd:** I do not accept that we are undermining those policies. What we are trying to do is get the right balance to support policies—to support renewable energy—while also looking after bill payers and ensuring that not too much is added to their bills. I also remind the hon. Lady that the UK is responsible for 1% of the world's emissions, and the success at Paris was that we were dealing with nearly 100% of the world's emissions. That is where we will get the real difference and change on carbon emissions.

**Caroline Lucas:** I hope the Secretary of State will agree that delivering the Paris climate agreement requires a cross-departmental and economy-wide approach. If that is the case, will she explain why there appears to be absolutely no mention of climate change in the remit of the National Infrastructure Commission? Will she urge her colleagues to remedy that, and confirm that the urgent need for rapid decarbonisation will be a non-negotiable criterion for every single one of its projects?

**Amber Rudd:** I thank the hon. Lady for bringing up the National Infrastructure Commission. I have had a preliminary meeting with the head of it, and know that it will shortly be consulting on which projects to prioritise. The project that it has already said it will be looking at in our sector—interconnectors and systems operations—will be important for delivering on our decarbonising future, and will play an important role in achieving cross-party consensus on making the much-needed investment in infrastructure.

**David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con):** The Secretary of State will be aware that the legally binding UK commitment is about 30% to 40% faster than that signed up to by the rest of the EU in Paris. Indeed, some countries in the EU, such as Austria, have increased their emissions by something like 20% since 1990. What discussions does she plan to have with her colleagues in Europe on getting their processes up to the same level as that of the UK?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. The fact is that the UK is leading in this area in terms of not only our ambition through the Climate Change Act 2008, but the structure of the delivery of our decarbonising—the five-year review and the transparency of the regime. I will be having conversations with my colleagues in Europe to ensure that they too step up and participate in the important effort-sharing decision that will take place this year.

17. [902834] **Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab):** The Secretary of State's words are one thing, but credibility with the public is another. Wirral constituents are worried about both jobs in renewables and our real commitment as a country to the agreement we made in Paris. Will she be absolutely clear on whether she will do any more to protect work in the renewables sector that affects my constituents?

**Amber Rudd:** I know that the hon. Lady will be concerned about offshore wind, as it is so close to her constituency. I hope that she will welcome the fact that DONG Energy has publicly stated that it intends to invest a further £6 billion in the UK by 2020, which is encouraging news for her constituents who are so close to its important offshore wind development. What she can take from this is the fact that, having signed up to the Paris agreement and with the UK's commitments on this basis, we are seeing more investment, from which her constituents will benefit as well.

**Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** If Paris had happened a year ago, would the Secretary of State still have made the same announcements that she has made in the past six months, adversely affecting onshore wind and solar energy, which has impacted badly on jobs and investor confidence?

**Amber Rudd:** I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's interpretation of the announcements that I have made. We have set out a clear path to getting a balance between ensuring that we continue to support renewable energy and ensuring that we get the investment we need, and also that we look after people's bills. Paris has been a great triumph; let us not knock it. Let us recognise the fact that it starts to bring other countries up to the high standards that the UK has placed on it, and that it will encourage further investment.

**Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP):** On the decision to pull £1 billion from carbon capture and storage, the Prime Minister said to me at Prime Minister's questions:

“You have to make decisions about technology that works and technology that is not working.”—[*Official Report*, 16 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 1548.]

How was that assessment made given that the competition had not yet been completed?

**Amber Rudd:** We do not rule out carbon capture and storage in the future. This Government have made substantial investments through our entrepreneur fund in early-start carbon capture and storage. We have industrialised carbon capture and storage projects operating and testing in Teesside. The fact is that the decision was made not to have a £1 billion investment. It was a difficult decision made in a difficult spending round. None the less, we recognise that carbon capture and storage will still have an important future in a low carbon economy.

**Callum McCaig:** The Prime Minister said that CCS was not working, but the Secretary of State says that it will work, so one of them is clearly wrong. In his list of technology that was working, the Prime Minister included small-scale nuclear reactors. Where is that technology working, and if it is working as the Prime Minister has claimed, why does it require £250 million of taxpayers' money?

**Amber Rudd:** I think I can bring together some of the hon. Gentleman's questions by highlighting the investment that we are making in innovation, which is an area in which we think there can be great steps forward in renewable energy. We can help to develop important new renewable energy technologies. For instance, in

Paris, under “mission innovation”, different countries came together and agreed to double their investment in innovation, and I believe that carbon capture and storage and small modular reactors will benefit from that investment.

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent North) (Lab): Now that DECC has accepted that the energy reset has pulled us further away from achieving the fourth carbon budget by some 54 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, meaning that we are on track to fall short of it by some 10%, or 187 million tonnes, and now that it is predicted that we will also miss our 2020 EU renewables target, will the Secretary of State explain precisely what steps she will take in the remainder of this Parliament to make good the Prime Minister’s boast that the UK is “leading the way” in work to cut emissions?

**Amber Rudd:** I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s depressing interpretation of our progress towards our important targets. Our EU renewables targets are difficult to meet, but we have exceeded the interim target. We know that we need to make more progress, which is why I am working with other Departments across Government to ensure that action is taken on heat and transport.

It was recognised in 2011 that there was a problem with the fourth carbon budget, and we now need to ensure that we put in place the policies necessary to meet it. Be in no doubt that we remain committed to achieving that.

#### Paris Agreement on Climate Change

5. **Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): What discussions she has had with her ministerial colleagues on the financial implications of the UK’s commitments under the Paris agreement on climate change. [902822]

**The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd):** The hon. Lady will be aware that the cost of UK action to reduce emissions is already committed to through the setting of our carbon budgets. The Paris agreement will help to ensure that all other countries are also acting. That will help to ensure that climate change is effectively addressed, help level the playing field, reduce the costs of climate action such as on technologies, and provide much greater opportunities for UK business in low carbon transformation.

**Ms Ritchie:** I thank the Secretary of State for her answer, but does she accept that the estimates suggesting that the UK is on track predate the cuts to DECC’s budget and are out of date, meaning that meeting the 2 °C target will require further Government support, particularly for low carbon generation and carbon capture and storage?

**Amber Rudd:** I do accept that the Government need to put in place more policies to ensure that we meet our carbon budget, which we have just referred to. I point out to the hon. Lady that the Paris climate change agreement is not as ambitious as the ambition that we already have in place through the Climate Change Act, which is legally binding and is delivered in our carbon budgets.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): The Secretary of State rightly says that the Paris climate change agreement is not as ambitious as the Climate Change Act. The national action plans agreed to in Paris commit the world to no more than 2.7 °C of warming. Will she outline what steps she has taken and what conversations she has had with her EU ministerial counterparts to increase the EU’s ambition for those nationally determined plans before the next stock-take in 2018?

**Amber Rudd:** The hon. Lady raises an important point. The current proposals from Paris would actually only achieve an increase of no more than 2.7 °C. Not only are we ambitious to ensure that we reach a maximum of 2 °C, we would like to see the rise restricted further. There will be conversations within in the EU this year to ensure that we meet the EU renewables targets, and we have the “effort share” discussions ahead of us. The real triumph of the Paris agreement is that it involves not just the UK and the EU but the whole world. The largest emitters, such as China and India, are also participating.

#### COP 21 Climate Conference

7. **James Berry** (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): What steps her Department is taking in response to the outcome of the COP 21 climate conference in Paris. [902824]

13. **David Mackintosh** (Northampton South) (Con): What the outcomes for the UK were of the COP 21 climate conference in Paris. [902830]

**The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd):** My hon. Friends will be aware that the agreement reached in Paris in December was an historic step forward. Almost 200 countries committed to climate action, which, for the first time ever, they all agreed to review every five years and to be held accountable for. There will now be follow-up work in the UN to agree the detailed rules and prepare for the five-year reviews.

**James Berry:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that the deal in Paris sees the world signing up to the approach to tackling climate change adopted by the UK? Is she confident that her approach will ensure that we meet the goals agreed in Paris?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend is right. The UK can take pride in the structure that was put together in Paris because it mimics in some ways the Climate Change Act that we put in place so many years ago. The five-year review, the transparency and the need to come back all the time with an improved offer are the right way to go, and I am confident that we will be able to deliver on that. I am excited about the prospect of talking further to my international partners to make sure that we have in place the right system for delivering that over the next few years.

**David Mackintosh:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that ensuring that all countries which have signed up to the agreements submit regular and full updates, and that data on progress are crucial so that we can see which countries are sticking to the agreement?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. Transparency in these reviews is essential and it is something that the UK fought hard for during the Paris negotiations to ensure that when other countries come back with their five-year reviews, they have made them clear in a way that we can examine so that we can be certain that the carbon emissions are being reduced.

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): New figures from the Department have shown that renewables were the biggest source of electricity in Scotland last year. The industry is a real Scottish success story and will play a significant part in helping to meet the targets set in Paris. Will the Secretary of State show her Department's own commitment to this vital sector by accepting the case for the inclusion in the grace period for the renewables obligation of projects which have attracted significant investment and achieved all the technical requirements to meet the Government's cut-off date of 18 June 2015, including the Binn eco farm in my constituency?

**Amber Rudd:** The renewables industry, the solar industry and onshore and offshore wind are indeed a great British success story, and other countries wanted to talk to us about them. There is a great opportunity for exports for business. I am happy to say that a number of Ministers spoke to me about this in Paris and I think there will be great opportunities. As regards individual wind farms or proposals, I must ask the hon. Lady to write to me separately so that I can look at those, but I gently remind her that the Government are committed to making sure that we deliver on our renewables target while ensuring that we keep bills down. That will always drive us to make sure that we get that balance.

#### Anaerobic Digestion and Biogas Sector

8. **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): What steps she has taken to support the anaerobic digestion and biogas sector. [902825]

**The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom):** First, may I say how delighted I am to see my hon. Friend fully recovered and back in his place?

We support AD and biogas through each of the feed-in tariff scheme, the renewables obligation and the renewable heat incentive. The Government have provided £124 million of support under the renewables obligation, £53 million under the renewable heat incentive, and enough support under the feed-in tariff scheme to deploy 161 MW since 2010. These technologies can make a valuable contribution to our decarbonisation targets and we will continue to support them.

**Andrew Stephenson:** I thank my hon. Friend for her kind remarks. I recently met Salterforth resident Peter King, along with representatives of Kirk Environmental, at my Earby advice surgery to discuss anaerobic digestion and biogas. Does my hon. Friend agree that, compared with wind or solar, biogas has significant benefits in delivering predictable and consistent amounts of renewable energy into the network?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Indeed. There are real benefits for the UK in having a wide range of renewable energy sources, but my hon. Friend is right to point out that as the sector develops in the UK, biogas technologies

could bring additional benefits, including providing baseload energy, injection into the gas grid and potential use as transport biofuels.

**Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): In her letter to other Departments on 29 October the Secretary of State—whom I congratulate on stressing in her letter the importance of reaching EU renewables targets in perhaps more recalcitrant Departments—she indicated that the highest potential for additional renewable heat is from biomethane injection into the grid, but she also said that we will face a shortfall against the part of that target that is related to the heat sector, even if support for her proposed measures was agreed by the Chancellor in the comprehensive spending review. Now that she has a reduced amount of money for the renewable heat incentive up to 2020, does she consider that that amount will enable us to reach our heat targets by 2020 and, if not, what new proposals will she bring forward to make sure that there is investment in this sector that can enable us to reach that target?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that we had a good settlement in the comprehensive spending review. We were very pleased with the commitment to enhancing—increasing—the renewable heat incentive each year between now and 2021, and we are making good progress towards that. He will realise that the fourth carbon budget is for 2023-27. He would not expect us to be meeting it today, but we are putting plans in place and working towards that progress as we speak, and we will continue to set out plans during this year.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): Despite more effective use of packaging, better date labelling and programmes by the supermarkets to distribute and sell food, we still generate substantial quantities of food waste. Does the Minister agree that using this resource to generate electricity is better than sending it to landfill?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I completely agree. In fact, just recently I went to see a proposed new project in my own county of Northamptonshire that is looking to use landfill to create a renewable heat scheme. Some fantastic new ideas are coming forward, and my officials and I are always very keen to hear about them and support them where we can.

#### Shale Gas Drilling

9. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps she is taking to prevent shale gas drilling at the surface in areas of the greatest environmental value. [902826]

**The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom):** First, I commend my hon. Friend for the personal commitment he has shown to researching best practice in this area. I can assure him that the Government are committed to protecting our most valuable spaces from surface drilling of wells for fracking. On 4 November, we set out how we plan to do this via petroleum exploration and development licences. We will issue a response to our industry consultation as soon as possible.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I very much welcome the Minister's comments. The Task Force on Shale Gas has called for a single regulator and increased levels of independent monitoring. Does the Minister agree that this would improve public confidence and provide further protection, particularly for our most sensitive areas?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The task force's 2015 report says that the regulatory regime is currently fit for purpose, but my hon. Friend rightly points out its proposal that if the shale gas industry does develop the Government should consider creating a bespoke regulator. I can absolutely assure him that we will keep the regulatory regime under review to make sure that it remains fit for purpose. On his second point about independent monitoring, I entirely agree, and that is why we are already grant-funding baseline monitoring in North Yorkshire and Lancashire.

**Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab):** Does the Minister accept that there is widespread opposition to fracking in all parts of Britain? Will she congratulate, as I have, the residents of Calow in Bolsover for refusing to allow a drilling operation and getting it stopped not only by the local authority but by her own inspectorate?

**Andrea Leadsom:** It is quite extraordinary that Opposition Members continually talk about the potential for shale gas as if it is some kind of disaster. The hon. Gentleman comes from a very honourable and long-standing mining area. Mining has a legacy that we will be dealing with for many years to come. The shale industry, on the other hand, offers the opportunity to create a new home-grown energy source that is vital for our energy security into the next decades.

**Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab):** When will the Secretary of State produce some legally enforceable protection against surface-level fracking in our national parks and sites of special scientific interest?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I hope that the hon. Lady heard my initial comment, which was that we have been able to put forward our proposal to restrict surface drilling in any of our most protected areas, not limited to national parks but including many other valuable spaces, through licensing. As things stand, we are waiting for our report in response to the industry consultation that closed on 16 December, and we will make our announcements very soon.

### National Grid

10. **Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC):** What assessment she has made of the effect of increased energy generation on the national grid. [902827]

**The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom):** As more domestic, community and business generators come on stream, the demand for grid connection is increasing, as the hon. Lady rightly points out. Accommodating this is the responsibility of the network companies, overseen by Ofgem. Network companies publish long-term plans setting out how new generation and demand will be

managed. She might like to take a look at National Grid's annual electricity 10-year statement as a good example of this.

**Liz Saville Roberts:** Let us face it: National Grid is notorious for stifling new energy projects at birth in rural Wales. Given that the draft Wales Bill proposes devolving generating stations up to 350 MW but not transmission, how will the Minister work with the Welsh Government to ensure that that is not an empty promise?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady that the Government are committed to the Welsh devolution Bill, as set out in the Silk commission, and that is going through. Specifically, Ofgem, through the electricity distribution network price control, has approved about £24 billion of investment in the distribution network for between 2015 and 2023, and about £1.7 billion of that is for the distribution company responsible for north Wales, including the hon. Lady's constituency.

**Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab):** Does the Minister share my concerns that, in the short to medium term, our energy security may be put at risk if the capacity market that is being put in place to bring forward new gas capacity not only fails to do that, but makes current gas capacity, such as that provided by the Glanford Brigg power station in my constituency, no longer worthwhile and results in it coming off-stream?

**Andrea Leadsom:** We have just completed the second capacity market auction and achieved a very competitive price for consumers; as the hon. Gentleman will know, it is a top priority for this Government to keep the bills down. At the same time, we have ensured that National Grid has the tools at its disposal to be able to ensure energy security, which is our overriding concern. I do not share his concerns. We are reviewing the capacity market to make sure we bring on new gas, but there are no concerns about energy security.

### Small-scale Solar Sector

11. **Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con):** What recent steps she has taken to support the small-scale solar sector. [902828]

**The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom):** Solar is an enormous UK success story that this Government continue to support. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday, 98% of all solar deployment has taken place since 2010. In December, we announced that the feed-in tariff scheme would remain open and continue to support small-scale solar up to a value of £35 million of subsidy, potentially delivering an additional 1.2 GW across 220,000 installations by 2019.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. I had the opportunity recently to meet a company in the solar sector industry in my constituency, ESP Energy in Dorrington, and I was very impressed with its technology, innovation and job creation. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the Government will do everything possible to continue supporting this very important energy source?

**Andrea Leadsom:** As my hon. Friend will know, it is a key priority to keep consumer bills down, so there must always be a balance between supporting a superb UK industry and making sure that consumer bills remain affordable. We will continue to support the further growth of the sector, but not at any price. The changes we have made to the feed-in tariffs seek to maintain the solar industry, which in the medium term can continue to reduce its costs and therefore move towards a subsidy free deployment.

**Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab):** Will the Minister update the House on what steps she is taking to ensure that the rate of VAT on solar installations does not rise, as proposed, from 5% to 20%, which could add £900 to an average solar installation?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The right hon. Gentleman is exactly right to raise that very important point. He will know that it is the result of proceedings by the European Commission, which believes that our VAT rates on solar installation should be higher. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is looking closely into the issue and consulting on it. Once we have taken into account the outcome of that consultation, we will have to look further at the regime.

20. [902838] **Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con):** My constituency has a number of thriving solar businesses, some of which I have worked with during the recent changes to feed-in tariffs. As the Government look to the industry to expand, and in response to a query from Solar UK in Battle, will the Minister explain how she will support the development of energy storage solutions for existing and future solar systems?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is exactly right to point out the huge potential for energy storage to enhance the value of solar PV installations. My Department has provided more than £18 million of innovation support since 2012, to develop and demonstrate a range of energy storage technologies. We are also investigating the potential barriers to the deployment of energy storage, focusing in the first instance on removing regulatory barriers, and we plan to hold a call for evidence on that specific area this spring.

**John Pugh (Southport) (LD):** The Minister is in danger of sounding complacent on this subject. Many small and medium-sized enterprises in my constituency fear the end of solar. Has she had a chance to consider the Solar Trade Association's £1 rescue scheme, and what is her response to it?

**Andrea Leadsom:** As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have made clear on so many occasions, there is a fine balance. As the costs of a new technology come down, as they very much have in the excellent UK solar industry, so we must focus on the need for people in this country to be able to afford their energy bills. Fuel poverty is an enormous problem, but we do not want to over-subsidise, so it is a fine balance. We think that our response to the consultation in December provides that fine balance: giving a 5% investment return to solar installations is fair to consumers and fair to the industry.

24. [902842] **James Heappey (Wells) (Con):** EU minimum import prices on Chinese, Taiwanese and Malaysian photovoltaic cells inflate the cost of an average solar installation by £385. The Minister is working to extract the UK from that, but will she update the House on her progress and set a date by which she hopes to end these price controls?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that the MIP is an unwelcome drain on the UK solar industry. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made that point in her letter to the Trade Commissioner in November. I also agree that it would be fairer and simpler to remove the MIP while the current expiry review is under way. Unfortunately, however, the decision to launch an expiry review is one for the Commission, not for member states. Anti-dumping and anti-subsidy regulations require the Commission to maintain existing trade defence measures while the expiry review takes place, so it could be some months yet.

**Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab):** Last year, the Solar Trade Association estimated that 27,000 workers would lose their jobs as a result of the Government's proposed 87% cut to the feed-in tariff. Following a public outcry, including from Members on both sides of this House, the Department reduced the cut to 64%, saving about 8,000 jobs. I am sure the Minister would like to take the credit for that, but what is her message to the remaining 19,000 solar workers who face redundancy this coming year as a result of the tariff cut?

**Andrea Leadsom:** UK solar is a huge success story. It has grown rapidly since 2010, with enormous support from energy consumers in the UK. As we have said time and again, there is a balance. We absolutely welcome the jobs and growth that have been provided in the sector, but we cannot continue to support jobs just through bill payer subsidies. That would not be fair. Our measures will ensure that there is good potential for the industry to continue to grow and for jobs to continue to be supported, while at the same time making sure bills remain affordable.

### Energy Tariffs

12. **Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to ensure that energy consumers are on the best-value tariffs. [902829]

**The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd):** The Government are making it quicker and easier for energy consumers to switch supplier and move to the best-value tariffs. We have delivered a national switching campaign and worked with industry to cut the time it takes to switch to 17 days, and we are now working with Ofgem to move to reliable next day switching. We are also working with industry to develop an energy-switching guarantee, which will be launched later this year.

**Sir Oliver Heald:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is particularly important for vulnerable customers to be able to find the best-value tariffs? Will she say a little more about what the Government are doing to spread that message and to ensure that such consumers get the best deals available? Does she agree that carers' organisations and children's centres, which support vulnerable younger families, may have a role to play?

**Amber Rudd:** Yes, I do agree with my hon. and learned Friend. It is absolutely essential that we improve access for vulnerable people to the switching that can provide such great benefits. It is no good people being able to benefit from a saving of about £200 on their energy bills unless they can actually access it. We launched the big energy saving network and put in £2 million to make sure that vulnerable people, who particularly need the improvement that this can deliver to their energy bills, can access it. One of the ways in which that can be done is through citizens advice bureaux, but in addition we will look at his other suggestions.

**Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab):** But the Competition and Markets Authority has identified something I have been speaking about for quite a long time: that that sticky customer base is not being served well by energy suppliers. The CMA has said that about 70% of customers on the standard variable tariff are paying over the odds, so has the Secretary of State looked into the suggestion I have made in the past year and previously that we need to protect those customers as well, and that a default or protection tariff could ensure that suppliers provide tariffs that are fair to their customers, and particularly those ones?

**Amber Rudd:** The right hon. Lady makes an important point and the suggestion about the CMA is helpful—it has just begun to include in its consideration vulnerable customers on pre-payment meters. We are interested in the recommendations it will make—we hope—in the next few months, to ensure that we look after those vulnerable customers who are unable to switch. We have said previously that we will take seriously and act on the CMA recommendations to ensure that we look after those customers who have not engaged in switching but should do so. We look forward to seeing the CMA suggestions for remedies.

**Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab):** I welcome the concern expressed by Members on both sides of the House for consumers and best value. Last month, the Secretary of State agreed to hand out hundreds of millions of pounds in new public subsidies to diesel and coal power generators through her capacity market scheme. Will she tell the House by how much family energy bills will rise as a consequence?

**Amber Rudd:** The capacity market is specifically designed to ensure that energy security is not negotiable. The Government take energy security very seriously. Because of the lack of investment in energy infrastructure over the past decades, we needed to ensure that the capacity market is in place to ensure that we do not have any problem at all with energy security. Diesel will form a part of the future, but only in very small amounts. Let us remember that it is there as back-up and will be switched on occasionally when it is needed. The addition of the capacity market to people's bills will be a matter of a few pounds.

**Lisa Nandy:** It is astonishing that the Secretary of State comes to the House and repeatedly says that the Government want to put as little pressure as possible on to hard-pressed households, and yet is spectacularly unable to answer a very simple question about how much that will put on to family energy bills. In just one day in December, she agreed to subsidise high-polluting

diesel generators to the tune of £175 million, paid for by increasing family energy bills. Will she answer this question: are those companies expected to make returns of more than 20% at the expense of bill payers?

**Amber Rudd:** What is astonishing is the hon. Lady's lack of understanding of the fact that the capacity market is needed because of the Labour Government's woeful under-investment in infrastructure. We are left with the consequences and need to ensure that energy security is completely reliable. The capacity market is essential to ensuring that that hole is filled. We are proud of the way in which it has delivered—the second auction has just completed. As I have said, it will cost a few pounds—under £10—and we will ensure that energy security will never be a question under this Government.

### Smart Meters

14. **Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op):** What progress is being made on the roll out of smart meters. [902831]

**The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd):** I can assure the hon. Lady that good progress is being made. Energy suppliers have now installed over 2 million meters in homes and small businesses across Britain, ahead of the main installation stage starting later this year.

**Meg Hillier:** In September 2014, the Public Accounts Committee raised concerns about the roll-out of smart meters, but very recently, Alex Henney, a former Conservative energy adviser, warned the Secretary of State that the roll-out would at best be regarded as a waste of money and that it is “a ghastly mess”. Does she agree with Mr Henney, and what is she doing to resolve those problems?

**Amber Rudd:** I can say very clearly to the hon. Lady that I do not agree with that position. Smart meters will have a great future in this country. We discussed in earlier questions energy security and fuel poverty. Smart meters will be a very good way for people to reduce their bills and use less energy, therefore creating fewer carbon emissions. Smart meters are an important part of that.

**Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con):** I have no doubt that the introduction of smart meters will help customers to control their energy bills, but, just so that they are aware of the background, will the Secretary of State confirm that the UK is rolling out smart meters because of European Union directive 2009/72/EC?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend is right that the European Union has directives that give us guidance on this matter, but there is no question that the initiative of smart meters is of huge advantage to UK customers. UK customers and consumers will always be put first.

### Neart Na Gaoithe Offshore Wind Farm

15. **Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP):** If she will take steps to encourage companies associated with the Neart Na Gaoithe offshore wind farm to base their operations at Dundee port. [902832]

**The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom):** As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in her November speech, we are committed to the continued growth of UK offshore wind. Britain is already the world leader. This industry is a huge potential source of jobs and growth, and we will always focus on maximising UK content in the supply chain. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the decision on where one company's operations will be based is a commercial decision for that company. However, my officials are working closely with the developer and the Scottish Government to maximise the use of UK content in this wind farm.

**Chris Law:** Does the Minister agree that, should the outstanding legal challenge be overcome, Dundee and its deep port are ideally placed to provide operations, maintenance and suppliers?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am extremely keen on that. Recently, I visited one port in Scotland, Aberdeen port, to hear how it is trying to expand to accommodate not just the growth of offshore wind, but potential decommissioning in the future. It is vital that whatever our energy policy is, we focus as far as possible on maximising the UK content in the supply chain.

### Oil and Gas Industry

19. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What her policy is on the future level of Government support for the oil and gas industry. [902837]

**The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom):** The oil and gas industry is vital to our economy and provides more than 350,000 jobs. The Government are committed to supporting it. Our latest projections show that in 2030, oil and gas will still be a core part of our energy mix, providing nearly 70% of the UK's primary energy requirements. Our commitment to the industry is the precise reason why we have established the Oil and Gas Authority, which is charged with working with the industry to maximise the economic recovery of the UK's oil and gas resources.

**Hannah Bardell:** The oil and gas industry has asked the Government for further tax reliefs to incentivise exploration activity. Professor Alex Kemp of the University of Aberdeen has described them as "clearly necessary to exploit the remaining physical potential" of the North sea. What consideration has the Minister given to a refundable tax credit for exploration?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady will be aware that the Chancellor has already improved the fiscal regime significantly to encourage further exploration in the North sea basin. Just before Christmas, we had a series of meetings with North sea basin participants, the Oil and Gas Authority and others to discuss what other measures could be taken. Further fiscal measures are certainly on the table, but so too are vital measures such as getting production costs down, making more efficiencies and sharing infrastructure. The OGA is absolutely focused on doing those things.

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) for raising this question and to the Minister for her reply. I acknowledge the work that the Government have done in the sector, but will the Minister give me her assurance that in the lead-up to the Budget in March, she will leave no stone unturned in ensuring that this vital industry secures the support that it needs at this difficult time?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has focused so much on this important sector. I assure him that we are totally focused on looking at what more can be done in all areas to support this vital UK sector.

### Topical Questions

T1. [902893] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd):** My thoughts are with all those who have been affected by the recent flooding. Energy security is our No. 1 priority. We are working closely with the energy industry to assess the range of potentially disruptive risks, including severe weather, put protections in place and improve the response to electricity disruptions. The industry worked to ensure that power was restored to customers who were disrupted by the recent storms as quickly as possible, in very challenging circumstances.

**John Mann:** Everyone in the Chamber will benefit this year from electricity generated by coal burnt in the Bassetlaw, West Burton and Cottam power stations. What contingency agreement has been reached with EDF to ensure that in 2026 and beyond, when we do not have enough power available, the decision to close coal-based power stations can be reversed?

**Amber Rudd:** Can I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are moving to a consultation on ending coal-fired power stations by 2025? I am sure that he will want to participate in it. This Government are taking the long-term view on getting the right mix of decarbonising and having energy security. That is why we are making this plan well ahead of time—it is 10 years ahead.

T2. [902894] **David Warburton** (Somerton and Frome) (Con): Given the revisions to the feed-in tariffs that will shortly come into force, has the Minister made any assessment of the likely effects on the solar industry, particularly in the south-west, where the sun nearly always shines?

**The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom):** Of course, my hon. Friend is absolutely right—the sun nearly always shines there. It is a great place for solar, which has been a spectacular success there. The tariffs aim to give generators with well-sited projects appropriate rates of return, so around 5% for solar. We believe that that will save bill payers between £380 million and £430 million a year by 2021, while at the same time enabling up to 220,000 new installations to be subsidised under the new feed-in tariff.

**Lisa Nandy** (Wigan) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's update to the House on the actions taken in response to the floods. I particularly welcome the Prime Minister's decision to set up a cross-Whitehall review of the Government's approach to flood defences, which will consider the rising flood risk that climate change poses. We know now that the last review in 2014, which was also led by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin), met just three times and did not publish a single finding. Will the Secretary of State confirm that she personally attends this committee? Will she tell us whether it has met yet, how often it plans to meet, which independent experts are on it, and what, this time, she expects it to achieve?

**Amber Rudd:** As the hon. Lady will know, the Government take very seriously climate change and its devastating impact in terms of the recent flooding. I can reassure her that the Department participated in regular meetings of COBRA on almost a daily basis to ensure that electricity sources were restored as quickly as possible. The review will take place, and we will keep a careful, watchful eye on ensuring that it does meet and that it looks carefully at what impact it has had.

T3. [902895] **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to address the increasing shortage of skills in the nuclear industry?

**Andrea Leadsom:** We have already taken a lot of action to tackle the skills problem at all levels, from programmes to attract more schoolchildren to science, technology, engineering and maths careers to apprenticeships and training at all levels, as well as setting in train work to determine the scope for transfers of skills from wider sectors. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the need for more nuclear skills. Hinkley C alone will provide up to 25,000 jobs and 1,000 apprenticeships.

T4. [902896] **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Department's impact assessment suggests that 18,700 jobs could be lost as a result of the 65% reduction to the solar feed-in tariff. That affects jobs in my constituency. What loss in national insurance contributions and income tax will that mean for the Government, particularly in light of the £16 billion shortfall in tax receipts last year? What assessment has been made of the combined effect if Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs presses ahead with the increase in VAT to 20% on domestic solar installations?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government remain committed to the ongoing success of the solar industry. As I explained in an earlier reply, we cannot simply keep jobs going as a result of subsidy, but our best guess is that our new feed-in tariff will support up to around 23,000 jobs in the solar sector. Of course, it is for the sector to bring down the costs as far as possible to reach a subsidy-free stage by 2020. We will do everything that we can and, as I have also said, if the VAT rate has to go up, we will look at what more we can do within the tariff to ensure that we do not penalise the sector.

**Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am chairman of GLOBE International, which recently held a successful summit in Paris as part of the COP process. Does the Secretary of State agree that the world's leading network of parliamentarians devoted to legislative leadership on climate change has a key role to play in ensuring that the intended nationally determined contributions—INDCs—turn from aspiration to reality? Will she meet me to discuss work between the Department and GLOBE, internationally and nationally, to ensure that that is achieved?

**Amber Rudd:** I am aware that GLOBE International is one of the largest forums for parliamentary engagement devoted to legislative leadership on sustainable development and climate change, and I recognise my hon. Friend's important role in chairing it. I would, of course, be delighted to meet him to discuss how we can further promote parliamentary international engagement on this important subject.

T5. [902897] **Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (UKIP): I was absolutely delighted when the Minister said in June, at a renewable energy summit, that we were going to remove subsidies. When does she expect onshore and offshore wind subsidies to have disappeared completely?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Projects such as Gunfleet Sands, just off the coast of the hon. Gentleman's constituency, provide enough clean electricity for over 100,000 homes following hundreds of millions of pounds invested by the developer, much of which was spent locally. I am sure he will have welcomed that. As we have made clear, however, we have to get the right balance between supporting newer technologies such as offshore wind and being tough on subsidies to keep bills as low as possible. We will always be working towards making technologies subsidy-free.

**David Mowat** (Warrington South) (Con): By far and away the dominant source globally of low-carbon electricity is nuclear power. In the EU, a third of electricity comes from that source and China has approximately 50 stations under construction. We also need small modular reactors. Will the Minister set out what her plans are in that regard and how the UK can provide leadership?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Nuclear is an incredibly important part of our energy future and I am very proud that we have signed the first new nuclear deal in over 20 years. We believe small modular reactors will have an important part to play. I am delighted to say we are using part of our substantial innovation funding to make sure we bring them on as early as possible, but that will not be at the expense of existing plans for nuclear reactors. We will be aiming for a mix of larger nuclear and smaller nuclear.

T6. [902899] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Earlier this week, the SNP Scottish Government agreed a support package to retain staff at Dalzell and Clydebridge steel plants. The package will include measures to address energy use and costs. Energy costs are a substantial expense facing business.

What consideration has been given by the Secretary of State or her Cabinet colleagues to bringing forward a coherent strategy to address the high energy costs facing business across the UK?

**Amber Rudd:** We are well aware of the importance of keeping energy costs down to support businesses and households. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced recently that energy-intensives would be given a specific support package. That has recently got state-aid clearance and will be put in place as soon as possible.

T7. [902900] **Mike Weir** (Angus) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that just before Christmas the European Commission announced new import tariffs, backdated to May last year, on Taiwanese and Malaysian solar panels. That could result in many solar companies having an unwanted and potentially devastating tax bill. Will she take action to assure that that will not happen?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this matter. It is a real concern that, in spite of the fact that the cost of solar panels has dropped so dramatically, the cost in Europe remains higher than elsewhere in the world as a result of the import tariffs. As I mentioned earlier, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wrote to the Trade Commissioner explaining how very bad this is for the ongoing success of the UK industry. We will do everything we can to try to ensure the tariffs are removed as soon as possible.

T8. [902902] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): We were disappointed in the Humber last year not to be granted the national college for wind energy, especially in light of the fact that renewables are so important to the future of the area. Will Ministers agree to meet me and representatives of the local enterprise partnership to discuss what more can be done to promote a national wind college that might attract local funding?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Yes, I would certainly be delighted to meet the hon. Lady and colleagues. I can tell her that I recently had the huge pleasure of seeing the new Siemens turbine blade site in Hull, which is fantastic and so impressive. It is a real injection of enthusiasm, new jobs and apprenticeships in her area. We should do everything we can to promote the northern energy powerhouse that is taking off and doing so well.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. There is a veritable army of Opposition Members seeking to catch my eye, but as a practitioner of diversity and inclusion I say to the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) that I do not want him to feel excluded. He wished to contribute earlier. If he wishes to contribute now, we will happily hear him.

**Mr Peter Lilley** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

**Mr Speaker:** Not at the moment. Very well, but as soon as he wants to he can.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The rate of fuel poverty across the UK is very high, which is why I welcome the Scottish Government's £200 million warm homes scheme to help reduce bills for low-income households. Such households are more likely to pay their bills using prepayment meters, but these are more than £200 per year more expensive than the cheapest direct debit bill. What measures will the Secretary of State introduce to ensure that customers using meters have access to the lower energy prices available to those using other payment methods?

**Amber Rudd:** I am well aware of the issue of fuel poverty. In Paisley and Renfrewshire North, there are energy company obligation measures in place that I believe will help the hon. Gentleman's constituents. By September 2015, some 119 measures per 1,000 households had been installed, which compares to the average of 77 per 1,000 in the rest of the UK. He can rest assured, however, that we are focused on making sure that bills stay low and fuel poverty is addressed, and the ECO system is one of the best ways for us to do that.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, one in five pensioners are defined as living in income poverty, and 62% of them are in fuel poverty. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with her counterpart in Northern Ireland to help address these issues?

**Amber Rudd:** I know the hon. Gentleman cares as much about this as we do. Keeping fuel poverty at bay and bills down are absolute priorities. On the statistics he mentioned, I will have to write to him.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Outside Hinkley Point C, for each of the five proposed new nuclear power stations the Government are considering, they are discussing having a single supplier for each one. This means that yet again they will be held hostage, with no guaranteed programme, high profits for suppliers and extortionate strike rates agreed, which will be picked up by electricity users. Should the Government not do the decent thing and rethink this "nuclear at all costs" policy?

**Amber Rudd:** The Government think that nuclear reactors are an important part of delivering a low-carbon future, but we also have a great opportunity to ensure we develop skills, as my hon. Friend the Minister mentioned. I will ensure that my Department considers the hon. Gentleman's point carefully and gets back to him with some answers.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): In her attempt to explain the hugely unpopular cuts to solar, the Secretary of State constantly pretends this is about reducing costs to householders, yet industry analysis shows that solar will cost half as much as Hinkley over 35 years and save consumers about £15 billion. How can she keep justifying such blatant double standards when it comes to nuclear power?

**Amber Rudd:** I am sorry, but the hon. Lady is not dealing with the facts. The solar changes will still deliver a 5% yield to those who put them up, but nuclear provides an important base-load, even when the sun does not shine or the wind does not blow. She can have her own views, but she cannot have her own facts.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Last but not least, and never forgotten, I call Mr Skinner.

**Mr Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): With the Chinese economy hitting the buffers week after week, does it make sense to continue with this Chinese connection and nuclear power in Britain? Is it not time it was

abandoned? The shine is being knocked off it every single day. Will the Secretary of State change her mind?

**Amber Rudd:** I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are ambitious for this country, we are confident in our regulation and we are open for business, and if the Chinese want to make a substantial investment in delivering new nuclear, we will take it and make a great success of it.

## Business of the House

10.33 am

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week—and the week after and all the rest?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling):** Surely not all the rest, but the business is as follows:

**MONDAY 11 JANUARY**—Remaining stages of the Armed Forces Bill, followed by general debate on local government funding for rural areas. The subject for this debate was nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

**TUESDAY 12 JANUARY**—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Housing and Planning Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 13 JANUARY**—Opposition day (15th allotted day). There will be a debate on trade, exports, innovation and productivity. The debate will arise on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party.

**THURSDAY 14 JANUARY**—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 15 JANUARY**—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 18 January will include:

**MONDAY 18 JANUARY**—Second Reading of the Energy Bill [*Lords*].

**TUESDAY 19 JANUARY**—Opposition day (16th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

**WEDNESDAY 20 JANUARY**—Remaining stages of the Psychoactive Substances Bill [*Lords*], followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

**THURSDAY 21 JANUARY**—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 22 JANUARY**—Private Members' Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 18 January, decided by the Petitions Committee, will be:

**MONDAY 18 JANUARY**—Debate on e-petitions relating to the exclusion of Donald Trump from the United Kingdom.

**Chris Bryant:** I am certainly up for that one!

Happy new year, Mr Speaker, and if you are a Russian, happy Christmas. Also, many congratulations to the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) and to our wonderful Chief Whip who proves, of course, there's nothing quite like a dame! Warm congratulations, too, go to our new Serjeant at Arms elect, Kamal El-Hajji—we look forward to working with him. In the words of Stephen Sondheim, "I'm still here!" [*Interruption.*] Division? No.

I am delighted that the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) yesterday joined my call for a proper parliamentary commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare, although I thought he rather marred the effect by referring to Shakespeare as "our greatest living bard", which I notice *Hansard* has corrected for him. May I suggest that we have a St George's day Shakespeare debate, which would give us a chance to consider the Government's own rather special use of the English

language? After all, yesterday the Leader of the Opposition about the £190 million flood defence project on the River Aire in Leeds that was cancelled in 2011. The Prime Minister stated quite categorically:

"No flood defence schemes have been cancelled since 2010".— [*Official Report*, 6 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 277.]

But that is not quite the case, is it, Mr Speaker? In fact, the Prime Minister's official spokesman had to dig him out of that hole by resorting to the most extraordinary bout of circumlocution yesterday afternoon, claiming that

"Jeremy Corbyn's suggestion was that the scheme had been cancelled",

whereas in fact:

"There was a proposal made, it wasn't adopted."

In Shakespeare's English, that does mean it was cancelled, does it not? The truth is that families do not want spin; they want proper protection from flooding.

That was not all. When my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) asked the Prime Minister about the number of special advisers, the Prime Minister said:

"There are fewer special advisers under this Government than there were under the last Government."— [*Official Report*, 6 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 283.]

He obviously meant us all to believe that he had cut the number of special advisers since he came to power. Oh no, he can't have meant that, can he, Mr Speaker, because under the last Prime Minister there were 71 special advisers, and now there are 97. I know the Secretary of State for Education cannot do her times tables, but even she must be able to work out that that is a net increase of 26. The Prime Minister's words yesterday can be true only if when he said "the last Government", he did not mean the Labour Government but the Government he led last year. It is as if he has not existed for five years. I have heard of people being airbrushed out of history by their opponents, but this is the first time I have ever heard of a Prime Minister airbrushing himself out of his own history books.

I note that yet again the Leader of the House has given us only the dates for the Easter recess and not for the prorogation for the state opening of Parliament or, for that matter, for the Whitsun recess. Is that because he does not yet know when he will table the motion for the date of the EU referendum? Will he now come clean and tell us how he is going to vote? It is not a matter of conscience for him any more; he will even be able to keep his two special advisers, his ministerial car and his salary. He can tell us—in or out? It's an out, isn't it? He is an outer. Come on, come out!

May I suggest that after every recess, the first day back should be devoted to no business other than statements from Ministers and urgent questions? That might stop the Government piling up bad news announcements for the very last day before the recess. This December was the worst ever, with 36 all in one day. In one day, we learned that immigration officers had given up hunting for 10,000 missing asylum seekers, that HMRC had lost out on £16 billion of tax, and that there would be a massive expansion of fracking for shale gas. During the recess, we learned that the Government had abandoned the Financial Conduct Authority review of the culture of banking, and that half the Cabinet had gone to pay tribute to Rupert Murdoch, bearing gifts of

a licence fee cut, an end to Leveson, and an inheritance tax cut for millionaires. Is it not time that they learned that Rupert isn't the Messiah but a very naughty boy?

On Tuesday, we shall debate the remaining stages of the Housing and Planning Bill, and for the first time in our history, some Members will be barred from voting in a Division in the Chamber. Was it not preposterous that we started to debate the Bill at 8.50 pm last Tuesday, and that over the recess the Government tabled 65 pages of amendments to a Bill that is only 145 pages long? Moreover, there was not a single amendment on resilience and sustainable drainage.

Will the Leader of the House clarify a few aspects of the operation of English votes for English laws next Tuesday? Because of the programme motion that the Government have tabled, we shall have to proceed on the basis of manuscript motions from the Government and manuscript amendments, if there are any. That is right, is it not? Surely it is wrong for us to proceed on the basis of manuscript business when we are dealing with such important measures and when EVEL is operating for the first time. Would it not be far better to devote the whole of Tuesday to the Report stage, and to keep the remaining stages for another day?

Could there be a clearer symbol of how incompetent Conservative Ministers are than the events of Monday afternoon, when two of them visited flood victims in Pooley? Not only did they arrive late, but they turned up at the wrong end of a bridge that had been washed away a whole month ago. A farmer had to be dispatched on a quad bike to fetch the two MPs—which involved a 30-minute ride—while their bewildered entourage of civil servants, bag carriers and party hacks had to trundle along in a minibus. I suppose one could have just about understood the confusion had it not been for the fact that the two Ministers concerned were the Secretary of State for Transport, who really should know when a bridge has disappeared, and the local MP, who had visited the bridge once before when it had already disappeared! I gather that there was some signalling from the villagers on the other side of the river, although it is not entirely clear what they were trying to suggest. As Mr Leeroy Fowler put it,

“You couldn't make it up.”

Four new elements in the periodic table were discovered this week, and scientists are looking for names for them. Apparently, these elements are dangerous and short-lived, rather like the policies of the Leader of the House when he was at the Ministry of Justice—so may I suggest that one of them should be named “Graylingium”?

**Chris Grayling:** A happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to everyone in the House. Welcome to day four of the Labour reshuffle. I imagine that this has been a rather frustrating week for the shadow Leader of the House. As Oscar Wilde so famously said, the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about. But never mind: I believe that the hon. Gentleman will be making a return to the newspapers on Monday. It is his birthday, and I expect that he will appear in the Court Circular. I wish him a very happy birthday for next week.

Mr Speaker, may I echo your comments yesterday about the new Serjeant at Arms? I worked with him—he was my head of security when I was Secretary of State for Justice—and he is a fine man and a consummate

professional. When I discovered that he was in the frame for this job, I was delighted. It is an excellent appointment, and he will serve the House admirably. I am very grateful to all who were involved in the recruitment process for the work that they did and the choice that they made, and I commend this new appointment to the House.

May I also ask colleagues from Northern Ireland to convey my congratulations to the new Northern Irish First Minister, who took up her position during the Christmas period? She takes up a difficult and challenging role, and I think it is in the interests of everyone in the House to wish her well for it. We all want stability to continue in Northern Ireland, and for it to continue to succeed in future.

The shadow Leader of the House referred to the European Union. The Labour party has a leader who has changed his mind twice in the last few months. Labour Members claim to support a reformed European Union, but will not say what they want to reform. They did not even want a referendum. The Prime Minister has done the right thing this week, and I will take no lessons from Labour Members. When will they ever do the right thing for their people? I would just remind him of what it means in the Labour party when people say something. In the Conservative party a free vote means we can vote according to our own conscience; in the Labour party a free vote means they can vote according to the Leader's conscience.

On the flooding issue, I am proud of the response this country has made to a devastating situation in so many parts of the country. Our emergency services, voluntary services, local communities and our armed forces have come together to deal with a dreadful situation effectively and well. The Government have committed to provide financial support to all the communities affected in a way that goes far beyond what has taken place in the past. I am distressed about what has happened in this country but proud of the way the country has responded, and I am happy to say to the Opposition party that I think we have done a better job than has been done in the past. We will learn the lessons for the future, but it is imperative that we do the right thing when troubles like this strike.

On the question of the announcements made before Christmas, I just remind the hon. Gentleman that I have stood at this Dispatch Box week after week listening to the Opposition asking, “When can we have an update? Can we have an announcement before Christmas? Can we have the publication of a report before Christmas?” However, when before Christmas we actually produced a whole range of announcements, publications and reports and confirmations of Government policy, they complain about it; it is an absolute nonsense. We will do the right thing by this country; they will no doubt carry on complaining about it. That is their prerogative in opposition, but frankly I am taking no lessons from them.

As for the Housing and Planning Bill, let me first remind the hon. Gentleman that we are having a two-day debate on it, something that is often called for in this House. The Chief Whip and I believed it was necessary to make sure that the House had two days to debate a substantial Bill with changes being made to it. I just remind the hon. Gentleman that at 1 o'clock on Wednesday morning while we on this side of the House were

[Chris Grayling]

debating those measures, most of the Opposition Members had gone home to bed, so I will take no lessons from him when they say we should be offering more time for debate, given that we were debating and they were asleep.

The hon. Gentleman brought up the question of Shakespeare. Listening to the hon. Gentleman on Thursdays, I am reminded of the great quote from “King Lear”:

“Have more than you show, speak less than you know.”

Mr Speaker, this week of all weeks we should express our thanks to the Labour party. Having come back to work after the Christmas period, you and I perhaps think, in the words of the song, “I wish it could be Christmas every day.” On the Conservative Benches, looking at the Labour reshuffle, frankly it is.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Successful local businesses in Eagle Tower, a prominent office building in my constituency, have recently been informed that they will have to vacate so that floors can be converted under so-called permitted development rights. May we have a debate to consider whether the planning system affords adequate protection to high-quality occupied business space, which is vital for generating jobs in places like Cheltenham?

**Chris Grayling:** I understand the concerns my hon. Friend raises. The change we have brought forward has been to ensure that redundant office buildings, which exist in many parts of the country, can be quickly used for residential purposes given the nature of the housing challenge we face in this country. We all agree that we need to step up house building and make more housing available. However, I take note of what my hon. Friend says. He will shortly have an opportunity to question the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. My hon. Friend makes a valid point, but I do think this is a policy we need in order to make sure that there are no empty commercial buildings while people are struggling to get on the housing ladder.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. May I too take this opportunity to properly wish you a happy new year, Mr Speaker, and extend that to all the staff who work so diligently on our behalf throughout the course of the year? On behalf of the Scottish National party, may I congratulate Kamal El-Hajji, who has the notoriety of being the first BME Serjeant at Arms this House has ever had? We wish all the best to Kamal in his duties and responsibilities in the future.

I think this is going to be a fantastic year. It is going to be a particularly good year for the SNP anyway. We start the new year pretty much as we ended the old year, with divisions in both the Conservative and Labour parties. For the Conservatives, of course, it is over Europe, as usual. I know that the Leader of the House is looking forward to campaigning for his cherished Brexit. At least he will have that option, whereas Scotland as a nation might be taken out of the European Union against our will. That is going to be a massive issue for us. And the Labour party is divided on just about everything else. As it descends into a civil war of the total, intractable, take-no-prisoners variety, I think it is

about time to send in some sort of international peace envoy, because somebody needs to rescue them from themselves.

This week’s business has been dominated by the flooding, which has impacted on virtually every constituency in this nation. Much of my constituency, which has the biggest river system in the United Kingdom, remains under water. There has been massive disappointment throughout the country at the tone of the debate on this, however; I think the nation expected better. Given the tragedy that we have observed over the course of the past few weeks, the House has not risen to the occasion. All the debates have been of a partisan, point-scoring variety, but there will be many more debates on the subject and I appeal to Members to debate it properly, consensually and constructively—in the way that we have heard from the Scottish National party when we have addressed the issue in this House. I really hope that we can achieve that.

I was listening to the Chancellor this morning. What has happened to him? Has he had a miserable Christmas and new year? After all the cheeriness of the autumn statement, there is nothing but doom and gloom today. Perhaps it is just a bit of uncharacteristic honesty as he makes a proper assessment of the fortunes of the United Kingdom as we face international pressures. It is just as well, then, that the SNP is offering an economic debate next week. I do not know whether it will be a happy Chancellor or a gloomy Chancellor who turns up to it, but we should find out what is ailing him and offer him some proper economic medicine.

Immediately after business questions, we will be debating the appalling and unfair changes to the state pension age imposed on women born after April 1951, and the Women Against State Pension Inequality—WASPI—campaign. I am delighted that the youngest Member, the baby of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), will be leading that debate. Many of our constituents have been caught up in this pernicious trap, and they are hoping to hear something positive when the Minister responds today. Let us hope that the Government will do the right thing for all those women caught in that appalling pensions trap.

This is going to be a massive year, and if the Government think they can just put their feet up and observe the chaos in the Labour party, they will have to think again. They will have a united Opposition, here on the Scottish National party Benches. We will ensure that the Government are properly held to account. If Labour is not up to the job, we most definitely will be.

**Chris Grayling:** First, let me wish the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues a happy new year. I hope they all had an enjoyable Hogmanay—I am sure they did—and it is good to see the hon. Gentleman back in the House. I have to tell him that we are going to disagree on many things this year, as we always do, but I agree with him on his final point. There has been an utter shambles in the Labour party. In fact, there is one thing that has not been a shambles, and I should have congratulated the Government Chief Whip—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”]—I mean the Opposition Chief Whip on her well-deserved honour. The right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton) has been an excellent servant of this House, in opposition

and in government, and this honour has been welcomed on both sides of the House. I offer her my sincere congratulations.

**Chris Bryant:** What about North West Norfolk?

**Chris Grayling:** The shadow Leader of the House can never resist talking in this place. More than anyone else, he likes the sound of his own voice. He cannot stop talking. If he will just be patient, I was about to say that I am also delighted by the honour that has been awarded to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham). That, too, is well deserved. He is a long-standing and distinguished Member of the House. Both he and the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central very much deserve their recognition in the new year's honours list, and I apologise for not saying so earlier.

The spokesman for the Scottish nationalists and I clearly agree that there has been an utter shambles in the Labour party. We are now on day four, and it still has not finished making appointments. I notice that the shadow Leader of the House's Parliamentary Private Secretary seems to have disappeared, so perhaps he is in the process of being moved around—

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I am here!

**Chris Grayling:** Ah, I beg his pardon. He is not sitting in his usual place. But you couldn't make up the idea of a reshuffle that lasts for four days. It is a sign of how utterly incompetent the Opposition are. That said, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is back on some of his usual themes this week. I just remind him that the United Kingdom will vote on our future in the European Union, and Scotland voted to be a part of the United Kingdom. I know he has never quite adjusted to or accepted that reality, but none the less the reality is that Scotland chose to be part of the United Kingdom and we will vote as one United Kingdom.

On the economy, the Chancellor is prudently talking about some of the challenges we face internationally. I remind the hon. Gentleman that unemployment—the number of people claiming jobseeker's allowance in this country—has almost halved since 2010; the number of children growing up in workless households has fallen by more than half a million; and the level of employment in this country has mushroomed under this Government. He should look across the House and at what the Government have done over the past five years and say, "These are people who have delivered for this country and will carry on delivering for this country."

The hon. Gentleman also talked about the floods, and I pay tribute to everyone in Scotland, too. I know that south-west Scotland, in particular, was badly affected. The emergency services, the local authorities and all those involved in south-west Scotland did an excellent job. I commend the Members of Parliament in the areas affected for the work they have done. It was a distressing period for this country and I hope that those communities can get themselves back together shortly. I shall look forward across the course of this year, as ever, to our usual amicable debate. We will not agree on most things, but I always enjoy seeing him in this place and I look forward to a year of repartee.

**Mr James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): You will recall, Mr Speaker, that in October the Administration Committee, on which I serve, nodded through an altogether unwelcome recommendation from the House of Lords that we should abandon the centuries-old tradition in this place of recording Acts of Parliament on vellum. By abolishing that tradition we are also putting out of work a number of workers in Milton Keynes, who are the last remaining experts in this matter. You will recall that in answering a point of order, you made it clear that "for the recommendation...to be implemented, the matter would have to be brought to the Floor of the House, as it was in 1999."—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2015; Vol. 601, c. 39.]

You made it plain that this could not proceed unless the matter were debated here in the House of Commons on a substantive motion. Will the Leader of the House therefore tell me whether the Government have any plans to make time available for such a debate? Will he confirm that if they do not and there is no such debate on the matter on the Floor of the House of Commons, the recommendation cannot go ahead?

**Chris Grayling:** That is a matter for discussion by the relevant Committees, and it is on their agenda. As of today, I have had no request to make time available for a debate about it. This is of course a difficult decision; there is a balance to be found between maintaining traditions of this House and this country, and making sure that what we do is cost-effective. It is a matter for lively debate and I am not aware that any final decision has been reached.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): May we have a debate, perhaps in Government time or as Back-Bench business, on flooding—[HON. MEMBERS: "There was one yesterday!"]—with a particular focus on the resilience of major critical infrastructure assets? A quarter of all bridges, 10% of all emergency stations and 6% of hospitals are in areas susceptible to flooding. The last flood resilience review did not report to Parliament, because of national security issues. Can the Leader of the House ensure that the next flood resilience review, which is about to be carried out, does report to this place and is dealt with by the Intelligence and Security Committee, and that we treat the issue as the national security threat that it actually is?

**Chris Grayling:** One thing we are going to have to do is learn lessons from the flooding, and issues have arisen. For example, mobile phone networks have come down in areas of the country because key parts of them have been affected by the floods. These things are already being looked at carefully in the Cabinet Office and in government. We had the debate yesterday and there will be further opportunities to discuss this issue in future, but I assure the hon. Lady that work is taking place to make sure that lessons arising from the most recent floods are learned and that we do everything we can to protect our critical national infrastructure—she is right.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): May we have a debate on the effect of air pollution on health and the action needed to deal with it? About 7 million people worldwide are dying each year because of the effects of air pollution, and locally we face terrible consequences arising from standing traffic, including in my constituency.

**Chris Grayling:** I know that my hon. Friend has been a tireless campaigner since her election on trying to secure local improvements, and that she has campaigned on the issue of the Chickenhall Lane link road in her constituency and will carrying on doing so. Many of these decisions are now taken locally, in discussions with county councils about what projects should be prioritised for the future, but we will continue to look for ways of investing nationally and providing financial support for local and regional authorities to ensure that we provide the improvements to infrastructure that we need to keep the traffic flowing and to ease the kind of air pollution pressures that come from long traffic jams.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for advance notice of the two days of Backbench Business Committee debates to be held on 14 and 21 January. I am glad to say that, before the Christmas recess, we were pretty much up to date with our waiting list of debates to be tabled, and we now have almost a clear deck. I am therefore putting out an appeal to hon. Members across the House for applications for business on those two days.

**Chris Grayling:** I commend the hon. Gentleman and his Committee for the work that they do. I also echo what he says. For the Backbench Business Committee system to work well, we do need colleagues from all parts of the House to come forward with topics for debate. In recent weeks, we have seen requests for the traditional annual debates on veterans, policing and so on. It is very much my hope that those traditions will continue, so I encourage Members to go through the appropriate channel of the Backbench Business Committee, where I suspect there will be a receptive ear.

**Mr Andrew Turner** (Isle of Wight) (Con): Is the Leader of the House aware that the European Commission is attempting for the third time to impose damaging and wasteful regulations on the UK's ports? Employers and workers' representatives agree that those measures will damage investment and jobs. The European Scrutiny Committee, of which I am a member, has called for the measures to be debated on the Floor of the House, not in Committee. Will he look urgently at that matter and ensure that it is properly scrutinised by the whole House?

**Chris Grayling:** I am aware of the issue. In the past couple of days I have had a number of discussions with colleagues who represent ports and who have particular concerns about the matter. The Chief Whip and I are considering those representations. I can assure my hon. Friend that that matter is on our agenda. We must ensure that we get it right. The Prime Minister is absolutely right when he talks about the need for deregulation and subsidiarity in Europe. It is not entirely clear to me why we should have European regulation of our ports anyway, and it certainly has to be the right regulation if it has to happen at all.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be delighted to know that the "Rough Guide" has put Hull in the top 10 cities of the world to visit, alongside Vancouver and Amsterdam. *[Interruption.]* I can see that he is delighted by that given the comments that he is making to the Government

Chief Whip. On that basis, can we please have a statement from the Minister responsible for local growth and the northern powerhouse, the hon. Member for Stockton South (James Wharton), in order to discuss how to improve transport links to a global city and the UK city of culture 2017, including electrifying the railway lines and scrapping the tolls on the Humber bridge?

**Chris Grayling:** First, let me congratulate the hon. Lady and all the people of Hull on a remarkable achievement. It is always a matter of pride to this country when one of our great cities receives worldwide acclamation. We can all be proud of Hull's achievement. We should also be proud of Hull's preparations for the city of culture year. It promises to be a great year for the city. I know that my colleagues in different parts of the Government will do what they can to help ensure that, for the people and the authorities in Hull, it is a moment of great historic importance and great enjoyment.

**Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger** (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): The Prime Minister has quite rightly made the decision that all Members on the Government Benches can speak with their conscience over the European debate. Given that, can we have a series of debates on the European Union and what it will mean for this country come the referendum, so that people will be aware of what they can and cannot vote for and why they should vote with their conscience, as we will?

**Chris Grayling:** I suspect that we will have extensive debates on the matter in this House and around the country over the next few months, and rightly so. It is perhaps the key issue for our generation. The disappointing thing is that, while there appears to be debate in much of the country, there seems to be very little debate coming from the Opposition Benches. Labour Members do not know what they stand for and they are not interested in engaging in debate. They call for a reformed European Union, but they will not say what they are prepared to reform.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, may I thank the Leader of the House for his kind comments about Arlene Foster's election as the leader of the Democratic Unionist party and her shortly becoming the First Minister? We look forward to a confident, brighter future in Northern Ireland, taking everybody forward together.

The Leader of the House will be aware, because I know he is interested in the matter, of the High Court decision to grant a buzzard control licence, which took five years to happen. In light of that decision, will he agree to a statement being made in the House to ensure that all future applications for buzzard control licences will be looked upon sympathetically under the criteria that exist?

**Chris Grayling:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I will ensure that the Secretary of State responsible takes a look at that and writes to him with a proper response.

**Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): As somebody who is interested in international development, Mr Speaker, you will be interested to know that I have just returned from Uganda, where I looked at the terrible situation of

the malaria epidemic in the north of the country. May we have a debate on the health systems in Uganda, which are failing people? Mothers and children are dying from malaria, which should not be happening in this day and age. May we have an urgent debate in the House to discuss the situation?

**Chris Grayling:** First, I commend my hon. Friend for her work. Malaria is a scourge in many parts of the world and is particularly bad in Uganda at the moment. It is a terrible disease that can cost the lives of young people and blight communities. She makes an important point, and I know that she is looking for a debate on Uganda in the House. Of course, a broader debate on the global impact of malaria will take place in the House in the near future, but she makes a good point that the situation in Uganda merits attention in the House. I hope that the fact that we are as prominent a donor of international aid as any country in the world will enable us to do something to help Uganda, a country with which we have historic ties.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): When can we debate whether Parliament is slipping back into its bad old ways that led to the expenses scandal? In recent cases involving Malcolm Rifkind, Jack Straw, Tim Yeo and Lord Blencathra, bodies in this House took lenient decisions but independent voices outside, including a court and Ofcom, took harsh decisions. The Committee that adjudicated on Lord Blencathra was chaired by Lord Sewel, who now has his own difficulties. If we do not look at the fact that the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, which is meant to be a watchdog, is in fact a toothless pussycat, and at the uselessness of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, which is an expensive ornament, is there not a grave danger that we will slip back and have new scandals in the future?

**Chris Grayling:** I think we probably now have the most regulated system of operation of any Parliament in the whole of Europe. Cases can always be made for improving the situation—I am not going to discuss individual Members of this House or the House of Lords—but there are proper processes in the House for making representations on change and improvements, particularly through the Committee on Standards, which has responsibility for deciding on not only individual cases but the overall approach. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will make representations to that Committee.

**Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): This Christmas, news headlines were dominated by the floods. Obviously I am concerned about the amount of wildlife that has been lost, including hedgehogs.

Although Plymouth has not faced the type of problems that saw the railway line at Dawlish washed away, over the past two years the walls have been falling into the sea at both Devil's Point and Devonport in my constituency. May we have a statement from the Government about how local authorities can apply for money to look after their heritage?

**Chris Grayling:** I saw over Christmas that my hon. Friend has continued his valuable campaign on protecting the hedgehog, and I have no doubt that we will hear a lot more about that work in the coming months.

I know that last year the impact of the floods was very much about the south-west, and this year it is about challenges further north. It is important that we learn lessons, and we have ensured that we have made compensation available to communities affected by flooding. Of course, there are various mechanisms and funds available to local communities for the protection of historic buildings and sites. I know that there are many of those in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I will be happy to ensure that the relevant Minister talks to him about the options that are available.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Leader of the House will be aware of significant concerns that the UK might be in breach of international law for supplying the Saudis with weapons that are being used in Yemen. Has he any intelligence about when the Arms Export Controls Committee will be re-established? We need that Select Committee to look at these issues and to ensure that the UK is not in breach of international law.

**Chris Grayling:** That Committee is effectively a conglomeration of four different Select Committees, which is free to meet whenever it wishes. Its decision to meet or not to meet is not a matter for the Government. It is a matter for the Chairs of those four Committees to come together, to constitute the Committee and to hold meetings. There is no reason why that cannot happen now.

**Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I was disturbed last night when I visited a winter night shelter hosted by churches across Enfield. I spoke to Artur, who told me that if it was not for that night shelter, he would be travelling round on the night buses tonight and on future nights because he is not young or vulnerable enough to get housing. May we have a debate to consider developing a cross-departmental strategy on homelessness which will prevent people such as Artur becoming homeless in the first place, which should not be tolerated in 2016 Britain?

**Chris Grayling:** I commend my hon. Friend, who is typical of many people in the House who do unsung and unseen work in the community, visiting shelters, spending nights out with the homeless on the streets and so on in other situations. I commend my hon. Friend on what he is doing and on bringing the issue to the House. The best solution to homelessness is more homes and that is the incentive for what this Government are doing, but I will ensure that the relevant Ministers engage with my hon. Friend to discuss what he has learned and to try to ensure that we do what we can to end the blight of homelessness.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): May we have a debate on how we improve support for and the dignity of people who suffer incontinence? Sadly, there is a postcode lottery across the UK as to how long they wait to access support and advice. There is also a problem with how often they can access the products they need to deal with their incontinence. In England alone just short of 200,000 people were admitted to hospital with urinary tract infections. If we tackled this problem, we could give people dignity and respect and save considerable sums of money. May we look at the problem across Government and see how we can begin to tackle it?

**Chris Grayling:** The hon. Lady makes an important point. Suffering from the conditions that she describes is enormously disruptive to life and enormously distressing. These matters are devolved not only to the different parts of the United Kingdom, but to local clinical commissioning groups, which take the decisions about how to operate policies in their local communities. Where Members have situations in their constituencies which they think are not right, they need to take those up with local clinical commissioning groups and try to get a change of practice in those communities.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** My constituents in Kettering are outraged that an illegal immigrant from Sudan who broke into this country by walking through the channel tunnel has this week been awarded asylum and allowed to stay here. This sends an appalling signal to the staff at Eurotunnel and our hard-working border staff both in this country and in France. What is the point of intercepting these people if they are going to be given permission to stay? Also, it sends a green light to illegal immigrants from across the world that they might as well give it a go because if they make it here, they will get asylum. May we have an urgent statement from the Home Office on this matter?

**Chris Grayling:** I understand the concerns that my hon. Friend expresses. We have Home Office questions on Monday. Of course, we are subject to international rules about asylum claims and the best way of addressing the pressures is to continue the work we are doing to make sure that the border controls in Calais are secure. We are grateful to the French Government for the way they work collaboratively with us on this. The protective measures at Calais are much stronger than they were a few months ago, but it is a constant battle for our border forces.

**Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP):** I wish a good new year to the Leader of the House. I congratulate him on his bold leadership of the anti-European faction in the Government, but has he considered what all this means for the geography of the House? As I understand it, if the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) loyally supports his leader by disagreeing with him again, he is going to move from the Front Bench to the Back Bench. In European debates, if the Leader of the House is summing up in future, will he move from the Dispatch Box to the Back Benches? Will he be joined by the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary if they join his rebellion? Call me old-fashioned, but instead of playing musical chairs, could we not go back to the previous practice? When Government Ministers did not agree with the policies of their own Government, they just tendered their resignation.

**Chris Grayling:** If I understand correctly, we are about to move on from the days of “call Nick Clegg on LBC” to “call Alex Salmond on LBC”. The question is whether, when the right hon. Gentleman gets a call from Chris of south London or whatever, we can—

**Chris Bryant:** That’s you—I’m not south London.

**Chris Grayling:** Perhaps it is north London. Anyway, I look forward to hearing the programme. We are all going to have a lively debate over the next few months, and it is right and proper that we have a debate as a nation, but on the Government Benches we are a united

party in government, while on the other side of the House we have an Opposition who are not fit to be an Opposition.

**Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con):** Three quarters of all pension tax relief goes to those who least need it—those paying 40% tax and above. May we have a debate on addressing this unequal situation and proper reform of pension tax relief so that we move to a single-tier relief to benefit millions of ordinary British workers?

**Chris Grayling:** The Chancellor of the Exchequer is currently undertaking a review of pension tax relief and the way our pensions system works. My hon. Friend has great expertise in this area, and I urge him to discuss his views with the Chancellor to make sure they are inputted into the review. When it comes to discussing proposals brought forward by the Treasury, there will be extensive debates in this House.

**Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab):** I am sure, Mr Speaker, that you and the rest of the House were as delighted as me to hear the news that my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell) has won the Plain English award for speaking in this House. In line with that, may we have a debate in Government time on the use of language in this House so that we can find out what the Prime Minister means when he says he is going to look into something and what Ministers mean when they constantly say they are reviewing something. We could also discuss what is meant when someone asks a question to which they want an answer but gets something completely unrelated to it?

**Chris Grayling:** Nobody could accuse Labour Members of a lack of plain speaking this week. Member after Member has lined up to say that their leader is hopeless. The question is whether they are actually going to do anything about it.

**Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con):** May we have a debate on the health benefits of eating black pudding? My right hon. Friend will no doubt have seen reports this week that this tasty delicacy is full of protein, potassium, calcium, magnesium, iron and zinc so it is not only good for you but is a superfood. A debate will enable us to ensure that its benefits are more widely known. [*Interruption.*]

**Chris Grayling:** I think that my hon. Friend has created a split among those on the shadow Front Bench. There were distinct nods of approval to black pudding from the deputy shadow of the Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), and a shout of “Fat!” from the shadow Leader of the House, so I am not sure they share the same view on this. I remember very fondly walking round Bury market with my hon. Friend looking at the fine black puddings on sale there. Some great products are made in Lancashire and they are tasty to eat, perhaps in moderation.

**Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC):** Given that 21 Members stuck it out until half-past 2 yesterday morning to take part in an Adjournment debate on the world’s only Welsh language television channel, S4C, only to receive the blandest of brush-offs, surely there should be an opportunity to discuss and vote on the Government’s policy of whittling the channel to death.

**Chris Grayling:** I heard, and the hon. Lady will have heard, the Prime Minister's comments about S4C yesterday. Welsh language broadcasting is of course important, and any changes that are brought forward would clearly be a matter for discussion and debate in this House.

**Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): Last month I chaired a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on fair fuel for motorists and hauliers on an inquiry into pump prices, where we heard that the number of independent petrol retailers has reduced from 14,000 to 8,600 in the past decade. We were told that automated car washes have been a much-needed source of income for independent petrol retailers, but the Valuation Office Agency calculates that 30,000 people are now employed in the hand car washing industry, and the Petrol Retailers Association calculates that the Treasury could be missing out on £200 million of tax. May we therefore have a debate on the hand car washing industry?

**Chris Grayling:** Of course, there will be an opportunity to raise that issue at Treasury questions shortly. The important thing is not to say that we should not have hand car washing in this country, but to make sure that the people and businesses doing the hand car washing are operating properly and appropriately within the tax system and have a legitimate right to do that work, in order to ensure that they perform like any other business.

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): This week the Department of Justice in the United States filed a civil law suit on behalf of the Environmental Protection Agency against Volkswagen, because 600,000 of its car engines were illegal as a result of defeat devices. In the light of the fact that 30,000 people a year die in Britain as a result of diesel particulate emissions—much of the contribution towards which is extra emissions from the illegal defeat devices—what legal action are the Government going to take, in line with the Americans, against VW, and may we have an urgent debate on the matter?

**Chris Grayling:** Let us be clear: what VW did was unacceptable and shocking and it has done immense damage to that company. It is utterly inappropriate for any major corporation to act in that way. Prosecution decisions in this country are a matter not for Government, but for the relevant authorities. I am sure they will have noted what the hon. Gentleman has said, but it would be wrong for politicians to get directly involved in whether prosecution decisions should be taken.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): Over the Christmas period, I was contacted by two constituents—one was Muslim and the other Jewish—about problems they had with the out-of-hours coroners service. People of those religions need a death certificate within 24 hours in order to comply with their religious beliefs and to dispose of the body. Could a Minister come to the Dispatch Box and explain how the Government are ensuring that a 24-hour coroners service is available to everyone across the whole of the United Kingdom?

**Chris Grayling:** I am well aware of the issues and some of the challenges, particularly those faced by some of the communities who live in north London.

The issue is now subject to review by the Ministry of Justice, and I hope it will suggest ideas to improve the situation.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on the plight of the 3,000 refugees living in soaking tents and knee-deep in mud in the Grand-Synthe camp near Dunkirk? There are restrictions on the aid allowed in, 90% of people there are suffering from scabies and 80% this week tested as hypothermic. Does the Leader of the House think that is how people should live? Does he not accept that the UK Government must do more?

**Chris Grayling:** I have a simple view on this. We are providing more support to refugees in and around Syria than any other country except the United States, and we are taking thousands of refugees into this country to provide a route for the most vulnerable to escape that environment, but I do not believe that people should simply be able to come through France and into the United Kingdom. If someone is a genuine refugee, they are seeking safe haven. France is a safe haven. It is not clear to me why we should throw open the borders and simply allow people to travel through France and arrive in the United Kingdom.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Honeypot Lane forms part of the border between my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner). It is also part of the borough boundary between the London borough of Brent and Harrow. Brent Council has proposed a parking exclusion zone on Honeypot Lane. All of the residents on the Brent side have been fully consulted and have, unsurprisingly, objected to it, because they have no off-street parking at all, but there has been no consultation whatsoever on the Harrow side, other than a tatty notice applied to a lamppost. Could we have a debate in Government time on the implementation of controlled parking zones and the need for public authorities to properly consult people before anything is done?

**Chris Grayling:** Clearly, that is a matter of local controversy and perhaps one on which the two Members can work together. On the overall rules, the practicality will have to be dealt with at local level, but my hon. Friend will have the opportunity at the next Communities and Local Government questions to raise the duties on local authorities to make people aware of changes.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): On Tuesday the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) told the House that

“there is no agreement on judicial co-operation”—[*Official Report*, 5 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 97.]

in the memorandum of understanding between the UK and Saudi Governments, but the Ministry of Justice report to Parliament states:

“The Secretary of State visited Riyadh in September 2014 to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on Judicial Cooperation”.

The Government have refused to publish the memorandum so may we have a statement to explain that stark contradiction, unless the Leader of the House wishes to do so now, given that it was he, as the then Lord Chancellor, who signed it for the UK?

**Chris Grayling:** There will of course be plenty of opportunities in the coming weeks to question the current Lord Chancellor about what the Ministry of Justice does.

**Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con):** Following the recent local government finance settlement, Lancashire County Council will have £730 million available to spend in 2019-20, compared with £704 million this year. Yet the Labour-run council continues to slash services and waste money. The latest example of that is spending £6.6 million on consultants to help it to identify cuts for it to make. May we have a debate on local government finance so that we can discuss the appalling way in which some of our local councils are run?

**Chris Grayling:** We have a debate coming up on funding for rural areas. It is quite noticeable that Conservative councils, with the financial challenges we all face across the country, have risen to those challenges and still deliver high-quality services at a lower price, but Labour councils are struggling even to operate with the money they have.

**Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab):** Driven grouse shoots damage wildlife sites, increase water pollution, increase greenhouse gas emissions, increase water bills, result in the illegal killing of hen harriers and shed water off hillsides, which causes millions of pounds of damage in floods—we have seen such floods in recent weeks—so may we have a debate and a vote on whether to abolish driven grouse shoots?

**Chris Grayling:** Conservative Members believe that we should support our countryside and our country traditions. Labour Members have absolutely no interest in rural communities or the people who live in them, and every time they are in power they damage those communities.

**Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP):** A good new year to you, Mr Speaker. May I bring to the Leader of the House's attention the fact that on 9 June 2015, my constituent Mr Majid Ali, who was studying at City of Glasgow College, was removed from the UK, despite a major campaign by the National Union of Students, back to Pakistan on the basis that his life would not be in danger? Since his removal, his home and those of his relatives have been raided by the Pakistan authorities, and Mr Ali now finds himself on the run. Will Ministers make a statement or hold a debate in Government time on deportation and removal orders, and on how we can ensure the safe passage back to the UK of those incorrectly served with such orders?

**Chris Grayling:** I do not know the details of the individual case, but the Home Secretary will be in the House to answer questions on Monday. We have to ensure a fair balance in this country: we provide a refuge for people who are genuinely fleeing persecution, but we cannot have an open door for everyone.

**Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab):** In the past eight days, the Chinese Government have devalued their own currency and intervened quite aggressively in their own manufacturing base, including in steel. May we have a statement on why the Government support giving the Chinese

market economy status, given the amount of steel flooding the European Union and the UK market in particular?

**Chris Grayling:** Treasury questions are coming up shortly, which will be an opportunity to question the Chancellor about matters in China. It is right and proper that we maintain close ties with China. After all, it is shaping up to be the world's biggest economy for this century.

**Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD):** May we have a debate on the excellent work done during the past 38 years by the charity Motability in providing disability-compliant vehicles and, critically, on the outcome of assessments for the personal independence payment? In such circumstances, many of my constituents have lost vehicles—only to have them restored at a later date, following an appeal—which causes huge distress and, in my area, a very real sense of isolation.

**Chris Grayling:** Motability is of course an important scheme—indeed, the welfare support we provide to people facing disability challenges is very important—but it is right and proper to have gateways in place. One of the reasons why we moved from the disability living allowance to PIP was that a very large number of people receiving DLA and accessing the support provided to people with disabilities had self-referred or self-diagnosed and, in the end, we had no certainty that those people genuinely needed such support.

**Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab):** May we have a statement from the Minister for Housing and Planning on carbon reduction building regulations? It is clear to all but Ministers that it is more cost-effective to integrate solar photovoltaics and solar thermal into buildings at the construction stage. Both the Greater London Authority and the Scottish Government have improved their building regulations in that respect. Is it not time for the rest of the United Kingdom to follow suit?

**Chris Grayling:** We have a record in government of encouraging the growth of renewables in this country that is second to none. In the last year, the level of electricity generated by renewables has risen above 25%. Building regulations and standards have improved, developed and changed, but there has to be a degree of flexibility for building firms to decide what products they will actually build.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):** Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), during the Transport Committee's inquiry we received evidence from industry experts that manufacturers were cheating the safety regulations in order to get around them. Do we not now need a debate in this House on the regulation of cars and other vehicles on the road in respect of emissions software and cheating devices, because the list of countries across the world that are taking action is getting longer and the UK Government's silence is getting more deafening?

**Chris Grayling:** The hon. Gentleman talks about the UK Government's silence. It is, of course, not the job of the UK Government to take decisions about prosecutions.

We have looked at these issues very closely and worked with the United States on them. The Transport Secretary takes this matter very seriously. If the hon. Gentleman feels the need to bring this matter to the House further, he should talk to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee and try to secure a debate in the near future.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): If the EU were to confer market economy status on communist China, it would cause a detrimental threat to UK steel jobs. May we have a statement in the House to update us on the discussions in Europe on this matter and on the Government's position?

**Chris Grayling**: The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to raise that matter on Tuesday, because the Foreign Secretary will be here to take questions. I encourage him to put that point to the Foreign Secretary.

**Greg Mulholland** (Leeds North West) (LD): A debate on the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman is long overdue. We have the nonsensical situation in which it is supposed to be the ombudsman for Parliament and parliamentarians, yet the system can be changed only if the Government decide to bring forward legislation. That must change. Parliamentarians in this House must be able to make decisions on how the ombudsman is structured and on the funding for it, without interference from Government.

**Chris Grayling**: The hon. Gentleman is free to bring that matter to the Floor of the House at any time. It may be that going to the Backbench Business Committee is the right way to test the view of the House to see how many people share his opinions. The future of the ombudsman, how it is structured and how it works is a matter of debate, and I do expect it to be discussed and debated in the coming months.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As we know, this House relies on tradition and convention. Following on from the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), may we have a statement that allows the Leader of the House to explain his understanding of collective Cabinet responsibility, what has traditionally happened to Cabinet members who disagree with Government policy and how that compares with a weak Prime Minister who will allow his Ministers to actively campaign against his viewpoint?

**Chris Grayling**: We have a grown-up approach to politics on the Government Benches. We will have a great national debate and the Prime Minister has set out his position. If we look at the Labour party—I do not blame the Scottish nationalists for this—it decided to have a free vote on Syria, yet the people who spoke and voted against the view of the leader got sacked. That is not my idea of a free approach to Parliament.

## Backbench Business

### State Pension Age (Women)

11.33 am

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House, while welcoming the equalisation of the state pension age, is concerned that the acceleration of that equalisation directly discriminates against women born on or after 6 April 1951, leaving women with only a few years to make alternative arrangements, adversely affecting their retirement plans and causing undue hardship; regrets that the Government has failed to address a lifetime of low pay and inequality faced by many women; and calls on the Government to immediately introduce transitional arrangements for those women negatively affected by that equalisation.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the time to debate this important issue. I especially want to take a moment to thank the WASPI team—the Women Against State Pension Inequality. Pensions are incredibly complicated, as most people would imagine, but these ordinary women have taken the time to sift through all the information and have drafted one of the most comprehensive and articulate briefings that I have seen since being elected. I thank them for articulating their arguments so well.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a very important statement, given that the former Pensions Minister has admitted that he made a bad decision, based on inadequate briefing. Is it not therefore only right that the House considers this decision today, takes it seriously and reaches the right decision, with the right information before it?

**Mhairi Black**: That is why the debate is so important, and we should call on the Government to act. However, because pensions are so complicated, it is important, not just for the benefit of some Members, or people in the Gallery, or those watching at home, to try to explain why those women have found themselves in the position that they are in.

To do that, we must go back to 1995, when the Pensions Act increased the female state pension age from 60 to 65. The purpose of that was to equalise the pension age so that women retired at the same age as men. That is fair enough; it makes sense and I do not think anybody would disagree with that principle. The Turner commission recommended that 15 years' notice be given to individuals if their pension arrangements were to change to give them adequate time to respond appropriately. The 1995 Act technically did that. The equalisation—the changes—was not to be brought in until 2010, which technically gave women 15 years' notice. The problem is that nobody knew about that. As late as 2008, fewer than half of women knew that they would be affected. The National Centre for Social Research stated in 2011 that only 43% of women were aware of the planned change.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes an important point about people not being aware. It would seem that Government Front Benchers are not aware: there is no Equalities Minister here and there is no Department for Work and Pensions Minister here. That is greatly concerning.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara):** I am here.

**Helen Goodman:** You are not in the DWP.

**Mr Vara:** I am.

**Mhairi Black:** It is noticeable, and a pity, how few Conservatives have turned out.

It is important to highlight that the Government did not send out a single letter to women. There was no official correspondence between the Government and the individuals affected, alerting them to the changes that were going to happen to them. Even the previous Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, recognised that not everybody knew that the changes had happened in the 1995 Act.

A response to a Freedom of Information request states that the Department eventually wrote to individuals affected and that

“Mail campaigns took place between 2009 and 2013.”

That is 14 years after the 1995 Act. Women were not personally notified by anybody official until 14 years after the changes came in. That is 14 fewer years that women have had to prepare and to try to make alternative arrangements.

**Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab):** The hon. Lady is making an important point. In a nutshell, is not the injustice to that set of women that they have had not one but two changes to the state pension age, that the process has been accelerated and that there are no transitional arrangements in place? Is not that the real unfairness?

**Mhairi Black:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman's points.

**Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con):** I have a great deal of sympathy with what the hon. Lady is saying. I am glad that she agrees that the need for equalisation is generally accepted and that it is right and proper. Does she think that it might be sensible to urge the Government to look at the sort of 10 to 15-year transitional arrangements that were made in public sector pensions reform? Would that be a constructive way forward?

**Mhairi Black:** As I said, I do not think that anybody here has a problem with the principle of transitioning towards equality. However, we are talking about women's pensions, and it is important to bring the discussion back to that.

Many constituents who have written to me said that the information in the letters that they did receive was conflicting. They were getting different information. In one case, a constituent was told that they had enough contributions to receive their full state pension at 60, which was a few months away, only to receive a further letter three weeks later telling her that she will not get her pension until she is nearly 66. Many of the letters did not even get to the people they were supposed to reach. Some people were told by MPs and Ministers that they must have given the DWP the wrong addresses, but those women had been living in the same house for more than 20 years, so I find that difficult to believe.

**Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab) rose—**

**Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) rose—**

**Mhairi Black:** I want to make some progress.

Some people say, “You should not have to be written to. It's your pension, you should be keeping an eye on it. You should be looking out for reports and things, and take responsibility.” But when giving evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, financial journalist Paul Lewis told us that after researching this himself he could barely find any reporting of the issue at all in 1995. There were a few small press cuttings from the business pages at the back of some newspapers. A freedom of information request revealed that the Government did fund “broader” awareness campaigns, which ran in waves between 2001 and 2004, but that these campaigns

“did not focus on equalisation in particular”.

In fact, only one of the press adverts in those campaigns was focused on this issue—one press cutting roughly seven years after this had already been passed into law. It is quite evident that this whole thing became a total mess. I do not know whether it was not reported deliberately, for political reasons or fear of ramifications, or whether it was a genuine accident, but what I do know is that women were not notified. It was not reported and they were not given enough time to be able to make appropriate arrangements.

This brings us on to the Pensions Act 2007, which increased the equalised state pension age from 65 to 66 between 2024 and 2026. It gave all affected people 17 years' notice. That is fair enough, but then we come on to what the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) mentioned, the Pensions Act 2011. That came along and said, “Forget the 17 years' notice, we're going to rush this through. We need to do this right now.” The 2011 Act accelerated pension age equalisation for women and the subsequent increase to 66, effective from October 2016 onwards, meaning that affected women had only five years' notice to try to remedy life plans that had been in place for years.

**Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op):** The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and I welcome the debate she has brought to the House. Does she agree that many of these women have had a lifetime of low and unequal pay in low-paid jobs? They have had broken careers, because they have brought up children. Some may have got divorced or separated. Their whole life plan has been disrupted, destroyed and impoverished by this awful change.

**Mhairi Black:** I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman and I will touch on that point later.

The 2011 Act made women wait an extra year to a year-and-a-half to claim their state pension. However, we have to remember and take into account the context that women did not know about the initial 1995 Act. We have a situation where there is a whole host of women who read about the 2011 Act and went, “Oh, God. Okay, I am going to have to be working an extra two years. I'd better start making plans. Oh no, wait a minute, I'm working till I'm 66. Where did that come from?” There is a whole host of women who have been given a double whammy. The Government have not and are not giving women enough time to prepare alternative plans. There have to be better transitional arrangements.

The Conservative ethos is to encourage independence and responsible choice, but how can that happen if we do not give people the time to make the responsible choices? By continuing this policy at such a high speed, the Government are knowingly and deliberately placing another burden on women who are already trying to deal with consequences of an Act passed 21 years ago that they have only now found out about. To put that into context, I am 21—that's how old this is.

One of my constituents told me that she began working at 17 and chose to pay the full rate of national insurance on the basis that she would retire at 60. Other options were available to her, but she said, "I want to retire at 60 so I'll pay the price, through national insurance, my whole working life." She put it in a way that I think is a very good and accurate description of what is happening. She has now found out that she is not retiring until she is 66. She says:

"The coalition and this present Government have stripped us of our pensions with no prior warning and with no regard to the contract we all entered when we were 17."

She uses the term "contract". That is an important point, because pensions are not benefits; they are a contract. People enter into them on the basis that if they pay x amount of national insurance they will receive y at a certain age.

**Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab): That is also the case for my constituent who at 57-and-a-half realised she would no longer be able to retire at 60. She is a care worker doing an extremely physically demanding job. She now has to work until she is 66. She has had a low income throughout her life working as a care worker and now has to carry on doing this demanding job for a further six years.

**Mhairi Black:** I could not agree more. Every Member, if they contact their constituents, will recognise that this problem spreads across the whole of the UK and affects women of all classes, from different backgrounds and with different jobs.

In criminal law, if we want to send someone to jail, it has to be agreed beforehand how long that person is going away for, and if that needs to change, there are appropriate measures to deal with it. In civil law, if we enter into a contract, there are terms and conditions stating, "If you want to change this contract or break out of it, there will be a price to pay." Why are pensions any different? This is a contract people have entered into, but it is now being broken and nothing is being done to allow them to transition. These women have done exactly what was asked of them—they have worked hard all their lives and paid their national insurance—but it is now being taken from them from behind their backs.

What is worse, if the Government choose to continue with the policy, they will be completely ignoring the years of gender inequality these women have lived through. Another constituent of mine, Kathleen Birney, explains that she worked until her children came along. Her husband could no longer work because of a disability, but she was determined not to depend on state benefits, so she studied and became a primary school teacher. She cared for her husband and her children, and she never claimed a penny. She has based all her life plans and financial plans on the basis that she would be

retiring at 60. She has now found out that she cannot retire until she is 66. Unpaid carers are the unsung heroes of our economy. They have saved consecutive Governments an absolute fortune time and again. Sadly, women in our society have had to live with years of performing gender roles, meaning that the vast majority of unpaid carers are women. They are the type of people who this policy is hitting: people who cannot afford to go another six years without a pension. Some women, such as Kathleen, are being left penniless. They have nothing and are being forced to turn to the state for benefits. How does that fit into the logic of reducing public spending?

We will most likely hear the Government say, "It's all okay because women will do better under the new single-tier state pension", but there is a campaign called CARIISP—the collection against real inequality and injustice of the state pension—which is a collection of women rightly pointing out that a person only receives the higher rate of the new pension if they have paid 35 years of national insurance, but many women have not had the chance to build up that level of contribution. It is a separate issue; I mention it, first, to raise awareness and, secondly, in the hope it will earn a debate on its own merits.

The Government have said:

"The policy decision to increase women's state pension age is designed to remove the inequality between men and women."

That is a strange definition of equality: I am being shafted and short-changed purely because of when I was born and because I am a woman. That is not my definition of equality.

To conclude, there are two problems at the heart of this. First, there is the poor communication over the years, but all we can do is learn from that. I accept that the 1995 Act has happened, and all we can do is reflect on the mistakes made and not repeat them. The second issue, however, is the 2011 Act and the rapid changes the coalition and the Government have made. We can do something about that. Unlike most things that come from this Government—I mean this sincerely—I do not believe that this policy was vindictive or done in the knowledge that it would hurt people. I genuinely think we have ended up in this mess purely because of mistake after mistake, but any mess can be cleared up. If they continue with this policy, however, in the full knowledge of everything that has been and will be outlined, it will become vindictive and deliberate, and it will be done in the full knowledge that people will be hurt.

I understand that we have to work in tandem and with responsibility when it comes to the economy, but that does not mean punishing people who are about to retire. Every topic we speak about in this Chamber comes down to: "Where are you gonna find the money?" I understand that, but the answer is always austerity, no matter how brutal or who it affects. In this Chamber since I was elected we have had a go at people on low wages, the disabled and women, and now we are having a go at pensioners. We can afford to send airstrikes to Syria and to pay for nuclear weapons, but we cannot afford to look after our pensioners? I just do not buy it. The women up in the Gallery right now did not cause the financial crash, they are not responsible for the state of our economy and they did not make the irresponsible decisions that got us here. I understand the question,

[Mhairi Black]

“Where are you gonna find the money?”, but I refuse to accept or believe that it has to come out of the pensions of older women.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. On account of the number of Members wishing to contribute, there will be a six-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches with immediate effect.

11.50 am

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on leading today's debate, for which there is an extraordinary turnout, showing the considerable interest of so many Members in this subject. I became involved in this campaign somewhat by accident. I was approached, as were many other hon. Members, by several constituents who said they were going to be disadvantaged. None of us realised the extent of the hundreds of thousands of women who stand to be treated disproportionately unfairly.

I went along to the Westminster Hall debate, which was led by the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley). I expressed my sympathies and I recorded a short podcast on the subject, which has now been followed by 145,000 people, many of whom have written to me about it—and not just my own constituents either.

I want to pay tribute to the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign, which has articulated the case so well in front of the Select Committee. Its petition has now been signed, I believe, by more than 103,000 people. I want to thank the WASPI campaign for the help and support it gave me, not least in telling non-constituents to write to their own MPs rather than have them all writing to me—and I am exceedingly grateful for that.

We all agree with equalisation of the pension age. Large sums of money are involved and difficult decisions have to be made, but it is important that the rule of fairness is applied as much as possible, and it is clear that a sizeable group of women seem to be bearing the brunt of these changes disproportionately.

**Alison McGovern:** The hon. Gentleman is making an important speech. I would like to ask him, while he talks about fairness, whether he realises how this feels for women of my generation who owe everything to those women who were born in the '50s and who fought for the Equal Pay Act 1970 and for all the advantages that have given us any chance. Does he feel that unfairness to those women, as I do?

**Tim Loughton:** I applaud the hon. Lady. I have had representations from constituents who were in low-paid jobs with huge caring responsibilities for children and other family members when they did not have access to free child care and other things—and we have them to thank. Yet it is those people for whom I believe there has been a breach of trust, as these changes hit them disproportionately. We have a large duty of care to them, but I do not think we are going to fulfil it.

**Robert Neill:** I very much agree with everything my hon. Friend is saying. Will he concede that in other pension reforms, we were anxious as a Government to

make sure that there was protection for those who were not able to change their circumstances? This operates particularly unfairly on people such as one of my constituents who has worked all her life but is unable to return to work because of a pre-existing medical condition, so she cannot change her circumstances.

**Tim Loughton:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why fairness needs to be applied to everybody, and in this case, there is a cohort of women who are simply not being treated fairly. Our state pension system is funded on the contributory principle. This is not a state benefit for which no prior commitment is involved, yet this group of women who have been paying national insurance contributions over many years in good faith and who have fulfilled their end of the deal face being short-changed retrospectively.

We need to bear in mind many other factors. Fewer than one in four women who qualify for the new state pension in 2016-17 will get the full amount. Right up to 2054, fewer women than men will qualify for the full standard pension. Women are significantly more likely than men to work part time, and to do so for longer periods throughout their working lives, largely driven by caring roles, as hon. Members have mentioned. They therefore tend to be under-pensioned.

I welcome the fact that the new single-tier pension will recognise periods of time spent caring, which will help in the future, and I acknowledge that the Government have made progress on shrinking the gender pay gap—an issue on which consultation is in place. Progress has been made with more women in work than ever before. We have seen lots of generous reforms on entitlement to free child care, the national living wage and so forth, but all those are far too late for a generation of women who relied on work without many of the benefits that we now take for granted, while bringing up their families and discharging their caring responsibilities. Because of the number of women who are going out to work, many others have caring responsibilities for grandchildren as well as having to hold down part-time jobs.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Tim Loughton:** I will not give way again, because so many other Members wish to speak.

It is right for the rise in the pension age to reflect growing life expectancy, but a number of recent medical and actuarial studies show that life expectancy for women aged 65, 75, 85 and 95 fell in 2012, while rates among men continued to rise. There are big discrepancies in life expectancy among some of the poorest women in society, and, of course, those born in the 1950s—the ones whom we are discussing today—are the most reliant on the state pension, and therefore the most vulnerable to the changes. There are grounds for querying why members of that group are being hit disproportionately.

There is also the question of whether the women were given proper and adequate notice. I think we all agree that that clearly did not happen. The money expert Paul Lewis, who has helped to articulate this campaign so successfully, has given details about how little notice some women received:

“Approximately 650,000 women worst affected by the speed up—those born 6 April 1953 to 5 April 1955—were written to in...February 2012.

That means they got their letters between the ages of 57 and almost 59 that their pension age would not be 60.”

Some women received no notification at all.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Tim Loughton:** I will not give way.

Those women had precious little time in which to make alternative arrangements, even if they could afford to. That could not happen now because of changes introduced in the state pension review of 2015. However, Angela Heasman, one of my Shoreham constituents, pointed out:

“A very important point that I feel has been missed here is that if one considers what if ten or 15 years notice had been given? For the women, like myself, who are low earners in part-time work, they would not have had enough or any disposable income to pay into a private pension on top of the high and ever rising contributions to National Insurance.

To put this in perspective, in order to save enough into a private pension for an annuity of £6,000 pa you are looking at...£100,000. This is why for low paid people their National Insurance contributions are all they can afford and consequently totally dependent upon a state pension. Therefore even ten years notice is not enough time for the low paid to pay into a private pension that would equal the State Pension.”

She suggested that

“the reintroduction of Pension Credit, which is means tested, would alleviate, at a stroke, those who find themselves in this invidious position. If Pension Credit could be reinstated from 60, and add on Pensioner Benefits this would lift those who are genuinely hit the hardest out of extreme poverty.”

I ask the Minister to consider that suggestion.

It is difficult for many older women to stay in the workplace or get back into it. Unemployment rates among women over 50 are well above the national average. The gender pay gap is at its worst for women in their 50s—exactly the sort of women whom we are discussing.

Recent comments from Steve Webb, the former Pensions Minister, strongly indicate that he acknowledged that the Department for Work and Pensions had been at fault in failing to provide adequate notice for the women affected when he made a big fuss about negotiating a six-month concession at the time. That has been compounded by his recent comment that the Government had “made a bad decision” about the state pension age, and had been badly briefed.

During previous debates, when the last changes were made, the Minister gave strong indications that transitional arrangements would be made for the worst affected, but that has not happened. Why not? Will the Minister please revisit that undertaking?

As I said earlier, I have received many e-mails from around the country and from my own constituents. Let me end my speech by quoting the closing paragraph of a letter from a woman in Worthing. She wrote:

“I have also heard some MPs say that older people should downsize their homes to free up the housing stock for families. We did this so that our larger house, where my husband had lived all his life, could be enjoyed by a family but we are quickly using up any money for normal day to day expenses...It seems that we

older women who have contributed to society are considered unimportant and not worth the financial support that we have earned over the years.”

I believe that we risk breaching the trust of women who have made many sacrifices, and who do not now have the expectations for their retirement that they were led to believe they would have.

11.59 am

**Mr George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) first on securing this important debate, and secondly on the forceful way in which she put the case. She was strongly backed up by the speech of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton).

I just want to make two points by way of introduction. The first is to also congratulate Women Against State Pension Inequality—WASPI—on the powerful way it has put this case and conducted its campaign. Secondly, I want to say there is a basic unfairness in this problem that does need to be addressed. Into the bargain, there is a broken promise—or a broken contract, as I think the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South described it—between the state and the women who are affected.

I received a very well put-together letter from a constituent. I will not name her as she marked it “Private and Confidential” and I think there is a message in that for me. Nevertheless, I thought it would be as well to use her words as much as possible, because this is someone who has been directly affected. The points she makes have already been reflected in the two speeches so far, but I think they bear repetition in her own words. The first point she makes is that she was given

“Inadequate notice and communication regarding the age change—I received less than 4 years instead of the recommended 10-15 yrs. This has had disastrous consequences on the important financial and life changing decisions I made in anticipation of my retirement at 60 and receipt of state pension.”

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure my right hon. Friend has, like me, had a number of women make representations to him. I met some women on Monday for whom this has changed their life for the worse. I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree that this is discriminatory against women.

**Mr Howarth:** I was going to come on to that very point.

The second point my constituent makes is that she was

“Hit by 2 pension age increases first to 65 and rapidly in succession to 66 resulting in the loss of over £35,000”.

The final point she made that I want to highlight is that she is

“No longer eligible to receive the old state pension into which I paid full contributions for over 40 years. I will not receive a full new state pension due to the shortfall of contributions between the ages of 60-66. A factor in my decision to retire at 60 was that I had paid in excess of the 39 years contributions that were required for a full state pension at that time.”

**Alan Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): This is a crucial debate not least for my constituents Jackie Williams and Debbie Watkins who are active in

[Alan Johnson]

the WASPI campaign. My right hon. Friend might be pleased to know that the Minister responsible for this issue says the reason she cannot carry out the terms of this motion is that it would be impossible. He and the House might care to know that, as Ros Altmann, she was a very effective advocate on pensions issues when I was the Work and Pensions Secretary, and when we were arguing that the pension protection fund we had introduced should not be applied retrospectively, as she wished, I said it was impossible. Ros said to me, “That word doesn’t—”

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order, Mr Johnson; come on, you are in the next debate as well. In the interests of fairness, we have a very tight time limit and must have short interventions so nobody drops off the list—and I know you would not want to do that to anybody.

**Mr Howarth:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. My right hon. Friend brings a wealth of experience and understanding of this subject to the contribution he has just made and I am very grateful for it, lengthy though it may have been.

If I can continue with the quote I was midway through from my constituent, she goes on to say:

“This requirement has now been reduced to 30 years. To be faced with an overpayment in the old pension requirements of 10 years contributions which I am no longer eligible for and to have a shortfall of 6 years in the new pension requirements is beyond belief.”

I want to conclude by quoting my constituent again. Her comments illustrate why the WASPI campaign is so reasonable. She says:

“I understand that the equalisation of state pensions had to be addressed but I object to the unfair way that this was handled creating more issues of inequality in the process. Future generations will be given 10 years notice on age changes whereas I and many like me were not. I am requesting that transitional protection/arrangements be provided for the 1950s women affected by these changes.”

Of course all Governments have to consider the financial situation, make proper arrangements and understand the economic difficulties that they face, but this is a basic question of inequality and unfairness.

**Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

**Mr Howarth:** I cannot give way again.

This matter has to be addressed, and I hope that the Minister will understand the strength of feeling that exists not only among those out there who are affected but in this House. We feel that this is an injustice, and all injustices have to be put right, as this one should be.

12.5 pm

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth). I should like to praise the reasonableness of the Women Against State Pension Inequality—WASPI—campaign. Several campaigners have come to my constituency office, and they have put forward their arguments in a cogent, respectful and thoughtful manner.

Since 2010, this Government have been taking the difficult decisions necessary to get Britain’s deficit under

control. This has often been contentious and involved many political disagreements with the Opposition. Since the Turner report, however, the one area on which Members on both sides of the House have in no small degree agreed is pensions. For more than a decade, MPs from all parties have been working together to tackle the challenges posed by an ageing population and to ensure the long-term financial security of elderly people. This quite unusual political consensus was both necessary and heartening in dealing with a long-term issue.

It is no secret that, without change, our current state pension arrangements will simply not be financially sustainable. People are living longer than ever: a teenager today can expect to live until the age of 90. That is to be celebrated, but it also imposes serious burdens on welfare systems that were designed in another age. In the last Parliament, the Government estimated the cost of abandoning state pension age reforms at a completely unaffordable £23 billion, the equivalent of putting 7p on income tax.

Much of this debate focuses on the impact of these measures on women, so perhaps we should reflect on how much this Government have done to improve the position of women in the pensions system.

**Helen Goodman:** Before the hon. Gentleman tells us that everything is okay, would he like to hear the experience of one of my constituents? She says:

“I have worked full time since leaving school at 16. I am now 61. I have worked through 10 years of kidney failure, dialysis and finally a kidney transplant. The effects have taken their toll. I cannot afford to retire without a state pension so I have another five years of my current life to look forward to, assuming my kidney does not fail or I die of something else.”

Surely that level of hardship is unacceptable.

**Julian Knight:** I thank the hon. Lady for putting the words into my mouth that everything was okay. I remind her that she is a member of the party that was in government from 1997 to 2010, and if there is anything amiss regarding the publicising of these changes, Labour Members ought to look to themselves in that respect.

The motion regrets that the Government have “failed to address a lifetime of low pay and inequality faced by many women”.

I really do not recognise that. Let us consider two central planks of this Government’s policy—namely, raising personal allowances and increasing the minimum wage to the living wage. Both those initiatives benefit women tremendously. In addition, the Government are looking at options to reform pensions tax relief, which was left unaltered by the Labour Government.

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Following the Budget, research carried out by the House of Commons Library showed that women would be twice as likely—if not more—to be hit harder than men as a result of the Chancellor’s measures. If the disproportionate way in which women have been treated and the discrimination that they have suffered are not addressed by this Government, that will simply add to a long list of ways in which the Government have continued to fail the women of this country. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree with that?

**Julian Knight:** I really do not agree with what the hon. Lady says whatsoever. The raising of the personal allowance, combined with the rise in the minimum

wage, will give a huge boost to British workers and to women in this country, and she should recognise that fact.

In addition, the Government are looking at options to reform pensions tax relief. If Ministers choose the option that I am calling for, as others are, and they dispense with the top rate of tax relief and move to a single rate of relief, somewhere around the 30p in the pound mark, it will hugely advantage women in the workforce. It would be a real game-changer for the retirement savings of millions of hard-working British women. Equalising the pension age may pose short-term challenges, but it is an overdue acknowledgement of the role women play in the modern workforce. It is quite wrong for the Government to structure the pension system around the assumption that women's careers—

**Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con):** My hon. Friend made an important point about there being more women in the workforce. There is evidence to show that women directly affected by the state pension age equalisation have increased their employment rate by 6.8%, to 40.7%, according to the Department for Work and Pensions in November. Older working-age women are now more likely to be in employment than at any time over the past 30 years.

**Julian Knight:** I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. Let me add to it. Many people are coming to retirement age—this is before they collect the state pension—and we need to encourage older people's involvement in the workforce as well.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Julian Knight:** I am sorry, but I cannot give way again.

One of the most encouraging things we have seen under this Government is that people are staying in work for longer. The move to equalise the pension age may pose short-term challenges but it was an overdue acknowledgement of the role women play in the modern workforce. We are also enacting very important reforms to the period for which someone has to pay national insurance before qualifying for the full state pension. Until relatively recently, that stood at 39 years for women and 44 years for men. That is surely the worst of both worlds, in that it is structurally unequal while being long enough to penalise women who take time out of work to have children. Under the new arrangements, time taken out of employment for caring or to raise a family will be counted towards someone's national insurance record, and the new, equal age of 35 no longer penalises such women. Moreover, by bringing the male contribution periods down to the same level, the Government have recognised that many men may also desire a different work-life balance than was traditionally the case in the past.

I am not in the habit of quoting Liberal Democrats, but I will make an exception in this instance over the Government's decision to defer the date at which the state pension age will rise to 66, at a cost of £1.1 billion. While in office, Steve Webb, the former Pensions Minister, put it as follows:

“a billion quid is a serious amount of money.”

This decision means that almost a quarter of a million women who faced a sudden increase of 18 months or more in their pension age no longer face that possibility. We have also instituted the triple lock, which ensures that pensions are increased by the highest of three measures: price inflation, growth in earnings or 2.5%. That means no more of the sort of infamous bag-of-peanuts increases we saw under the Labour party. Also, we must not forget that the new state pension will be higher in value than the old one and far less complex.

We in Britain are rightly proud of the care we take of our elderly citizens, which has been shown by a marked reduction in levels of pensioner poverty in the previous two decades. It would be wrong to take serious risks with long-term economic sustainability and our pension system for the sake of winning short-term political battles.

12.13 pm

**Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab):** First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on her outstanding opening speech, and the Backbench Business Committee on allocating time for this important debate. I am heartened to see the support from my Front-Bench colleagues, including my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), and my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green)—she is also my neighbour. I know that they all strongly support this campaign and the women in their constituencies who are affected by this issue. I congratulate the WASPI campaigners, who have worked tirelessly on this issue. They have now gained 107,000 signatures—perhaps 108,000 since the start of this debate.

The increases in the state pension age made by the Pensions Act 1995 and the Pensions Act 2011 have had a disproportionate impact on 1950s-born women. As we have heard, many received little or no notification of the changes, despite the Government saying that people must have 10 years' notice of such changes. Indeed, the financial journalist Paul Lewis found that none of the 1950s-born women had been given 10 years' notice. In the worst case—we have heard about one of the worst cases from my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman)—women were told at 57 and a half that their pension age would rise from 60 to 66. Women who expected to retire at 60 can now find themselves without a job, without a pension and without money to live on.

The former Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, has admitted that the Government made “a bad decision” over these changes. His excuse was that Ministers had not been properly briefed. It appears that civil servants did do a poor job on this legislation; astonishingly, the impact assessment for the 2011 Act states in its conclusion:

“Overall...based on the available evidence, the change to the previous timetable will not have a disproportionate impact on any group compared to another.”

**Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab):** The fact that my hon. Friend had a recent debate in Westminster Hall on this very subject should send a message to the Government that people want action on it. Does she agree with my constituent Linda Gregory, who was

[Dr Rupa Huq]

born in 1953 and points out that she has been working since the age of 15 and therefore is being penalised even more than people entering the workplace at the age, which is the normal standard nowadays?

**Barbara Keeley:** I absolutely agree with what my hon. Friend says and I thank her for coming to that earlier debate.

It seems unbelievable that civil servants and Ministers could believe that taking billions in pensions away from a particular group, adding years to their state pension age and then not informing them in good time would not have a disproportionate impact on that group.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I raised these concerns, which had been brought to me by the class that left Foxhills comprehensive school in 1970, on Second Reading of the Bill that became the 2011 Act. When I did so, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, said:

“I have had letters from the public stirred up by a number of people”—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2011; Vol. 530, c. 51.]

Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not just something being stirred up by a number of people, but a very real issue that we have known about for some time?

**Barbara Keeley:** I do agree with my hon. Friend and I thank him for the work he has done on this matter since that Second Reading debate. These changes are having a disproportionate impact on my constituents and on his, and I have heard from WASPI campaigners who are also badly affected. As we have heard, many have health problems that stop them working and others have given up work to care. One of my constituents affected by the changes has worked for more than 44 years and has raised two children. She suffers with osteoarthritis and she tells me that she suffered the indignity of having to attend the jobcentre, where she was told that she was only entitled to six months' jobseeker's allowance. Unable to find work, she has to use her hard-earned savings. She has said:

“I must watch my savings dwindle on living costs rather than enjoyment, I wish I had not bothered being frugal all my life, as by the time I get my pension I will be broke or dead.”

**Mr Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool South) (Lab): I am grateful for the sterling work that my hon. Friend and others have done on this campaign. Does she agree that there is a particular problem here for women in places such as Blackpool who have only been able to work part-time for a long period and are nevertheless having to take on some of the carer and other issues that people have described?

**Barbara Keeley:** Before the 1995 Act changes, the independent Social Security Advisory Committee said that savings made on raising the state pension age should be spent on the most vulnerable groups, with help specifically for low-paid women, women returning to work and carers. That advice was not followed. Recently, a court in the Netherlands ruled that raising the state pension age could be considered a breach of the European convention on human rights. A woman in her 60s appealed against a two-year increase in her pension age because it created an “individual and excessive burden” on her. The court found in her favour. It is welcome that some Conservative Members who voted for the acceleration of the state pension age in 2011 are

now supporting the WASPI campaign. However, other Conservative Members are blaming European legislation for the shabby treatment of the pensions of 1950s-born women—but the facts are against them.

When the Minister answered the debate on 2 December, he said:

“Equalisation was necessary to meet the UK's obligations under EU law to eliminate gender inequalities in social security provision.”—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 145WH.] The same point has been made to WASPI campaigners in replies from Conservative MPs. However, research done by the House of Commons Library and my own research show that that is not the case. EU law allows countries to have differences in their state pension age, and it also allows lengthy transitional arrangements to be made.

Library research notes that directive 79/7/EEC requires “the progressive implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women in matters of social security.”

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about the fact that we need to reach a level of equality on this issue, but she is absolutely right that it is the pace of change and the transitional arrangements that are so unfair. Does she not agree that the continual changing of the goalposts goes against the sense of fair play, justice and fairness on which this country should be based?

**Barbara Keeley:** Absolutely. Furthermore, this background of EU law is not really a cause of the problem. The directive allows for different state pension ages. Indeed, article 7 of the directive specifically states that the determination of the state pension age is the right of member states. A 2007 European Commission report confirmed that different state pension ages are allowed. Equalisation of state pension ages is therefore described as “an objective to be strived for”. The Netherlands, Portugal and France have no current difference in their state pension age, but Austria and Hungary are equalising the state pension age with long transitional arrangements. In other states, a difference in pensionable age is currently maintained, or changes are being made very slowly. State pension ages will not be equalised in Poland until 2040, or in the Czech Republic until 2044. Bulgaria and Romania are retaining different state pension ages. EU law therefore allows different state pension ages and long transitional arrangements, and the Government cannot hide behind it and use it to explain what I see as a £30 billion “pensions grab” from 1950s-born women.

Transitional protections were discussed during the debates on the Pensions Act 2011 but were not brought forward by Ministers. It is worth saying that other countries have had transitional arrangements, or have amended their legislation to help specific groups. The Netherlands has a bridge pension. Italy brought in extensive pension changes, but made exemptions for people who were made redundant or who had a defined level of contributions. Later, Italy realised that public sector workers with a contracted career exit pathway risked being left with no job and no pension owing to the reforms. It then legislated six adjustments between 2012 and 2015 to protect those workers, via special derogations. The UK can and should put in place additional transitional arrangements to address the unfair consequences of this Government's Pensions Act.

One of the unfair consequences is having to continue to pay national insurance contributions even though many 1950s-born women have already contributed for more than 40 years. Unfair differences in pensioner benefits also exist at a regional level. In November 2012, the Greater London Authority restored to Londoners aged between 60 and the state pension age the free travel that had been lost under the Pensions Act 2011. Bringing in the 60+ London Oyster card, the Mayor of London said:

“Londoners who have grafted all their lives and expected to receive free travel on retirement, quite rightly felt cheated when the age escalator removed the Freedom Pass from their grasp.”

What about women living outside London who have “grafted all their lives” and who also felt “cheated” when the 2011 Pensions Act removed both retirement and free travel from their grasp?

The UK reforms cannot be justified on the basis that the previous system was unsustainable. Historically, the UK state pension has been one of the lowest in the OECD. EU law allows transitional arrangements, so the Government cannot justify their changes by hiding behind that law. The lack of transitional arrangements in the UK for 1950s women is due to decisions made by this Conservative Government. I urge the Minister to look again at the issue and at ways of providing adequate transitional protection.

12.23 pm

**Chloe Smith** (Norwich North) (Con): I am pleased to take part in this debate, and I congratulate those who have secured it and those who are working so hard outside this place to contact their Members of Parliament to talk about this very, very important issue of public policy and the impact of it.

My starting point is a passionate belief that a civilised country provides for families, protects the most vulnerable, helps those who look for work, and supports those in retirement. I am looking for the principles that we might apply to this debate based on the petition that has been presented. As I understand it, the petition raises three particular concerns: the lack of notice; the changes being made faster than expected; and the lack of time to plan. I recognise some of those concerns in what I have heard from my constituents. One told me that they had worked since they were a teenager, and that they were concerned about their own health challenges, their caring burdens and the prospect of re-planning. Other constituents are worried about the way the retirement dates work out. Indeed, one told me in 2011 that

“a woman who is just two months older than me can retire a whole year earlier.”

Again in 2011, a constituent told me that she was concerned about the “double attack” on her. She described how she felt when she received the first notification of change. She said:

“She didn’t like it, but eventually accepted it and made the necessary changes to her plans, both mentally and financially”.

She then received another notification of change and was then forced to readjust a second time.

Another constituent put forward a very powerful and emotional argument. She said:

“When I first heard that my retirement age had gone up from 60 to 64 I was shocked and tried to ignore it.”

Those words seem to explain the communication problem that exists. The fact that a person was so shocked that they tried to ignore the problem shows just how powerful the problem is.

**Andrew Bingham** (High Peak) (Con): I, like my hon. Friend and many other Members in this Chamber, have had many emails on this matter from constituents. Does she share my concern that the people who are affected by this have worked all their lives and have made plans and are now having to change them? We must try doubly hard when it comes to notifying people on pension issues, because, whether we like it or not, pensions are not very exciting until one reaches a certain age, at which I am now.

**Chloe Smith**: My hon. Friend puts it very well. Let me repeat what a constituent has more recently told me. She came to my surgery and explained that it had come as a shock to her that she would have to wait until she was 66 before she could retire, she was not informed, and found out only when she requested a pension statement. That goes to the heart of this matter of being informed and of having time to plan.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I would like some clarification from the hon. Lady. Freedom of Information requests suggest that details were not sent out until the late 2000s. Is she implying that all these women who say that they were not contacted were contacted after 1995, but just ignored the notification? I find it hard to believe that that is what she is saying.

**Chloe Smith**: No, the hon. Lady is mishearing me. I am citing directly from constituents. I will ensure that the *Official Report* reflects my citations. Let me be absolutely clear. I do not know whether the woman in question received the letter; how could I possibly know that? I know what my constituents tell me. I look forward to the Minister’s explanation of what has happened historically. I understand the point made by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) who opened the debate that the past is the past and that there is only a certain amount that we can do if we are looking back at a problem that has its roots in 1995.

Let me now explain what I am looking for as we move forward. I have already listed a set of principles that we could apply. The first is that we should protect those who can no longer work. Secondly, we should provide the right support for those who can work. Thirdly, we should maintain sound public finances, as to fail to do so hurts every single person in the economy. Fourthly, we should of course promote better communications to enable people to plan. That is my main message to Ministers today.

Let me dwell on the point of equalisation. Earlier in the debate, there was a hubbub of people saying, “Yes, we all agree on equalisation.” Let me provide a few figures on why we need to do that. When the state pension age was first set at 65 in 1926, male life expectancy at birth was 64 compared with 89 today. Indeed, if the state pension age had risen in line with the average life expectancy at 65 since 1926, it would now be at least 75. We have a significant gap that we need to make up. Indeed, if we looked even further back in the history books, we would see that when the state pension was set in 1908, the average life expectancy was 41. Members

[Chloe Smith]

can see very clearly the difference with which we have to deal. Lord Turner's report on pensions, commissioned by the previous Government, acknowledged that a more generous state pension had to be funded by an increase in the pension age.

Let us also make sure that we are aware of the costs. I understand that there would be costs to the tune of £30 billion to return to the 1995 timetable. Let us compare that with a few other things, simply so that we have a well informed debate. The 2015-16 spending figures, as shown in the July Budget, include expenditure of £28 billion on housing and the environment and £34 billion on public order or safety. All that we spend on housing or on public order and safety is broadly equivalent to the sum we are talking about today.

**Mr Marsden:** Of course comparative statistics are extremely important, but does the hon. Lady not recognise the reasonableness of the WASPI campaign, particularly on the issue of pension credit entitlements, which has been raised today? As she will know as a constituency MP, those are often key to what people receive.

**Chloe Smith:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point; I do recognise the grounds of the campaign. As I hope I have made clear with remarks from my constituents, I recognise the importance of the issue for every single person affected. I will leave it to the Minister to reply to the hon. Gentleman specifically about pension credits, but let me give him one further example of what £30 billion can buy. It can buy some of the debt interest on his party's Government's financial catastrophe, on which we have to spend £36 billion in this financial year.

I will conclude, because I have only a few minutes left and I have already taken several interventions. We have to listen carefully to such a comprehensive and well informed campaign, and I am pleased that we are doing that today. I want my constituents' concerns, which I have given prominence in my comments, to be balanced with everything else that the Government have to do. I strongly sympathise with the campaign, and in 2011 I was active in representing my constituents' views to the then Pensions Minister to mitigate the two-year delay in about a quarter of a million women receiving their pension. My call today is for the Government to communicate considerably better than has been done to date. It seems to me that we cannot go back, and equalisation has to mean equalisation. We cannot delay it for ever or duck it. We need to maintain the principles that I have set out and communicate better.

12.32 pm

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): First, I apologise for not having been present at the beginning of the debate.

There is no doubt that this Government's treatment of women in general has been abysmal: more women are in part-time, low-paid work and women are being hit harder than men by tax and benefit changes. It therefore comes as no surprise that the Government are resolute in refusing to redress the financial disadvantage that they have forced on women born in the 1950s. The Pensions Acts of 1995 and 2011 have resulted in millions of women's pensions being delayed. That is of concern in itself, but given that most of those women have not

been notified of those changes, it becomes more than a concern. It becomes a situation in which some people who are already struggling to get by are pushed into poverty.

Of course, I am in favour of equalisation, as are all the women whom I have spoken to. I accept that increases in life expectancy mean that any Government need to consider carefully the state pension age and the extension of working lives. However, if such changes are to be implemented, is it not the mark of any responsible Government who care about the people whom their legislation affects that they ensure that they let those affected know and do not introduce legislation that directly disadvantages millions of people?

As other Members have said, many of the women affected simply were not notified. Those who have been notified since the 2011 acceleration have received only two years' notice, yet as we all know, the appropriate minimum notification period for a state pension age increase is generally agreed to be 10 years.

**Caroline Flint** (Don Valley) (Lab): My grandma taught me that two wrongs do not make a right, and the women affected have been wronged time and time again. Given that there has been a successful legal action in the Dutch courts, is it not better that we form transitional arrangements rather than end up in the law courts?

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** My right hon. Friend is spot on. It would be embarrassing for the Government if the women affected by the changes decided to take individual legal action.

**Mr David Lammy** (Tottenham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise that for many of the women affected, who are our constituents, there is a real threat of stress and stress-related illness as a result of the failure to inform them? The Government should take that seriously when they are trying to understand why so many Members want transitional arrangements.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I thank my right hon. Friend, and I will come on to some examples from my constituency of women who are experiencing such stress.

In my constituency of South Shields we have a higher than average number of people with illnesses such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, left over from our proud heavy industrial days. That means that we have a large number of women who are caring for relatives or husbands, including those who fall into the group disadvantaged by the pension changes.

One such woman is my constituent Lynn Wilson. She got a letter sometime in 2011 or 2012 telling her that she would be getting her pension not at 65 but at 66. That was a complete and utter shock to her, as she was still of the view that she would get it when she was 60. Lynn's husband Derek was diagnosed with lung cancer four years ago. Due to the pension changes Lynn has had to continue working, but she has had to reduce her hours so that she can care for Derek. She does a difficult and physical job, and she suffers from serious back problems and arthritis herself. She tells me that she has a small private pension that she and Derek could manage to live on if her back got worse, but that it would not last the whole six years she needs to wait

for her state pension. She tells me that she continues to struggle, but we agree that it just should not be this way.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that women such as her constituent face a double barrier? There is discrimination in the workplace as women are being forced to work longer, and the Government have also put barriers in the way of their access to employment tribunals.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I agree completely with my hon. Friend.

My constituent is not the only person who knows that things should not be this way. Baroness Altmann, who is now in the other place as Minister for Pensions, said when she was director general of Saga that the Government's changes to state pensions were "clearly discriminatory". In 2011, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions made a firm commitment to look at transitional provisions to help the women hit hardest by the changes, and the previous Pensions Minister stated only last year that the changes that had been made were "a decision that we got wrong".

It is outrageous that, despite knowing that, the Government are not prepared to do anything about it. They seem content to let the women affected continue to suffer.

Another of my constituents, Dianne Dawson, took voluntary redundancy from her job when she was 60 years old, assuming that she would reach state pension age at 62. She then found out, not from the DWP but from a friend, that she would reach state pension age at 64. She is now living off dwindling savings, and as a result she is having to sell her family home. She has never received anything at all from the DWP. No wonder she feels completely let down and cheated.

There are many more women in such difficult situations, who have worked their entire lives only to find out at the eleventh hour that the system they trusted and paid into for decades has let them down. I urge the Minister to look seriously at the motion, because if transitional arrangements are not introduced, the women affected and Opposition Members will not give up pressing for them. I am sure the Minister agrees that it would be a lot more costly and embarrassing for the Government if those individuals began to seek legal redress. I just hope that the work of WASPI campaigners and others that has prompted today's debate will lead the Government for once to listen.

12.39 pm

**Marcus Fysh** (Yeovil) (Con): I have sympathy with people when their expectations change and I thank my constituents who have emailed me to highlight this issue. I shall start by looking at the background to it.

The longevity of our population is rising, which is a good thing. It is great to live longer and women live longer than men—

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Marcus Fysh:** Not at the moment.

Women on average have a healthier longevity and that is increasing at a greater rate than it is for men. As a nation we spend a massive and increasing amount on

our healthcare system and on our pension system in order to allow as many people as possible a happy retirement.

It was in 1908 that the Liberal Government under Lloyd George brought in the first provisions—*[Interruption.]* I am certainly not blaming the Liberals for that. A great man, Mr Churchill, was involved too. The age at which the state pension could be claimed was set at 70, compared with the average longevity of 55 at that time. That gives us some idea of the changes that have taken place since. In 1995 the retirement ages were raised so that they would be equal between women and men in the future. That was further examined in the mid-2000s by Lord Turner. There was cross-party support for those ages to be raised further, given the increases in longevity that I mentioned.

Under the coalition Government, when I was not in Parliament, a decision was taken, based on further increases in longevity, to raise the retirement age even faster for a few people. One of the principles behind all the recent changes was the affordability of the system overall. We have heard that it would cost £39 billion to reverse those changes. That liability would apply to all age groups, and it would be unfair for us to continue to burden younger generations with extra taxes in order to make more concessions than we have already.

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Marcus Fysh:** Not at the moment.

At the time of the last decision in 2011 a concession of over £1 billion was made to help the age groups who are contacting us now.

I want to say a little about equality. I have two very young daughters and I am keen that they should have equal opportunities, as far as possible, with men of this nation in the workplace and as citizens. I shall highlight a few things that make me think that we as a Government are doing well on behalf of women. The introduction of a single tier state pension will have a good effect on women. It will be equally available to men and women, based on the same approach to national insurance.

**Nusrat Ghani:** My hon. Friend talks about equalisation of the state pension and about men and women living longer. Equalisation of the state pension age reflects the fact that women and men play an equal role in our society and in our economy.

**Marcus Fysh:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Equality is at the heart of what we are trying to do for women. One of the ways that we are trying to achieve that is by decreasing the gender pay gap. That will be helped by increasing the minimum wage, increasing the availability of jobs and increasing the personal tax allowance. We are pursuing many incentives and programmes that will allow women to participate successfully for a little longer than they may have expected.

The issue at the heart of this debate seems to be the extent to which women were given notice and therefore the ability to plan for their retirement. I am sympathetic to anyone going through a stressful personal situation, but we need to be responsible. It is hard to say who was contacted or who was not, but from what I have seen—obviously, I was not involved in any of the previous decisions—it seems that most people were given notice of the change, allowing them to plan.

[*Marcus Fysh*]

I have some advice for the younger generations who might be listening to this debate. I have some experience in the pensions world. The main thing that people have to remember when investing for their retirement is that the earlier they start saving, the more money they will have at the end. That is because of the power of compound interest, which has a tremendous effect.

**Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a wide-ranging speech. Will he join me in hoping that the Minister, in his closing remarks, will address the issue of communication with those who are working now and who hope to retire in the future, so that my hon. Friend's young daughters and mine will know where they stand?

**Marcus Fysh:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, the very point on which I had intended to conclude my remarks. We have a duty to the young people of this nation to keep their taxes down so that they have as much scope as possible to plan for their retirement. They are already being asked to shoulder an unacceptable burden that was put on them by the Labour party. It would be entirely wrong to reopen a decision that was taken by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition back in 2011.

12.47 pm

**Mr David Anderson** (Blaydon) (Lab): I am sure the women listening to this debate will be glad that the hon. Member for Yeovil (*Marcus Fysh*) feels sympathy for them. When he lectures people about saving early in life, he might want to recall that many of the women we are talking about were barred from paying into secondary pension schemes.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (*Mhairi Black*) on securing this debate. She should not have had to do so—there should have been a statement from the Government. She said the subject was complicated. People always hide behind the notion—the hon. Lady did not do so—that pensions are very complicated, but this is a very simple debate. This is not a pensions debate; it is a debate about public policy.

We have a Chancellor who has a long-term economic plan—Members might have heard about it. It was supposed to end the deficit in four years. It was a complete and utter flop. He cannot even put forward a plan that lasts four weeks. Last year he came to the House with a Budget that would have been detrimental to working people, to those facing welfare cuts and to pensions. A few weeks later he came back with £27 billion in his pocket, which he had found at the back of the settee. That was going to be the way forward. With one leap, he was free. But this morning he is all over the media telling us, “Whoa, hang on. You’ve got it wrong. We’re in a mess again. We’ve got to put the brake on again. People have to realise that we are still facing lots of austerity.”

To give them credit, Government Members who have spoken today have trotted out that line and said how hard it is going to be, as billions of pounds are needed to put right the existing wrongs. However, we have to accept that this is not like the weather. This is a political choice being imposed on the people of this country. The Government are knowingly and deliberately making

women, rather than the wealthy, pay for the mistakes that resulted in the crash in 2008, caused not by the Labour party, but by the bankers and the global markets.

**Margaret Ferrier:** Just yesterday I read that the National Audit Office had identified that the cost of the UK's complex weapons programme has increased to £14 billion a year over the past few years. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is clear evidence that pensioners are suffering from the poor decisions and priorities of this Government?

**Mr Anderson:** That is absolutely right. The hon. Member for Solihull (*Julian Knight*) said that to put this right we would have to raise income tax by 7p. No, we would not. We could stop spending on other things. We could stop doing things like giving more money to the children of dead millionaires in inheritance tax bungs. We could stop giving businesses cuts in corporation tax at the same time as saying to poor people, “You’ve got to get even poorer.” The truth is that this has been a choice.

Two days ago, the salaries of the chief executives of the top 100 FTSE companies passed the average annual wage of working men and women. That is the level of inequality in this country. At the same time, we are saying to this group of women, “Sorry, you’ve got to carry the can for the failures of global capitalism.” By and large, Conservative Members simply do not care, because they do not understand the reality of life at the sharp end. My mother was one of the women who worked all her life. She was in and out of jobs where she was never allowed to join a pension scheme, and she was only able to build up a secondary pension scheme, so in the end she died in relative poverty. My mother died 15 years ago, but things have not really changed for the majority of women in this country, particularly the group we are talking about.

My constituent *Elizabeth Ainsley* wrote me a long, heartfelt letter from which I will quote only small bits. She says:

“My pensionable age has changed twice once in 1995 from 60 to 64...to bring women in line with men and then again when I was not notified until I was age 59 with 5 years to work to my retirement age that this had been changed from 64 to 66. This is just not enough time to prepare.”

**Dr Huq:** My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. He has reminded me of an email I had from a constituent who also said she had been double-walloped. When she was younger, she did not think about these things, but now she has health problems and she worries that she will be knocking on jobseekers door if this goes on.

**Mr Anderson:** Every one of us in this room, particularly Conservative Members, could read out cases from people who have written to us and come to see us about the inequality and the disgrace that is going on today and should never have been allowed to happen.

My constituent *Elizabeth* goes on to say:

“I started work at age 16 and believed for 25 years that I would receive my pension at 60 only to have this changed not once but twice”

in her lifetime. She continues:

“I feel betrayed by the government and that women of my age have been discriminated against most of our working lives, denied the ability to prepare for our retirement and are now taking the biggest hit of all so the government can rush through the transition to equal retirement age to save money.”

I believe that the Minister is a decent man, but I am not sure that he will have the power or the authority today to do what we think should be done.

The ex-Minister responsible for this was Mr Webb, the Liberal Democrats' human shield. Where are the Liberal Democrats today? Is anybody here from the Liberal Democrats? Perhaps they are ashamed of him, as they should be, for being a human shield for the austerity agenda that they forced through during five years in coalition. He says now that he made a mistake. He admits that it was an error and he was not properly briefed by people in the DWP.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South was absolutely right to say that this is a contract with the people of this country. Yet the people of this country had no say in that contract; there was no proper negotiation where they could say, "Let me have my say and you have yours." It was a contract imposed on them, and it has been breached. That needs to be put right and we need to do the right thing.

**Caroline Flint:** Would it not do the world of politics a very positive service if, when we get it wrong, we say we got it wrong and put it right?

**Mr Anderson:** That is absolutely correct. I am really glad that my right hon. Friend made that intervention just before I was about to sit down. We do want this to be put right. What we do not want is the shifty thing that happened when the Chancellor came here in December and said, "I'm not going to go ahead with the tax credits cut", but had moved it round that so that it is going to come back and hit people on universal credit. We want this put right, and put right now.

12.54 pm

**Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con):** This debate is in some ways a rerun of one held in December in Westminster Hall organised by the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who has a long track record of campaigning on this issue. I congratulate my Work and Pensions Committee colleague, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), on bringing this up and bringing to life, in a sense, the emotional feelings of many women of the ages most affected by changes to the state pension. She did so in a way that everyone here can relate to, because we all have pensioner constituents, and indeed members of our own families, who are affected.

However, there is a risk of overstating the case. My Select Committee colleague will not, I hope, mind my saying that when she said that nobody was aware of the 1995 changes because there was no correspondence, that was an exaggeration of the situation. We will never know exactly who was communicated with or who, probably most importantly, noticed and paid attention to it.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Richard Graham:** I will not give way yet.

We do know, though, that in 2004 the previous Government did a study on this through the DWP, as Labour Members will remember. That study concluded that three quarters of those affected had been communicated with effectively. Opposition Members may care to comment on that.

**Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Richard Graham:** Not at the moment.

The fact is that quite a lot of people were told about this at the time and thought it was a long way off and therefore they did not have to pay attention to it, while others were not communicated with and have therefore found this to be a difficult wake-up call. There are lessons on communication that I will come on to and that I hope the Minister will address.

**Neil Gray** *rose*—

**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)** *rose*—

**Richard Graham:** A lot of people want to speak, so let me carry on for the moment.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South was right to quote the previous Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, as saying that not everyone knew about this. He has accepted that, as I think we all recognise. None the less, the argument that no transitional arrangements were made—arrangements that Opposition Members are calling for—is wrong. A significant transitional arrangement and concession was made in 2011 that affected 250,000 people and cost the Government—the taxpayer—£1.3 billion, which was a significant amount of money at the time. That arrangement was made because the then Pensions Minister and the then Government recognised advice from the Department saying that the waiting time for some women born in the 1950s had increased to as much as two years, and they wanted to reduce it to 18 months to benefit those 250,000 people.

What is interesting is that while the motion calls for further transitional arrangements, it does not spell out, nor has any Member who has spoken so far spelt out, exactly what transitional arrangements are being called for. Were the intention—

**Barbara Keeley** *rose*—

**Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP)** *rose*—

**Richard Graham:** Hold on a moment—let me finish what I am saying.

Were the intention simply to change all the arrangements for women born in the 1950s and go back to the original proposal, that would, I believe—the Minister might want to put a more detailed figure on it—cost the taxpayer about £10 billion. Yesterday we had the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), calling for changes to universal credit that were not costed and for which he offered no alternative in terms of where the money would come from. Today we have a proposed transitional arrangement that might cost £10 billion, but its detail has not been spelled out, and neither has its exact cost or how it would be paid for.

I believe that it is incumbent on all of us as MPs partly to represent the emotional feelings of our constituents, as has been done very well by a number of Members today, but also to reflect on the reality, the cost and the implications of what is being proposed, which remains an open question.

**Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP)** *rose*—

**Richard Graham:** I am happy to take an intervention on that specific point.

**Gavin Robinson:** Does the hon. Gentleman accept that we had a quest for equalisation in pensions that has resulted in an iniquitous outcome for the women we are discussing? Social justice demands that whatever the transitional arrangements should be—he makes a strong point about that—he and other members of the DWP Committee will work to find arrangements that would ease the iniquitous outcome of this equalisation.

**Richard Graham:** In fact, the Committee had that discussion and we heard evidence from Women Against State Pension Inequality, which is a good, reasonable and sensible campaign. On the whole, its evidence to the Committee focused on the issue of communication, partly so that lessons can be learned so that when future announcements are made about what will happen in 10 years' time, they are communicated effectively to those who will be affected. We do not want to end up in a similar situation in 10 years' time, with another generation of women complaining about not knowing.

**Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con):** Does my hon. Friend, like me, hope that when the Minister sums up he will address the failure of the communication strategy since 1995 and right up to the current day? A constituent of mine was told in October that they had qualified for their state pension, but a few weeks later they were told that they had another three years to go. We really need to address that problem.

**Richard Graham:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I am sure the Minister will comment on communication. As I said in the debate in December, there are clear lessons and it would be good to have future changes clarified. I know that a further review is planned in 2017, and longevity continues to increase. The average life expectancy for women, as projected by the Office for National Statistics, has already increased by 2.6 years since the 1995 proposals, and Adair Turner, whose report led to the consensus that this House held for many years, said not very long ago that, if he had done the report now, he would have planned for faster changes to state pension ages.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South rightly said that at some point we will want to discuss the effect of the future state pension on women. In answer to her point about discrimination against women, I think it is really important that all Members and our constituents are aware that the new state pension will be much fairer to women than the old system. National insurance credits will be given for years taken out of work for caring or for bringing up a family. This is the first time this has happened in the history of the pension—it is a really important point. It will give women the same entitlement as they would get from national insurance contributions through earnings. That is a significant change and I would have thought that those Members who tabled the motion would want to allude to it.

**Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab):** I have listened very carefully to the hon. Gentleman. He has said that in 2011 the Government made a policy decision to accelerate and that they failed to communicate the effects of that decision to the many people affected. Why does he therefore conclude that the Government do not have a moral obligation to put that mistake right?

**Richard Graham:** Actually, what I said was that the communication issue goes back to 1995, when I certainly was not in this House. For the bulk of the period from 1995 to 2010, the right hon. Gentleman's party was in power. There is no point in pointing fingers at different parties, but that period is at the heart of the issue of communication, which the motion addresses.

On the question of what good advice we can now give those of our constituents who are not sure what they are going to receive in retirement, it is important that they ask for a statement. That is what the Pension Wise campaign, which is available to everybody, free of charge, is there to do. People should ask for their statement. Some 500,000 people have already taken advantage of that. It is the most effective communications tool and we should be using it to make sure that everybody—women and men—approaching retirement knows what they will receive.

1.3 pm

**Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab):** When the latest changes to pensions were made in the Pensions Act 2011, Labour Members objected to them. We had many debates about the issue—I remember speaking in them—and focused especially on the double-whammy effect on women, but the Government went ahead and passed the legislation.

I want to explain to the Minister what my constituents have written to me—I will read some of it out—about how women are being affected by the changes. Every one of the women who has contacted me has said that they agree with state pension age equality, but they object to and have difficulty with the way in which it has been implemented, particularly the acceleration of the increase and the lack of information.

Some of my constituents who are directly affected by the changes have told me that, even now, they have not received any communication or formal notification of the changes from the Department for Work and Pensions. That is utterly unacceptable, given the gravity of the changes. Posting notices in women's magazines and Sunday supplements is both patronising and ineffective. None of the women I have spoken to are readers of such publications; they found out about the changes through word of mouth.

As the increase in the pension age is literally life-changing, far more notice should have been given ahead of the changes, and the Government should have ensured that everyone affected can plan for their future. One lady I spoke to told me that she has lived at the same address for the past 30 years and has not received anything. There is no excuse for that. To suggest that people somehow knew what was happening is wrong.

**Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con):** I fully recognise that there has been a breakdown in communication from successive Governments, but does the hon. Lady have a practical solution to deal with that?

**Yasmin Qureshi:** I will come on to the practical solution later in my speech.

Women have told me that their other major concern is that, even when they have been notified, they have not had enough time to prepare for the major changes in

their lives. One of my constituents is 62 years of age and she was due to retire at 62 years and three months. However, she will now have to work until she is 65. Understandably, that has caused a great deal of distress and uncertainty for her, because she had been planning to retire in a few months' time. Her plan was to co-ordinate her retirement with the birth of her grandchildren so that she could look after them and not have to resort to having the Government pay for their childcare. The changes have thrown her life into turmoil and, of course, the Government will now end up paying for that childcare.

Another constituent has told me that, anticipating retirement at 60, she took voluntary redundancy aged 58 and a half when her company was seeking to downsize. She was later informed that she will not be able to access her state pension until she is 66 years of age. She now finds herself unemployed and having difficulty finding another job, because of her age. She has been left in financial hardship as a result of not being notified about the changes to the state pension age until it was too late. She is not the only example; many thousands of women across the United Kingdom are in the same boat.

The discrepancy of two years and two months for women born between April and December 1953 is simply confusing and unfair. The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Government were told as much in the debates in 2011. It means that, for some constituents, the difference is about £14,000, which is a lot of money. Again, it is not just a few of my constituents who have been affected, but women across the country.

Hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them not just once, but twice, with a lack of appropriate notification, and retirement plans have been shattered, with devastating consequences. The Government seem to have failed to recognise the severe impact that the speed of the implementation of those changes has had on those women. The changes have not affected men to the same extent, as their state pension age has not been increased by such a large amount and they have had much more notice. The pension system has historically discriminated against women, and the new changes are yet another example of that.

I urge the Government to reconsider the provisions and to diminish their impact by making transitional arrangements that are fairer for those women affected.

**Victoria Atkins** (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I have listened with great interest to the hon. Lady's speech and to those of other Labour Members, particularly to their references to transitional arrangements. I wonder whether she could help me. What does she mean by and what would she suggest as "transitional arrangements", how much will they cost and how will we find the money?

**Yasmin Qureshi**: I am glad that the hon. Lady has given me extra time for this speech. There are many different ways in which to deal with the issue; there is not one panacea or simple solution. If the Government want a comprehensive response from me about the way forward, I am very happy to put together a detailed plan about how to deal with this issue.

**Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): Conservative Members are constantly asking what a practical transitional plan might look like. Surely it is the responsibility of the Government to bring forward such a plan, which the House can then debate. This is an abdication of responsibility.

**Yasmin Qureshi**: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is typical of this Government's approach to such things.

**Mark Durkan**: My hon. Friend may recall that a further transitional arrangement was proposed when the Bill went through in 2011. In October 2011, an arrangement was proposed that would have meant nobody had to wait more than a year, rather than up to 18 months, to reach their pension age. It would have cost £10 billion over 10 years, and it would have meant having a common state pension age in 2022. That was proposed, but the Government rejected it.

**Yasmin Qureshi**: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, which I hope has helped the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins).

As I have said, I am very happy to pen a very detailed plan to help such ladies, but if I write it, I would like the Government to promise to implement it. Perhaps the Government will give me an assurance that, when I come up with suggestions about how to deal with various problems, they will say, "Yes, you are right: the hon. Member for Bolton South East has come up with a solution, and we will actually implement what she says." Will the Minister make me such a promise?

1.12 pm

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) and for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) on securing this debate.

In the past few months, I have met a number of my constituents who have been impacted by these changes. These constituents have detailed how the state pension age increases have had an impact on them owing to their being on the wrong side of the dateline. I have every sympathy with anyone impacted by these changes, and I can see why they have felt so much frustration. I congratulate the WASPI campaign on driving this debate.

Although it is true that any criteria changes regarding pensions, benefits or taxation in general are always going to have an impact on some people, I am conscious that the individuals we are talking about have, in many circumstances, worked for decades on the basis that they would receive their pensions at a prescribed time. However, I am also conscious of the fact that when actuaries calculated life expectancy, and therefore the number of years for which a pension would pay out, they did not expect it to reach the level currently enjoyed, and they would not have anticipated the current rising levels of health. These factors have driven successive Governments, and most OECD nations, to increase the pension age.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not however accept that life expectancy is not the same for everybody everywhere? There are places in Glasgow where life expectancy is significantly lower than in other parts of the country.

**Huw Merriman:** I absolutely take that point, but it would be naive not to recognise that as we live and expect to live healthier lives, we not only can but want to work for longer.

**Dr Philippa Whitford:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Huw Merriman:** No. I will make some progress, if I may.

The question remains: what, if anything, can be done to lessen the impact on those who will now have to work for longer before qualifying for their state pension, particularly those whom it can be demonstrated were not notified over time, as they should have been?

**Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con):** Does my hon. Friend agree with me and my constituents in Eastleigh that the notice period for some of the women was simply far too short? We hope that the Minister will agree it is a great cause of regret that the largest group of women affected by the pension age increase sadly got less than eight years to plan for it.

**Huw Merriman:** I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I know she has led a campaign in her constituency to that end. Ideally, we will hear such a statement from the Minister. I believe pension changes require 10 years' notification and that 15 years' notice was given for the 1995 changes, but, as she mentioned, the notice period for the 2011 changes was eight years, and even down to five years. As I was not in this place at that time, I am certainly very keen to find out more from the Minister.

Where I have issues with the motion is that although I agree very much with the concern raised, I do not ultimately see a remedy. I stood on a manifesto commitment that pledged us to deliver a budget surplus by 2020, which means that compensation for this matter would have to be paid for by another group of my constituents.

I have real concerns about another age group in my constituency—those in their 20s and 30s. They are sometimes referred to as the packhorse generation because they are saddled with debts from university, which I and many others of my age group and those older than me did not have to endure. They are not in receipt of occupational pension schemes. They are paying high rents and struggling to afford a home of their own, and they are likely to be the subject of pension changes in decades to come if life expectancy continues to increase.

**Mhairi Black:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Huw Merriman:** No. With respect to the hon. Lady, I will make some progress, if I may.

I am keen for the Government to assess what more can be done to help the women impacted by the pension changes, but I am conscious that, before my election to this place, they conducted a review and allocated more than £1 billion to mitigate the impact on the worst affected. Further mitigation, if introduced, would then reveal the next age group to be impacted, and we would never be able to move on. If my Government's manifesto is to be enacted, such further mitigation will have to be paid for by others in the form of increased taxes.

The issue of pensions is becoming increasingly vexed. It is undoubtedly the case that post-retirement life expectancy is now much greater than was envisaged when pensions calculators were put in place. Additionally, with the advances made to allow those in their 60s to remain fit and active, many people in their 60s and beyond are working in a manner that was not envisaged when those pensions calculators were put in place. This is a general change in life and working age expectancy—we all rightly celebrate it, because it shows that people are living longer and leading fitter lives in their advanced years—but it means that there is a funding gap. To avoid placing a financial obligation on those in their 20s and 30s, who are currently struggling to get on, that gap has required the country to revise the pension age to take into account the changes in life and work expectancy.

**Mhairi Black rose—**

**Huw Merriman:** I will take one last intervention as this is the hon. Lady's debate.

**Mhairi Black:** Does the hon. Gentleman not see that by forcing such women to continue to work until they are 66, he is contradicting himself? One of the reasons why people my age cannot get work is that it is being done by those trying to secure some income until they reach the pension age.

**Huw Merriman:** I thank the hon. Lady for making that point, but I do not agree with her. The reality is that if the change had not been implemented, £30 billion would have had to be found from elsewhere. I think there is an additional £8 billion in tax revenue to be found as well. Where would that money come from if not from the generation that she knows well?

**Mhairi Black rose—**

**Huw Merriman:** I will continue to make progress. To me, it is a complete contradiction to say, on the one hand, that something needs to be done, but, on the other, that it will not have an impact on any other taxpayers over the generations.

Finally, I have the greatest sympathy for those caught by the changes who have had to revise their plans accordingly. This, however, is a settled matter, and I worry about what the impact will be on others if changes are now made.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. There will be a five-minute limit from now on.

1.19 pm

**Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab):** Half a million women, including more than 3,500 in my constituency, are asking the Government why they have to wait up to six years longer for their state pension. During their working lives, they paid national insurance contributions expecting to get their pension at the age of 60, an age fixed in 1940 and five years below that for men.

In 1995, the Conservative Government set out a timetable to equalise the pension age for men and women at 65. They fixed a start date 15 years ahead—April 2010—and phased in the changes slowly, so that only

from April 2020 would women born in April 1955 or later not get their state pension at 65. The pending changes were largely ignored except for a small section in the financial section of a broadsheet. The women affected, who were then aged 45, were not warned by the Department of Social Security.

**Peter Dowd:** One of my constituents, Angela Pugh, has sent me valuable information, and I thank her and WASPI. She outlined one woman's experience. She said that the job market is not ready to accept older women and that many are forced to accept zero-hours contracts, temporary contracts or low-paid contracts that offer no financial security. Does my hon. Friend agree that those women—the backbone of this country—have been betrayed by the Conservatives?

**Carolyn Harris:** I most certainly agree with my hon. Friend.

In 1995, 2020 seemed a long time away. In 2007, the Labour Government decided to increase the retirement age for both men and women to 66, but included a caveat that no changes would be made until 2024. In 2011, the coalition Government unsurprisingly reneged on that caveat and set a new timetable that was tough on women and broke a pledge that there would be no change until after 2020.

**Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab):** Does my hon. Friend accept that that is not the only way in which older women have been discriminated against? The raising of the tax threshold disadvantages older women much more than it disadvantages any other group, and the pay gap for older women is bigger than for any other group. Do we not need to hear the voice of older women more clearly in politics, as it is obviously being completely ignored by the Government?

**Carolyn Harris:** I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend and consider myself to be in that age group—I am an older woman in politics.

**James Heapey (Wells) (Con):** Nonsense!

**Carolyn Harris:** Thank you.

Half a million women had their pension postponed further in 2011. One of the women affected is Lin Phillips, who was born in May 1954. I think she is in the Gallery. She will be nearly 65 and eight months when she gets her pension in January 2020, nearly six years after she originally expected it in May last year when she was 60. Only in 2011 when she read about the new plans did she realise that her state pension age had already been increased to 64. She was shocked to discover that it would be pushed a further 18 months into the future to age 65 and a half.

Altogether, half a million women face an extra delay of more than a year, and 300,000 face an extra wait of 18 months. That delay will cost them in excess of £12,000 each in lost state pension. That money is very difficult to replace. Few will have company pensions, because many firms excluded women and part-timers from their schemes. About half the women aged between 55 and 64 are not in work. Many of them—as we have heard, they are the backbone of this country—are

caring for children and elderly relatives. The idea of their finding a part-time job in the current situation, or even a low-paid job, is ludicrous.

The changes to women's pensions are categorically unfair and unjust. Lin, along with other affected women, started to campaign to push the Government into a compromise agreement for those most affected, possibly in the form of a transitional payment. My understanding is that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions promised to look at that in 2011 but—surprise, surprise!—he never did. The WASPI campaign is the inspiration behind the debate. Those women have made us sit up and think.

Each of us will be able to tell of constituents who are affected by this gross injustice. Each of us will know of women who have worked and paid their contributions or who have spent the majority of their adult life bringing up the children of this nation. Each will have a different set of circumstances, but they will all say that, had they been written to in 1995 and told of the changes, they would have made appropriate arrangements.

WASPI accepts that the pension age must rise as people live longer but argue—most on the Opposition Benches would agree—that it is not fair to women who were not personally informed either in 1995 or in 2011. The Minister should beware: WASPI has a sting in its tail. Given the power of its argument and its ability to attract the attention of many in the House, its demand for fairness is a compelling one. It has a simple message and only asks for fairness.

I would say this to the Minister: do not underestimate the power of that lobby. Those women have managed to mobilise and get more than 107,000 signatures on a petition, which is far in excess of what is needed for a debate in the Chamber. In four days, they managed to raise funds through crowdfunding to engage the services of a barrister. From my contact with them, I can tell the Minister that they want justice, and that the buzz in the air from the WASPI campaign will not rest until they get it.

1.26 pm

**Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on securing the debate. I also congratulate members of WASPI—many of the women are in the Gallery today—on its magnificent campaign. Had they not had that campaign, I fear that the problem would have gone unnoticed and certainly would not have been addressed.

The Pensions Act 1995 increased the state pension age for women from 60 to 65 over the period April 2010 to April 2020. It was not a short-notice change—the notice was 15 years. In a debate in October 2013, the Minister, Steve Webb, accepted that some women did not know about the change at the time, but went on to say:

“Although it was all over the papers at the time, these women were a long way from pension age and probably turned the page when they saw the word ‘pension’.”.—[*Official Report*, 8 October 2013; Vol. 568, c. 54WH.]

What a way for a Government to expect people to find out!

The coalition Government legislated in the Pensions Act 2011 to accelerate the increase in the state pension age, which became 65 in November 2018. They intended

[Marie Rimmer]

to equalise the state pension age at 66 by April 2020, but that was amended. During that debate, the then shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), expressed concerns. Largely because of that, the date was amended and we got a reprieve of six months. The Government seem to believe that that is some compensation.

I will not say much about the impact, because hon. Members who have read about it will know. Anne Keen, one of my constituents and a leading WASPI campaigner, is in the Gallery today.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. I did not mean to do this and I have tried to ignore it, but hon. Members are not meant to make reference to the Gallery. As much as we appreciate the people here, it is meant to be about the Chamber. I am sorry about this but we must not keep making reference to the Gallery.

**Marie Rimmer:** I will not do so again, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The women affected were not informed of the changes to the system, so it came as a complete shock to Anne Keen when she discovered that her plans for retirement were in tatters 18 months before her 60th birthday. She said:

“In 2012 I received a letter saying my new state pension age was 63 years and eight months. I was absolutely shocked because I wasn’t told about it.”

She explained that people have been caught out by Department for Work and Pensions mismanagement following changes to pension law in 1995 and 2011. They were caught out again in 2011 when further increases were introduced with, they claim, little notification before their retirement age. She went on to say that many women were having to dip into their savings to survive rather than relax and enjoy their retirement as they had intended and planned. She said:

“Unless people requested a pension forecast, they would not have known about it. All we are asking for is a fair transitional arrangement”

and some consideration.

WASPI has raised important concerns about the changes, which affect millions of women who were born throughout the 1950s, and who are unfairly bearing the burden of the increase in the state pension age. In 2004, DWP research showed that only 43% of those affected by the 1995 Act were able to identify their retirement age. In 2008, the National Centre for Social Research found that only 43% of them were aware that the state pension age was 65. This change has left many women in financial hardship.

Anne Keen says that the situation is worrying. She points out that privileged people, such as MPs, judges and civil servants, have had their occupational pensions protected if they are within 10 years of normal retirement age. Why are women not being treated in the same way? Why are they not afforded the same protection?

Ten years’ notice will be given for any future changes to the state pension age so that people can cope with the change in circumstances. Is that not an admission that what has happened is wrong? The Government have said that they will not revisit the state pension age

arrangements for women affected by the 1995 and 2011 Acts. These women have been dealt a severe and unjust blow. Put simply, the Government must revisit this matter and address the concerns.

1.31 pm

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I am concerned that some Government Members appear to have missed much of the main point of this debate. For clarity, I remind them that the opening line of the motion states:

“That this House, while welcoming the equalisation of the state pension age”.

I do not think anyone is suggesting that there is not an argument to be made for equalising the pension ages of men and women. There are serious long-term pressures that mean that it should be addressed with a degree of urgency. However, there is a fairness argument to be made about the way in which it should be done.

I, too, have been contacted by a succession of constituents—a succession of women who appreciate that action needs to be taken, but who are exasperated utterly by the continual shifting of the goalposts and the unfairness of not knowing where the finishing line will be, just to mix my sporting metaphors. They do not know when they are likely to be able to retire.

These women accepted the first change as something that had to happen. Perhaps it would adversely affect them, but they were persuaded that changes needed to take place. I am not claiming that they were delighted, but they did at least accept it. What worries the women I have heard from and women throughout the UK is that the first change proved not to be sufficient, the second came without warning and there is no guarantee or even probability of belief that it will be the final change.

These are women, as has been mentioned, who worked through times when the working environment for women was far harsher than it is now. They suffered more blatant sexism than is the case for younger women who enter the workplace now.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case about how unfair this situation is. Does she agree that there is a particular unfairness for women born between 1951 and 1953, such as my constituent Catherine Kirby, who will be left worse off on a weekly basis because they will not qualify for the new flat-rate state pension, whereas men will? Does she agree that it would be simple to solve the problem by allowing women in that position to opt for the single-tier pension?

**Deidre Brock:** The hon. Lady makes an excellent point.

We are talking about people who were forced to accept being passed over for promotion. Some of them are still fighting for compensation for unequal pay. These people were given scant consideration when pregnancy and motherhood forced them to take time away from the workplace. Surely they deserve a little more consideration from the Government than they have been given so far. It gets more and more difficult for people to pick themselves up and get back into the workplace with the same enthusiasm as they did before if they feel that they are kicked back at every turn.

I accept that Baroness Altmann has a track record of campaigning for justice in this field, as has been mentioned. I certainly welcome the fact that we have someone with such a track record as Pensions Minister, but she appears to be a lonely figure in this Government. The pressure that is being applied by the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to drive down public spending means that she can do little on her own. The strange worship of the austerity idol, as I call it, constrains any attempt by any spending Department to deliver anything that might look like fairness or help for the poor and disadvantaged.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that, given that the Minister in the coalition Government, Steve Webb, indicated that he was aware that not everyone who was affected by the changes was aware of them, the Government must take responsibility for that? Questions must be asked about why women were not more fully informed by the Government and were left in the dark for so long.

**Deidre Brock**: Absolutely; I agree with my hon. Friend and look forward to the Minister addressing those points when he speaks.

With the Government's assault on benefits in full flight, we should remember that pensions and pensioners account for the largest share of benefit spending in the UK and that the Chancellor's gimlet eye will turn inexorably towards pension provision when the other stones have been bled dry.

I do not think that any working woman is asking for special treatment on her pension. I certainly do not think that any of the many women who have contacted their MPs with concerns over these changes is a shirker or a scrounger. They simply want a bit of fairness and a sound knowledge of what the future is likely to bring. Women who started their working lives under one set of pension rules look like they may finish their working lives under their third set of pension rules, provided that there are no further changes down the line.

Providing these women with as much certainty as can be mustered and making sure that they will not lose out financially have to be the watchwords for the Government over these changes. As has been suggested, a gentle transition would be far more in keeping with the need to ensure that we do not exacerbate pensioner poverty or drive more of the most vulnerable members of society into poverty. I urge the Government and the Minister to keep that in mind.

1.36 pm

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on securing this important debate and on moving the motion with such an impassioned, articulate and typically powerful speech. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for her speech and for being a co-signatory to the motion. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) and for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who have consistently and effectively raised this issue since their election in May.

By the same token, I must pay tribute to the Women Against State Pension Inequality and their campaign to urge the Government to make fair transitional state

pension arrangements for women born after 6 April 1951. In particular, it is important to show our appreciation to Anne Keen, who first raised the petition on this issue after receiving a letter from the DWP which said that her expected retirement age had been increased. Far from getting 15 or indeed five years' notice, she was notified only 18 months before her 60th birthday. What an absolute scandal and disgrace. Last night the petition had more than 107,000 signatures. I imagine that it is now approaching 108,000. That is testimony to all those who have worked so hard to bring this matter to the Government's attention, including constituents of mine in Airdrie and Shotts.

Unashamedly, the Government are shifting the goalposts at very short notice for hard-working women—women who have gone to work, bettered our industries, raised children and supported families, but who have not had equal employment opportunities, access to independent pension funds or the opportunities that we have today. These women who have made enormous contributions to our society for the betterment of us all will see their retirement age rise without fair or proper notice.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister must come to the Dispatch Box and give an explanation to my constituents in Livingston, some of whom retired and finished their employment before they had even heard the news and many of whom did not have time to prepare or save before the news was upon them?

**Neil Gray**: I wholeheartedly agree. Sadly, those are typical stories that have played out across the Chamber today. It is this simple but dramatic injustice that is so galling.

The simple truth is that women born in the 1950s will be disproportionately burdened by the Government's plan for many reasons, not least because men of the same age are and have long been in a better position to offset at least part of the loss through savings or a private defined contribution pension scheme.

The Pensions Policy Institute, in its submission to the Work and Pensions Committee on the Government's pension reforms, emphasised that point by illustrating that only 65% of women in the 55 to 59 age range are economically active compared with around 76% of men. The gap is even greater among those in the 60 to 64 age bracket: 34% of women are currently economically active compared with 54% of men.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does he agree that some Government Members seem not to recognise the sense of injustice and grievance that exists among women born in the mid-1950s, such as my constituents Andrea Gregory and Wilma Robertson, who have worked all their lives, paid all their taxes and had their retirement postponed by the state not once, but twice? The word that they use is "robbery". They feel that they are being made to pay for a financial crisis that was not of their making.

**Neil Gray**: I wholeheartedly agree. There have been some noteworthy speeches from Government Members, but some that have sadly not met the same standard. I hope that the Minister will show some contrition and introduce transitional arrangements.

[Neil Gray]

Many women who have had their retirement plans shattered will be forced, through no fault of their own, to accept zero-hours contracts—temporary and low paid contracts that offer no financial security and poor return for their labour when, relatively recently, they expected to be enjoying a hard-earned retirement. Little, if any, thought has been given to the many women who care for their grandchildren or elderly relatives. It is not always possible to return to work in those circumstances and at this time in their lives.

I, my SNP colleagues and many other hon. Members of all parties agree with the reasons for the equalisation of the state pension age. However, the increased speed of the plans, with poor notice and no transition arrangements, is of great concern. The Government are betraying women and I am worried that there will be further undue hardship if they do not address the blatantly evident inequality. Not transitioning appears to be another example of the Government making cuts in pursuit of their budget surplus holy grail, with no consideration of the impact.

The Government must take some responsibility for their failure not to notify and fully prepare women for a longer wait. That means bringing forward the transitional protection and righting the injustice for those already and those set to be affected. I hope that today we will not get the same complacent ministerial reply that we heard to the recent Westminster Hall debate in which I was involved.

The Government are being warned today that the campaign will not go away. The women in the WASPI campaign will fight this all the way, and will be supported wholeheartedly by my SNP colleagues and by Labour Members. The Government need to sort the matter out with the same speed with which they delivered tax cuts for the rich when they got the opportunity, or they will forever be remembered for their betrayal of pensioners, particularly female pensioners.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. I am sorry to say that I will have to drop the speech limit to three minutes and ask Members to keep interventions to an absolute minimum so that we can wind up in time.

1.43 pm

**Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to take part in this Backbench Business Committee debate. I commend the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) for her opening remarks and pay tribute to the WASPI campaign, particularly to Marion and Anne and all the other ladies who helped campaign on this important issue. I have worked long and hard with them over the past few months. We have had meetings with my hon. Friends the Members for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds). I lobbied my constituents with the WASPI group in Morrisons in Denton recently and I think that I was the first in this Parliament to raise the issue at Prime Minister's Question Time. I am therefore glad that the subject has been brought to the Floor of the House for a full debate.

A very real injustice has been done to this group of women born in the 1950s. We can go through the history again: there have been two changes to their state pension age and, if that were not bad enough, the real injustice has been the acceleration of the process, which has left many women who were not expecting the changes having to make alternative arrangements. When it came to the private pensions of Members of Parliament, those within 10 years of their normal state pension age could remain on the old scheme, but the group of women we are considering have had no chance to put in place their alternative arrangements.

**Barbara Keeley:** Government Members have asked Opposition Members for our transitional arrangement suggestions. I made some. I gave examples from other countries: some have bridge pensions while others look after people who are made redundant. It is up to the Government, who have made the £30 billion pension grab, to come up with ideas.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is right. When the Pensions Act 2011 was debated in the House of the Commons, the current Secretary of State said, “but we will consider transitional arrangements.”—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2011; Vol. 530, c. 52.]

Where are they? Those ladies are still waiting. It is about time the Secretary of State came to the Dispatch Box and set out those transitional arrangements, because those women cannot wait forever.

We have already had the first U-turn from the former Pensions Minister, who said that he was not properly briefed. That says a lot about the calibre of Liberal Democrat Ministers in the former coalition Government. Now we have a Pensions Minister in the other place, who was a champion for those ladies until she took the Queen's shilling. She now says that she cannot do anything about it. What utter nonsense. What is the point of having a Minister if she cannot do anything about it? It is time that Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions got off their backsides and did something to help those women.

Following on from my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), I will give the Minister some friendly advice. I appreciate that it is not his area of responsibility but that of the noble Lady at the other end of the building who speaks on pensions. My hon. Friend likened the WASPI ladies to wasps. Wasps can be pests and nuisances. They cannot easily be bashed away and, when that happens, they get angry and come back. If they are really annoyed, they sting and, unlike bees, they can sting more than once. Let us have some justice for these ladies; it is long overdue.

1.47 pm

**Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on bringing this debate to the House through the Backbench Business Committee, and on opening it so powerfully.

From my experience of meeting my constituents at surgeries, I have learned of women affected by this cack-handed change by the Government who are living in damp housing, unable to afford the necessary housing repairs, and I have heard harrowing stories of marriages breaking up due to the financial pressures forced on them through no fault of their own.

During my research on the issue, I met WASPI and I thank them for not only meeting me and my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), but for their tireless work in campaigning to right this injustice. WASPI has expressed several concerns about the implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pensions Acts, mainly, although not exclusively, about communication and timescales.

**Drew Hendry:** Does my hon. Friend agree that it is ridiculous that women should have such short notice, or no notice? One of my constituents found out that she had an extra six years to wait not through a letter from the Government but from her insurance salesman.

**Gavin Newlands:** I could not agree more. I have received an email in the past hour from a constituent who turned 60 in March and was not aware of the changes and is coming to meet me tomorrow at a surgery. The problem is still going on.

My shorter contribution to the debate will centre on fairness. I believe that it is fair that both sexes will receive their state pension at the same age, but the rapid rise in the age of eligibility for the state pension has been unfair for hard-working men and women who have paid into a system all their lives in good faith.

**Patricia Gibson:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the changes to the state pension mean that women are finding out that retirement is four, five and six years further away than they thought and that that not only leads to financial difficulties but is cruel and heartless? It happens in the context of a lifetime of low pay and inequality faced by far too many women.

**Gavin Newlands:** I am pleased my hon. Friend has made that point for me. Given the time limit, I had to delete that section of my speech.

Hard-working men and women have paid into the system expecting, in good faith, the state to help to support their retirement. The combination of equalisation and increasing the pension age has been devastating for some women.

As I have said, WASPI has no problems with the principle of the policy; rather, it has problems with its implementation. These rapid and rushed changes have had a significant impact on a large group of women: 2.6 million women, if we accept the Department for Work and Pensions estimates. The changes have meant that some women may have to wait an additional six years to receive a state pension. From the first day of their working lives, these women have been advised to plan accordingly. At the very last minute, the Government have altered the plans that these women have had for years. This, in essence, is why the women affected feel deeply aggrieved and betrayed by the actions of subsequent Governments.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, in answer to my written question on the communication of the changes to the pension age entitlement, replied that the DWP wrote to all individuals directly affected to inform them of the changes to their state pension age. However, from speaking to WASPI and local constituents this does not appear to have happened on the scale or to the degree that the Secretary of State indicated. I have spoken with women affected. They have said they received the DWP letter far too late, with only a few months'

notice of the increase in the pension age. I have also heard of letters sent to wrong addresses. In one case, unfortunately, a constituent who came to my surgery—another is coming in tomorrow—had no knowledge whatever of the changes.

It has come to light that the UK Government informed a large number of women affected only 14 years after the changes were made.

**Alison Thewliss:** Does my hon. Friend agree that there has almost been some maladministration? I have just heard from my constituent, Susan Casey, who received a letter when she turned 50 to say that her retirement age would be in 2014. She was born in 1954. It is most unfair not only that she has been losing out, but that she has been misinformed.

**Gavin Newlands:** Absolutely. This seems to have happened to a whole a catalogue of women. It is an absolute disgrace.

We encourage individuals to plan for the future, but if during their working lives the Government make changes to the state pension, it is only appropriate and fair that the Government communicate them adequately to allow people to re-plan financially for their retirement. I phoned one of my constituents yesterday and asked her how she would like the Government to respond to this issue. Her request was simple: she wants the Government to accept that they made a mistake with how hard and how fast the changes were introduced. That should not be a difficult concession for the Government to make, as the previous Pensions Minister himself has already accepted that mistakes were made.

It is important for the Government to learn from the mistakes they have made and to review how the changes were introduced. We need clearer channels of communication between the DWP and individuals when it comes to pensions. I hear all too often that the information the DWP sends out is confusing and unclear. I would ask that the current Government sit down with WASPI and consider ameliorating some of the financial stress that the changes have brought, and perhaps extend the timeframe.

We know the problem. We cannot sit idly by and allow cack-handed policy implementation from subsequent UK Governments to devastate the lives of so many people who have worked so hard for so long. The Government cannot shirk their obligations. They must accept responsibility, apologise and correct this as a matter of urgency. Ignorance will simply not suffice.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** I just remind hon. Members that nine more people wish to catch my eye and we need to start wind-ups at a quarter past 2. If people insist on taking more interventions, as they are doing, there will be those who will not be called to speak. With that in mind, I call Philippa Whitford.

1.53 pm

**Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP):** A lot of the issues have already been covered. The issue of equalisation is totally accepted, but in response to a Government Member who is no longer in his place I should say that we did point out that the life expectancy increase is not equal. In parts of Scotland we have huge

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

differences in life expectancy, which relates to wealth, in particular. Women who are lower paid, who are unlikely to have a decent pension, who have no chance of having any other kind of pension are exactly the ones who do not get this extended life expectancy.

We also heard from a Government Member that women were definitely written to and that maybe they chose to ignore it. However, we know from FOI 3231 that the information campaign was from 2009 to 2013; in other words, 14 years later. I am sad to challenge Labour Members, but the DWP in 2004, under a Labour Government, recognised from its survey that only 46% of women knew what was coming. For most of these women it is not an extension of a year or 18 months; it is literally a change from 60 to 66.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): One of my constituents from Strathaven contacted me this week to say that she had only heard about the changes through word of mouth and a web search. At 59, the Government website suggested she could retire at 62. That was then changed and put up to 64-and-a-half. The changes are unfair because they penalise people at the latter stages, when they cannot make alternative arrangements.

**Dr Whitford:** We have heard from right across the Chamber about the lack of communication and the acceleration of the age extension, and the fact that women could do nothing about it. This is built on a generation of women who had a lifetime of poor pay. We need to think about that going forward.

Auto-enrolment does not cover the modern worker who has multiple mini-jobs, as they are called. Their combined earnings are not considered. We will therefore have another pension debate in another 30 years about the people who have been left with no pension because of current approaches to work. We know that the derived pension benefit from their husbands is not counted. We know that only 22% of women who retire this year will qualify for the full flat-rate pension. This is just unacceptable. We are talking about women who are often unemployed at 60. They are facing jobseeker's allowance and multiple job applications. They do not qualify for free transport here in England, free prescriptions or any other benefits, such as cold weather fuel payments. For these women, this is a multiple and accelerating problem.

We have been asked by those on the Government Benches—they are now horrifically empty for such an important debate—to come up with a solution. I understand that HMRC is looking at the higher rate of pension relief, which may claw back £45 billion. That more than covers the £30 billion, which we are told would cover full transitional arrangements. High level tax relief is for the wealthiest people, those who this week, the first proper working week of the year, have already earned more than the average wage. Three-quarters of them are men. The route we should be following is to take away money that goes to people who probably, despite their long life expectancy, will not live long enough to spend it, and share it more equally with women who have been very badly treated. This is an issue of fairness and the Government have a responsibility to deal with it.

1.57 pm

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on bringing this important issue to the House today and thank her for articulating this inequality so passionately. I am glad that Women Against State Pension Inequality is holding us to account, in spite of the problems I understand it has had in reaching some MPs.

This is a concern for millions of people across the UK, one that continues to gain momentum as the impact on women's lives looms larger. It is important to stress that Plaid Cymru supports the principle of equalising the state pension age. I note that Lloyd George, who brought in the original state pension, represented part of my constituency.

There is no reason why a woman should be expected to retire earlier than a man. Originally, it was put in place to reflect the age at which husbands retired and the discrepancy between the ages of husbands and their wives. That is not appropriate in an age of modern equality.

I speak today in opposition not to the purpose of equalisation but to the process of doing so. The accelerated timetable simply does not give women sufficient time to prepare for retirement.

I want to concentrate on the situation in Wales. The Government claim to be making the changes in response to an increase in life expectancy, but both life experience and life expectancy vary significantly depending on which part of the UK we look at. Unfortunately, this means that Wales will be hit particularly hard by the changes. For example, a new-born baby could expect to live to the age of 87 in parts of England, but just 76 in parts of Wales. At 71.4% of the UK average, income per head in Wales is the lowest in all the UK nations and regions. The average gross salary for a Welshman is £25,200, but a woman in Wales earns on average just £20,500—a fact that this Government and the Welsh Government should be ashamed of.

I reiterate that Plaid Cymru welcomes the equal treatment of women with regard to the state pension age, but this also requires the equal treatment of women in other spheres, such as the workplace, earnings and life opportunities. The UK Government are keen to push ahead with the former as a way to cut social protection budgets, but they are doing precious little fully to secure the latter. I urge the Government to phase in the equalisation of the state pension age over a longer timeframe to give women nearing retirement adequate time to prepare. The current timeframe is too fast and will cause undue hardship. These women cannot go back and live their lives again, and they deserve better treatment from the Government. I urge them to rethink. In a case of such fundamental inequality, and given that these people vote, none of us can afford not to consider this matter in detail and to end this inequality.

2 pm

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) and my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) on introducing this important motion. The hon. Lady spoke with passion and force and characterised the problem

facing many women born in the 1950s throughout Britain and Northern Ireland who are now faced with decisions they did not think they would have to make in such an accelerated fashion. Many of them are in receipt of, or have been in receipt of, low pay and undertake onerous and strenuous jobs in caring professions—for example, as nurses or home helps providing care within their own families to ageing parents. This places an additional strain on their health, yet, despite that burden, they will, because of this pensions ordeal, have to work for longer and for a smaller pension.

Women in my constituency, many of whom are associated with the WASPI campaign, which I congratulate, will be affected by these changes, because of the mirror legislation passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly. The equalisation of the state pension age is, in principle, to be welcomed, but it would be better if this symbol of gender equality was accompanied by transitional protections to ensure that women do not lose out. I recognise that, as life expectancy increases and many people stay in education longer before entering employment, the pension system must adapt. However, women in lower-paid work—home helps and carers, for example—and more physically straining jobs might not necessarily enjoy such an increase in life expectancy, yet they are the people likely to suffer most as a result of these changes, without being given adequate time to prepare.

That injustice and unfairness is the issue the Government need to address now. The previous coalition Government failed to recognise it, and instead wanted ordinary women to pay for a financial crisis they had nothing to do with. The responsibility for it should not lie at the door of women born in the early 1950s, yet they will be expected to work for longer and for a smaller pension than that which they had expected and planned for. They did not plan for this because they did not realise it was happening.

2.4 pm

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on securing this important debate.

No one today has disagreed with the concept of equalisation. To bring the pension age for men and women into line promotes the sort of gender equality I have campaigned for, but the way the changes have been implemented amounts to an injustice for women, in the form of a faster roll-out than promised; little or no notice of changes; and no time for women to make alternate arrangements.

**Drew Hendry**: Is this not the 10th major change in these women's working lifetimes and by far the worst and the one that impacts on them the most?

**Angela Crawley**: Absolutely. If there had been more women in the House over the years, perhaps those changes would not have taken place.

Many women expecting to start drawing their state pensions only found out in 2011 that they would face a delay. I acknowledge the hard work of WASPI and its vociferous approach to ensuring the matter is addressed. These women have experienced at first hand the consequences of the Government's failure to provide timely and appropriate communication when implementing significant policy changes. The facts are simple: these

women were not given sufficient notice. In fact, the Government did not actively inform any women for 14 years. That is simply not sufficient. The Work and Pensions Select Committee suggested 10 years, and even the Chancellor acknowledged in the spending review that 10 years' notice must be given in the future. To me, that sounds like an admission of guilt and something the Government must address. They know they have short-changed these women and that they must take action. They must now face up to that truth.

In my time as an MP, I have been contacted by many female constituents. I was contacted by a lady from Carnwath who was born in 1956 and began working for the local council in 1978. The age of retirement impacted on her choice of career and mortgage. She could have been better prepared for her retirement had she been given adequate notice. Another constituent told me she had worked for the NHS for 42 years and had retired last May. With one year's notice, she was informed that she would no longer receive the state pension, and she has since taken on part-time employment to fill the gap. That is simply unacceptable.

Similar themes have emerged in all my conversations with constituents: women working hard and earning less than men but still not having their contribution to society recognised by the Government. I am sure that many of my colleagues on the Women and Equalities Committee, who would have been here today had it not been for a Committee visit, would have echoed the same sentiments from the Conservative Benches. Sadly, their colleagues have failed them in that regard. I must also highlight the submissions to the Committee's inquiry into the long-term effect of the gender pay gap and the impact of low-paid work on women.

Such sentiments are echoed throughout all constituencies across the country. There are women in every constituency who have signed the petition calling on the Government to take action. The way the changes have been implemented is unfair. The women affected have spent years paying into the system and rightly expect that to see them through to their retirement. We owe it to them to make fair transitional state pension arrangements for women born in and after the 1950s. I hope the Government will heed these remarks.

2.8 pm

**Sue Hayman** (Workington) (Lab): I want briefly to talk about the situation of two women who have contacted me. The first was born in July 1953 and expected to retire at 60. This initially increased to 62 years and three months. She had no problem with that because she had been given plenty of notice and agreed with the gradual move towards equality of retirement age for men and women. Then, of course, with no warning, the retirement age was increased, so she now has to wait until she is 64 before she gets her higher state pension. The injustice is in the way it has been done—on a sliding scale—which means that some people in her class at school will get their pensions almost two years before her, despite their having worked for the same length of time and the same number of pension years. My constituent is still working but says she is fortunate because she has a good civil service pension. She is deeply concerned, however, that many other women rely on their state pension and now find they have to wait for many more years to get it, as discussed this afternoon.

[Sue Hayman]

Another constituent of mine is in that unfortunate position. She worked for 20 years as a secretary, and although the male workers in the company were automatically enrolled in the company pension scheme, women were not. It was very different for women in those days. My constituent has arthritis and is continuing to work as a cleaner because she simply cannot afford not to. She also agrees with pension reform to equalise the retirement age. That is not a problem for women; it is the way it is being done that is so very upsetting. Younger women have had to time to adjust to, and plan for, these retirement dates and the changes. Women such as my constituent, however, do not have that opportunity.

I am willing to give the Government the benefit of the doubt and say that perhaps they did not understand just how many women would be affected. I can accept that, but what I cannot get my head around is why they are refusing to look at it again. To me, this is simply callous. You know so many women are being affected; you could look again; you could listen; you could change things—[*Interruption.*] Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I ask the Government to look again at the people who have been disproportionately affected. They should listen to what those people are saying and get up and do something to help.

2.10 pm

**Roger Mullin** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker, although the people I really hope have a happy one are the women who have been suffering under this injustice for too long.

On 20 June 2011, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions advised MPs during a debate on the Pensions Act 2011 that he would be considering “transitional arrangements” to provide assistance to the worst-affected women, yet later that year, only completely inadequate transitional arrangements were accepted. In the same 2011 debate, the *Hansard* record reveals that although concern was expressed by many Members, the extent of the problems, not least the lack of effective communications, support and the transition, was not as well understood as, thanks to the WASPI ladies, it is today.

Today gives us an opportunity to begin to set the record straight and to give the Government the chance to right a wrong. Much more recently, on 24 January 2014, Ros Altmann, now the ennobled Baroness who has become the pensions Minister wrote:

“Women in their late fifties or more today have been the most disadvantaged by the UK pension system”,

and she also pointed out:

“For years, women have been the second class citizens in both state and private pensions. This particularly affects women already in their late 50s...Women...typically...earn less than men when they are working, once again leaving them with less chance to save for a pension and leaving them with lower state pensions as they lose out on the earnings-related element of the system.”

Let us recall, too, that women born in the 1950s did not have the same breadth of employment opportunity as men. In the early years of employment, it was still legal to ban women from joining private pension schemes if they married or worked part time. Women were

encouraged to pay the married women’s stamp, which meant they accrued no state pension rights at all, and the state pension system did not credit them if they worked full time raising a family. In other words, the pension system was designed by men, for men.

Thousands of women are now struggling to fill the gap before they have access to their state pension, and no adequate impact assessment has been undertaken by the Government. They have simply left these women to get on with it. Some are planning to use up what savings they have, and others who may have very small private pension pots are choosing to pull them all down to help fill a gap that is the creation of this Government. The Government must act.

2.14 pm

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I want to pay tribute to the WASPI campaigning group, a group of non-political women who have come together to demonstrate and raise awareness of the serious issues involved. They had to resort to freedom-of-information requests to hold Government Departments to account, and these demonstrated the lack of communication about the Pensions Act 1995. What that group said, what we have heard today and what we hear from our constituents is how the combination of the 1995 and 2011 Pensions Acts is shattering people’s lives.

Some women have spent their whole lives planning to retire at 60 and they now find that they might have to work an extra five or six years. Nobody here can imagine the impact and the stress that this could wreak on family life. Some women have already retired on the basis that they would have enough income to get by until they reached what they thought was going to be the state pension age of 60. These include women who have been out of the workplace for up to five years and now find themselves in the position of having to find employment again. This is difficult enough when they have been out of the workplace, but it is further compounded by the austerity measures in the public sector. Some of these women had financial advisers and took early retirement, but their advisers did not tell them about the impact of the 1995 Act.

One of my constituents was made redundant from the civil service, which allowed her to care for her husband, who has now sadly passed away. Now she has discovered that she needs to get back in the workplace for a further five years. How is she going to do that at the age of 60, bearing in mind that only 34% of women in the 60 to 64 age range are economically active? Another constituent has been lucky enough to get back into work, but she feels that having to pay national insurance again while she is working these extra years rubs salt in the wounds. Another constituent, Jan Buchanan, simply says she has been robbed of over £30,000.

Another aspect of the excellent information gathered by the WASPI group is its submission and recommendations on how the Government should communicate with people in future about their pensions and how to make financial information and its impact clearer. I recommend that the Government take that on board.

We have heard that the previous Pensions Minister now admits that acceleration in 2011 was a mistake, but he has taken the easy option of blaming the civil service and the Tories. I do not think that is acceptable either. Two months ago, the Chancellor found £27 billion

pounds and as we have already heard, money could be found for bombing Syria and £5 billion has already been wasted on the development of the future Trident programme.

This Government continue to tell us that they take pride in being able to take tough decisions. We will give them an open goal and an easy decision—they should change their minds on the transitional arrangements and help these people whose lives have potentially been ruined.

2.17 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, and I shall put forward a viewpoint that expresses the concerns that many Members have already raised. I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on setting the scene so passionately and in such a well-focused manner.

A large group of women born in the mid-1950s have had their entitlement to a state pension fundamentally altered by the last Government. Instead of being entitled to their state pension at 60 as they had expected and planned for during their entire life, they now do not qualify at all until the age of 66. Equalising the state pension age is a good move for gender equality in the long term, but in common with many other Members, I have been inundated with messages from constituents who are concerned that their whole life's plans are going to be thrown up in the air by these unplanned and unexpected changes.

The Office for National Statistics has released research showing that women born in 2064 can expect to live for 100 years. That statement shows that the long-term reform of the pension age is necessary, and statistics on issues other than our ageing population also reinforce that. However, thousands of women across my constituency will be affected by these changes and the publicising of their impact has not been adequate. Thousands of women might not even be aware of these changes, which could have a drastic impact on their lives.

Margaret from my Strangford constituency wrote to me with a heartfelt plea, which I am sure echoes the views of many women across the whole of Strangford, Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. She says:

"The stress I feel at times is awful. I thought that at this stage in my life I would have time for the 'me' things in life. Women my age have worked hard, we were the generation of the working wife and mother. We are, at this age, the generation of looking after grandchildren and ageing parents. We were given very little time to prepare for this extended retirement age...I feel this latest update in retirement age is unfair as all the plans I had disappeared."

She underlines the point by saying:

"I was told several years ago that retirement age would be 62 so I had set that as a target for my future plans. Then 18 months ago I am informed that the retirement age was upped to 66. How could our own Government treat us this way?"

I ask the Minister to answer that question of how the Government could let such people down so badly.

It is important to give consideration to the fact that women who are going to be affected by these changes grew up in and worked in a time when income inequality was still rife. The women affected were in the workplace in environments drastically different from today's. They had none of the advantages young women have today in a more equal professional and working environment.

The DWP issues state pension forecasts to working-age people who had not received any type of forecast in the preceding 12 months. Despite this being issued after equalisation was agreed, the letter made no reference whatever to the changes. The opportunity to communicate the changes to affected women early and clearly has been missed, but it is not too late, even today, for the Minister to say that it is possible to make a difference, and to make the process much easier for those women. We need a coherent Government strategy, and we need it to be implemented as soon as possible to assist the women who are affected by these changes through no fault of their own.

2.20 pm

**Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): It was a privilege to hear the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) move the motion, and it was an honour for me to join her in approaching the Backbench Business Committee to request the debate. There have been some powerful contributions from a number of Members who have campaigned on this issue in this and, indeed, the last Parliament.

We have heard much reference to the former Minister Steve Webb, and to what he has recently said. The question that now arises is this: if the Minister himself was subject to some misunderstanding or misapprehension—if he was in some way misled or misinformed—was the House in turn misled and misinformed in 2011, when he made various statements about impact assessments both in the Chamber and in Committee?

I often hear in the House about the principle that one Parliament cannot bind its successor. We are talking about an issue, and a choice, for this Parliament. Those who were not here in 2011 but are here now cannot wash their hands and say, "It is nothing to do with us." This is a choice for us. The fact is that if the Minister was not fully aware of the facts by the time the Bill had completed its passage, other Members were not either, and the people who are directly affected by these changes certainly were not. Given that they are now so active and animated through the WASPI campaign, it is clear that if they had been aware of the facts much earlier, they would have been active much earlier.

It is insulting for Conservative Members to suggest that perhaps people had been informed and simply did not know, and if they did not know they should have known. These women have demonstrated that had they known about the position, they would have done something about it, both in terms of their personal circumstances and in terms of the public policy challenges that they would have issued. Conservative Members also came out with the nonsense that there was no alternative: that they were seeking transitional arrangements leading to pension equality, but none had been proposed. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) about the "hard shoulder" arrangements that had been introduced in other countries. Moreover, as I pointed out in an intervention earlier, additional transitional measures were proposed during the Bill's passage in 2011, but were voted down by the Government.

In May 2011, during a debate in Westminster Hall, I said that if the Minister did not indicate that he would revise the proposals in the Bill because the women involved were an unintended anomaly, those women

[Mark Durkan]

would have no choice but to conclude that they had been calculated as the victims of an intentional injustice—a drive-by hit on their pension rights. That is how things stand. If we fail to pass this motion, we will be saying that those women are an acceptable casualty on the way to equality, and we cannot accept invidious treatment in the name of equality.

2.23 pm

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I warmly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) and congratulate her on securing the debate, and on making such a powerful speech about the inequalities that many women face as a result of changes in the state pension regime. I must add that, given that the debate concerns an issue that is so important to millions of women, it is an utter disgrace that a grand total of two Tory Back Benchers were in the Chamber at 2 pm, and that only half a dozen are present now, as the debate draws to a close. That shows the contempt that the Government feel for the women who are suffering as a result of the pension changes that have been foisted on them. [Interruption.] Yes, it would have been easier for them just to turn up. Where are they, and will they have the guts to stand up and vote this afternoon if we press the motion to a Division, as I expect we will?

There is no more fundamental consideration for all of us than ensuring that we can look forward to retirement, and to a retirement that offers security and dignity. We are here today because women who were born in the 1950s believe that they have been short-changed by this Government, and they are right to do so.

I should make it clear—as many of my hon. Friends have done already, along with Labour Members—that we support the principle of equalisation. It is not equalisation that is the issue; it is the speed of the journey towards equalisation that is unjust, and has led to significant and unacceptable consequences for many women whose expectation of retirement has been deferred.

The Government will tell us, as they often do, that this is all about money. To us, it is also about equity and fairness, and about doing the right thing. That is the problem with this Government. They are wedded to austerity, and wedded to reducing spending, and their obligation to society—and, specifically, to the case that women pensioners are pressing—is one that they are quite prepared to rip up and toss away. “Let us get the deficit down, and others will have to pay the price.” Austerity is not an economic necessity but a political choice, and 1950s women are paying the price of that choice. As we know, this Government know the price of everything and the value of nothing. Women’s pension rights are expendable, and the hopes of many for a decent retirement are crushed by the desire to achieve a budget surplus. We should never cease to tell the House, and the country, that there is an alternative. What we are seeing from the Government is an abrogation of responsibility. We are seeing a poverty of hope and a poverty of ambition.

No doubt the Minister will trot out the excuse that the money could not be found to create a longer transitional period, but this is all about priorities. When a Government can find £167 billion to invest in weapons of mass

destruction, they can find the money to ensure that our prisoners are protected. On this issue as on so many others, this Government have a faulty moral compass.

When people enter into an arrangement with any pension provider, they are, in effect, assuming that the provider will exercise its contractual responsibilities. Whether private pensions or national insurance contributions are involved, they are effectively entering into a contractual arrangement. In this case, the state had, since 1940, been paying pensions to women who had reached the age of 60. Women had the expectation that that was what was going to happen.

The women behind the WASPI campaign are to be congratulated on the way in which they have pursued this matter. As with the issue of tax credits, on which the Government ultimately had to see sense, I expect there to be a growing clamour for the Government to do the right thing. I am glad to see that the press are already beginning to take an interest in this story. The *Sunday Post* in Scotland should be commended for putting it on the front page last Sunday. I understand from its Westminster editor that it has received nearly 400 e-mails this week from women affected by the changes, and I have many of them here.

Let us look at the reality of what is happening. Let us consider how sharply different will be the experiences of women born in the early 1950s. For argument’s sake, let us take the examples of women who were born on 10 February, from 1950 onwards. A woman who was born on 10 February 1950 would have retired at 60 in 2010. A woman born a year later would have had to wait almost two years longer to retire on 6 January 2012. A woman born on 10 February 1952 would have reached the state pension age yesterday, aged 61 years, 10 months and 27 days. Such a woman would have had to wait almost two more years than a woman born in 1950. As if that were not bad enough, the increases in pensionable age for women born in 1953 and 1954 become markedly worse. A woman born in 1954 will not reach pensionable age until 6 July 2019, when she will be aged 65 years, four months and 26 days. A woman born in 1955 will not retire until 10 February 2021, aged 66.

That cannot be right. It is far too steep an increase over a short period in pensionable age. I ask the few Conservative Members who are present to examine their consciences. Members of the WASPI campaign will be coming to their surgeries. Perhaps they will include a woman who was born in 1955, and who had expected to retire either now or not long into the future. Are Conservative MPs going to tell those women that it is right for them to have to wait six years longer than someone who was born five years earlier, without mitigation? That is the scale of the increase that has hit them. It is a breach of trust between the Government and women who have earned the right to a pension. Let me, as a reasonable person—as indeed we all are on these SNP Benches—help the Government out. We should also heed the recognition of the last Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, who last month admitted that the Government made a bad decision on state pension age rises. We should recall the advice from the Turner report—much quoted today—that such measures should be brought in over a 15-year period to mitigate the impact of any such changes. We have heard about the failure of communication, which it can be argued means the start of the 15-year process should be the beginning

of the changes in 2010. That would mean that, as we are effectively going to be at a retirement age of 63 for women as of April this year, the Government could, for example, look at smoothing the increase in pensionable age for women aged 63 to 66 out to 2025.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South mentioned at the start of her speech that pensions are incredibly complicated. My hon. Friend is also right that we have built in complexity, as well as a number of inconsistencies from the incessant tinkering that often seems at odds with other aspects of pension policy. We all ought to agree that pensions policy should be about getting things right for the longer term.

A number of positive developments have been enacted, such as auto-enrolment, but even here we need to come back and talk about how we can enhance auto-enrolment, and deal with the issue of part-time workers, for example. There are also outstanding issues on the new single-tier pension, and here again there are rightful criticisms on how this has affected many women born in the 1950s. What I would suggest to the Government, and this is something I hope would have broad support, is that they should establish an independent pension commission that can look holistically at all these issues that require oversight.

If we accept, as we do, that there has to be equalisation of the state pension age, we also need to look at how this and the increase in the state pension age will affect people throughout the UK. We need to look at vastly different mortality rates across the UK and question how this may influence the debate on state pension age.

In conclusion, therefore, let me say the following. In Scotland a 65-year-old man today can normally expect to live until he is 82, and a woman to age 84. That is nearly two and a half years below life expectancy in England. There is therefore a considerable difference in the life experiences of people in different parts of the UK and, crucially, much less time for someone in Scotland to enjoy a secure and comfortable retirement.

We have had a debate today that has shone a light on pension inequalities that many women born in the 1950s face. I hope the Government are listening and are prepared to reflect on what can be done to mitigate this unfairness. I would also hope they would take on board our suggestion of having an independent pension commission.

2.33 pm

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) for securing and opening this debate. It is perhaps an irony, however, as we are discussing pensions, that she is further from retirement age than any other Member of this House. I also want to pay a warm tribute to WASPI on its campaign and the dignity with which it has conducted it. It is a measure of the campaign's success that every Member of this House knows the meaning of the acronym WASPI. I also pay tribute to the other groups and individuals who have been advocating the cause of women born in the 1950s.

The level of interest in this debate is summed up by the fact that we have had 26 Back-Bench contributions from Members from all parts of the United Kingdom. I want to pick out two contributions: that of my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who has done so much work on this in recent

years, and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), whose deep commitment to this is known across the House.

I also want to pay tribute to my Labour colleagues who in 2011, when the Pensions Act was going through this House, pressed the issue of transitional provisions as hard as they could. It is a shame the Government did not listen to many of our proposals set out at the time.

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): At that time, the Secretary of State said in debate said he would consider transitional protection. Has my hon. Friend seen any evidence of that consideration being given?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds**: That points to what has happened here. In previous debates on this matter the Minister has talked about the cap on the increase being reduced from 24 to 18 months, but that was as far as it got, and we see the Government today have no positive proposals. They keep asking the Opposition about their proposals, but it is the Government whose mind has gone completely blank on this issue.

Let us not forget the fundamentals of this debate. Many women born in the 1950s will have started their working lives without even the protection of the Equal Pay Act 1970. Many of those women will have been paid at a lower rate than men for no reason other than that they were women. The gender pay gap is at its widest for many of the women under discussion today. Also, let us not forget the time that many of them took to work part-time or bring up children when they have not even had the chance to contribute to occupational pensions.

The Pensions Act 1995 increased the state pension age from 60 to 65 for women between April 2010 and 2020, to bring it into line with the state pension age for men, but the coalition Government moved the goalposts. They decided to accelerate the increase in the women's state pension age from April 2016 so that it reached 65 by November 2018. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has pointed out, in the Second Reading debate in this House on 20 June 2011 the Secretary of State made it absolutely clear that the Government would "consider transitional arrangements."

The much vaunted reduction in the cap—capping the maximum increase at 18 months—that the Minister has pointed to in recent debates simply is not enough. Do the Government understand the anger at the fact that more transitional provisions have not been considered—over 100,000 signatures for a debate in this House, the online campaign and the great response to it in the media? Recently I was told by the *Sunday Post* that a feature on this subject brings an unprecedented response from the hundreds of thousands of women who are affected.

Let us ask ourselves what the Pensions Minister in the coalition Government at the time thinks. This is what he told the Institute for Government:

"There was one very early decision that we took about state pension ages, which we would have done differently if we'd been properly briefed, and we weren't."

He added:

"We made a choice, and the implications of what we were doing suddenly, about two or three months later, it became clear that they were very different from what we thought."

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

He then said:

“So basically we made a bad decision. We realised too late. It had just gone too far by then.”

**Mr Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): The only thing my hon. Friend has forgotten to mention is that the whole idea was masterminded and put forward at the Dispatch Box by that tin-pot Liberal who called himself Professor Steve Webb.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** I am honoured to be put right by that intervention, and perhaps the Professor, as we shall forever refer to him, would have been better off listening to my colleagues on the Labour Benches and the civil servants.

It would be even more interesting to ask ourselves what the current Pensions Minister thinks of the 2011 Act. I thoroughly recommend to the House [rosaltdunn.com](http://rosaltdunn.com), which has a lot of wonderful critiques of the coalition pensions policy in it. She cannot deny it is her site; her photograph is on every contribution. She said this about the 2011 Act:

“The Government has decided to renege on its Coalition Agreement, by increasing the State Pension Age for women from 2016, even though it assured these women that it would not start raising the pension age again before 2020.”

That is what the current Minister for Pensions said. Even after the concession of the cap being reduced, this is what she said to the *Yorkshire Post* on 6 June 2013:

“The coalition seems oblivious to the problems faced by those already in their late fifties, particularly women, who feel they simply do not matter to policymakers.”

What an appropriate critique that is!

We should also look carefully at the intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) who talked about being lobbied by the Pensions Minister about applying the pensions protection fund retrospectively. Her lobbying of my right hon. Friend was effective on that occasion. She told him that the impossible was possible. Now, however, she says that what we are trying to achieve is impossible. I have an interest in history, and I have been trying—unsuccessfully—all morning to think of an example of another Minister who had more influence on Government policy when they were outside the Government than when they were in it.

We have heard much about the key question of notice. It is key because the Government have in their gift the pensions legal framework in this country, and when they make changes to it, they have a duty to provide notice of them. The House should not just take my word for that; let us take the word of the Pensions Minister. What did she say about women who were already in their late 50s and about the notice they were given under the 2011 Act? She said:

“They are not being given enough notice of such a huge change.”

Why will she not listen to her own words now?

This debate is taking place against the backdrop of a decision in the district court in the northern Netherlands, which has already been mentioned today. It found that a lady who suffered from a number of chronic, progressive diseases faced a disproportionate burden in bridging the gap to her extended retirement age. How awful it would be if this battle were to end up in the courts,

given that the Government have the chance to do something about it today. The Government keep saying that they are not sure what to do. They find it impossible to do anything about this, and they have no proposals to bring forward. Yet if we look at the passage of the Pensions Act 2011, we can see that they had a number of options at that time, one of which has been set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) today. Another, which was put forward by one of my predecessors as shadow Pensions Minister, related to maintaining the qualifying age for pension credit on the 1995 timetable rather than the 2011 one, which would at least have provided a buffer for those who were least able to cope financially with the changes. That proposal was completely dismissed at the time.

I ask the Minister at least to open his mind to having a discussion about what might be done, instead of consistently hiding behind the fact that he is going to do absolutely nothing. We have today heard the passion around this issue, and it is not an issue that is going to go away. I urge the Government to be constructive. They could still do something to ease the transitions. Whatever the Minister does today, he should not slam the door in the face of the 1950s women.

2.43 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on managing to secure this debate, which has attracted many Members on both sides of the House. I also commend all the colleagues who have taken the trouble to come here and speak today. I will try to address as many of their points as I can in the limited time available to me.

I should like to begin by reminding the House of the rationale for reforming the timetable. For our state pension system to function effectively, it has to be fair, affordable and sustainable. The changes made to the state pension age under the Pensions Act 2011 make an important contribution to achieving those aims. Gender equality is one of the main purposes of the changes to the state pension age. Under the previous system, women reaching state pension age in 2010 would spend on average 41% of their adult lives in receipt of the state pension. For men, the figure was only 31%, owing to the longer life expectancy and earlier state pension age of women.

It makes little sense for women to work to a pension age originally set in 1940 which does not reflect the employment opportunities open to them in a modern society. Changes were needed to take account of increased life expectancy and to ensure fairness for working-age people who would otherwise bear the cost of this longevity. Following sharp rises in life expectancy, the previous Government acted to address this and brought forward the timetable for rises in the state pension age. This was vital if we were to continue to meet the UK's obligations under EU law to eliminate gender inequalities in social security provision and to ensure that the state pension remained affordable and sustainable. It is also important to look at the changes in the context of our wider pension reforms and what these mean for women.

**Barbara Keeley:** The Minister cannot have been listening to what I said earlier. A substantial proportion of what I said showed that that is not the case, although he and his colleagues are hiding behind that argument.

We were not required to do that. Some EU countries are not equalising until 2040 or 2044, and some are maintaining a difference. Will he please stop hiding behind something that is not true?

**Mr Vara:** The hon. Lady should respect the views of other people, rather than simply stating that what she says is right. We are bound by EU law, but it is also right and proper that we should have gender equality, irrespective of EU law.

**Ian Blackford:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Vara:** I will not give way. I am mindful of the limited time that I have, and I am keen to ensure that the proposer of the motion, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South, has time to make her concluding comments at the end of the debate.

The introduction of the new state pension will benefit many women who would have lost out under the current two-tier system, largely as a result of lower average earnings and part-time working. All those affected by the 2011 changes will reach pension age after the introduction of the new state pension. Around 650,000 women reaching state pension age in the first 10 years will receive an average of £8 per week more under the new state pension than they would have done under the previous system. The majority of households reaching state pension age up to 2030 will receive a higher total income over retirement under the new system.

The solution to ensuring that people have a comfortable later life is encouraging and enabling them to work longer. This benefits individuals through the social and financial rewards of employment, it benefits employers through the skills and experiences that older workers bring to the workplace, and it benefits the wider economy. Research by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research has shown that adding just one year to people's working lives would add 1% to UK GDP per year.

Support is in place to provide extra help for people who cannot work owing to caring responsibilities, ill health or disability. Women affected would be eligible for the same in-work, out-of-work or disability benefits as men of their age, and carer's allowance may be available, for which national insurance credits are awarded automatically. In 2011, credits were introduced to help adult family members looking after a child under 12 in order to assist the parents who were working, with these credits being able to count towards state pension entitlements.

Much has been made of the comments made by the previous Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, and it is important to recognise that even he was not seeking a restoration that would cost £30 billion. Indeed, he said that he was only looking for a 10% clawback. It is also worth remembering that he does recognise that the £1.1 billion concession that was made was generous. His exact words were:

"and we got £1 billion back in the end, and a billion quid is a serious amount of money."

**Ian Blackford** *rose*—

**Mr Vara:** I will not give way.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** *rose*—

**Mr Vara:** I will give way.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** I am grateful to the Minister for being so generous in giving way. He read out the quote about £1 billion being a "serious amount of money", but he really should have quoted the whole sentence, which begins:

"this was a measure to save 30 billion quid over how many years, and we wanted 10% of that back to soften the blow".

Steve Webb wanted £3 billion back but got only £1 billion.

**Mr Vara:** If the hon. Gentleman had taken the trouble to listen while he was preparing his question, he would know that that is what I said, except that I used different words. He might want to check the *Hansard* record tomorrow morning. In this place, it always helps to listen before speaking.

The Government listened to the concerns expressed during the passing of the 2011 Act, and shortened the delay that anyone would experience in claiming their state pension, relative to the 1995 timetable, to 18 months. That concession benefited almost a quarter of a million women, who would otherwise have experienced delays of up to two years. A similar number of men also benefited from a reduced increase. The concession was worth £1.1 billion in total, and as a result 81% of women affected will experience a delay of 12 months or less.

**Mhairi Black:** To me, the concessions that were given show that the Government recognise that the transition was not appropriate. Given that the wording of today's motion is clear in asking the Government to reassess the transitional arrangements, will the Minister confirm that he will do so if the motion is passed, be it unanimously or with a vote—yes or no?

**Mr Vara:** Much has been made of what was "promised" on Second Reading. What I say to the hon. Lady and others is that this concession was made after it was said that this would be considered, and that the concession is worth six months and £1.1 billion.

**Ian Blackford** *rose*—

**Mr Vara:** I have only a short time left and I must press on.

As for people being aware of the 1995 changes, I should add that research carried out in 2004 by the Department for Work and Pensions found that 73% of people aged 45 to 54 were aware of the changes to women's state pension age. It is regrettable that people have sought to put this on a political basis and have conveniently forgotten that after 1995 we had 13 years of Labour government. I have here a list of some 10 Labour Pensions Ministers who totally failed to do anything, yet Labour Members conveniently seek to put the blame on the things that have happened post-2010. The shadow Home Secretary made comments earlier, but he was a Labour Cabinet Minister, and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), who also made comments today, was also in the Labour Administration. He is a former Pensions Minister, yet he did nothing then.

**Alan Johnson** *rose*—

**Mr Vara:** I am afraid I will not give way. [HON. MEMBERS: "Give way."] I have only a few seconds left, but I will give way.

**Alan Johnson:** Indeed, I was the Work and Pensions Secretary, but we introduced measures that did not include this anomaly—it was introduced in 2011.

**Mr Vara:** The right hon. Gentleman spoke earlier of being lobbied, but he took no action on that. Furthermore, big issues arise as to whether notice was given in respect of the changes in 1995, and when he was Work and Pensions Secretary he did nothing to make sure that those women were informed. All the blame has been put on Conservative Members.

I wind up simply by saying that this matter was debated thoroughly and properly in 2011. A concession was made then—by way of time period and financially—which was worth more than £1 billion, and it was thoroughly debated in both Houses of Parliament. I very much hope that I have put the Government's position on the record. I simply say to some people that they, too, should learn to take responsibility, given that they were in government for 13 years. With that, I shall allow time for the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South to speak.

2.45 pm

**Mhairi Black:** First, I wish to congratulate the House on having such a good quality debate. What has been striking is that this is an issue that clearly crosses party boundaries and constituencies. The Minister said that it had already been thoroughly debated, but that was in 2011. All the evidence that we have heard today shows that this matter needed to be debated more, which it has been, and we have found that the accommodation reached in 2011 did not go far enough and is not good enough. Despite my intervention in this whole debate, I am no further forward in understanding whether, if this motion is passed, the Government will commit to reassess the transitional arrangements.

The Minister has spoken at great length about equalisation. Nobody here disagrees with the principle of equalisation. What we are concerned about is the transition, and that has not been addressed. My hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) quite rightly pointed out that this matter is about priority; everything that a Government decide to do is about priority. I am still not clear what the priorities of this Government are, and for that reason I wish to press this matter to a vote.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. Before I put the question, may I remind the House that Members who shout, "Aye" cannot then vote no, and Members who shout "No" cannot then vote aye. I hope that is clear.

*Question put.*

*The House divided: Ayes 158, Noes 0.*

**Division No. 159]**

**[2.55 pm**

**AYES**

Abrahams, Debbie	Austin, Ian
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Bardell, Hannah
Alexander, Heidi	Benn, rh Hilary
Ali, Rushanara	Black, Mhairi
Allen, Mr Graham	Blackford, Ian
Anderson, Mr David	Blackman, Bob
Arkless, Richard	Blackman, Kirsty

Blenkinsop, Tom	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Boswell, Philip	Lewis, Clive
Brock, Deidre	Lucas, Caroline
Brown, Alan	Lynch, Holly
Brown, Lyn	Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Burden, Richard	Marsden, Mr Gordon
Burnham, rh Andy	Maskell, Rachael
Butler, Dawn	Matheson, Christian
Cameron, Dr Lisa	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	McDonald, Stuart
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	C.
Chapman, Douglas	McDonnell, John
Chapman, Jenny	McFadden, rh Mr
Coaker, Vernon	Pat
Coffey, Ann	McGarry, Natalie
Cooper, rh Yvette	McGovern, Alison
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	McLaughlin, Anne
Cowan, Ronnie	Monaghan, Dr Paul
Coyle, Neil	Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Crawley, Angela	Morden, Jessica
Creagh, Mary	Mullin, Roger
Creasy, Stella	Murray, Ian
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Newlands, Gavin
Dakin, Nic	Nicolson, John
Davies, Geraint	O'Hara, Brendan
Day, Martyn	Onn, Melanie
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.	Osamor, Kate
Donaldson, Stuart Blair	Oswald, Kirsten
Doughty, Stephen	Paterson, Steven
Dowd, Peter	Pennycook, Matthew
Durkan, Mark	Pound, Stephen
Edwards, Jonathan	Qureshi, Yasmin
Esterson, Bill	Rees, Christina
Ferrier, Margaret	Reynolds, Jonathan
Fitzpatrick, Jim	Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Flint, rh Caroline	Robinson, Gavin
Flynn, Paul	Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Foxcroft, Vicky	Ryan, rh Joan
Gibson, Patricia	Salmond, rh Alex
Glass, Pat	Saville Roberts, Liz
Goodman, Helen	Shannon, Jim
Grady, Patrick	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Grant, Peter	Sheppard, Tommy
Gray, Neil	Shuker, Mr Gavin
Green, Kate	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Greenwood, Margaret	Slaughter, Andy
Gwynne, Andrew	Smeeth, Ruth
Haigh, Louise	Smith, Cat
Hamilton, Fabian	Smith, Owen
Hanson, rh Mr David	Smyth, Karin
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Spellar, rh Mr John
Harris, Carolyn	Stephens, Chris
Hayes, Helen	Stevens, Jo
Hayman, Sue	Streeting, Wes
Hendry, Drew	Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Hillier, Meg	Tami, Mark
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Thewliss, Alison
Hoey, Kate	Thomas, Mr Gareth
Hollobone, Mr Philip	Thomas-Symonds,
Hosie, Stewart	Nick
Howarth, rh Mr George	Thomson, Michelle
Huq, Dr Rupa	Thornberry, Emily
Johnson, rh Alan	Timms, rh Stephen
Johnson, Diana	Turley, Anna
Kane, Mike	Twigg, Stephen
Keeley, Barbara	Vaz, Valerie
Kerevan, George	Watson, Mr Tom
Kerr, Calum	Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Kinahan, Danny	Whitford, Dr Philippa
Kinnock, Stephen	Williams, Mr Mark
Kyle, Peter	Wilson, Corri
Lammy, rh Mr David	Winnick, Mr David

Winterton, rh Dame Rosie  
Wright, Mr Iain  
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Marion Fellows and**  
**Jeff Smith**

**NOES**

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Mike Weir and**  
**Grahame M. Morris**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House, while welcoming the equalisation of the state pension age, is concerned that the acceleration of that equalisation directly discriminates against women born on or after 6 April 1951, leaving women with only a few years to make alternative arrangements, adversely affecting their retirement plans and causing undue hardship; regrets that the Government has failed to address a lifetime of low pay and inequality faced by many women; and calls on the Government to immediately introduce transitional arrangements for those women negatively affected by that equalisation.

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have just had a very convincing vote on a motion that is quite specific in calling for the Government to introduce transitional arrangements. These Backbench Business debates are a relatively new phenomenon. Even newer is the Government's tendency to try to ignore them completely. That is something with which we should not put up.

Can you confirm that there are certain things that we can do unambiguously as a House if the Government choose to continue this bad practice? We could, for example, cut the salary of the Pensions Minister—or his pension, for that matter. Alternatively, we could ask you to summon him on a weekly basis. Can you confirm that it is within the province of this House to ask you to summon the Minister on a weekly basis till he bends to

the will of the House? Can you confirm that these are matters that are unambiguously within the province of this House if the Pensions Minister continues his arrogant refusal to accept a democratic vote?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that point of order and for advance notice of it. He was not in the previous Parliament so he is probably unaware that I chaired the Backbench Business Committee for five years, during which we spent a lot of time grappling with these issues. Most people know that Backbench motions are not binding on the Government. There are situations in which they are binding on the House and I am happy to have a long conversation—not here and not now—with the right hon. Gentleman about those situations. This is an opportunity for the House to express its will.

We have had a long debate and a long Division. We have another debate coming up which is heavily subscribed. I want to move on.

**Alex Salmond** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I will let the right hon. Gentleman have a brief word, then we move on.

**Alex Salmond:** Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I gave you two illustrations of things that the House has within its gift—namely, action against the Minister or asking you to instruct him to do something. Could you confirm that those are unambiguously within the province—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. That really is way outside the debate that has taken place, and I wish to move on. We now come to the next motion on the Order Paper, which is on children in care.

## Children in Care

3.9 pm

**Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to take steps to help reduce the number of children entering the care system by bringing forward measures to support more children to remain safely at home with their family or extended family.

I am most grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place. The voices of children in care and their families are rarely heard, yet they are among the most vulnerable in society and have the greatest need of representation.

Over recent years, steadily rising numbers of children have been taken into care. There are now 70,000 looked-after children in this country. The rise began in response to the very tragic case of baby Peter Connelly in 2008, but has since continued. Some argue that an increase in the number of children in care shows that local authority children's services are getting better at identifying those at risk of harm, and that it must therefore be a good thing, but we need only look at the outcomes and life chances of care leavers to realise that a childhood in care creates its own risks.

I could cite many deeply saddening statistics on levels of poverty, addiction, suicide, poor educational attainment, over-representation in the prison population, and higher levels of mental health difficulties compared with the population as a whole. However, perhaps the saddest statistic is the number of care leavers whose own children are then taken into care. There is a self-perpetuating cycle of loss, with wounds that never heal, when the bond between parent and child is broken. Children in care will tell us of multiple fostering placement breakdowns, the sense of being unwanted, unloved and abandoned, the loss of identity in being split up from their siblings and grandparents, repeat changes of schools and loss of friendship circles, and the feeling of never truly belonging.

The tragic, high-profile cases of child abuse and neglect have left professionals with an entrenched fear of getting it wrong. Understandably, they face significant pressure to take steps to secure the removal of children rather than finding the optimal solution for every child. I say that if the state is going to intrude in the private family life of an individual, it must guarantee better life chances for those children. Of course the welfare of a child must always come first, but in many cases their welfare is best served by staying with their parent, if that parent can be supported properly, rather than facing an uncertain future in care.

Instead of supporting a family when experiencing stress, the situation may be left until a crisis point is reached, and then the family experience compulsory state intervention. Inevitably, this is a time of scarce resources for local authorities, but it is hard not to argue that prevention is better than a life in care.

**Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Lady join me in thanking and paying tribute to the many thousands of family members around the country who step in and support children when the parental relationship has broken down? Those kinship carers, as they are known, do a fantastic job, and we would like to see more support for them, perhaps on an equal partnership basis with those who adopt. They save the state an awful lot of money and give kids a life chance they might not otherwise have had.

**Lucy Allan:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I will come on to speak about the important role of kinship carers and the support they could be offered. She makes a very valuable point.

Yesterday, Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner, gave evidence to the Education Committee on early intervention and she spoke powerfully about the benefits. It is a vital stage in child protection and it can, in these difficult financial times, be in danger of being bypassed.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): I am a Welsh MP and in Wales we have the Flying Start scheme for families with difficulties in areas where poverty is high. The scheme starts at the point of pregnancy and there is regular engagement with a midwife. Once the child is born, dedicated nursing services provide support by discussing play, talking, food and setting boundaries, as well as by tackling any drug and alcohol problems in the family. Is not that kind of holistic embracement the way forward for many families?

**Lucy Allan:** I thank the hon. Lady for her helpful intervention and I hope the Minister listened to what she had to say.

Instead of care proceedings being the option of last resort—which it really is intended to be under the legislation—many families find themselves on a track where too often there is only one outcome. Media, families and campaigners have been talking about that trend for a number of years, and I believe the message is starting to get through.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I should declare my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising this subject, because this Chamber does not get to talk enough about children in care. I concur with her: the number of children in care in England is now the largest since 1985. On her point about early intervention, will she challenge the Minister later—alas, I cannot be here for the end of the debate—by asking him what has happened to the early help recommendation made by the Munro review of child protection, which I commissioned back in 2010 and which reported in 2011? It is exactly that sort of intervention that will keep families together wherever possible, but it seems to have gone off the radar. Does my hon. Friend agree that it needs to be very much back on the Government's agenda?

**Lucy Allan:** My hon. Friend was an excellent children's Minister. I remember talking to him about some of the issues and he makes his point very well. I am encouraged that there is growing acceptance that more can be done to help families stay together and to stay together safely. That has to be better for society and financially, and, most importantly, it is better for children.

My local council in Telford understands that. Its focus is on ensuring that children and families receive the right help at the right time. Its strengthening families programme supports families with deep challenges, which in turn ensures that more expensive and damaging interventions do not become necessary. Central to that successful scheme is the implementation of "Family Connect", which is a single, multi-agency front door for children and families. There are other examples of good practice helping children on the fringes of care to stay out of the system.

Many MPs will have had correspondence from constituents desperate to keep their children out of the care system and to keep their family together. Usually, by the time families are in touch with their MP, care proceedings are under way and there is nothing we can do. Parents are frightened, angry and overwhelmed by the monitoring, the scrutiny and the building of the case against them, which is never intended to be supportive of or conducive to building stronger families.

The Family Rights Group provides free specialist legal advice for families caught up in what can be a nightmare. It helps families navigate the complexities of local authority child protection investigations, enabling them to have a more constructive and informed relationship with social services. Demand for the organisation's services has doubled since 2010, and only four in 10 callers can be answered. According to the Family Rights Group, its Department for Education funding is due to end in March. I urge the Minister to think carefully about the benefit of the organisation and whether its funding can be renewed.

I do not accept that a continued increase in the number of children in care is inevitable. What sort of society would this be if we were to assume that state care would do better than parents? I believe—this is based on working with families caught up in the child protection system—that most parents, however difficult their circumstances or background, set out to do the very best they can by their children. The first step must be to help them to achieve that goal, but such a mindset is not necessarily prevalent in the world of child protection. In fact, sometimes the reverse is the case.

A professional—a health visitor, a teacher, a nurse, a GP, an A&E doctor, or anyone interfacing with a child—is encouraged to think the unthinkable. What do I mean by that? I mean thinking that any parent, including any of us, might be capable of deliberately harming their child. The net in which families are caught is being cast wider and wider. Today, one in 100 children in England is subject to child protection investigations, which is a 79% increase in five years. As professional anxiety rises and support services dwindle, the consequence is that more children are spending a life in care. A parent fleeing a violent or abusive relationship, one seeking help for mental health problems or those who themselves had a childhood in care may all be considered a risk of future emotional harm to their child.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): I very much agree with the points the hon. Lady is making. Does she agree that this is a false economy? If we cut back on preventive services—the support services to which she is referring—we will end up spending more in supporting children in need, who have reduced educational outcomes and all the other consequences of being in care. From everybody's point of view, it is a worthwhile investment to stop that happening.

**Lucy Allan:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his very useful comment, with which I agree entirely.

A risk of future emotional harm is assessed on a pattern of potential risk factors—poor housing, single parenthood, poverty, an abusive partner—which all combine to create a risk that professionals simply cannot take. All too often, it is the most disadvantaged who are affected by this system.

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me for saying that she is painting a rather malign picture of the child protection system, as if it were a bunch of child catchers wandering around the country and randomly looking for children to apprehend. Will she acknowledge that, notwithstanding the odd one that does not go the right way, the vast majority of child protection cases actually come to the right decision?

**Lucy Allan:** I will move on to my hon. Friend's point with regard to the court system.

There will always be children who are not able to stay safely at home. It is a difficult and challenging task to identify those children correctly. As such matters are decided by an independent court, we are told that we should be confident that the correct decision will always be made. I must say to the House, however, that a court can decide a case only on the basis of the evidence put before it by child protection professionals and that that evidence is often dominated by opinion. The court does not have the discretion to disregard professional opinion in favour of a distraught parent who is desperately trying to navigate the complexities of the legal system or desperately trying to prove their innocence when up against the full might of the state.

The motion asks the Government "to support more children to remain safely at home".

There are many examples of good practice currently being undertaken by the Government, such as the troubled families initiative, the children's social care innovation programme and the Pause project in Hackney. I will conclude by briefly asking the Minister to consider other alternatives to help children to stay safely at home with their families.

We know from recent research that when a mother has a child removed, the trauma and loss often results in multiple repeat pregnancies. Sadly, such children are almost always taken into care immediately. I have sat on an adoption and fostering panel to which a mother came back 10 times. Nobody ever addressed the mother's issues, and those 10 children were taken into care. That goes back to the point made by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) about the cost-effectiveness of dealing with the difficulties experienced by a mother in such a situation. I therefore ask the Minister to consider therapeutic intervention for mothers at the earliest opportunity, because that is cost-effective and because care simply is not the answer that the professionals would like it to be.

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): Before becoming a Member of the House, I represented parents whose children were taken into local authority care. One thing I noticed was that, when a baby was up for adoption, there was an unseemly haste, and local authorities did not try to work with the family or the mother to be able to give the child back to the family. I found that very disturbing.

**Lucy Allan:** I agree with the hon. Lady. There is a requirement to facilitate reunification and rehabilitation. I, too, have worked with those families, and often found that local authorities do not engage. Local authorities are required to consider those points but the preliminary steps are difficult and potentially fraught with risk.

[Lucy Allan]

That is why they are often skipped over or dismissed. The words used so often are: “It would be inconsistent with the child’s timeline,” or, “It is not in the best interests of the child,” or, “It shows unmerited optimism to assume that rehabilitation and reunification is an option.”

**Mr Andrew Turner** (Isle of Wight) (Con): Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that there are two types of home? Some homes are found to be guilty and some should be found guilty but are not. We have both those things going on at the same time.

**Lucy Allan:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. Some families are under the radar, do not approach professionals for help and are missed. We must be extremely careful. That is why it is such a difficult judgment to make.

Kinship carers perform an invaluable role. Placing a child with a grandparent or a member of an extended family is, in my experience, often overlooked as an option. There is always a stronger focus on adoption. I urge the Minister to consider more support for kinship carers and to continue to encourage local authorities to see kinship care as often being in the best interest of the child. It allows the child to stay with siblings in a familiar context. Relatives are often dismissed as inappropriate because of their connections with the child’s natural parent who is found wanting.

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the problem is that local authorities’ rush towards adoption makes it more difficult for grandparents to go through the process and demonstrate that they are properly equipped and suited to look after their grandchildren?

**Lucy Allan:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and I am delighted that he makes that point.

No family is perfect—it is about good-enough parenting and the sense of belonging and identity that is irreplaceable for any child. I urge the Minister to support the Family Rights Group so that parents can have access to free and independent advice at an early stage in any investigation against them.

**Mrs Moon:** It is some time since I placed children for adoption and some time since I have been involved in child protection work, but the guardian ad litem system is being disregarded. It plays a vital role in ensuring that all potential other sources of care are examined and explored before the case goes before a judge. I would like that to be examined and acknowledged.

**Lucy Allan:** The hon. Lady makes an excellent point.

In conclusion, I am encouraged by what I have heard from the Minister and the Prime Minister. He has always been committed to strengthening families and sees families as the bedrock of society. He has recently spoken passionately and sincerely of his desire to see fewer children in care. He has said that the care system and the plight of children in care shames our country, and has spoken of his commitment to the life chances of the most disadvantaged young people. It might be

that, with the motion, I and other Members who support it are pushing at an open door. I very much hope that that is the case, so that that sense of belonging and security can be part of every child’s life.

3.29 pm

**Alan Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am delighted to join the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) in sponsoring this debate.

To declare my interest, I am the patron of the Family Rights Group, the charity that works with parents in England and Wales whose children are in need, at risk or in the care system. May I follow the hon. Lady in this preamble to my speech and say to those on the Treasury Bench that the Family Rights Group provides the only free, open-access, specialist legal advice service for such families? Governments of all persuasions have recognised its importance.

The simple fact is that demand for the charity’s services has gone up and its funding has reduced. That is bad enough, but if the Government do not pull their finger out, the service will cease completely on 31 March—just a few weeks from now. I hope that the Minister will say something on that in his response, because the need for the work that the Family Rights Group does and the advice that it gives underpins all the various elements that we will hear about in the debate on this huge subject today. Preserving it would be the first step towards carrying out the terms of the motion.

I do not claim to have changed the world in my short period as Secretary of State for Education, but together with my children’s Minister, now Baroness Hughes of Stretford, I tried to improve the situation for children in care through the measures in the “Care Matters” White Paper. We were driven by a host of depressing statistics, but the most scandalous of all was that children in care accounted for 0.5% of the child population, but as adults accounted for 27% of the prison population. We might as well, as a society, direct them straight to Wormwood Scrubs and the other institutions they are going to end up in.

We did much in government to address that problem, but after 10 years in power, which is when I became Education Secretary, and despite an awful lot of concentration on what we used to call social exclusion, that statistic remained. My point is that this is not a party political joust. This problem is so deeply entrenched that we need to work on the solutions together across this House and not deal with it in a combative way.

**Kit Malthouse:** On that statistic, which is of course appalling, does the right hon. Gentleman accept that it does not necessarily follow that it is the care system that meant that those individuals ended up in prison, and that if they had stayed with their families, they may well have ended up in prison anyway?

**Alan Johnson:** I do not concur with that at all.

All these problems are profound and multidimensional—of course they are—but I could sum up the problem in my time, although more recent children’s Ministers may sum it up differently: children are pushed into care too easily, moved around too much and kicked out too soon. That is the issue that we were trying to face in the “Care Matters” White Paper in 2007. I will

focus on the first of those three problems—the fact that they are pushed into care too easily—and on kinship care.

On the point about young people being removed from care too soon, I congratulate the Government on the important step that they took in the Children and Families Act 2014 of insisting that young people in care who reach the age of 18 may remain in care or “stay put”, to use the terminology, with foster carers until the age of 21. In response to the intervention by the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), we used to kick them out at 16. Nowadays, children practically cling on to the door mantel when you try to get rid of them, if I may say so as a father. The average age when children leave home is 27. Kids in care—the most vulnerable children—were kicked out at 16. Of course that contributed to the pressing statistic on where they ended up.

**Kit Malthouse:** I am fully conscious of that. When I was a councillor, I established the first leaving care service in the country at Westminster Council. It won us beacon status from the then Labour Government. I was trying to make the point that it does not necessarily follow that leaving those children in their families would lead to benign outcomes as opposed to the outcomes of the care system. I fully accept the failures of the care system, but I am not sure that the alternative would have been more benign.

**Alan Johnson:** I will come on to research that might help the hon. Gentleman because I believe that it is indeed the case, not in every instance of course, that a higher proportion of children who are left to be raised with families—and friends, incidentally—will not end up in the situation that I described.

The Government introduced the welcome change for children in foster care to be able to stay there until they are 21. Can the Minister can tell us in his response whether there are any plans to introduce an analogous provision for children in residential care, as the Education Committee recommended in 2014? It seems ridiculous that children can stay in care with foster parents until they are 21, but that they get kicked out at 18 if they are in residential care.

The main issue that I wish to raise is kinship care. Kinship carers are grandparents, older siblings, other relatives and friends who step in to care for children. Ninety-five per cent. of the children in kinship care are not declared “looked-after” children by the local authority. By keeping children out of the care system, those carers save the taxpayer billions of pounds each year in care costs alone. All the research evidence demonstrates that kinship care has real and substantial benefits for children. They feel more secure, and they have fewer emotional problems and behavioural difficulties. On top of that, the latest piece of research, from last November, states that those children also do better in educational attainment than those in residential care.

There is another issue about the care system for the hon. Member for North West Hampshire to consider. It used to move kids around all the time. That was bad enough, but when they arrived in a new location, they went to the worst schools. They went to the schools that had the vacancies, which were generally the most unpopular and the worst. We introduced a measure that provided

that schools must accept children in care as a priority, in accordance with what the children and their carers wanted. That is another example of how we can change the care system for the better.

Despite everything that has been done, the system neither encourages nor sufficiently supports the important alternative of kinship care. Yes, there is helpful guidance, but there is no statutory duty that requires local authorities to explore the kinship care option, or even to have the all-important family group conference—the FGC—which is a crucial way of involving the wider family early in the process. In the vast majority of cases, that does not take place until after the child goes into care. It should be held before that decision is made. One of the important aspects of the family group conference is the voice of the young person, which is crucial. It is vital to the process and central to the success of family group conferences. However, not only are they almost always held after a child has been designated as “looked after”, but their number is diminishing as budget cuts force local authorities to retrench.

As a crucial step towards realising the motion, the Government should place a new statutory duty on local authorities so that when they conclude that a child may need to become looked after, they must, other than in emergencies, first identify and consider the willingness and suitability of any relative or other person connected to the child to care for them. Secondly, they should arrange a family group conference run by an accredited FGC service to develop a plan to safeguard and promote a child’s welfare. They should also ensure proper funding for free specialist independent legal advice, as both I and the hon. Member for Telford have mentioned, through the Family Rights Group.

My final point concerns the need to recognise the problems that kinship carers face, and the need for the Government to avoid adding to them through changes to the benefit system. The largest survey of kinship carers in the UK found that 49% of respondents had to give up work permanently. That is often a requirement for taking a child into their care—the authorities insist that they give up work. Some 18% had to give up work temporarily and 23% had to reduce their hours. That creates a family income problem.

The recent Department for Education review of special guardianship and Sir Martin Narey’s imminent review of residential care provide a perfect opportunity to introduce a support framework for kinship care that includes a designated council official to contact when necessary. The Government should also consider extending to kinship carers the measures that are available to adopters, such as paid leave and priority school admissions. More urgently, kinship carers should be exempted from the limiting of child tax credit to two children, the benefit cap and the extension of work conditionality rules to carers of children under five years of age. Let me briefly explain why.

In respect of the benefit cap, many children arrive to live with kinship carers following a crisis. They are deeply traumatised and many have suffered prior abuse. As a result, the behavioural response hoped for by the Department for Work and Pensions, of staying in or returning to work, is just not an option. The relevant drop in income caused by the lower benefit cap will affect more kinship carers, who, as I said earlier, are saving the taxpayer a small fortune. Limiting child tax

[Alan Johnson]

credit to two children will obviously make it financially unviable for some relatives to take on a larger sibling group to keep the family together. The daughter of a grandmother in my constituency died. By taking in the three children, she will be hit by the two-child policy. That is no way to run a civilised social service and welfare state. Incidentally, the cost of an exemption would be about £30 million. It would only require 200 kinship carers to be financially prohibited from taking in a sibling group of three or more, for care and court costs to outweigh that amount. The Government could therefore be making a saving.

The new work conditionality requirements that will be applied to carers of children under five will place obvious and substantial burdens on kinship carers. I say to those on the Treasury Bench that there is an important precedent for the exemptions. Kinship carers have already been exempted from work conditionality requirements for a year after they take on the care of a child. We are not talking about precedents here, but consistency.

This is an important debate, which allows right hon. and hon. Members to raise issues that are aired all too infrequently. Despite the benefits, kinship care is largely overlooked by the media, Governments of various persuasions, and the Prime Minister and his predecessor. In the past two years, there has been much attention paid to adoption. Rightly, it has been the subject of Prime Ministerial speeches, Government initiatives and newly announced funding streams. On kinship care, there has been radio silence. It is time we gave kinship care the recognition and support it deserves, and which children so badly need.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** There is considerable interest in this debate. I am afraid that, if I am to accommodate all interested colleagues, that will have to be reflected in a five-minute limit on Back Bench speeches with immediate effect.

3.44 pm

**Neil Carmichael** (Stroud) (Con): It is a great pleasure to participate in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson). This is a very important subject and they have done extraordinarily well to put it at the forefront of our proceedings in the Chamber.

I want to say how much I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle in his emphasis on the importance of kinship care. In my constituency, I have encountered situations where a kinship care solution would have been more appropriate than what actually happened. I fully concur with what he said and urge the Government to think very carefully about how they can encourage kinship care.

The chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, frequently mentions the importance of strong family life, and I am pleased to note that in the autumn statement the Government significantly extended the troubled families programme. That programme, which began in 2013, is an important step because it signals what everybody knows: that good families are better

than bad families and that families going through appalling experiences and heading towards crisis must be given the appropriate help. The Government are also right to make it easier for separating parents to go through mediation rather than a full-scale battle. That is another step in the right direction.

It is important that we have high standards of social work in order to avoid some of the pitfalls encountered in recent years. One important element here cropped up when the Education Select Committee last visited the Department: the importance of leadership—not necessarily at director level, but at assistant director level—in ensuring high-quality and timely decisions in social work. The Government should think about the quality, nature and forward planning of social work in local authorities. Another big point is agency co-operation. I would like to hear from the Minister how the ministerial taskforce on child protection is getting on. One of its key priorities should be to encourage better agency co-operation and to make it easier for them to work together. That is an important direction of travel and one that I hope the Select Committee will be pushing.

The pupil premium and children's centres, which are linked, are important aspects of this debate. The pupil premium is for children in poverty, but there are links between those children and children in troubled families, so we should be using the pupil premium to identify and help the children in jeopardy. The same logic applies to children's centres, because they are really useful places. I have seen how important they are in my constituency: thousands of children in my constituency are going to well-run children's centres and benefiting from some extraordinarily good services. We need to put a spotlight on the value of children's centres, which, certainly in my constituency, are well run and well organised.

I want to make two final points. First, we need to think about having statutory personal, social, health and economic education. I have written to the Secretary of State several times, urging her to think carefully about that, and we continue to press on that front. Finally, I end on an observation made in my meeting recently with the Youth Justice Board. We heard earlier about children getting into difficulty—with prison, criminal activity and so on—so I want to repeat the key point about the need for strong, better and more transparent agency work and co-operation.

3.49 pm

**Ann Coffey** (Stockport) (Lab): The hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) is right to express concern about the rising number of children taken into care and to ask whether more can be done to keep families together, but perhaps consideration should also be given, particularly in respect of older children in care homes, to whether the care system could be more flexible in supporting relationships with families, if that is what the child wants. In European countries such as Denmark, there tends to be a much stronger focus on prevention and family support, and that is characterised by the care system operating more flexibly around the family. Residential care is likely to be more local, allowing work with the family.

In March 2015, there were 6,570 children in children's homes in England. They are likely to have had more placements than children in foster care and to have significant emotional, behavioural and social difficulties.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): As a children's home visitor until my election here in May, I am very aware that, as my hon. Friend says, care homes are not the best environments for vulnerable young people, who often have mental health issues, to grow up in. I am sure she agrees that the best approach is to intervene before families go into crisis. Does she agree that unfair cuts to the most deprived local authorities, such as those in Manchester, make it much harder for the authorities with the greatest need to provide services such as Sure Start to the families with the most vulnerable children?

**Ann Coffey:** I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend, and the point he makes is absolutely right. To achieve prevention, funding is needed.

Children in children's homes are more likely to have more significant problems. In October 2015, the Government announced that Sir Martin Narey would head an independent root-and-branch investigation into children's residential care. The aim of the review, which I welcome, is to

"help put an end to a life of disadvantage for some of the most vulnerable children in care".

The Minister will be aware that in 2012 the all-party parliamentary group on runaway and missing children and adults, which I chair, conducted a joint inquiry into children missing from care. It looked at the incidence of children going missing from care homes and concluded that one of the biggest problems was the unequal distribution of such homes, as a result of which large numbers of vulnerable children were placed at a distance from their home area. Many placement decisions were last minute, driven by what was available at the time rather than by the needs of the child. This meant that the child was often not involved in planning. Children told our inquiry that they felt "dumped" in children's homes many miles away from home. This increased their propensity to go missing and come to harm—from child sexual exploitation, for example.

An expert group on the quality of children's homes was set up and reported to the Department for Education in 2012. The Government then published the first children's homes data-pack in the same year. One of the key findings of the expert group was indeed that the pattern of supply of children's homes was uneven across England. One reason for that could be that property prices were so much lower in some areas than others, leading companies to set up in low-cost areas to suit business plans rather than what is best for the children.

The latest figures show that 79% of homes are in the private or voluntary sector. In 2012, homes were charging up to £5,000 a week for children with complex needs. Some £1 billion a year is currently being spent by local authorities on children's home places, and concerns have been expressed about the number of large private equity firms becoming involved.

The report from the Government's expert group in 2012 made a number of recommendations to help remedy the unequal distribution in the market, and to mitigate the impacts of children being placed at a distance, but what has actually changed since 2012? In 2012, children's homes were concentrated in the north-west, the west midlands and the south-east. For example, the north-west has 15% of the children's homes population, but 25% of the children's homes.

The 2014 children's homes data-pack shows us that the picture has not changed in regard to location of homes and the number of children placed at a distance. In 2014, a third of children were still placed 20 miles or more from their home areas. It is disappointing that progress is slow. We still have still the continuing problem of children being sent to where the homes are rather than the homes being where the children are. All this evidence paints a picture of a market that is run in the interests of the providers, not in the interests of children and young people.

I very much welcome the introduction by the Government of new regulations recommended by the expert group, particularly the need for a director of children's services to approve a decision to place a child in a distant placement. However, I am not clear about how the effect of these regulations is being monitored for assessing better outcomes for safeguarding children, particularly those in distant placements. I would be grateful if the Minister provided some information on that.

The 2014 data-pack makes it clear that local authorities placing children far from home are not placing them in poor-quality provision, but that the main problem is one of distance. This means that the placing authority is unable to rely on any local knowledge or intelligence about the quality of homes or the suitability of their location. It also gives rise to significant travel times, limiting social work oversight, and the distance between the child and their family might limit relationships and undermine the scope of work with the family.

There are, of course, other issues, such as the quality of staffing, but it is the geographical local of children's homes that limits choice for social workers and for the child at the point of placement. Unsatisfactory placements of children only compound the difficulties that they may already have, adding to their distrust of the system and causing more to go missing, with the subsequent risk of harm involved.

Evidence continues to point to a failure of commissioning in relation to the unequal distribution of homes. After all, local authorities are the only buyers of these places, and commissioning cannot simply be the sum total of decisions made according to available capacity. It must be proactive, having regard to the longer-term needs of the children whom local authorities look after, now and in the future. As I said earlier, the European model, in which residential care is likely to be local, allows families to visit, which provides an opportunity for constructive work with parents. That approach aims to support the resources of the family. At present, families all too often feel that they have been identified as failing, and that all decisions have been taken away from them. Local provision is the key.

3.55 pm

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): I commend the Members who proposed the motion. They did so for a laudable reason: they see the value of strong families and their irreplaceable role in raising children as the granite on which our society is founded, and their desire to work to help children stay with their families is to be praised. They also rightly recognise the severe limitations of our child protection system, and seek to keep children out of it. Early intervention, prevention, and encouragement and support for kinship care are intelligent parts of a coherent strategy.

[Kit Malthouse]

It should be noted, however, that this debate is not about strong families, functional families, or even the care system. It is about families and households who all too often put the lives and well-being of children in serious danger. It is about children in care who have been removed from their families because they are not safe, and because those families will not help them to grow up to be healthy, independent adults. For such children, stable families are already out of reach. When that happens, the solution is not to dither, apply half measures, or wait and see. It falls to the state to step in and protect children, and, if needs be, to remove them from danger.

That should never be done lightly, and it is, of course, far from ideal, but it is done none the less because we recognise that waiting to see whether parents can improve, or trying to improve the home, is often a very risky path to take. In recent years, we have seen again and again that the “wait and see” approach—the failure to act quickly enough—has had horrendous consequences. I believe that the cost of repeatedly failing to act frequently outweighs the potential upside of trying to enable children to stay with their families. According to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, most children in care eventually recognise that it was the right path for them. They recognise the issues that led to their being in care in the first place, and the fact that those dreadful situations demanded action.

Once it has been properly established that a child is in danger and there are no safe kinship alternatives, we have no choice other than to act. That applies to cases of severe neglect, but it applies especially to cases of child cruelty. In matters of cruelty to children, there are no second chances. There are no second chances for the child or baby who is at risk of being permanently harmed, or even, sadly, killed.

**Lucy Allan:** Does my hon. Friend agree that children are taken into the care system who have been neither harmed nor neglected? I referred earlier to actual or potential emotional abuse. Very subjective judgments can be made.

**Kit Malthouse:** I recognise that, but, as I said to my hon. Friend earlier, I have the general sense—having worked with the care system when I was a councillor, and subsequently—that in the vast majority of cases this is the right decision for the children concerned. There are some cases in which the system does fail, but the fact is that most children are removed because they are in some kind of danger or peril, whether it be emotional or physical.

There should not be any second chances for parents who put their children at risk or deliberately harm them. I must emphasise that to make that case is not to argue for one minute that, ordinarily, the state is better placed than families to look after children. Nothing is, and it is not helpful or right that children in care are still so vulnerable, or that, in many cases, they have been destined for such miserable lives after they leave. However, the fact that we fail too many children in care does not mean that we have too many children in care, or that it is wrong to remove such children from the families who were endangering them. That simply does not follow.

What follows is that we should be doing more for children in care and continuing with the practice of intervening quickly when the need arises.

My rejection, sadly, of today’s motion is in two parts. The first, as I have already said, is that given that the danger of failing to intervene is so strong, I actually think we should be intervening more. The second is that all this is predicated on a drastic improvement in the care system that the Government have also indicated they are determined to make.

The care system exists to keep children safe where their families have failed them. The burden of looking after these children falls on you, me—everyone. In arguing for special measures to help children stay with their families “safely”, proponents of the motion acknowledge that they are not safe with their family in the first place. Considering the degree of damage abuse and neglect can inflict in a very short space of time, we cannot take risks or gamble with their lives. In many cases, children should be taken into care sooner.

**Alan Johnson:** I am puzzled by the hon. Gentleman’s contribution. Nobody supporting this motion or sponsoring it does not believe that children who are in danger should be removed from that danger quickly. His whole contribution and opposition to this motion is based on a total misconception. What we are saying is there are many children who go into care—and their voice is important, by the way—who actually would be better placed, and happier, with family members. I suggest that that proposition should unite the House, not be defeated by some suggestion that people disagree that children in danger should be removed from that danger quickly.

**Kit Malthouse:** I accept what the right hon. Gentleman says and I have mentioned kinship care twice in my speech. I absolutely agree that if a safe alternative can be found in an extended family, that should be encouraged. I was pleased to hear his speech and I do think the Government could do more to support that. The motion, however, does not mention kinship care, and it laments the rise in the number of children in the care system. The point I am trying to make is that while we as a social care system seek to intervene with a family and try to make the family home safer, there is still a child who is remaining in the home who may still be damaged. We have seen some horrendous situations where the social care system failed to act sufficiently quickly. My view is that if we hide behind the idea that we may be able to make some progress with the family, we are fundamentally gambling with the lives of young people.

**Lucy Allan:** In my opening remarks I referred to the fact that one in 100 children are subject to child protection investigations. It is no secret that my own son was subject to a child protection investigation, and often children in families who are not well-placed to protect themselves from that type of forceful state intervention end up in care when they do not need to be there.

**Kit Malthouse:** As I said in an earlier intervention, my experience of the care system is not that the country is teeming with malign social workers looking for children to purloin from their parents and shove into the care system. These are professional people who investigate largely professionally. Errors are made, as in all bureaucratic

systems, but nevertheless their motives are good and right, and more often than not they see cause for alarm that requires action.

My concern about this motion is that the tragic case of baby P, which has been referred to, led to a rise in the number of children in care, and I think it was generally accepted that before that case the child protection system was not functioning correctly. I was tangentially involved in the Victoria Climbié affair. She came through Westminster's hands for two weeks. Pleasingly, we did everything right, but that is another case where the care system had failed. My point is not necessarily that the system is operating incorrectly now; it may well be operating correctly. My concern about the motion is about the signal it sends to social workers about the desire of this House that they should attempt to leave children in possibly dysfunctional and perhaps damaging situations for longer while they attempt the much harder task of trying to turn the home around.

4.4 pm

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): I support the motion wholeheartedly because one of the best things we can possibly do is to improve the prospects for children to be able to stay at home successfully with their birth parents. However, many things need to be done in order to achieve that, not least of which is to address the availability of support for parents who would otherwise be in a situation in which their children might be at risk. Some Members have already commented on the cuts to public services and the contribution they have made to undermining the ability of parents to provide good parenting. That is an important point, and this is one of the big areas in which the Government need to take a long, hard look at the support and resources available, not least in local government and the NHS.

Equally, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) said, the Government need to take a wider look at all the options available. A certain option might be right for many children, but it will not always be the right option for all children. This must be about putting the child at the centre of all the decisions that are taken. My right hon. Friend is right to say that kinship care is often not considered, but it should always be an option if members of an extended family are available. The motion makes it clear that we are trying to discuss that matter today.

We should do all that we can to avoid having such high numbers of children in care. The figure was 86,000 last year, and we should be trying to reduce it at all costs, but that involves significant early intervention and prevention work. It involves working with families whose children might be at risk and preventing the kind of neglect and abuse that leads to children being taken into care in the first place.

I am sorry, Mr Speaker, I should have mentioned at the outset my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am no longer a foster carer but I was one briefly recently.

One of the challenges is to ensure that we have the workforce to deliver the necessary services. We must support, encourage and celebrate the work of social workers and all those who work with children and with families in supporting them and trying to prevent the kind of breakdown that leads to children going into care.

We should be supporting, encouraging, recruiting and training the very best people to become foster carers or to work in residential children's care. We also need to support kinship carers and parents to enable them to provide the very best quality of care in these circumstances.

As has been said, we should look at children in care as though they were our own. The concept of corporate parenting is another fine example of something the Labour Government introduced, but I do not believe that it is practised to the extent that it should be in this country. We all have a responsibility to ensure that every child in the public care system gets the support, encouragement and opportunities that they would get if they were our own children, and that includes the extension of staying put to 21 and beyond, not just in foster care but in residential care as well.

We also need to learn from other countries. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) talked about Denmark. Denmark has a long-term commitment to support for children through the use of social pedagogy and through the development and training of experienced residential workers who live with children over a long period of time to create family units. That is a successful model, and there are successful examples of it in this country. Perhaps the Government should look at those examples too.

Permanence for children is incredibly important, whether with their birth family, with kinship carers, in foster care or in residential care. Finding the right option for each individual child is the most important thing. We should learn from best practice in this country and around the world. Speed is also incredibly important when making these decisions, and any decision on whether a child should remain with their birth family should be made quickly and should always reflect what is right for the individual child.

4.9 pm

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for securing this important debate. My hon. Friend speaks from more direct and personal experience than any of us would like to have. Nobody could have a higher opinion of and greater respect for social workers and child protection officers than I do. At the time I was born, my mother was running a local authority children's home in central Birmingham, so the first years of my life were spent living in that home. Even at that age, I was able to see daily the dedication, care, commitment and love shown by the workers in that children's home, but I also know that even the most compassionate and dedicated social worker cannot possibly replace the care and love of a family. That is why we must do everything we can, where possible—where there is no threat of abuse or serious neglect—to help keep families together.

It seems that the pendulum has swung too far towards an assumption that where any kinds of concern are raised, one option on the table is to take a child into care. We desperately need to address that. Nobody would argue against removing a child from an environment where it is at risk of abuse or serious neglect, but in too many of the cases we see at our surgeries that is simply not the assessment that is being made.

[Mike Wood]

Shortly before Christmas, I came across a constituency case which appeared to me, having read the magistrate's report, to be based primarily on a chaotic lifestyle in an untidy house. Those issues clearly need addressing, but they were not serious threats to the welfare of the children or certainly to their safety. If more support could be put in place to help with those issues, it must be better for the families, particularly for the children, and much more economic for local authorities and for the Government.

One aspect of the care system that has not yet been referred to is how we approach the mental health of parents. A lot of extremely valuable work has been done by a number of Members, particularly the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who is no longer in his place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), in establishing the principle of parity of esteem between physical and mental health. However, that approach is simply not being taken where the care system and assessments about taking children into care are concerned. Children are being taken into care when parents are suffering from mental illnesses, whether that relates to depression or other mental health issues.

Yesterday, a former Labour councillor in my constituency wrote to me to highlight a case that she had been involved with in the past. It concerned a mother of three young children who had nursed her husband through the advanced stages of cancer. Sadly her husband did pass away, the mother struggled to cope, as many of us would, and the three children were taken into care. Rather than making sure that the mother received the support she needed to look after the children or to find a temporary solution, the children were taken into care. The mother therefore lost not only her husband but her children, and not only did the three children lose their father, but in a short period of time they were taken away from their mother. They were put into care out of borough, so they were at a different school and they had, in effect, lost their friends, too. This really matters because, as has been said, on any metric we can measure, the outcomes for children in care are significantly worse than they are for the population as a whole. That applies in respect of employment, housing, the criminal justice system and educational achievement, and it has to be because of the thing we cannot measure: the enormous psychological and emotional impact of taking children away from their families. The safety and welfare of children must come first, but I do not think that always applies—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I call Fiona Mactaggart.

4.14 pm

**Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough) (Lab): I agree with the focus of this debate. Sadly, our care system in Slough has not protected children effectively, and I am particularly sad that the Children's Services Trust, which the Government set up to improve services, has apparently not done so very effectively. The Minister will be aware of a case involving a two-year-old, about which I have written to the Secretary of State. I would like to see better monitoring of Children's Services Trusts from the centre.

I wish to shoehorn into this debate the issue of children who are not in the care system but who are not able to remain safely at home with their family or extended family. If we do not include those children, we will fail to address some of the urgent issues in this regard. Specifically, I want to raise the matter of trafficked children, particularly children who are trafficked across borders, as, according to a recent Home Office commissioned report, they are more isolated from protective networks than their internally trafficked counterparts.

The Government published that report as a result of the pilot they introduced on child trafficking advocates. It was only after intense pressure from Members that they agreed to introduce any system of protection for trafficked children. These are not guardians with legal powers, and the Government only had a pilot of the advocacy system. Unfortunately, despite the fact that a report by the University of Bedfordshire made it quite clear that the pilot had been successful, Barnardo's has not been commissioned to extend its service and nor has any subsequent service been provided.

I urge the Minister to speak directly to his colleagues in the Home Office to ensure that there is a continuing advocacy or better guardianship provision for these children. I gather that the excuse for not carrying on providing any protection mechanism for them that is worth the name is that children within the advocacy service still disappeared. It is clear from the university report that half the children who disappeared—overwhelmingly, they were Vietnamese children who were trafficked into cannabis farming—disappeared before they had been referred to the advocacy service.

There are clear examples in the report of how advocates worked very hard to protect children who were at risk of disappearing. The fact is that those advocates did not have legal powers and could be ignored by local authorities. In one case, they were unable to persuade the local authority to put a trafficked child in safe accommodation, and the child then disappeared into the hands of a trafficker. In another case, they were unable to persuade a local authority that a child was a child, and it was only because of the determination of the advocacy service that when that child re-entered the healthcare system they were discovered again and re-referred to the Home Office protection system.

I am very concerned indeed that this group of children is falling through the gap, and that the problem is being regarded as an immigration issue rather than a child protection issue. I urge the Minister, in responding to this debate, to say that he is not prepared to tolerate the one bit of the Bedfordshire report that suggested there was no enthusiasm for this process—certain social workers felt that they should have the money rather than child protection advocates. Will he also ensure that, within the month, he will speak to the Home Office about continuing to fund proper child advocacy services, preferably child guardians with legal powers to stop local authorities ignoring those children's need for protection, so that they, like all other children in Britain, can be properly kept safe?

4.19 pm

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West

and Hesse (Alan Johnson) on securing the debate, because how we treat young people and children in our society is really important.

I want to bring to the Minister's attention my experience of having represented parents whose children are taken into local authority care. I also want to say a little about when I used to represent young people charged with criminal offences and prosecute adults who had been abusing young people. I have worked quite a lot with young people and seen what happens in their homes. I want to concentrate on family law, which does not get enough attention, and especially on what happens in the legal process.

I agree with everyone who has spoken, bar the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse)—I do not agree with a lot of what he said. Nobody is saying that children should not be taken into care. We have heard about the case of baby P and the Climbé case, as a result of which I am concerned that the pendulum has swung too far the other way. When there is even a slight expression of concern about children, local authorities come in, take them away and put them with foster parents, and then they start dealing with the parents. They never look at kinship care: often, it is the family themselves, or maybe their lawyers, who talk to the wider family and say, "Would you like to put yourselves forward to be a kinship carer?" Then the wider family members come forward, and it takes about six to eight weeks for them to be assessed to see whether they are suitable. I ask the Minister to urge local authorities and social services to proactively find a family member who could look after a child they have taken into care. I assure him that a child will always feel happier with an auntie, uncle or older brother or sister than with a complete stranger, so maybe we need to change the emphasis.

Secondly, when I was practising in the field I noticed that children often have a guardian appointed—a lawyer—and social services are involved, but very rarely do people talk to the children about what they want. I remember a case where I was banging my head against a brick wall. I asked all the people involved, especially the legal guardian who was supposed to be representing the children, "Have you spoken to the child about this? Have you got any information from them? What do they think about it? Where do you think they would like to live?" I was met with a wall of silence. I was very frustrated, and I said, "You know, if you really want to do it, you should be asking these questions. You should be trying to find alternative sources."

Thirdly, as the Minister probably knows, sometimes when children are taken into care they have an opportunity to have supervised access to meet their parents in a contact centre. However, that tends to be on an awkward date and time and in an awkward place, and the visits are not frequent. Again, we have to fight social services to increase the number of visits for parents, make the location more accessible and allow parents to have more quality time with their children. If that happens, it means that when the process is finished, six months or a year down the road, the child will not have forgotten his or her parents. I ask the Minister to urge social services to look at those aspects of the system.

Finally, I am sorry to say that there is unseemly haste to place babies in care. We know that most people who want to adopt are happy to adopt a little baby but

reluctant to adopt a toddler or older child. Babies are therefore carted off to the adoption system before there has been thorough and proper work with the family to see whether they can help. There will always be situations in which children are vulnerable and their family will never be able to look after them, but in my experience those cases are a small minority. We hear about them in the media, but we do not hear about the cases that do not fall into that category. We need to talk about the thousands of cases in which it would be far better to work with the family at home and spend the money that we would otherwise give to foster parents on allowing the parents to improve their home and helping them to look after their children.

4.24 pm

**Mr Graham Allen** (Nottingham North) (Lab): I shall make a brief contribution to the debate. If people wish to read the unabridged version of my speech, it will be on my website at the end of the debate. I declare an interest as the unpaid founder and chair of both the Rebalancing the Outer Estates charity and the Early Intervention Foundation.

I fully support the motion tabled by the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan). I may surprise colleagues by not taking the opportunity to speak again about the need to change from a late intervention philosophy to an early intervention one, the need for evidence-based policy making, or the need for a "what works" organisation for the victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse. Today I want to speak to the need for local people—real people in the localities—to make a difference in places such as my constituency, Nottingham North. In doing so, I pay a specific and well-deserved tribute to those connected with the Safe Families for Children programme for the phenomenal work that they are doing.

Safe Families was brought to the UK and started in the north-east of England entirely as a result of the energy and personal commitment of Sir Peter Vardy. After I spoke to Sir Peter about my constituency, with typical generosity he put at Nottingham's disposal his fantastic team led by the unstoppable chief executive, Keith Danby, and we began to work out how we could take things forward for unsafe families in Nottingham North. We had several planning meetings involving the community convened under the auspices of the Rebalancing the Outer Estates charity. Nottingham city council put its considerable weight behind the idea. Alongside our own 20-year early intervention plan, the programme works with the many other facets of Nottingham's early intervention city programme and with the strategy of our far-sighted and talented team led by Candida Brudenell, Katy Ball and Kevin Banfield.

Put simply, Safe Families works with three levels of volunteers. Colleagues might wish to take this up in their own constituency. Those three levels are, first, family friend volunteers, who are trained to help the families directly to overcome their problems; secondly, host family volunteers who, after proper criminal record checks, can look after the children for one night, a week or whatever, giving the family the time they need to get it together again; and thirdly, resource friend volunteers who, like us perhaps, can contribute a little bit of time here and there to help with supplying or delivering much needed household and other items to families in difficulties.

[Mr Graham Allen]

Building the volunteer critical mass has been crucial. The wonderful Kat Osborn and the local Safe Families for Children Nottingham team have been brilliant. They have recruited, trained and approved 240 volunteers in Nottingham and throughout the east midlands—sadly, far too many to name, but I have met many of them—starting with faith-based communities and spreading to involve people of all faiths and none. Starting just a few months ago from the base in Nottingham North, the city of Nottingham has now made 32 referrals and 49 children have been supported to date. These include 32 nights of hostings, with more in the pipeline over the next few weeks.

The financial benefits are enormous. A very small upfront investment of resource, time and effort avoids costs of tens of thousands of pounds for every child who did not go into care. The average cost of a looked-after child is estimated to be £48,000, excluding legal costs and council staff costs. We in Nottingham are close to making our own evidence-based savings prediction as we grow beyond the 32 referrals we have made so far.

The Safe Families for Children extended pilot became a joint venture between the Department for Education's children's social care innovation programme and Nottingham council. As with all the ideas we trigger in the Rebalancing charity, the idea was to pioneer Safe Families in one place and then grow it. Now, using Nottingham as a hub, all four of our east midlands phase 1 Safe Families partners—Derby, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire—have been up and running for over a month and all are now making referrals.

Will the Minister raise with the Treasury the possibility of using this as a social investment programme? Also, will he ensure that every council takes up a similar scheme?

4.29 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to participate in this important debate on a topic that affects some 93,000 children who are in care across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I commend the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) for introducing it and for their wording of the motion. How anyone in this House could have any doubts about its wording astounds me. What it says is very clear to me, and I believe to everyone outside this House as well.

I take this opportunity to commend my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly for recently passing a vital new law, the Children's Services (Co-operation) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, which will make a real and practical difference to the lives of many children in care in the Province by removing bureaucracy and putting the needs of the child first.

The figures really do speak for themselves. As of 31 March 2015, there were 2,875 children in care in Northern Ireland; in my eyes, that is 2,875 too many. Four per cent. of those looked-after children, or 112, were less than a year old; 20%, or 581, were aged between one and four; 34%, or 958, were aged between five and 11; 24%, or 693, were aged between 12 and 16; and 18%, or 530, were aged 16 and over. My reason for

putting those stats on the record is to show the House that the majority of those in care in Northern Ireland tend to be older children or teenagers. Perhaps the Minister can tell us whether he is having discussions with the Northern Ireland Assembly to see what its thoughts are on that. In the year ending March 2015, 72% of children adopted were four years old or younger, and 28% were aged over five. With figures like these, it is little wonder we find that the majority of those in care tend to be slightly older.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics suggest that children in care are four times more likely to suffer from mental health difficulties than those who are not in care—an extremely worrying statistic. The NSPCC claims that if children and young people do not get the help they need early enough, these problems can get worse. Such mental health issues can lead to children in care having challenging behavioural problems that may prove difficult for carers to deal with, which, in turn, causes yet further problems. If children's placements break down, that can have a detrimental impact on their emotional wellbeing and mental health. A placement breakdown can also mean increased costs to the system as a new placement has to be found, and as children's mental health grows worse, they need increasingly more specialist placements. The whole thing gets worse and more complex; it is a Catch-22 situation.

Not only that, but the Department for Education has revealed that children in care are less likely to do well at school compared with their peers who are not in care. These figures cannot be ignored. The findings are further supported by figures from March 2014 showing that 34% of care leavers were not in education, employment or training at the age of 19, compared with 15.5% of the general population. That is another statistic that cannot be ignored in relation to the wellbeing of those in care. Clearly, more needs to be done to help those in care to reach their academic potentials. I hope the Minister will explain what steps the Department is taking to address that. It is vital that we get it right for young people, whenever they need direction, and focus on their potential and where they are going to be in adult life.

According to the NSPCC, more than half of children are taken into care because of abuse or neglect, and an estimated 20% to 35% of sexually exploited children are in care. A number of charities—the NSPCC and many others—actively work to provide support and help for children in such circumstances, but again, much more needs to be done and much more action is needed from the Minister and his Department. I hope he can tell the House what they are doing to improve the support available for children who have suffered abuse, whether physical, emotional or sexual. More than 50,000 children are currently identified as needing protection from abuse in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but it has been estimated that for every child so identified, a further eight are suffering from child abuse. If those stats are correct, then this is another enormous problem that the Minister has to respond to.

With these figures in mind, it is little wonder that so many of those leaving care struggle with mental health and/or behavioural issues. Instead of moving these children to and fro, we need to help them to deal with and overcome their experiences, bad as they are. We have to do more to help the vulnerable in society. This will not only help children to realise their potential and secure

the very important employment they need for their future, but help to cut costs in the system. I very much look forward to the Minister's response.

4.34 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in this debate on such an important issue. Indeed, after the cities of Glasgow and Dundee, my own local authority of North Ayrshire has the highest rate of looked-after children in Scotland, with 2.1% of young people up to age the 17 currently being looked after.

In contrast with England, where the figure is rising, there has been progress in Scotland in recent years, with a 3% fall in the number of looked-after children since 2013. I make that point because it is important that lessons are learned and best practice shared in all corners of the United Kingdom. There are no easy answers, but much more can be done.

I listened with enormous interest to the contribution of the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), who said that children are often, in effect, kicked out of residential care at the arbitrary age of 16. In Scotland, under the SNP Government and the provisions of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, young people in foster, kinship or residential care may extend their stay in such care until the age of 21. The SNP Government have also further committed to providing support for care leavers up to the age of 26, to help them move to independent living.

Several Members have pointed out that, in order to reduce the number of children entering care, the focus must be on preventive work and early intervention to support children and young people and their families. Importance must be placed on early engagement to support and build on the assets in families and communities, to prevent children from becoming looked-after, wherever possible.

I agree that one of the most effective ways of providing care is by way of kinship care. The work of kinship carers is not always fully understood, and all too often it is overlooked entirely. Indeed, kinship care is often far more challenging than many people realise, and it impacts enormously on the carer's life as well as that of the child. For a grandparent, it can be a daunting task, particularly when they believe that their life is going to go along a different path from the one they had envisaged.

It is wrong to assume, as sometimes happens, that kinship care is simply a normal family obligation, with near seamless transitions from one household to another. Indeed, the circumstances surrounding the need for kinship care can often be incredibly complex and difficult to deal with for both the child and the carer. It is important, therefore, that we do what we can to recognise and confront that reality and to support kinship carers as they manage in what are often very difficult circumstances.

In Scotland, the Children 1st charity, supported by the SNP Government, carries out vital work to support kinship carers through its national helpline and national kinship care service, which offers advice, support and information to kinship carers. Over the years, the SNP Government in Scotland have been moving in the right

direction to provide additional support to kinship carers. Indeed, the current SNP Government were the first to introduce kinship care payments.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act also provided, for the first time, specific legal entitlements to support kinship carers and eligible children themselves. Financial support is of huge importance, given the increased costs of raising a dependent child and the fact that 43% of kinship carers have to give up work to fulfil that role, undoubtedly causing a financial strain. By supporting those caring for our children, we support those children themselves, and that must be our focus.

I was delighted when the Scottish Government announced last month that they would provide £10.1 million to councils in Scotland to raise kinship care allowances to the same level as that received by foster care families, helping to alleviate financial strain and recognising the very important work that kinship carers undertake. The new funding will help to improve the lives of 5,200 children in kinship care across Scotland.

Unfortunately, despite assurances by the UK Government during the welfare reform process that they would exempt kinship carers from welfare reform changes—including sanctions, return-to-work interviews and the bedroom tax—for up to a year after they came into effect, many of them have been affected. I urge the Government to reflect on the assurances given to kinship carers during the discussions on welfare reform. I am very interested to hear what the Minister will say on that very point.

I therefore hope that Conservative Members will recognise the significant strain that the welfare reforms have placed on kinship carers. Those reforms are clearly hampering the Government's ability to provide the necessary care to keep a child within the family unit. I hope that the Government will think again about the impact the reforms are having on carers and look at this situation as a matter of urgency. I am very grateful to those who secured this debate. As I always say in such debates, I hope that we can share best practice across the border and across the UK as a whole.

4.40 pm

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for securing this debate. It has been a short, but very thoughtful one. Our attention has rightly been focused on how we can best help and support struggling families and prevent children from entering the care system.

This debate is timely, given the research published at the end of last year by the University of Lancaster. The research found that one in four women return to the family court after previously having a child removed by court order, and that the number of new-born babies subject to care proceedings has doubled during the past five years. Those findings are backed by the Department for Education's own figures, which show that the number of children in care has reached its highest since 1985. The total population of children now in the care system is 69,450.

The significant increase in the number of children entering the care system is seen by many, including the Education Committee's report on child protection in 2012, as a reaction to the tragic death of Baby P in 2008. That is supported by figures showing that the majority

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

of children enter care due to neglect or abuse. This tells us that more must be done to support parents at the earliest opportunity to avoid situations such as those of Daniel Pelka, Baby P and the many other high-profile cases about which we have heard in recent years.

We must have a serious rethink about the current strategy to support families and about how the huge social, personal and economic costs of children going into care can be avoided. Although it cannot be denied that there are circumstances in which the best-case scenario for a child may be to be taken into care, based on the risks of remaining in the family home, that does not mean that we as a society should not feel ashamed of this failure to support all families.

There are two areas that the Government must consider when it comes to reducing the number of children entering the care system—a more comprehensive early intervention and prevention strategy, and improving the support on offer to kinship carers.

There is an old African proverb with which I am sure all hon. Members are familiar: it takes a whole village to raise a child. That reminds us of our collective duty to offer support and help to those families who need it the most. When abuse and neglect are cited as the main reasons for a child being taken into care, it is clear that comprehensive early intervention and prevention programmes are needed to reduce the threat of a child's abuse or neglect in the family home and to avoid the eventuality of a child being taken into care.

Addressing issues about nurture and early family life is championed in "The 1001 Critical Days" manifesto. The all-party group of much the same name is steered passionately by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). He was in the Chamber earlier, but he is not in his place at the moment. The manifesto calls for more support to be given to families to help nurture and support a healthy family environment for children to grow up in. I hope that the Minister has had the chance to read this excellent manifesto. If not, I am sure his hon. Friend will send him a copy of it forthwith.

A National Audit Office report in 2014 cites one of the previous Labour Government's greatest achievements, Sure Start children's centres, as a key measure to help to reduce the number of children entering care. The family-focused vision of Sure Start centres brings together specialists, professionals and practitioners to provide parents with vital information on how to overcome the struggles of being new parents and how to cope with challenging family circumstances in order that they do not fall apart and descend into situations in which a child may be removed from the family home. However, according to an investigation last year by the Children's Society and the National Children's Bureau, cuts to Whitehall budgets have meant that overall spending on early intervention programmes has fallen by 55%, or £1.8 billion, since 2010.

The short-sightedness of cutting early intervention budgets is detrimental to the vision all hon. Members share, but which was laid out full well in "Early Intervention: The Next Steps", the seminal report from 2011 by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen). He highlighted the top 19 intervention programmes as a blueprint for government. The top of the list was the

excellent family nurse partnership programme, which was piloted and which has since been rolled out a little—it needs to go much further to become universal.

Since 2010, almost 800 Sure Start children's centres have closed. Many more are mere shells of their former selves—the "caretaker and bottle of bleach" model, as I like to call it, means that they are classed as open but not quite as we know it. The Government are sifting through the responses to their consultation into the future of Sure Start centres. In the light of the lack of progress since the my hon. Friend's report, it is concerning that the hollowing out of Sure Start centres and the devastating cuts to intervention programmes that families rely on, such as parenting classes, drug and alcohol abuse support, and domestic violence services, have not been cited as causes when trying to understand the increase in children entering the care system.

Although a push for greater early intervention schemes is vital to addressing the increase in children entering the care system, there will still be situations when children must, sadly, be removed from the family home for their own safety. When a child is placed into care, all efforts must be made to ensure that they are safely placed with extended family members in a kinship care arrangement where possible, instead of within the care system.

It is estimated that 200,000 children are being raised by kinship carers across the UK. A significant number of children are being looked after by their grandparents or other relatives, but there has been little development in Government support for kinship carers that mirrors, for instance, recent announcements on adoption. Allowing a family member to care for a child instead of that child going into residential or foster care is important for the development of the child, but it can also help to reduce the strain on local children's services, the budgets of which have been devastated by cuts. That does not mean that kinship carers should be seen as a cheaper option for providing care to children but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) made clear in his speech, kinship carers save the country millions upon millions of pounds by providing care to their kin.

Many kinship carers become so due to emergency circumstances, which means that the costs for raising that child, such as the immediate cost of providing a bed for the child to sleep in, clothes to wear and uniform for school, are not factored in to their household budgets. That is exacerbated when kinship carers must give up their jobs to look after their kin. The largest survey of kinship carers last year found that 49% of respondents had to give up work permanently. An analysis of the 2011 census found that 76% of children living in kinship care were living in deprived households.

The lack of joined-up thinking is laid bare when the same kinship carers who were told to give up their jobs are chased by the Department for Work and Pensions or ATOS and sanctioned for not looking for work, as my right hon. Friend said. I am gravely concerned about how both kinship and foster carers will fare when the Government's proposed two-child policy comes into force. I echo what he said and plead with the Minister for exemptions for both kinship and foster carers if that policy goes ahead. That is why it is so important that the Government explore how the financial costs of being a kinship carer can be alleviated by allowing better access to funds and entitlements that are already

available to adopted or foster children, who share similar adversities to children in kinship care, so that their development is not hindered or regressed.

The Government must also look at the process of placing a child with a kinship carer. Although new guidance for local authorities published last year is helpful in calling for more identification of potential family carers, there is still no statutory duty on local authorities to explore those options. That means that many local authorities look into kinship care only after a child is placed in the care system, causing avoidable upheaval for the child and the extended family.

There is a duty on all of us to ensure that every child, no matter what their circumstances, has a safe and nurturing home in which to spend their childhood. However, that is clearly not the case for tens of thousands of children who are currently in care, but who could have avoided entering the system in the first place. Continuing to fail those children is not an option. We cannot fail them; we are their village and we need to help raise them. I hope that the Minister realises that this is his moment to really make a difference to the lives of some of the most vulnerable children in our society. I hope that he makes it count.

4.50 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Sam Gyimah):** I will begin by explaining why I am answering this debate in place of the Minister for Children and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson). I am sorry to tell the House that his mother, Alex Timpson, died peacefully at home on Tuesday after a long illness. Many people in this House will know that, with her husband John, Alex fostered around 90 children over 30 years, as well as adopting two boys into their family.

My hon. Friend has always said that it was living with his mother's seemingly boundless enthusiasm to give so much selfless love and support to so many desperately needy children that truly shaped who he is today. I know that he would very much have wanted to speak from the Front Bench about children in care, including those who were cared for by Alex. Our thoughts are with him and his family. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

This is an important debate. Much has been said about the role of kinship carers. A casual comment was made that suggested that they are somehow overlooked in the care system. I assure the Chamber that they are very much part of the Department's plan. Issues have been raised about the welfare reforms and what needs to be done. The Minister for Children and Families will respond to the Members who raised those points in due course.

Enza Smith, the founder of Kinship Carers UK, was awarded an MBE for services to children in the new year's honours list because of the important research it is doing into support mechanisms for kinship carers. My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) has brought that issue to the attention of the Minister for Children and Families a number of times. I want to highlight the fact that kinship carers are very important and key to our thinking.

The decision to take a child into care and the decisions that flow from it—whether the child will return home at a future point, stay in long-term foster care or be

adopted—are serious and life-changing. They affect not only children, but their families, and are never taken lightly. That is why I welcome the opportunity to set out the Government's position in the brief time I have.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that the Government are determined that no child should be left behind. That determination is even more pronounced when it comes to the most vulnerable children in our society. It means taking robust action to support families and children so that the need for children to enter care is reduced. It also means improving the children's care system, so that when children need to be taken into public care, they are well looked after and supported to fulfil their potential. When children enter care, the state is their parent. We should want the same for those children as we want for our own: the very best start in life.

The Family Rights Group and its excellent work have been mentioned in this debate. The Department has funded the Family Rights Group for many years and it provides a valuable service to many families who have taken on the care of children who are relatives. There is a strong evidence base for continuing to fund its helpline. We will take that into account in making forthcoming decisions about voluntary sector funding.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) talked about the Munro duty. The Government acknowledge the vital role that early help can play in getting help to children and families as soon as need arises. I will say a little more about that in due course. The Government considered implementing an early help duty based on Professor Munro's recommendation, but concluded that an explicit duty was not necessary as there was existing statutory provision under the Children Act 2004 for such support. The Government agreed to keep the matter under review and we continue to do so. However, we have strengthened our statutory guidance to make it clear that early help services should be part of the continuum of support to vulnerable children. The guidance sets out the need for teachers, health visitors and police to be alert to the indicators of abuse and neglect, and to work with families and children to undertake an early help assessment and agree a package of support to prevent needs from escalating.

More broadly, the Government are committed to ensuring that children are protected from the risk of abuse and neglect. We want to ensure that all those children are identified early and have timely and proportional assessments of their individual needs, and that the right services are provided for them. As many Members have said today, that does not necessarily mean taking them into care. Nevertheless, that is sometimes the right decision. Such decisions are never easy, and the systems in which they are made can always be improved.

To that end, over a two-year period to March 2016, we invested £100 million in the children's social care innovation programme to support 53 projects in developing, testing and spreading more effective ways to support children and families who are in need of help from social care services. The programme concentrates on two priorities. The first is rethinking children's social work to empower and support front-line decision making, ensuring that that focuses on the quality of work with children and their families rather than management

[Mr Sam Gyimah]

arrangements, processes and compliance. The second is rethinking support for adolescents in or on the edge of care.

In a world where, far from a spending a lifetime in care, the average length of a care episode is 785 days, we are not talking about supporting children only once they are in care. Through the innovation programme, we have supported several projects to find different ways of supporting children in their families before matters reach that stage.

There are many projects about which I cannot go into detail, given the time. However, much of what we are considering draws together a lot of practical work that can deliver for children who find themselves in vulnerable situations.

Despite all the very good work, it is inevitable that there will always be times when local authorities are required to act by taking children into care. The Children Act 1989 requires us to ask one fundamental question: what is in the best interests of the child? That is why, in addition to all the preventive work that I have mentioned, we have taken important measures to ensure that, once children are taken into care, they are safe and well looked after.

In residential care in particular, we have reformed the care planning in children's homes regulations to improve children's safety, including strengthening safeguards for when children are placed out of area and go missing. We have introduced new quality standards for residential settings. Work is under way with the Association of Directors of Children's Services review to ascertain how better co-ordination and planning can be achieved across our secure children's homes so that there is better provision.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Children and Families has set out a lot of work over the past few months. Again, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) and the other sponsors on bringing the debate forward. I look forward to working with hon. Members to make the world a better place for vulnerable children.

4.58 pm

**Lucy Allan:** I should like to extend my condolences to my hon. Friend the Minister for Children and Families. I thank all hon. Members who took the time to make such thoughtful contributions to this important debate. I hope that today marks the beginning of our talking about the subject much more often. I am grateful to the Under-Secretary for listening to all our ideas, thoughts and experiences. Ultimately, our discussion has been about enhancing the life chances of the most vulnerable children. We all share that common interest.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House calls on the Government to take steps to help reduce the number of children entering the care system by bringing forward measures to support more children to remain safely at home with their family or extended family.

## Primary Schools Admissions Criteria

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

4.59 pm

**Suella Fernandes** (Fareham) (Con): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise an issue that is currently disadvantaging a small but vulnerable group of children. Many are already seriously disadvantaged, so any extra problem is one which causes considerable hardship.

First, I should declare myself as a big supporter of the Government's schools agenda, if I can do so without seeming overly sycophantic towards the Minister. He cares passionately about raising standards and getting the best education possible for children across the country. He has personally done a huge amount of work in the past 10 years to make these issues a priority for our party, and I thank him.

This is not a party issue, however, and nor is it a question of Government policy. The issue is a very specific and technical point on how infant class admissions operate in practice. It was raised with me by a group of concerned campaigners, including many experienced people working in the field of school admissions appeals, such as those who sit on independent appeals panels and work in local education authorities. A number of them are watching this debate today and I thank them sincerely for raising this matter with me and providing me with a detailed briefing of the problem. I will draw on much of that material this afternoon, and I made it available to the Minister in my letter to him last month.

Before I come on to the crux of the issue, I want to put it on record that there is an outstanding group of primary schools in my constituency. I have visited many and I will visit them all. I am there to help all schools, teachers and parents in whatever way possible, whether Harrison primary school, an outstanding teaching school led by the inspiring Carolyn Clarke, which is leading the Pioneer Teaching School Alliance and is the home of the school-centred initial teacher training programme in Hampshire, or Locks Heath junior school led by Kevin Parfoot, where I was thoroughly put through my paces in a question time by years 5 and 6. I am proud that they are schools of national excellence in primary education. I invite the Minister to pay a visit to see that excellence for himself.

I also want to say why I care so much about schools and the education of our children. Education is the heart of social justice and the reason I am a Conservative. I owe so much to my education. My parents came to this country in the 1960s with nothing but hopes in their hearts and dreams for their child. I was blessed to have encouraging teachers, disciplining schools—I needed them—and inspiring lessons, all of which helped me along the path from an inner city state school to Cambridge University. My father started on the shop floor of a paint factory and my mother was recruited as a nurse at the age of 18. For them to see their daughter achieve in education was an aspiration come true. Education is the engine of aspiration and the reason I am a proud Conservative.

The issue of this debate relates to admissions to infant classes. Currently, the law limits class sizes to 30 pupils for infant classes, something that has been in place for many years and has widespread support.

Let me be clear: that principle is not in question. However, the law allows an exception for certain categories of pupils that an admissions authority deems “excepted pupils” who can be allowed into a particular school even if the infant class size limit has been reached. This is set out in both the school admissions code and in the statutory class sizes regulations. At the same time, parents of children who fail to gain a place at a particular school have a right of appeal to an independent appeals panel. Herein lies the first problem with the current regime.

These appeals are limited in scope to reviewing how a decision was taken by the admissions authority and ensuring there was no error or irrationality in how the admissions criteria were applied—Wednesbury unreasonableness—and can take into account only the information available to the authority at the time of the original decision. It is not a merits-based appeal. This limited scope means that the children affected—those seeking places in reception, year 1 and year 2—are treated less favourably than older children in other years, because, in contrast, for all other appeals, known as normal prejudice appeals, independent panel members can balance the difficulties for the school in taking an extra pupil against the needs of the child, so that a more flexible judgment can be made on the evidence available.

Secondly, what happens if there is a significant change in a child’s circumstances or some other exceptional situation that might make a compelling case for them to attend a particular school? Currently, if the change in circumstances happens after the date of the family’s application for an infant class place, but before the appeal is heard, it cannot be taken into account by either the admissions authority or the independent appeals panel. Similarly, if such problems arise and there are no social or medical criteria in the admissions authority’s over-subscription criteria, the same problem arises. The family might have an exceptional and convincing reason for their child to attend a particular school, but there is no discretion. There is then no power for the appeals panel to consider those factors.

This situation is leading to serious injustice for a significant group of vulnerable children who might be facing severe and exceptional problems—things such as murder, suicide or serious domestic violence in the family, which we would all agree are serious matters for consideration. Even when the facts and their relevance are accepted, still no one in the system has the discretion to consider them. Such cases are coming before independent appeals panels, and I have heard from many involved about the distress it is causing.

Perhaps understandably, there is a suggestion that in some cases panels are nevertheless persuaded by exceptional factors to allow such appeals. They might find a technicality or artificially interpret a different criterion to justify a decision. While that might be a welcome outcome, it is nevertheless improper and leading to arbitrary justice. As a lawyer, I believe in the rule of law—its predictability and its robustness—and I do not want it to be circumvented in order for justice to be done.

Real life cases illustrate the problem. In one case, a parent had two of their children at a Roman Catholic primary school whose admissions criteria gave priority to regular practising Catholics residing in the parish. Their third child was already attending the school’s nursery, and understandably their parent wanted them to have some continuity, to join their siblings and to

have a Catholic education. However, that child was denied a place at the school, and was instead offered a place at a different, non-Catholic school. The reason was that, at the time of their application, the family had been rehoused by the local council as a result of domestic violence and then lived outside the parish. When the case was appealed, the panel was sympathetic but could not allow the appeal because of the lack of social and medical criteria and because they had no additional discretion themselves.

Let us consider another case: a family faced an awful tragedy when the father of the child in question committed suicide, after the allocation day for places, when their child had failed to secure a place at a particular school. Her sibling already attended it, and she had other difficulties that meant she could not easily transfer to another school. Her bereaved mother naturally wanted the children to be together and set out cogent evidence of the extra difficulties both faced as a result of their father’s death. But, again, there were no social or medical criteria and no discretion for the appeal panel to take those exceptional circumstances into account. And a last case: an unsuccessful yet timely application for reception year where, after allocation day, the child had been sadly diagnosed with cancer. The child already attended the nursery at the school. It was an own admission authority school and the school governors wanted to admit the child in these circumstances but could not do so. There are many other cases, all suffering from and indicating the same problem: the rules are the rules; the law is the law; and the policy says no. My response is to ask whether the rules can be changed.

The representatives to whom I have spoken made some suggestions about what might need to be changed. There is an existing precedent for protecting categories of vulnerable pupils in the admissions process in the treatment of previously looked-after children in the current schools admissions code as exceptional cases. That seems to offer a useful model, and it would appear that a specific and discrete amendment to paragraph 2.15 of the school admissions code would be what is required, inserting a new category that could be worded along the lines of “children in crisis for whose mental health and/or physical well-being it is in their best interests to be admitted to that particular school.”

What the campaigners on this issue are seeking is not an immediate commitment to such a change, but merely that the Government should consult on it, examine its likely effects and consider the inclusion of a general discretion. They feel that this would allow the issues I have summarised today to be properly considered and aired in detail.

Fundamentally, the problem comes down to whether the current admissions regime builds in sufficient discretion for vulnerable children to be treated as exceptional cases. I believe that it does not. I am persuaded by the argument that an admissions authority should be able to consider the exceptional and compelling circumstances of a child in crisis, where they believe that the child would suffer a significant detrimental impact by not being admitted to the particular school. I also believe that making provision for this discretion would be consistent with the protection already afforded to previously looked-after children.

We all know how emotive and controversial school admissions can be. Parents pin their hopes for their children on getting them into a school that is right for

[Suella Fernandes]

them, and where places are limited, tough choices have to be made. So I realise how carefully the Government will need to consider any change, but I hope I have been able to demonstrate that there is an issue here worthy of that consideration. I thank the Minister for his attention, and look forward to hearing his response.

5.12 pm

**The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) on securing this debate, and I thank her for opening kind comments. She, too, is a passionate supporter of high academic standards in our schools, and her pioneering work in chairing the Michaela community school board of governors is having far-reaching consequences—beyond Brent and throughout the country. She is absolutely right when she says that education is the engine of aspiration. I look forward to visiting some of the schools in her constituency, which she has kindly invited me to see.

This debate is timely, as we are currently reviewing the school admissions code and are considering at the same time whether it would be appropriate to make changes to the school admissions appeals code. The debate also provides me with the opportunity to set out how the school admissions process supports vulnerable children, as well as the importance of the infant class size limit in supporting the progress of all younger children.

I understand the concerns raised by my hon. Friend about the small number of cases where neither the school nor the appeals panel can offer a place to a child who, owing to an extreme change of circumstance, becomes vulnerable with a compelling case to admit them to the school in question. The Government's aim is to ensure that the most vulnerable children in society are provided with a place at the school that best meets their needs.

The admissions code makes it clear that the responsibility for setting admission arrangements rests with school admissions authorities. However, all schools must admit children with a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan that names the school. The code also requires that all schools must offer first priority to children either in, or previously in, local authority care. Those who have suffered domestic violence or bereavement are, of course, vulnerable, too. This is why the admissions code allows all admissions authorities to prioritise children with a social or medical need.

We are determined that a child's economic circumstances should not predict the outcomes of that child's education or life chances. Our aim is to raise the attainment of disadvantaged children and thereby improve social mobility in the long term, breaking the cycle of disadvantage from one generation to the next. That is why we amended the admissions code in 2014 to extend to all state schools the freedom to prioritise children who are eligible for free school meals, the pupil premium or the service premium. Previously, only academies and free schools had that freedom.

The Government want all children to receive the best possible education, no matter where they live or what their circumstances are. To ensure that all children had

access to good school places, the Government in the last Parliament invested £5 billion between 2011 and 2015 to create the places required. Those funds helped to create 445,000 school places between 2010 and 2014, with many more in the pipeline.

As we announced in the spending review, we shall be spending £23 billion on school buildings between 2016 and 2021 to create 600,000 new school places, open 500 new free schools, and address essential maintenance needs. We are also increasing the number of good school places by tackling underperformance where it exists, and allowing good schools to expand without the restrictions and bureaucracy they have faced in the past.

The changes that we have made are working, and, despite the unprecedented rise in the number of children requiring infant school places, the average infant class size remains at 27.4, well within the statutory limit of 30. Furthermore, 96.5% of families received an offer of a place at one of their preferred primary schools. That is encouraging, but, as I am sure my hon. Friend understands as a result of her work as chair of the governors at the Michaela community school, good schools will always receive more applications than they have places.

It may be helpful if I clarify the position relating to the infant class size limit. As my hon. Friend knows, the statutory infant class size limit is 30 pupils per school teacher. The law requires schools to limit numbers in that way because research shows that smaller classes allow teachers to spend more time with individual pupils and that that can have a positive effect on the progress of younger pupils, particularly in the case of maths and literacy. The limit does mean that the admissions process for infant classes differs slightly from that applying to other year groups, as schools are restricted in terms of the number of pupils that they can admit to an infant class. There are, however, a small number of prescribed exceptions to protect the most vulnerable children, such as those in care, or those who move into an area where no suitable school places are available. The excepted pupils do not have priority over other children, but a school can lawfully admit them to a class of 30 without breaking the statutory requirements.

When parents are refused a school place for which they have applied, they have the right to appeal to an independent panel. The panel can uphold a non-infant class size appeal if it considers that the admission of an additional child would not adversely affect the school's ability to operate effectively. The panel can also uphold an appeal if it considers that the parents' reasons for wanting their child to attend the school outweigh the school's reasons for refusal. To ensure that the statutory class size limit is not breached, the school admissions appeals code requires infant class size appeals to be treated differently from those applying to other year groups. When a child is refused a school place because it would breach the infant class size limit, the appeal can be upheld only if the admissions arrangements were unlawful or had not been applied properly, or if the decision for refusal was not one that a reasonable admission authority would make.

There will, of course, always be circumstances in which good schools are full and unable to increase the number of pupils whom they admit. In such cases, an appeals panel is unlikely to uphold the appeal, even when the child in question is an excepted pupil. My hon.

Friend is suggesting an amendment to paragraph 2.15 of the School Admissions Code and the infant class size regulations, to include a new category of excepted pupil for children in crisis whose mental health or physical wellbeing mean it is in their interests to be admitted to a particular school. The important point my hon. Friend makes is that, although admissions authorities are able to give priority to children with social or medical needs, when those particular needs only arise after applications have been made, the infant class size limit means admission authorities are unable to admit the child and an appeal panel would not feel able to uphold their appeal.

We are currently considering a number of possible changes to the admissions system to support families

and schools while ensuring the system remains fair for all, and we will look at my hon. Friend's suggestions in carrying out this work. I am grateful to her for raising this important issue today. I hope that she is reassured to learn that we will look carefully at the important issues she has raised and consider her suggestions for changes to the codes.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.21 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Thursday 7 January 2016

[MR DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report

1.30 pm

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2015.

I thank you, Mr Hanson, and the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to hold this debate today. The armed forces military covenant report published in December by the Ministry of Defence is the fourth such document, and together the reports tell a story of growing efforts to meet the military covenant. I was surprised to discover that although four annual reports have now been presented to Parliament, none of them has been the subject of a parliamentary debate. This is therefore a wonderful opportunity for parliamentarians to reflect on the progress being made by Departments, devolved Administrations, local service providers and organisations in the commercial as well as the voluntary sector to meet the covenant's pledge.

The term "military covenant" was coined in 2000 in an MOD booklet called "Soldiering—The Military Covenant". It aimed to highlight the mutual obligations between our nation and its armed forces following years of decline in that relationship. Although the term "covenant" seems to imply some form of legal guarantee or contract, it is not enshrined in law. For more than 400 years, though, the state has recognised having some obligation towards its armed forces, with Queen Elizabeth I, for instance, providing by statute in 1593 a weekly parish tax to support disabled Army veterans returning to their homes. With British troops engaged in so many difficult military campaigns and new types of warfare over the last 20 years, our armed forces leaders, with a particularly strong voice from General Lord Dannatt, called on the nation to re-engage with its obligation to our soldiers, sailors and airmen. They all have to swear an oath of loyalty to their Queen and country when they join up, and the military covenant is or should be the nation's reply to them for their commitment and sacrifice.

A series of legal judgments in the early 2000s led my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, while still in opposition, to set up the military covenant commission. Led by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), its report led to the coalition Government in 2011 deciding that the military covenant should be covered and monitored through provision of an annual report to Parliament. That decision was enshrined in the Armed Forces Act 2011.

I am not from a military family—well, not in recent times. My French great-great-uncle was killed in the

opening weeks of world war one by German fire as he acted as a lookout for the French army on the Alsace-Lorraine front.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady mentions the first world war. Does she agree that given that 2016 is the centenary of the battle of the Somme, equality for Northern Ireland service personnel would be very fitting and is long overdue? It would be recognition that every person who serves in the British Army, within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, deserves the same opportunities under the covenant; we should have that in Northern Ireland as well.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** I thank my colleague for his intervention. I agree wholeheartedly and hope very much that in the months and years ahead we will be able to achieve that across the UK, including in Northern Ireland.

In world war one, my relation was acting as a lookout for the French army and he was sent up a church tower because he had great eyesight, but he was immediately spotted by German troops because he was wearing a very bright, shiny uniform—you have to wonder. That story has always stuck in my mind; I was first told it when I was four years old. The reality is that if all efforts at diplomacy have failed and war breaks out, we ask our young men, and now our young women too, to go into harm's way to protect us, our country, our values, our families and our way of life. We ask our armed forces to defend their nation without regard to their own safety, and I am continually in awe of every one of those people who choose a military career.

I am involved in many ways as a campaigner, and now as the local MP in north Northumberland, with serving military personnel, their families and veterans of all ages, for whom the covenant's pledge has not always been a reality. I am acutely conscious of the fact that although many citizens agree with the covenant's ideals and direction, far too many are not really aware of it and do not consider how they can make it a reality in their working lives or how their local community might be able to support the needs of military people and their loved ones. I am also aware that many of our serving and veteran personnel are not fully apprised of the commitment that the covenant gives to them and their families.

The Government's commitment to all who serve and have served in our armed forces is clear: they and their families should face no disadvantage compared with other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Special consideration is appropriate, especially for those who have given most, such as the injured and the bereaved. The covenant is clear about the areas in which it should apply. It covers healthcare, education, housing, deployment matters, family life, benefits and tax impacts, the responsibility of care, particularly during defence policy change periods, voting rights and support in transition and in life after service. It covers so many aspects of personnel's lives, and every year since 2011 we have seen new projects and support being built to meet our covenant commitment and reported by the MOD to Parliament.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, but also on setting up the all-party parliamentary

[*Michael Tomlinson*]

group on the armed forces covenant. In relation specifically to no disadvantage and to special consideration, a number of our constituents, and mine in particular, have concerns about housing. Perhaps she will touch on that and invite our hon. Friend the Minister to comment on it in his closing remarks as well.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** Yes, I will cover that some more. It is a big area where work is beginning to develop, but we need to do a lot more to join the dots.

Colleagues here, as well as others, have raised many issues with me. They want to discuss areas of the covenant that are of concern to their constituents. I want to mention a few areas where I believe that commendation for progress made already is due and some concerns about areas where I believe the Government and MPs could take a lead to improve the current state of play.

First, and not only because I am an accountant, but because the exceptional work to support the covenant undertaken by many charities could not happen without it, I—

**Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con):** I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate, and my hon. Friends the Members for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) on their part in that. I want to touch on the point about charities. Obviously the armed forces covenant has progressed the outlook for people returning from deployment overseas. Two of my constituents, Pam and Al Sutton, were shocked a decade ago at the treatment of personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, so they started a charity, Troop Aid, and have raised millions of pounds for returning personnel. Will my hon. Friend pay tribute to Pam and Al Sutton and, indeed, all those in the charities that help our returning troops?

**Mrs Trevelyan:** I will. I have enjoyed some of the outcomes of Troop Aid. A great supporter of mine is also a great supporter of that extraordinary charity, which has done amazing work and continues to do so. I pay enormous tribute to Pam and Al Sutton and to so many people who, having had some connection with the armed forces—be it through a direct family relation or simply, as my hon. Friend identifies, a relationship in their community—have taken up the mantle of the covenant, which is exactly what we want to happen across the nation. This is about all of us respecting and honouring both those who put their lives in harm's way and those who support them as they do that. We should encourage and praise to the rooftops all those who are willing to give up their time and energy to ensure that that can happen in practice.

Perhaps people do not do this too often, but I want to thank my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer for having the bright idea of channelling the LIBOR fines money directly into covenant projects. An initial fund of £35 million is backed up by an enduring £10 million a year, and in 2013 a further £100 million was added to it. This is a long-term and clear commitment by the Government, and I commend them for it. Charities small and large have been able to make great use of that funding stream to provide excellent local provision for

housing, health support and business development opportunities for ex-service personnel. Those are real practical efforts, and the reality is that without some level of funding and Government commitment, all that energy out there—that human capital that wants to make the covenant reality—could not really make that happen.

The corporate covenant, which was launched in 2013, now has more than 700 companies signed up, which is a huge explosion in the last year—at the time of last year's report there were two hundred-and-something. In the corporate world, a real energy is developing to understand what the covenant means in practice for our biggest businesses in terms of investing in our armed forces and how they can make best use of the energy and skills that all our personnel can bring. We are seeing real enthusiasm from many of those large organisations. They are supporting reservists and providing practical financial support for personnel when they are deployed. For instance, mobile phone contracts can now be put on hold—a practical, real-life improvement that makes things easier and does not leave personnel on deployment out of pocket. Those organisations are working with charities such as X-Forces to encourage the entrepreneurial spirit of those who have recently left the forces, alongside spouses of personnel on active service, by helping them to set up their own businesses. In the last year, the charity has helped hundreds of new businesses to be started. Financial support from the likes of Barclays and PayPal, to help in the critical early months of building a new enterprise, is a really exciting part of the corporate covenant, and it is really working on the ground. I commend the Minister and his team on continuing to drive that forward.

As the nation becomes more tuned in to the military covenant principles—that is what we want to happen—many small and medium-sized businesses want to be involved, but the practical issues can be challenging for a business that has five or 10 employees. I know of several family businesses in Northumberland that seek to employ reservists and veterans, but we need to find practical ways to help them to achieve their aims, because doing so is not straightforward for them. It is a lot easier for a business that employs 1,000 people to have one or two reservists in the system and support them when they need to be deployed.

The community covenant, which has now taken off—I am told that every local authority has signed up and is working on action plans—is the next level of involvement. Families who are back in their communities and leading normal everyday lives might need to access the covenant principles.

**Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con):** I want to touch on the point about community covenants. I must put on the record the fact that I am a member of the parliamentary armed forces scheme, as are other Members here. I have, once again, received a distressing email from a constituent who is a disabled war pensioner. The treatment he is getting from my—award-winning, I have to say—council is very different from, and not as good as, the treatment that he would have got from a neighbouring county council. He does not want any extra treatment for the injuries that he suffered defending our country, but I believe that our veterans should be prioritised, whether in the NHS, in education or in housing. Perhaps the

Minister can explore how we can make sure that there is a baseline for all community covenants, so that when people display—

**Mr David Hanson (in the Chair):** Order. Interventions have to be short.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** I thank my colleague for raising that. The reality is that although many local authorities have signed up, the variability of output is still fairly evident.

**Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con):** My hon. Friend is being extremely generous with her time and making exactly the right points. Does she agree that variability goes hand in hand with good information? Whether we are talking about doctors not being aware of the covenant—I can provide a constituency example of that—or a local authority, such as Norwich City Council, not appearing to know what a bounty payment is, we need to educate people about the principles in the covenant and make this happen in a joined-up way.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** That is exactly what we need to do. We call on the Minister to meet that challenge, and we will help. There is not an MP in the House who will not work with their local council and local communities to provide further support, improve their understanding of what they have signed up to and encourage them to draw together the practical outputs, which are so variable, into a cohesive whole so that we have best practice everywhere in the UK. The British Legion has published excellent best practice guides that give some clear guidance. Those guides can really support the armed forces champions in every council. More than that, we need to make real inroads to ensure that when the military families in each area need assistance, they are supported to the full. That is the point of the covenant: not only should military families suffer no disadvantage, but if there is a real need, we should be there to support them. There is a sense of that in the general population. The practicalities are, without doubt, difficult, but we need to continue to push that forward.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab):** I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and congratulate her on securing the debate. My local authority has announced today that armed forces personnel, veterans and those who have the defence discount service card will be given free swimming. Will the Minister consider asking local authorities to publish an annual report on their progress, so that we can encourage them to join up their offers?

**Mrs Trevelyan:** That is exactly the sort of practical, real-life example I have been talking about. It makes best use of the tools that the Government are putting out there for families, to help us to identify them and give them the practical support and wraparound affection that the covenant is there to offer. The hon. Lady anticipates my speech; I was going to say that, as with other strategies across Departments, we ask councils to submit a self-assessment report every year—I worked closely on that in the autism sector—and say to them, “As we are doing at a national level, would you please share this information with your communities?” That self-perpetuating encouragement raises the concept, the understanding and the reality of whether the covenant is working, whether in Birmingham, Bradford or Berwick.

**David Mackintosh (Northampton South) (Con):** I congratulate my hon. Friends on securing this debate, because it is important that we monitor the progress of the armed forces community covenant. I speak as somebody who, in a previous role as leader of Northampton Borough Council, introduced and signed the community covenant for Northampton. The council produced, and continues to produce, an annual report on what was happening. That was a welcome move, and it helps to reflect the work done by officers and councillors to bring forward this important measure.

We must also recognise that not all armed forces people know that the community covenant exists, so perhaps we need to do some work on making sure that when people leave the services, they are aware of it.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** I thank my hon. Friend, and I absolutely concur. Within the community covenant framework, we also need find ways to join things up more effectively when families move. The nature of the armed forces is such that families are expected to move around the UK, and to and from the UK, so it is important that the system really supports them. We have endless examples of systems that do not.

I was very pleased, literally weeks after being elected, to be able to help a family who were leaving RAF Boulmer, in my constituency. The airman in question was leaving the service. He had been on a British Gas training course while he was still in Northumberland—fantastic—and he and his family wanted to move down south to be near his wife’s family. That was all good, and they were looking forward to it. They had found a school in the right area for their children, one of whom had special needs, but when they came to move, they could not find a house. It was impossible; there was not a house to be found. They could not register their children with the school because they were not in the right area, and the gentleman could not start his job because he was not yet registered in the right area.

The system seemed nonsensical, and the lovely family liaison lady at RAF Boulmer was pulling her hair out. As it turned out, she made the right phone call. I did not know anything about Banbury or Bicester, but I had a new colleague in the area, and between us, we were able to find a solution.

**Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con):** As the recipients of that delightful, hard-working, honourable and brave family, we in Bicester were delighted to welcome them to our area. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would have been much easier—without the intervention of MPs—if some sort of central hotline had been available to the family liaison officer, to enable her to access the line that I, in the end, accessed on the family’s behalf to help them to find a house? My hon. Friend may not be aware of the end of the story: the house that family moved into was an ex-services house.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** I was not aware of that, and I am pleased to hear that we are making the best use of our property portfolio. That is most encouraging. Housing is a big part of the covenant’s challenge. The new forces Help to Buy scheme was introduced last year and has been incredibly successful. This year’s report has some really positive messages about that, both because armed forces families are very aware of it—it has been very

[Mrs Trevelyan]

well publicised—and because it is being taken up in very large numbers. It enables families to get on to, or stay on, the housing ladder as they resettle into civilian life.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I will be very brief. It would be a great idea if the period of time after which servicemen either joined or got married could count towards a local housing list—it could be a credit in some way. That would help a lot of people not just to get to the top of the list, but to get hold of a local house or flat.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** I am sure that the Minister will consider my hon. Friend's point and move forwards on one of the most critical areas that we need to ensure works smoothly for all armed forces personnel.

I have some concerns about two areas in the healthcare part of the covenant. First—this ties in with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart)—is the commitment that family members should maintain their position on waiting lists in the healthcare system even though they are moving around the UK due to new postings. I have been made aware several times that that commitment is not very well known in medical frameworks or to armed forces families. The 2015 report highlights that anecdotal evidence. In the tri-service families continuous attitudes survey, only 37% said that waiting times did not increase when they had to move. There is work to do in the NHS framework and on its commitment to the covenant to give the families better support and continuity of medical care.

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): I represent a garrison town and I am a former school governor of a predominantly military school. Does my hon. Friend agree that schools have a part to play? When members of the armed forces move, places should be available in schools that understand the military covenant, the important differences and, indeed, the important role that the service pupil premium can play in a school.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** That is absolutely right. The challenge across many Departments is to ensure that armed forces personnel and their families are clearly identifiable to make it easy for the public services that are needed to support them, wherever they are.

**Marcus Fysh** (Yeovil) (Con): I have experience of the matter in respect of school places and housing. I have found that, by and large, armed forces families have more children than normal families—perhaps I should say the general population—because of their age group. It is a real issue. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that supporting our armed forces is so important? I congratulate her on her all-party parliamentary group.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** My hon. Friend's point is well made. The age demographic of service personnel is such that while those personnel are deployed on active service, we are supporting families who, in large numbers, have young children. Those of us who have had, or who are just coming to the end of having, young children, discover that it is a constant battle—let alone for those left holding the babies because their partner is out

fighting someone somewhere a very long way away. Those left at home cannot say to their partner, "I've had enough. Could you take them for a minute so I can have a breath of fresh air?" They are on their own and that level of support, ensuring that the services around those families work, is vital.

I would be grateful if the Minister would help us to find a way for the NHS, as well as the education system, to work better in terms of its markers and identification so that moving does not create a disadvantage. So many forces personnel say to me, "We are not asking for special treatment. That is not what we want", but they must not be disadvantaged. The nature of Army, Navy and RAF life—life within a military framework—means that it is more difficult for families just to have the stability they need.

**Mrs Moon:** I agree with all that the hon. Lady is saying, except in one respect. The one area for which I will praise the Government highly is the money that they have put into prosthetic limb care, and their commitment to ensuring that when armed forces personnel leave the armed forces, they continue to get the highest standard of prosthetic limb. Therefore, that is an area where service personnel should get better than average because they have certainly earned it.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** Indeed, that is absolutely right. The covenant is clear that for general purposes, families should face no disadvantage, but for those who have suffered permanent injury or for families who have experienced a bereavement, special consideration should be given. There is a real investment in that field of the healthcare element of the covenant's work. The system will obviously need to be fully maintained and financed forever, but individuals who need prosthetic support for life are in the system and it is working well to support them.

The Ministry of Justice is now asking those entering the prison system whether they are ex-military. The issue was brought to my attention as HMP Northumberland is in my constituency and two ex-military personnel have written to me in the past few months struggling with the support framework. My question to them was, "Does the prison know that you were in the Army?", to which the answer was, "No, I never told anyone and nobody asked." I am pleased that the Ministry of Justice is trying to turn that on its head. It is a voluntary system at the moment.

About 5% of the prison population are ex-military. Of those, 98% are male and more than a third are over 40, which is a much high proportion of older members of the prison population than the average prison age nationally. It is good news that we are at least starting to identify those people so that we can support them, but we need to find a way to overcome their fears that they are identifiable—for fear of violence in the prison—or any level of humiliation they may feel that they have ended up in the prison system. That is a real challenge that we need to face and it is frustrating from the covenant's perspective because, as a nation, we want to ensure that those who have fallen off the wagon, so to speak, and end up in the criminal framework can get the right and full support that they need, because they are almost certainly there because of a lot of long-term damage.

Many former soldiers—90% of these people are ex-Army—have fallen away from the straight and narrow because of untreated mental health issues leading to alcohol and drug abuse, and a breakdown of family life. Family members are also left damaged and broken by the destruction that failing mental health can cause. The worst cases include slow and painful declines into homelessness, violence and criminality.

I am currently working with a family in Northumberland. The wife is extraordinarily committed and is absolutely determined to try to keep the family together. She is throwing everything at it but she is running out of steam and there is no framework. She says, “I can see where this is going, Mrs Trevelyan. I just know that it is all going to end in disaster.” We are battling to try to find the support that her husband needs, because broken mental health is a very complex thing to fix for those who have been in some really difficult situations.

**Bob Stewart:** May I recommend Jim Davidson’s charity, Care after Combat, which has just received £1 million? I am slightly involved with the charity. It works inside prisons, specifically with ex-military personnel, and is apparently doing a seriously good job.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning that. I hope that we can share the knowledge of that charity more widely so that families who have a member in need in that crisis situation can reach out and get the support that that excellent funding will provide.

Across the country, we want our brave and damaged military heroes to receive the right support so that they can get well, start to rebuild their lives and try to rebuild their family lives for a positive future not just for them but for those around them. I ask the Minister, might we tackle this lack of rigorous and predictable identification with some sort of marker, perhaps alongside national insurance and NHS numbers? The nation wants individuals who have served—and their families, who have committed to protecting the nation—to be supported and for help to be made available to them as required. I hope very much that the defence medical information service programme is making good progress. It seems to be moving very slowly, but perhaps the Minister will update us on its status.

More widely on healthcare, the Minister will be aware that in the north-east—and, I understand, across the country—there are some serious gaps in the provision for mental health problems, which often appear long after veterans have left military service. The covenant is clear that veterans should receive priority treatment for a condition resulting from their service in the armed forces.

**David Mackintosh:** I put on record my thanks to the Minister for his work on veterans who suffer from mesothelioma, for exactly the reasons my hon. Friend outlines. Unfortunately, one of my constituents is suffering at the moment. He wanted to come to this debate but is unable to be here. He is one of those people who are not caught up in the Government’s changes, and I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet me outside the debate to talk about his progress. I put on record the thanks of people who suffer from mesothelioma. As my hon. Friend says, it is important that we ensure that veterans are not compromised by the service they give.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** I am also being contacted on that particular issue, and I hope that the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant will be able to support the work of my hon. Friend and the Minister to find a solution ensuring that military sufferers of mesothelioma will not be discriminated against compared with sufferers in the civilian population.

A huge amount of time, thought and investment continues to go into physical rehabilitation programmes, as the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) identified, with charities such as Help for Heroes opening bespoke rehabilitation centres. There are amazing technological developments in the world of prosthetics, and we are starting to see more investment in dental and primary care for these families, for whom there is respect and real support.

The challenge is that there simply is not capacity in the mental healthcare system to provide the necessary and often long treatment programmes needed to help those whose mental health starts to deteriorate long after they retire from military service. The covenant reference group, which is a group of experienced professionals and charities that oversees the report every year and provides an open, blunt commentary on the state of play—all credit to the Secretary of State for Defence for always allowing the group to go in, warts and all, so that those of us who are not experts can see the progress and really understand how the covenant is developing—highlights that the vast majority of our service families are incredibly resilient and just get on with it, whatever challenges are thrown at them, and provide unstinting support to their military spouses and partners, but the escalating problems are just too great for some families, who need to be able to access that help.

The latest covenant report, published in December, highlights the study of the King’s Centre for Military Health Research into mental health problems in armed forces personnel who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, but there seems to be little focus on the needs of those who fought in conflicts during the 1980s and 1990s in the Falklands, Northern Ireland and the Balkans who are now starting to be hit by deep-rooted traumas coming to the fore. Combat Stress is one of our older charities, and it does extraordinary work with mental health complexity, which is not really addressed by the mainstream NHS support system. Combat Stress is at absolute capacity all the time, and too often veterans who have hit a deep hole are unable to access the complex and intense therapies needed to rebuild their shattered minds. We all have mental health, some of it good and some of it sometimes not so good. The Government are starting to change attitudes and investment focus to help the development of that area of medicine, but in the short term we cannot fail those veterans for whom the armed forces covenant was intended, those who need proper long-term mental health treatment now. Colleagues have much to say on that matter, and I hope the Minister will support us as we campaign for the right care programmes across the UK for these veterans.

This year has seen a hugely welcome new covenant commitment, with widows, widowers and surviving civil partners now able to retain their pensions for life, regardless of whether they remarry. Many constituents of mine have commented on their gratitude to the

[Mrs Trevelyan]

Prime Minister for making that decision as it allows bereaved family members to move forward with their lives with their family and with renewed hope. That is an excellent decision.

I have read all four covenant reports published by our Defence Secretaries since 2011, and it is clear that really good progress is made year on year, but I am also conscious that many people, including our military personnel past and present, are not as aware as we want them to be, and as the covenant principles want them to be, of the effort that is going into changing how our nation feels and behaves towards our armed forces personnel. It is our duty to help to encourage wider participation in the covenant. My challenge to myself is that, by the end of this Government, I want our whole nation to think about the covenant in their daily lives. I hope that colleagues from all corners of the UK and of every political colour will join us in building a nation that has at its heart, in every sphere of our lives, a deep understanding and practice of the moral obligation to our armed forces. We are free to live our lives as we wish in this great nation of ours thanks to the unstinting and total commitment of all those military personnel who stood and who stand ready to defend us now in the face of dangers, so many as yet unknown.

2.5 pm

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the hon. Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) and for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) for doing all the work to put this together. I am pleased to have this debate, but I am even more pleased to know that there is now an all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant that can sit down, listen to all the variations and learn from and help each other. Obviously I am keen to hear what the Minister has to say. It is lovely to have the APPG in place, as it is something that we all need.

As everyone knows, I long to see the United Kingdom be treated together as one: the Union. Members will hear me bash on about that throughout my time here. I thank all of those who have been involved with setting up the covenant, with the reports and with all the work, benefits and flexibilities in the covenant to help everyone. I also thank the armed forces, and I always will. We saw all those members of the armed forces who had to work all the way through Christmas to help people with the flooding.

As a Northern Irish MP, I will be highlighting some of the difficulties and problems we have in Northern Ireland, especially the difficulty our Executive have had, due to the way they are set up, in not being able to choose to be represented on the covenant reference group. From that, the Executive are therefore finding it impossible to spend the £10 million that is available. We need a better system—I will get into that in more detail.

In the report, and in listening to the previous speaker, the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, it is fascinating to hear about all the good things that are in place and about how we can help each other. Reading the report, I thought that the Welsh seem to be leading in many areas, with many great ideas, although that is probably

a little unfair on the English and the Scottish. There are so many good ideas, and we should embrace them all and make them work. I particularly like the fact that Wales has champions for veterans and armed forces personnel on every health board and every NHS trust, and that the Welsh Government are fully involved with the strategic development of the veterans' hearing fund—I cannot speak, let alone hear.

We have the legacy of the troubles in Northern Ireland, as everyone knows, and with that comes many difficulties and problems, particularly with health. There are also legal problems, including on hearing. Veterans often suffer from having to come to this side of the water to deal with their cases, which they are not being allowed to deal with in Northern Ireland. In a few cases, veterans have found that because they served somewhere else in addition to Northern Ireland—even if they did just two or three months—their cases are being rejected because Northern Ireland has been treated differently. We need to find a way of accepting all armed forces veterans from the past, from the troubles all the way through, and treating everybody the same.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): I have a constituent in Northern Ireland who is a former lance corporal in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers—I hope the Minister can hear this story—who served in Iraq and Kosovo. He has been to Hollybush and is 40% disabled today. He was advised to apply for retrospective medical discharge two years ago and has yet to hear a response. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if the covenant operated fully in Northern Ireland, that outcome might be slightly different?

**Danny Kinahan:** I agree entirely. That is just one example, and I and many others have plenty more examples of where the system does not work especially well. We need a slicker, faster system that works. I will go into that a little later.

Returning to the good things that Wales is doing, particularly on mental health, veterans there can access Veterans NHS Wales services and can refer themselves, if they think they have post-traumatic stress disorder, via the Royal British Legion, SSAFA or the Veterans Welfare Service. It is really hard in Northern Ireland for people with PTSD to be taken seriously and treated. They have to go across the water. It is paid for so they can get that help, but at the moment there is no easy way of referring people. Looking back at our system and our troubles, it is not just about Afghanistan or Iraq; it goes right back to the late 1960s and early 1970s. We have many people with mental difficulties to help. In those days, PTSD was hidden away. We need to ensure that Northern Ireland has a much better system that focuses less on coming here.

I went to a very good briefing four years ago with a brigadier who showed us a great, slick organisation for dealing with everyone—ex-Ulster Defence Regiment and ex-police—and helping them, but what was happening in my office showed that they were not able to get there. The right people were there, and there were lots of people doing great work, but people were being let down. I will give one example.

I was called by a family who said that their dad was suffering from ill health. He was in a psychiatric hospital and was threatening to commit suicide, but the hospital

kept saying that he was fine and sending him home. Home could not cope, so he went back into hospital and was there for two or three weeks. I went to see him once. When we got to telling war stories and chatting, he lightened up; it was fun. His wife said to me that that was the first time in four or five years that she had seen him relax.

I went away and carried on with the other work that we were doing, and he went back to normal. The long and short of it was that he kept being sent home, despite my efforts to get the hospital to keep him there and look after him. One day he put on his waders, walked into the local reservoir and killed himself. We had all the signals, but we would not recognise them, and we let that family down. That is just one example.

I note all the great things that Scotland is doing. Focusing on education, Scotland has systems in place—I mention this for good reason—to ensure that local authorities know when a child is from a service family. In Northern Ireland, that would be very difficult. There is still a security situation. It is not in newspapers here all the time, but for us, things haven't gone away, you know—if I may use that awful phrase. There are still troubles and security issues. Military hospitals in Great Britain, for example, will not send information across to Northern Ireland. I will give two examples of the consequences.

A military spouse had been receiving long-term treatment for Crohn's disease in Northallerton in North Yorkshire. She was registered as a military wife. When her husband was discharged they moved back to Northern Ireland, but because the military wing of the Northallerton hospital would not forward her records, the treatment was not continued, resulting in long-term damage and, finally, major surgery. Also, some drugs that she was given in Great Britain were not funded in Northern Ireland.

In another example, someone registered for a course at Ulster University and was dismayed when he had to submit a credit note with all his military details to the university finance department, which then lost it. It was eventually found, but of course he had lost confidence, as so many other people have. We need to find a new system. People in Northern Ireland will not use the armed forces loyalty card, because it shows that they are in the armed forces. I could give more examples of the security reasons why people do not feel able to use it. We need to find a better way.

The Irish, as hon. Members will know, like fighting. We have a particularly long history and record in the Army. I always smile when I think of learning in Roman history during my schooldays that Agricola, having just taken England, looked to Ireland but was advised, "They like fighting among themselves too much," so the Romans never came to Ireland. Maybe things would have changed if they had, but hon. Members will all know that we have a long record of being part of the services. Between 2008 and 2011, more than 20% of those deployed on the ground were from Northern Ireland, which has 3% of the UK population. Just under 7% of reservists are from Northern Ireland. More importantly, we have the best recruiting in the whole United Kingdom. We are honoured to be part of the forces, but on the other side of things, some 65,000 Northern Irish served during the troubles. We experience it on a different scale, and it goes back a long way.

I am not sure how much we are meant to declare as an interest in this debate, but I will have a military pension, albeit a small one, so I had better declare that. I was a Household Cavalry officer, and I served in the Black Watch in 1983 in west Belfast, where my family had had a business for 100 years. Two or three years later, I was squadron leader of the North Irish Horse. My reason for saying so is that I am now an honorary colonel, so I am still involved. I thought that I had better declare my interests; I am still very much and very proudly involved with the North Irish Horse, and I am part of the Scottish and Northern Irish Yeomanry, which has a terrific history. I look forward to seeing it thrive, as we are recruiting well. Hon. Members will know that the reserves are the backbone of the armed forces, especially at the moment.

I referred in my maiden speech to the Union Brigade at Waterloo. It would have been good to see the Irish, the Scottish and the English all charging together as part of that brigade. Today, 100 years after the Somme, we should remember that not just the Northern Irish but every part of the United Kingdom gave lives there. Next year we will commemorate the battle of Messines, in which the Irish and the Ulster divisions fought together. We have a long history.

To return to the difficulties in Northern Ireland, as I said, the Executive have chosen not to be part of the covenant reference group, which makes it difficult to spend the £10 million fund. We still have a security situation, as I mentioned, in which one side of our politics, the nationalist side, will not recognise our armed services, and many will still not wear the poppy. I long for things to move on and for people to remember, but some still see us as imperialist and cannot get beyond that, despite my efforts to point out the great work done in Sierra Leone, and by the Navy with refugees in the Mediterranean and against pirates off the coast of Africa. I am very proud of our armed services. We must ensure that the covenant works for everyone well into the future.

This is an example of how we have not moved on in some respects: I was shocked to find, after the debate in which I proudly voted for action in Syria, a tweet from one of the Sinn Féin Members of Parliament saying, "There we go; typical British Army, carrying on murdering civilians," or words to that effect. That was from someone that I had personally helped while in the Assembly. I am proud to say that I would still help them, but we in Northern Ireland need to find a way to move on. I call on the nationalists and those of similar thinking to move into the democratic world and accept everything that has gone on. Let us make things work. That is what will move us on. The covenant working in Northern Ireland will allow us all to deal with matters.

**Mrs Moon:** I feel that the hon. Gentleman is bringing his comments to a conclusion. Before he does so, on behalf of Welsh MPs and the Welsh Assembly, I thank him for his kind comments about the work that we are trying to do in Wales. His speech has been moving. I hope that his words about the fact that we are a United Kingdom, and that our armed forces and our commitment to their service must unite us all, are heard.

**Danny Kinahan:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for those comments. We must all keep working together to make things happen. My main point is that I want the same treatment for all the armed services and veterans.

[*Danny Kinahan*]

It is difficult that in Northern Ireland we have had to spend our lives ensuring that our veterans are at no disadvantage. I want to celebrate them, not just consider how we can ensure no disadvantage. Yes, I realise that politics is involved, but these are people who have fought and heroes who have worked hard and given their blood while their families have had rotten times at home. Let us all work together to support everyone. I really want to see Westminster helping us to put things in place if we do not move on, otherwise we are stuck.

Members here may not know that our councils in Northern Ireland do not have the power or responsibilities in education, health and housing that exist up at Stormont, where of course we have this enforced, and at times dysfunctional, coalition. That is why it does not work—because we need both sides going there—which is why I want to see Westminster not just sitting back, but making it work. We need the Ministry of Defence and certain elements of the armed services on this side not to fall foul of Northern Ireland politics, but to make things happen. We need them to stop pussyfooting around and saying, “We can’t do that, because Sinn Fein are likely to say no,” or, “You can’t do that, because they may say no.” We need to look here at all the things that the covenant is trying to do, put legislation in place and make it happen.

I praise the reserve forces in Northern Ireland for what they are trying to do, because they have the long-term influence in Northern Ireland—by talking to the companies and to the people on the ground for the reserves. They are often used as the ones who understand the politics a little bit more—and, of course, they fall foul of it at times; nevertheless, they work phenomenally hard trying to make it work.

I also praise one or two Unionist colleagues. If a Unionist Minister has a portfolio, they can at least do some things that are not the decisions of the Executive. For example, our Health Minister in the past, Michael McGimpsey, was able to put in a health protocol to be followed. However, if we cannot get hold of that ministry, we may never be able to change things, and that is why we need help from this place.

I certainly want to praise one of our Members of the Assembly—Andy Allen, who is a new Assemblyman for us there. He lost both legs below the knee in Afghanistan and he has lost 80% of his eyesight, but he is there in the Assembly, doing his best. He found it phenomenally difficult when he came back to get things working, so he set up his own investment charity, with others, to provide support for veterans and their families in Northern Ireland. He should not have had to do that, but he had to; he had to pull it all together.

I also want to praise Doug Beattie, our councillor, who has a Military Cross, for his work in getting covenant champions in each of the councils. The councils may not have the responsibility, but Doug and others saw that if there was a champion in each council area, they could at least feed through relevant matters to the powers that be. So far, we have five councils out of 11 that have put forward a champion. There is a long way to go and there will be some there that will probably never do it, unless we move on.

I also want to praise the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who came over before the last election and met with the Democratic Unionists,

with ourselves, to discuss these matters. We went through them, and she at the time said, “Look, come direct to me if there are difficulties.” Then elections have happened and we have had a change, but I would like to see the same thing happening. If it is not working in Northern Ireland, can we please come through to a central point here to make things work?

**Gavin Robinson:** I was waiting to see if the hon. Gentleman was going to praise any Democratic Unionists in his list; I am sure he was getting there.

**Danny Kinahan:** No. [*Laughter.*]

**Gavin Robinson:** I am also sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that Brenda Hale, the widow of Captain Mark Hale, should be praised.

**Danny Kinahan:** Absolutely.

**Gavin Robinson:** However, one of the biggest precluding factors is section 75 in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which arose from the Belfast agreement and which does not allow us to discriminate positively or negatively, including positively for servicemen. Government assistance in removing that legislative impediment to operating the covenant would be most useful.

**Danny Kinahan:** We are aware of the DUP wish to go down the section 75 route. We are not sure we agree with that system. We are not keen to have the armed forces seen as a minority or dealt with in that way. There is much more that we need to work our way through, although I certainly praise Brenda Hale. She has been magnificent in coming into the Assembly, having lost her husband, and working through on armed forces issues. She has been extremely good.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Can the hon. Gentleman also bring himself to acknowledge the change—a subtle change, but a change nevertheless—of attitude within the nationalist tradition within Northern Ireland? That change certainly struck me when I was a Northern Ireland Minister. It is difficult for many, but it is definitely there in terms of attitude towards the armed forces and, interestingly, in connection with the centenary to which he has referred, whereby for the first time there are members of the nationalist community who are prepared to talk about relatives who served during the great war.

**Danny Kinahan:** I thank the hon. Gentleman very much; I am very glad he has raised that matter. There have been huge changes in my time at home and we have seen many people from the nationalist side come on board—that is why I said “some” earlier, but sadly that “some” on the other side are the ones who drive everything against us. I remember going down to Dublin and being told to take my poppy off. That was a long time ago, but we have seen the visits of the Queen and the Duke. So much is changing in Ireland—Northern Ireland is getting there. There are some quite fantastic people leading in what they are doing, and from the nationalist community as well.

If I can talk about prisons, I know that in Northern Ireland we also have a high percentage of veterans in our prisons. I met Care after Combat a few months ago.

It is not involved in Northern Ireland, but I look forward to seeing it work there, because we need a great deal of help. We also need to help all the other veterans' groups. Sometimes I think we have too many veterans' groups, but that is not their fault; it is because so many people are seeing that things not working for them. We need to find a better way of pulling all the veterans' groups together and making sure that they are actually helped.

Hon. Members will have had enough from me today, but what I really want to see is Westminster and this side of the water helping to ensure things are put in place. If I can go back to my comment earlier, we must stop pussyfooting around, use common sense and make things work for our veterans.

2.26 pm

**Mr James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): May I first of all pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for Fermanagh and South Tyrone—?

**Danny Kinahan:** South Antrim.

**Mr Gray:** I beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon. If I may say so, Mr Hanson, I wish that the screens in Westminster Hall better indicated who is speaking here and what the topic is here, rather than who is speaking in the main Chamber. Currently it is rather hard sometimes to follow the debate here. That is a point that is perhaps worth making.

I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. I particularly respect what he has had to say because standing up for the armed forces or serving the armed forces in Northern Ireland is a significantly more difficult thing to do than for those of us who are in areas such as mine in Wiltshire, where almost the most natural and easy thing to do in the world is to stand up for the armed forces. To do so in Northern Ireland, in the way that he has described, is particularly difficult, so I pay particular tribute to him and the points that he made, and I know that the Minister and the Government will listen very carefully to them.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) and her two male colleagues—my hon. Friends the Members for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer)—for having the initiative to call for this outstandingly good and useful debate. As she said, it is very important that we discuss the armed forces covenant. We should be doing so on an annual basis and I was astonished to discover—perhaps it is my fault and I should have called for such a debate myself—that we have not done so after the previous three annual reports on the covenant. So I respect and pay tribute to the way that she has done that, and very much hope that this example will be followed in future years. We could actually debate every year what progress has been made in the implementation of the covenant.

I should first of all say that the covenant itself is an outstandingly useful and worthwhile document, and I pay tribute to the then Labour Government, which first created such a document. They did not write it into law, but it was their idea to write down a contract that had been in existence for many centuries—that invisible contract between society and our armed forces. It was

the Labour Government that said, "This time, we ought to codify, write down and make it plain, create a metric of it". It was then a Conservative Government that wrote the observance of the covenant into law, which again was a very worthwhile thing to do, and the annual reports that we are now producing are extremely good.

No one in the debate today—indeed, no one in the Palace of Westminster and probably nobody in Britain—would disagree with the fundamental principle behind the covenant, namely that we ask our armed service people to do things that we ourselves would under no circumstances consider doing, and that in return for that we provide support for them. That is support of every kind. I will come back in a moment to talk about veterans and support for people who have suffered as a result of their service in the armed forces, but that support is not the purpose behind the covenant.

The covenant is about supporting people in our armed services every day of their lives, and their families. There are about 200,000 people who currently serve in our armed forces and do a brilliant job of doing it. There are also their families. If we take 200,000 people and consider regular turnover, probably a million people, or something of that sort, in Britain today have served in the last 20 years. Add their families to that number and we are talking about 2 million, 3 million or 5 million people who are being affected by service in the forces. The purpose behind the covenant is to ensure that they are not disadvantaged as a result of that service. It is about enabling them to go off to places around the world, to serve in the way that they do—they do so superbly well—and to ensure that their families are given education, housing, medical support and all the other things that they deserve. Those are things that they must have as service families.

I pay tribute to the variety of charities that do those things so extremely well. I am proud to be a patron of Recruit for Spouses, which provides jobs for the spouses of armed service personnel. I am also a patron of Mutual Support, which looks after service people with multiple sclerosis, as the initials indicate. A whole host of other similar charities of one sort or another do all sorts of things to help the families of our armed services.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I echo the hon. Gentleman's sentiments and comments on the charities that do so much good work. Would he join me in sending the wonderful volunteers at HorseBack UK all our best wishes as they try to deal with the flooding affecting their premises in Aberdeenshire?

**Mr James Gray:** I was not aware of the particular circumstances that the hon. Lady mentions, but if that is occurring in west Aberdeenshire—I know the area extremely well—I of course wish them well in their work, and I hope that they successfully rehabilitate their premises.

An enormous number of military charities across the board are doing all sorts of good work for people who are serving, for their families and for veterans. I am glad that they do that work. I am proud to be wearing the SSAFA tie this afternoon. Such organisations, which include the Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes—we spoke about them earlier—are outstandingly good charities doing outstandingly good work for our armed services.

[*Mr James Gray*]

One or two of the speeches this afternoon have focused on those who are disadvantaged because of their service in the armed forces, but that seems to misunderstand slightly the nature of the covenant. Of course it is right that people who have been injured in warfare, whether physically or mentally, should be looked after properly. Of course it is right that when people have come back and have all sorts of difficulties—whether they find themselves in prison or have problems with drugs or drink or other issues—we should look after them properly. That, however, is a very small part of the covenant.

The covenant is a broad document that concerns every aspect of the armed forces and every aspect of how we look after those who we ask to do jobs that we ourselves would not do. It is right that on such an occasion as this we should celebrate the triumph of the magnificent armed forces, their fantastic work and how we in this place are duty-bound to look after them and say, “Thank you very much” for what they do.

The covenant usefully covers what happens during a person’s active service. In North Wiltshire we have a huge military presence, and a great many cases come to my notice, including bullying in the armed forces, failure to be promoted and all sorts of other things that might go wrong in a serviceman’s career. The covenant says that we must look after our armed servicemen and what they are doing on the ground. We must encourage them in their careers and help and support them. They have a difficult job to do. Often they are away from their families and are asked to do all kinds of things that we would not normally do ourselves. Their career path must be encouraged and supported by what we do, and the covenant must take account of that.

I will focus on one particular aspect this afternoon in my brief contribution. I must be careful about my language, but it is what the press have called “ambulance-chasing lawyers”. That issue does not really appear in the armed forces covenant, but perhaps it should. Lawyers have been trawling around Iraq in particular, finding people who allege some form of abuse by our armed forces in Iraq 10 or 15 years ago. That has been highlighted in particular with the lawyers, Leigh Day, which behaved very badly in the al-Sweady inquiry, wasting £31 million of public money in pursuing a case that should not have been pursued in the first place. A whole variety of other lawyers are doing similar work in Iraq today.

We must be very aware of that issue because it does not only affect our veterans. It must be terribly worrying for large numbers of our veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan when they did things perfectly correctly under orders and behaved naturally, but some lawyers for their own financial reasons are seeking to investigate what they did. That must also have an effect on the operational capabilities of our forces today. Any soldier doing something might have to think, “What would happen if I got this wrong? What would happen if I breach some rule? What will happen if, in 10 or 15 years’ time, the law changes and the law comes back and haunts me and seeks to arrest me or prosecute me for something that I should have perfectly happily been doing under the law?”

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, who wrote a magnificent paper about “lawfare” called “The Fog of Law”. He wrote it

with Laura Croft, if I remember rightly. That fine paper lays out precisely how the law might interfere with operational effectiveness on the ground, and we have seen that issue become a great deal worse in recent years.

I would not want what has been a consensual, pleasant and important debate to become party political in any shape, size or form—it would be quite wrong if it did—but it is none the less worth noting that the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), who was appointed just yesterday, is in receipt of £45,000 of cash from this particular bunch of lawyers. It is she who, among other things, described that firm as a “great firm”. Our armed servicemen, who are worried about whether they will be picked up by that “great firm”, might be worried by her attitude.

**Mr David Hanson (in the Chair):** Order. If I may offer some gentle guidance, the points that the hon. Gentleman is making are perfectly within order, but the subject of the debate is the military covenant, and I hope he will reflect on that when making his remarks.

**Mr Gray:** You make an extremely good point, Mr Hanson. If I were in your place, which I often am, it is a point I would be making myself to speakers of my kind. None the less, it is worth reflecting on the fact that people serving around the world are taking difficult and often instant decisions. If there is a flicker in the jungle, they may fire at it. Was that the right thing to have done? The difficulty with these cases is that servicemen do not know whether someone will come looking for them in 10 or 15 years’ time, saying, “You should not have done that. You are arrested.” There are a number of particularly high-profile cases at the moment. We took part in a debate in the Chamber not so long ago on Marine A.

The simple point I make is that our contract with our armed forces asks them to do things that we would not. Part of that contract must give them the freedom, the rights and the ability to carry out things—to close with the Queen’s enemy and kill them if necessary; they do not want to do that, but if they have to do that, they have to do that—without excessive intervention by the law courts, whether domestically or even in the International Criminal Court. One thing that we might consider writing into the covenant is some approach to the whole question of “lawfare”, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling described it.

Leaving that to one side, the document is superb. I am pleased that the annual report that we produced recently demonstrates further work and further advances in a whole variety of areas. That is good. The covenant is incredibly important and I am glad that we are reviewing it every year. I hope very much that there will be debates in this Chamber in years to come, and that in those debates we will be able to record for posterity that every year we are giving our armed services greater respect and looking after them and their families in an ever better way.

2.38 pm

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am grateful to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Hanson. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) for his kind words on my

paper, “The Fog of Law”, which was published a couple of years ago. That paper is only more relevant, sadly, given that various trials—we warned of them several years ago—are coming to fruition. Young men who took decisions on our behalf are being unfairly pressured into answering for actions that were fundamentally of the Government and therefore of this House, rather than their own. When considering the covenant, it is important that we consider the individuals—they are carrying out requests not on their behalf, but on ours.

I should immediately declare an interest, as I am still serving in Her Majesty’s armed forces as a reserve officer. I have many friends who continue to serve in uniform, and I am proud to say that they do. The points I was going to make on the military covenant have already been made, so I will limit my comments a little more than others may have needed to.

The fundamental point of the covenant is that it is not just something that we give to those in the armed forces: the possibly 1 to 4 million people that my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire referred to; it is actually how we ensure our own future. All relationships and human interactions are fundamentally reciprocal. In the give and take of the armed forces covenant is the extension of the commitment we make to our troops. It is the extension of buying a proper uniform, of making sure the troops are properly armed, trained, paid and motivated. Part of that is the covenant. If we get that wrong, we not only fail to look after those who served us with great honour and courage, but we weaken ourselves, because we discourage the best and the brightest of every generation who have served with great fortitude in our armed forces. Indeed, everyone from the grandson of the monarch to the grandson of anybody else has served in our armed forces.

We discourage people from serving, and in doing so we weaken ourselves. I therefore argue that the military covenant is not an act of generosity or normalisation, but of self-defence. We must look at it very clearly as such, because self-interest in this area is sometimes the way to get the best result out of the Exchequer. The Chancellor has already been generous, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) identified, but it is important that we do not see the stories, which we occasionally see, about servicemen having to sell homes to fund the purchase of prosthetic limbs, and it is important that other veterans are not forced out of the family home in search of medical help. We need to make sure that such duties are taken on by society, not only because it is the right, moral and honourable thing to do, but because it is the best, safest and most sensible thing to do.

I look forward very much to our covenant coming to fruition and the reports building one upon another, so that we get to a state where what we are really arguing about is tweaks and turns and not substance, because, as we build up that covenant, we build up our own defence. That covenant is not only about the individuals, but about the families. When I speak to serving members of the armed forces today, I know that part of that covenant is also about the way in which we treat the serving families. I am particularly struck time and again when people—my friends in the armed forces—talk to me about things such as continuity of education. Some people have seen it as a luxury; some have said it is a way to support various families to continue a form of

education that has long gone from most people in society. It is not. It is a way of ensuring that families who move around—men and women who serve overseas at the drop of a hat, who leave home and family and go away—can continue to ensure that their children are properly cared for; that they enjoy the opportunities that they rightly deserve; and that, where the family is staying at home in one location, they enjoy it.

How do I know that? If we look at any large employer or any of the large multinationals that regularly move people and take staff and say, “You were a director of X in London; you are now a director of Y in Paris, New York or Nigeria,” one of the essential parts of the package of employment is always education. No father or mother will accept to impoverish their children’s future. It is wrong that we should ask serving members of today’s armed forces to do that, which is why I strongly support the continuity of education allowance. It is essential not only in terms of recruiting and maintaining the quality of personnel—officers and other ranks; many apply for it—but to guarantee the commitment to maintain that we have the best and the brightest for the future.

I want to talk a little about the law. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire has spoken extremely eloquently about it. The law can be used in both ways. It can be used quite rightly to support the actions of our armed forces and to defend them. That is exactly what the Geneva convention is for: to control and regulate the conduct of operations in battle. However, it is also right that we use the appropriate law. Sadly, in recent years a legal doctrine has grown up in which we have started to use inappropriate legislation, and we have started to treat soldiers as policemen. Once again, this is not just a nicety and choosing which element we like or do not like; this is fundamentally about the security of the state and the liberty of the individual. If we start to view people who are not policemen but soldiers and treat them like civilians, various operations become impossible.

It would be wrong to ask the police to storm a building knowing that they would take casualties of 5% or 10%, and yet we asked young men to do that on the beaches of Normandy. It would be wrong to ask the police to go into a riot situation knowing that five or 10 of them would probably be killed, but that is exactly what we did at Mount Tumbledown in the Falkland Islands. We do it again and again, because what we ask servicemen to do is not the job of a civilian. It is not the job of a policeman, a doctor or a fireman; it is something more than that. We literally ask them to put their lives on the line.

The deal is up to death, and that deal makes the covenant different, but it also means that the legal protection that is required to enable soldiers to act and to operate is also different. They must have the right to act. They must have the ability to act in a sensible and reasonable way. This does not mean that they must have the right to break the law; they do not and should not. This does not mean that the Geneva convention is irrelevant; it is not and it should not be. This does not mean that they should be allowed to commit murder, rape, looting or anything else. They are not and should not.

What it does mean is this: soldiers take split-second decisions—hard decisions—that young men and women were taking every day when I was in Afghanistan and Iraq. The 18 and 21-year-olds—junior commanders;

[Tom Tugendhat]

sometimes more senior—were taking split-second decisions and then, 10 years later, in the cool of the courtroom, were being asked to justify to people who had never walked on to a beach without getting into a sweat how they could have made such a decision, evaluated the situation they saw before them, and taken a call. What was actually happening was that the serviceman or woman in question was being asked to justify the decisions of this House that sent them there, and that is wrong. That is why it is right that the appropriate law, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire put it, is the law that should apply, and not the European Court of Human Rights. In this case I have argued against various articles, in the paper “The Fog of Law”.

There is another point I want to make about the covenant: it must apply as widely as we can make it. Many have served our armed forces with huge honour and distinction around the world, and I include the enormously courageous interpreters I served with in Afghanistan. I include the Iraqis who sadly lost their lives serving next to us, but in the Queen’s uniform—they were dressed as we were—as interpreters. We owe them a duty of care, too. This covenant does not cover them—I understand that—but the generosity of Her Majesty’s armed forces and Her Majesty’s Government must include them. Only by doing so will we ensure that we get the best people to serve alongside us in our time of need. Those interpreters were not extras. They were not a luxury. They were not an add-on to our fighting capability; they were integral to it. Only by getting that right will we maintain the fundamental combat power that the British armed forces deploy on operations. It is absolutely right that we extend the covenant rights, as much as is possible and is reasonable, to those who have served alongside us.

**Mr Gray:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about the interpreters, and we are making some steps in the right direction there, but there are of course large numbers of other contractors of one sort or another, who in many cases serve right up at the frontline. To a greater or lesser degree they, too, should be covered by the terms of the military covenant.

**Tom Tugendhat:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I agree entirely with what he just said.

I want to bring in one other aspect: the fact that many, many young men and women from various other countries have served in Her Majesty’s uniform. Our recruitment system is blessed in having young men and women from all over the world who want to come and serve in our armed forces. My information may be out of date, but when I joined the armed forces, more men and women from the Republic of Ireland were serving in the British Army than were in the Republic’s army. Those young men and women, who serve in the Queen’s uniform, deserve as much protection as we can give them. Ireland is an independent state, and quite rightly so, but it is absolutely right that Her Majesty’s Government should recognise their service and, where appropriate, offer the same support through the covenant that British servicemen would enjoy anywhere else. The same is true of Nigeria, Nepal or South Africa. Young men and women have come from those countries, sometimes

in great numbers, and served alongside us. I urge the Minister to look very closely at how, through the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development, Her Majesty’s Government can support communities that have sent young men and women to fight alongside ours.

Finally, I should say that the covenant is not always essential, because some of us have benefited disproportionately from our armed service. I have benefited massively from the camaraderie. I have benefited hugely from the education and the training. I have benefited completely from the moral ethos and the integrity that has, quite rightly, been rammed into us all. Military service is not a disadvantage. It is not a handicap. It is in no way something that should hold one back. It does not. In the vast majority of cases, military service empowers, enables and liberates people. It takes young men and women, often those who have been failed by the civilian services in our society, and gives them the leg up that they always needed, and a sense of discipline and purpose. The covenant is not a negative. It is not always about correcting a fault. It is about recognising where we can do that little bit more.

2.53 pm

**Johnny Mercer** (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) for the opportunity to speak in this debate. There can be no doubt about the growth in relevance of the armed forces covenant at this crucial time at the end of conventional combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. We have been at war in the public eye for some time. It is now critical that we get things right and put veterans’ care on a sustainable footing, thereby ensuring that they receive the very best levels of care, as is our duty.

Over Christmas, I read the Ministry of Defence report into the armed forces covenant and was heartened by much of what I read. Nevertheless, it would be disingenuous of me not to report what I have seen and felt, not only in Plymouth but throughout the country, which is in some cases a little different from what is in the report. The covenant’s core principle is that no one should be disadvantaged as a result of service. However, the truth is that servicemen and women are finding that the support they have come to rely on in the military falls away when they become veterans. There is, if one likes, a support cliff, of which there is clear evidence. One example of many is the Chavasse report by Professor Tim Briggs, which focuses on the unique needs of those with complex musculoskeletal injuries who are being discharged by the MOD or the Defence Medical Services into an NHS system that cannot entirely address their needs.

We have heard a lot of examples today, which I do not wish to repeat. My comments on the military covenant will be more holistic and strategic. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning a story that came out in the summer, when we were in recess. Clive Smith, who served in Afghanistan, found himself having to remortgage his house so that he could walk again. While he was serving in the military, his prosthetics care gave him four years of freedom, but when he left he found himself falling directly off the support cliff. Fed up with feeling disadvantaged, Clive reacted in the traditional Army fashion by finding the solution in a trip to Australia for

controversial treatment to directly fix sockets to his upper legs—so-called osseointegration. LIBOR funding has just been approved for limited trials of the procedure to start in the United Kingdom, but Clive is fed up and his faith in the system has been lost. That he should feel that way after sacrificing so much for our nation is simply unacceptable. If the covenant is working, we need to ask why that is happening.

There are plenty of examples like that, but, as I said, I want to keep my comments brief and offer a more strategic and holistic view of the military covenant across the service community. I will be as brief as I can in trying to highlight a couple of key issues that need attention.

**Mrs Moon:** I hope the hon. Gentleman will join me in asking the Minister to look in particular at continence support and care. Those who have high lower-limb blast damage often suffer continence problems. I wonder whether that can be looked at.

**Johnny Mercer** *rose*—

**Mr David Hanson (in the Chair):** Order. There is a Division in the House, so the sitting is suspended. We will return in 15 minutes' time when Mr Graham Brady will take the Chair. Mr Mercer should be back in time to ensure he can continue.

2.56 pm

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*

3.11 pm

*On resuming*—

[MR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

**Mr Graham Brady (in the Chair):** The sitting is now resumed and may continue until 4.45 pm.

**Johnny Mercer:** To pick up where I left off, we have heard a lot of examples today, and such examples are sometimes helpful and sometimes unhelpful, but I want to focus on broadbrush, strategic views of the military covenant across the service community—not only my own views, but those of a plethora of friends who remain in post. I will be as brief as I can as I try to highlight a couple of key areas.

There is a key problem with the corporate covenant in our large companies, and this was identified in the report, which is great. There is an appetite among our chief executives and business leaders—I have seen this—to support Government efforts to implement the corporate covenant. It is really important that we have that big company buy-in and agreement to what we are trying to do, but getting the information to the shop floor—the interface between our servicemen and women and these bigger companies—where it really matters, so that veterans receive the benefits associated with the military covenant, is, unfortunately, another matter entirely.

As I say, the issue is covered in the report, but I want to add to what the report says, not just repeat it. I want to do that because this issue was raised 12 months ago, but, unfortunately, little change can be seen. The point is really important because if we make a big public show of signing up large companies to the covenant, but the effects are not felt in the armed forces and in the veterans' community, that can increase the feeling of

tokenism that can so often be associated, rightly or wrongly, with such schemes. I will touch on that briefly at the end of my comments.

Another key area that really matters to our servicemen and women and to our veterans' community is financial disadvantage. That is the subject of an ongoing project in the MOD, but it cannot be right that British Forces Post Office numbers are still not recognised by some companies, meaning that some service overseas personnel do not have three years of continuous residence, for example. That continues to cause them real and significant problems when they access certain financial products in this country.

On another financial issue, I noted with interest in the report the fact that some mobile phone companies are allowing soldiers to pause their contracts while they complete service overseas. I would suggest that that is a very modest step, and not really one to hang our hat on, because I was able to do that as far back as 2007. It is important that we recognise the small steps, but they must be set in perspective, given the challenge of ensuring that we meet the Prime Minister's commitment to people facing “no disadvantage” due to their military service.

For me, that strikes at the very heart of the challenge of implementing the military covenant. Reading the report, there is no doubt that significant progress has been made. However, while some soldiers are required to look abroad for care and to fund their recovery personally, while some still struggle to access the myriad brilliant veterans' service providers in the third sector, and while it is only in the last 12 months that we have begun to see a slightly better transition of medical records from the military to civilian GPs, the Government must see this report in context, and set it against the increasing demand and the narrowing timeframe, if they are to get this subject right.

There is no doubt that the military covenant has been a step forward on the part of the Government in how we look after our servicemen and women, and I welcome that. However, it remains without teeth and without enforcement, and we expect servicemen and women and veterans to enforce the spirit and will of it themselves, so it is, unfortunately, felt in some areas of the country to be empty promises.

We are at a critical juncture in how we look after our servicemen and women and our veterans' community. Some have long spoken of the need to get this issue right, and many of us will remain forever indebted to those noble individuals who have stepped up and delivered veterans' care in the charity sector simply because that needed to be done. However, if we are to put veterans' care on a sustainable basis, now is the time to deliver. In five years, it will be too late; the problem will be too large, and the recent conflicts will be forgotten.

How we look after our servicemen and women and their families is a mark of how professional we see them as and how seriously we take our military in these globally unsettling times. Looking after those who have been prepared to sacrifice so much is a crucial and full part of combat operations; indeed, it is of equal importance to the other parts.

When it comes to finance, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have channelled millions into the sector. We owe it to them and to the country to make sure that the existing finance is sweated accordingly. I understand that we live in times of financial restraint, and that is a

[Johnny Mercer]

common objection to reform. I take this opportunity to remind the Government, however, that if we can afford to conduct operations abroad, we can afford to look after our people when they return; if we cannot afford to look after those who do our bidding, we must not send them. This is that important.

Next Tuesday, I will be reacting to an important study by King's College London into the scale of the problem we face in meeting our veterans' needs. On the back of that, I will release a report I have written in partnership with others calling for the total reform of the way we look after veterans' care. Such reform is necessary if we are successfully to meet their needs, as is our duty.

That aims of that reform are bold but simple. It seeks to eradicate gaps in the veterans' care system. It seeks no fear or favour from any of our brilliant charity sector service providers or, indeed, the Government, who have done more than any before them to get this right. It is simply an objective attempt to reconfigure services around the user and to ensure that the Government play their part in delivering what is a function of operations—looking after those who serve.

The Government's report is encouraging, and it makes wide reference to what is going into the arena of military support, but, critically, it fails to provide any meaningful statistical reference to the single most important measure of success: what our military community actually got out of this. No one seems to be tracking that against a common, easy-to-grasp metric, and there is no user-focused data on what the beneficiary community think about what is on offer or on their broader views of the military covenant.

I conclude by asking the Government to pay close attention to the report that King's College London will release on Tuesday. It would be a good idea to work out how many men and women, along with their families, got the fair second chance Theodore Roosevelt referred to when he said:

"A man who is good enough to shed his blood for his country is good enough to be given a square deal afterwards."

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed for securing a debate on this important matter.

**Mr Graham Brady (in the Chair):** We now move to the three Front-Bench winding-up speeches. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed can make a brief reply at the end if she would like.

3.18 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady.

As I rise to sum up for the Scottish National party, I am struck by the support on both sides of the Chamber for our armed forces and the work they do. As the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) noted, we have a special obligation to members of our armed forces, including our reserve forces, and to those who have served. The armed forces covenant recognises that, which is very welcome, but we need to focus on making sure that we back up its fine sentiments with real, measurable action and that that makes a difference.

We need to make sure that the UK Government address concerns in a number of areas—for instance, welfare and pensions.

There have been many useful and thoughtful contributions this afternoon, and the tone hon. Members have adopted is notable. It is evident that, as a group, we wish to see a clear and consistent position—one where our armed forces and our veterans see continual improvements in the way they are dealt with, as they should under the armed forces covenant. It is possible to make positive changes, as those of us who have been campaigning for fair treatment for veterans with mesothelioma perceive from the Minister's recent comments. However, it is an indictment of the antiquated procedures of this place that the armed forces covenant report, which is published annually—this is its fourth year—has never been debated in the House until now. I am sure that it would not be on the agenda if it were not for the creation of the all-party group on the armed forces covenant. It is positive that the all-party group, of which I am pleased to be a member, has obtained the debate, through the Backbench Business Committee. I wholeheartedly commend the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) on her initiative on moving things forward.

The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) made a useful point about using the report as an opportunity on which to build year by year. There will always be more to do, but it is clear that the report endorses the pioneering work of the Scottish Government to support our armed forces personnel and veterans. That is a positive place from which to move forward and continue to strive for the best for those who serve. I am hopeful that, in the spirit of sharing good practice in all directions for positive ends, the UK Government will take into account the work being done in Scotland, which is pioneering. For instance, in Scotland, we have the UK's first veterans commissioner, Eric Fraser. That is an important role, which allows us to develop our capacity in the key areas of concern to veterans. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) spoke passionately about veterans' needs and interests, and I think that we need to consider that role thoroughly.

The Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Governments have contributed to the annual report and their co-operation is valuable, particularly at a time when, as the hon. Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed and for Plymouth, Moor View noted, our service personnel are engaged in so many challenging duties, and in increasingly complex modern warfare. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire rightly pointed out that the covenant deals with a huge range of aspects of military and veterans' issues. For example, we may usefully ask further questions about concerns that healthcare may not be keeping up to speed with mental health needs. What support is given to Royal Navy personnel currently operating in the Mediterranean who daily see young children and their parents drown in a desperate search for a safer life? That must be incredibly distressing, and it is our duty to consider the wellbeing of our forces as they go about that vital humanitarian task.

A further concern that I have expressed in this Chamber before is the level of knowledge and support provided to care for the mental wellbeing of those who are deployed as drone operators. IKV Pax Christi, a Dutch peace organisation, produced a paper discussing the

psychological impact on drone operators. It raised concern about “psychological numbing”. The authors note emotional and stress impacts on the operators

“when they see and hear their friends come under fire or when they can see (often in detail) the effect of their own actions”.

It is a very challenging role that we ask those members of the forces to undertake, and it is our responsibility to assess the impact upon them of what they do and see, so that we can provide appropriate support.

It is a matter of concern that last year’s annual report on the military covenant included a commitment to the publication of a report on the causes of deaths among veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, but that that has been delayed because of “unforeseen resource issues” and is now due for publication later this year. I hope that the UK Government will not let that slide, because it is important in allowing us to establish and deliver specific support, which those veterans desperately need.

The most recent report revealed a steady increase in assessments for mental disorders from 1.8% of UK armed forces personnel in 2007-08 to 2.9% in 2014-15, so there is clearly an urgent need to assess the impact of modern warfare on our service personnel. In contributing to the report, the Royal British Legion also pointed out that there is a need for

“investment in research on ‘what works’ in treating veterans with Gulf War illness”.

I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who commended the fantastic work of the charities that work with our armed forces and veterans. They certainly deserve our thanks and support, and we should look out for areas in which we can help them and make a difference.

The Scottish Government are working very hard to support our armed forces personnel and veterans, and to work with charities, for example through state-of-the-art healthcare facilities and programmes such as the Scottish care information gateway, where the installation of hardware to ensure that military health centres have access to the same system as any Scottish GP is now complete. Also, in partnership with NHS Scotland and Combat Stress, the Scottish Government recently renewed funding for the provision of specialist mental health services for veterans resident in Scotland at the Combat Stress facility, Hollybush House, in Ayr.

The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) raised the issue of prosthetics. Scotland provides a state-of-the-art national specialist prosthetics service. The unit is working well through a single multidisciplinary team approach across two specialist centres in Edinburgh and Glasgow, with links to all the other limb-fitting centres in the country.

I completely agree with the comments by the hon. Member for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh) about the vital importance of families and of the education of service personnel’s children. In Scotland we have made sure that education is at the heart of our support for armed forces personnel, including those who want to make the transition back to civilian life. We are providing support to forces families to allow them to do that. Clearly, Scotland’s overwhelming contribution to supporting education for service personnel families and veterans is their entitlement to free higher education and the fact that they benefit from our scrapping of tuition fees.

As the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) noted, all 32 local authorities in Scotland now have a nominated education officer for armed forces families, and Education Scotland is working with the national transitions officer. They have produced learning resources to support those working with service children. Education Scotland also works closely with SkillForce in Scotland, a charity that draws on the skills of ex-forces personnel to inspire young people. It is also working with the combined cadet force, alongside schools, to deliver parts of the Curriculum for Excellence as part of the cadet experience programme. It is therefore important to consider Scotland’s wide development of education facilities for service personnel, and to include that in the UK Government’s forthcoming University of Winchester project report, which is aimed at improving the understanding of factors that affect the progress of children from service families.

The Scottish Government’s progressive attitude to housing—a topic that several hon. Members have mentioned—has benefited veterans. The SNP has scrapped Margaret Thatcher’s damaging right-to-buy policy, which was hampering the housing stock and restricting local authorities’ ability to provide social housing. If we had built at English rates since 2007 we would have 42,000 fewer homes than we do. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2014 issues guidance to encourage social landlords to give fair and sympathetic consideration to applicants leaving the armed forces, something that is important for families at that time of great change. The SNP Scottish Government have also allocated £80 million to their Open Market shared equity scheme in 2015-16, promoted to members of the armed forces, and they continue to work in partnership with the veterans charity the Scottish Veterans Garden City Association to build 38 homes across six local authority areas to support physically and psychologically impaired veterans.

Local authorities can be at the forefront of good practice. In my local area, Jane Duncan, the East Renfrewshire Council veterans’ champion, is, with her team, making a significant difference to people’s lives in practical ways. The hon. Member for Bridgend mentioned the importance of shared work, and she would be interested to know that that team works and shares practice across three local authorities, to very positive ends.

In September 2015, military service campaigners welcomed confirmation by the Scottish Government that changes are being introduced that will make fatal accident inquiries mandatory for cases involving service personnel. Coroners’ inquests are currently mandatory in England and Wales, but FAIs are at the discretion of the Lord Advocate in Scotland. Cases such as the recent fatal collision of two RAF Tornado jets above the Moray Firth, for instance, did not result in a fatal accident inquiry.

Additionally, the recent Armed Forces Bill has considered in depth the issue of sexual assault in relation to service personnel. A number of amendments were tabled to the Bill to improve the recording of those incidents and the structure of discipline arrangements. It is important for all concerned to increase efforts to deal with sexual assaults in the services.

In their contribution to the report on the armed forces covenant, the Confederation of Service Charities, the War Widows Association and Professor Sir Hew Strachan said:

[Kirsten Oswald]

“We observed last year that there would be merit in formally reviewing the initiatives taken by the devolved administrations with a view to identifying best practice which might be embraced more widely across the UK.”

That is important for future policy development. The report notes that,

“the Armed Forces community should have the same access to benefits as any UK citizen”.

Unfortunately, that means inequality just as it does for the rest of society suffering from the Chancellor’s iniquitous benefit cuts. Our armed forces and veterans deserve our support and respect. However, that respect is missing in the removal of commitment bonuses and accelerated incremental progression, which were important in encouraging retention and upskilling. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of pounds in extra spending have been earmarked for the spiralling costs of Trident replacement.

It is encouraging, however, that following calls from my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), the Prime Minister has vowed to examine pensions for armed forces widows. When he raised the issue at Prime Minister’s questions on 4 November at column 961, my right hon. Friend pointed out that many service widows continue to be deprived of their forces pensions if there is a change in their personal circumstances, and that that is a clear breach in the spirit of the military covenant. I hope that the Prime Minister will see fit to make progress on that.

In 2016 the UK Government are launching the new armed forces covenant brand. I think we would all agree that we support engagement with our communities in support of our service personnel and veterans, but to conclude on the note I started on, that cannot just be a matter of words. We need to back up our fine sentiments with real and continued progress. We rely on our service personnel to do the hardest and most dangerous jobs there are, and we must support them in that.

3.30 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. Governments ask a lot of those who serve in our armed forces, so we need to ensure that both regulars and reserves, and their families, are well served by Government. It is therefore vital that the Government respond to their needs. I welcome the fourth report on the armed forces covenant, which Labour was so proud to instigate when in government, and I welcome today’s debate, called for by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan). The armed forces covenant is on a journey and is constantly in development. It is right on such occasions that we take stock of where we have come from and consider where we can travel to.

Before I respond to the debate, I want to pay tribute to the work of our armed forces, not least this Christmas when they played a vital role at home in supporting flooded communities. I can give testament to the excellent service they provided in my constituency of York Central through the height of the floods. I thank Brigadier Gerald Strickland, commander of the 4th Infantry Brigade, for his leadership and also York’s local signal regiment. Many men and women are also serving in the most dangerous parts of the world, and we pay tribute to their professionalism and skill as they serve their country.

Ensuring that the families of personnel are supported with good services, from housing to health, is one of their greatest concerns when serving overseas. We have all heard stories from personnel about how, before taking part in operations, they are concerned more about whether the shower at home has been fixed than about the dangerous, high-risk situations they are about to face. As we debate the armed covenant and as we look forward, we must ensure that we focus on our service personnel’s peace of mind and ensure that they can be focused in times of duty because their families are supported at home. From spending time with service personnel, with their families and with many charitable organisations, including the services families federations, we know that more needs to be done to ensure that both regulars and reserves receive the very best support.

The armed forces covenant is a mechanism to ensure that no detriment is suffered by our service personnel, but we have also heard in today’s debate about whether we should take the opportunity to champion their needs. The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) mentioned scope of the covenant and whether it should be increased, bringing in interpreters, contractors and those who have come from overseas to serve in the British forces, so that we can work out how best to honour their service.

The armed forces covenant is a covenant for four nations. We heard about best practice in Wales, including representation on all health boards, bringing in awareness of the needs of service personnel, and the mental health self-referral system for victims of PTSD. At a time when so many people have ongoing mental health needs, it is important that we take that into account. We also heard about some of the challenges raised so articulately by the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan), including ensuring that the covenant is applied without representation on the reference group. We all want the hon. Gentleman to have as much support as possible so that he is able to further the covenant in Northern Ireland. Speaking of best practice, the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) mentioned the work being done in Scotland with the first Scottish Veterans Commissioner and some of the specialist services in mental health, prosthetic care, education and housing.

Let me turn to healthcare, specifically mesothelioma, which is a pressing issue, as many with the disease may not have long to live. Labour tabled an amendment to the current Armed Forces Bill to ensure that compensation for those with the disease matches what all other civilians receive. I know that the Minister is sympathetic to that, and I would welcome an update ahead of the Bill’s Third Reading next week on the progress made.

The covenant report rightly highlights the investment in specific services, from audiology to wheelchair provision, but one of the challenges faced by charitable and specialist organisations when providing healthcare is navigating the NHS, which has become far more complicated since the reorganisation following the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Instead of trying to engage in dialogue with over 200 clinical commissioning groups, there must be a smarter way for specialist services to deal with the NHS. I therefore ask the Minister to consider whether NHS England could be the focal point for organisations that are trying to provide such services. Many organisations, whether they deal with physical or mental health, have said that they are having multiple conversations, and it would be helpful if we could find a smoother way.

Continued reports of expedient access to treatment—which we have heard a lot about today—are also an important part of the challenge. We have received reports that people are waiting, whether for a transfer from one service to another due to relocation or just on waiting lists. We must ensure that dealing with the needs of both veterans and serving personnel, and their families, is expedited. It would be helpful to get more reports on the waits that people are experiencing in prosthetic care, wheelchair adaptation and access to mental health services, which can vary across the country. The current waits are unacceptable and can make situations worse. If someone receives an injury, they should be prioritised, not only for the duration of their service but for life, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) highlighted in his contribution. What mechanisms are in place for monitoring veterans' waiting times and what more is being done to help them to access services?

The Minister has done much to focus on mental health, and Combat Stress is playing a vital role in providing information and crucial research for better understanding of mental health needs and how to address them. Key to that is securing good tracking of veterans, which is a real challenge. What progress has been made in tracking those who have left the services—for example, by maintaining a database of their information to allow for continued communication?

**Mr James Gray:** The hon. Lady has been talking a great deal of sense—up until now. I take slight issue with her on the notion of a database. So many bureaucrats love to come up with databases, but we are potentially talking about many millions of people who are constantly changing their way of life, address and everything else. Trying to keep any kind of updated central database is therefore virtually impossible. It would be much better to rely on regimental and local support services to keep track of the people from their own units.

**Rachael Maskell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but tracking veterans and providing a continuum of service to those who have served is a real issue about which I have spoken to many organisations. I am not saying that the mechanism for doing so has to be at a governmental level—it could be regimental—but it is important for data access, research, and monitoring and overseeing the welfare of former personnel. Too many are slipping through the net, often because of constant changes of address due to their having no fixed abode or having to change locations. It is really important that, as part of our duty of care, we are on top of who they are and where they live.

Much needs to be done to support the mental health of service personnel, as has been highlighted today. We are asking for all serving and former members of the armed forces and their families to have better access to mental health assessments and services. The health service, in particular for mental health, is challenged at the moment, as we know from our constituencies, whether in delivery, capacity or prioritisation. Further investment is important, in particular in personnel.

We cannot depend on an individual presenting themselves for support, because that is often late in the day, when further treatment is needed and further damage has already happened because of the delay. We are changing attitudes to mental health culturally, with better

understanding coming more to the fore, but it is vital to take a more proactive approach towards mental health, moving upstream with it and ensuring that the needs of service personnel and their families are seen as a priority. We should provide the opportunity for assessment continuously, because early intervention can make such a radical difference to outcomes.

The public health agenda, although not mentioned in the report, should be a focus of Government attention. Alcohol use in the armed forces is a major concern and many veterans experience difficulties with substance abuse, so far more needs to be done to address public health concerns. Will the Minister develop a public health strategy for the armed forces to focus on the main pillars of public health? I was heartened to hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) said about the free swimming initiative in her constituency, but a public health strategy right across the services would be helpful, because so many people would benefit. Prevention of poor health is vital, and with the right investment we can save lives. Again, it is time to move upstream and to be proactive about the health agenda.

Much is being done on education, as the report highlights. The itinerant nature of work in the armed forces, however, has an impact on young lives. Moving families from base to base has consequences. In discussion with service personnel, I have found that many appreciate the benefits of their itinerant work and enjoy living in different communities, but many families find it disruptive, not least for their children's education. One solution is highlighted in the report, but it is also important to think about other opportunities for families to have stability in a community.

Many service personnel have asked me—and I ask the Minister—whether it is necessary for their work to be as itinerant as it is currently. Can more stability be provided, so that families stay far longer on one base? If so, children could have greater stability in their education and social networks, and spouses and partners could have greater stability of employment. Education is a lifelong issue and something on which the armed forces are very focused. Beyond the plans in the report, will the Minister also look at increasing opportunities for spouses and partners to engage in lifelong educational opportunities? They give so much to support those in the services and their children, but they should also be given a greater opportunity to develop their own careers. The itinerant nature of the forces militates against career opportunities for the wider family.

Transition issues are also vital. Many leave the services and find that their plan for the future fails, so they might need to revisit their opportunities for an exit or transition strategy. I am therefore asking for continuous access to educational opportunities for veterans, so that even if their plans go wrong, they can come back to get back on course. We want those transitional opportunities to be seen as longer term.

Many points have already been made about housing, but there are so many service personnel who want security for a home. Increasing demand for home ownership has been addressed with the Help to Buy scheme, which we welcome, but for some it is still inaccessible because of the level of income necessary or because of priorities at their stage of life. There are equity share schemes, but will the Minister also consider a rent-to-buy scheme?

[*Rachael Maskell*]

That is very much part of Labour's wider housing agenda, but I suggest it as another option in this housing portfolio.

The maintenance of service housing has been raised with me on a number of occasions. Companies have sometimes not been as good at fulfilling their contracts as perhaps they should have. What mechanisms are in place to monitor such contracts to ensure that they are fulfilled and that work is carried out in a timely way? Government need to provide scrutiny of the process, because so many personnel are concerned about what is happening at home when they are away.

I want to touch on the corporate covenant and then the community covenant. Engagement with the corporate covenant has increased. Seven-hundred companies are now signed up, so the momentum is picking up, but that number is quite small in the scale of things. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed also made that point, but engagement with the corporate covenant cannot be seen as tokenism either. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View was right to say that it must go beyond that and have real meaning.

In addition, all commercial companies that the Ministry of Defence procures from should be obliged to sign up to the corporate covenant under a mandatory social clause in MOD contracts. If a company is to gain from the MOD, it should also make a commitment to the services through the corporate covenant. I have been given examples of companies employing people working on MOD contracts that have not served reservists well on their return to the company. I would like the Minister to look at that. We believe a social clause would strengthen relationships and understanding of service personnel and bring greater synergy between service-provision companies and the armed forces. We think it should be extended to subcontractors, too.

The community covenant has received support from all local authorities, although I note the exception in Northern Ireland and hope for progress there. The vague nature of the relationship needs to be developed. I note the review due in March, which will be vital to assess the covenant's effectiveness. On top of that, sharing best practice among local authorities and promoting greater dialogue between them could place the covenant on a stronger footing. That is what we want to see, so that a real community of people oversee the covenant in the future.

The report emphasises the work that the Government have done with veterans who end up in the criminal justice system. It highlights how the needs of veterans appear to be akin to those of the general population, yet we know that the exposure to trauma and other trigger factors can be significantly different. We would therefore like services for veterans to be more proactive in supporting vulnerable veterans who have additional needs by providing for relevant early interventions to assist with managing the challenges in their lives, whether those are mental health issues, substance and alcohol-related issues, or issues relating to their conduct and behaviour.

That point also holds true for conduct within the family home. Many who serve in the armed forces can experience or be at risk of experiencing challenges in their relationships, and tragically that leads on occasions to domestic incidents. Instead of taking a reactive approach

to such incidents, a proactive support mechanism could benefit families and would enable greater recognition of the risks that can arise and more support to be provided at an early stage.

Finally, I want to turn to advocacy. While we very much welcome the increased role of the armed forces ombudsman—that is really important—we know that many still do not raise concerns that occur as a result of their duty. I would therefore like to know how the Minister sees the advocacy framework developing in the future. We have heard clearly from the hon. Members for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) and for Tonbridge and Malling about the changing nature of the challenges facing service personnel after their duty. It is therefore important to understand the advocacy support available to individuals now and in the future to take forward issues, from a first instance of bullying through to serious accusations about the situations they have dealt with in combat.

To conclude, I have raised a number of issues to help take the covenant forward, but there has not been time to raise everything today. This has been an excellent debate and I look forward to the Minister's response.

3.50 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. Following the example set by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), I remind the House, as I occasionally do, of my interest as a serving member of the Army Reserve.

I start by congratulating my hon. Friends the Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), for Tonbridge and Malling and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) on securing this debate to discuss the armed forces covenant annual report 2015. I thank hon. Members for the valuable contributions made, to which I shall return shortly. Some hon. Members raised constituency casework and I simply ask them to write to me on that, as I will then deal with those cases rather than attempt to deal with them in the debate.

I am sure I am on safe ground when I say that we all agree that we owe a debt of gratitude and a moral obligation to all members of the armed forces, wherever they are in the United Kingdom, both past and present. It is for that reason that in 2011 the Government enshrined its commitment to the armed forces covenant in law. With that came the commitment from my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), the then Defence Secretary, to report annually to Parliament about progress on upholding the covenant principles. As we have heard, the armed forces covenant has two main principles.

**Mr James Gray:** Before we move off the annual report, is there not an argument that the Government should hold this debate annually to highlight good work done and analyse whether the armed forces covenant has been adhered to?

**Mark Lancaster:** There probably is an argument for that, but my hon. Friend will be as aware as I am that the previous Government made the proactive move to change the nature and structure of debates in this place

by allowing much greater flexibility for Back Benchers to dictate what should be discussed. However, in so doing, that equally restricted the amount of time for the Government to deliver their business. It is therefore down to the will of Parliament to have such debates and today is a fine example of that genuine need and will. Therefore, on balance I am fairly content with the situation, because that Government gave Back Benchers greater flexibility, which is something that previous Governments did not. That is my view—I hope that is clear.

The principles are: the armed forces community should not face disadvantage compared with other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services; and special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most, such as the injured and bereaved. The armed forces covenant annual report 2015 is the definitive document of what we have done to uphold those principles and is the fourth such report. It sets out what we have achieved, but it is also an opportunity to explain our priorities for the coming year. Let me be clear that it is certainly not an opportunity for us to rest on our laurels; it is an annual report of the continuing efforts to strive to improve on the military covenant. I view it simply as a starting point for further progress.

I will say a few words on contributions to the report and the implementation of the covenant. Delivering the covenant is a national responsibility involving the whole of Government, local authorities, industry, service charities and of course the public, who provide vital support and recognition for our armed forces. It is only right that I pay tribute to the representatives from all of those groups who have helped meet the commitments in the armed forces covenant in the last year. I genuinely thank them all. However, I would particularly like to recognise and thank those charities who work so tirelessly in support of our armed forces. Their efforts are indicative of the whole nation's support for our armed forces community.

Our priority this year was to tackle the areas where the armed forces felt most disadvantaged: family healthcare; children's education; spousal employment; housing and local services; and commercial support. The report sets out the measures we have taken to address concerns in those areas.

A common theme in contributions and perhaps that which hon. Members focused on the most was the relationship with the national health service and access to healthcare. Indeed, I will happily say that that is the area on which I have spent most of my time. I am delighted to say that I now meet the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), on at least a quarterly basis to discuss areas where we can work together on that. Of course, the national health service in England and in the devolved parts of the UK is responsible for delivering healthcare to veterans, but equally the MOD has a duty to engage constantly.

To some extent we are asking whether we have proper buy-in. I think that we do, certainly to the extent that we have managed to embed the covenant's principles into the NHS's constitution in England. That positive step will hopefully ensure that veterans and their families are not disadvantaged in accessing health services where they live. It remains the case that veterans should receive priority treatment, subject to the clinical needs of others, relating to a condition resulting from their service in the

armed forces. I can only say again that if any hon. Member has evidence that that is not happening, I encourage them to get in contact, because I would like to hear from them.

A couple of other issues relating to health were raised. With regards to osseointegration, I am pleased that through close collaboration with Blesma we have now moved to establish a pathway for veterans who can now go back to Headley Court. That is a positive step and I look forward to seeing how that develops over the coming months and years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, who opened the debate, referred to updating electronic records. While I am pleased that since, I think, 2013 the armed forces have had an electronic record system, we are seeking to upgrade that system to allow an easier transfer of those records to the national health service. As part of that process, veterans will effectively be flagged so that they are easily identifiable. I cannot give her an exact timetable as to when that work will be complete—we all understand that Governments have faced challenges in the past on electronic systems—but I understand that work is progressing well, so I hope that we will not have to wait too long for that.

Equally, mental health was raised by several hon. Members. That is an area of particular interest to me: the first charity I visited when I became the Veterans Minister was Combat Stress. While there is some debate, there does not seem to be any particular evidence that veterans or members of the armed forces suffer a higher rate of mental health problems than the general population. However, we recognise that that is an issue and, where mental health problems do occur, I am determined that the highest standard of support should be made available. Indeed, it is.

To that end, I am delighted that we have implemented every recommendation of the "Fighting Fit" report, written by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). In addition, more than £13 million from LIBOR funds has been awarded to programmes supporting mental health in the armed forces community. That is an area I intend to continue to focus on and on which I would like progress to continue to be made, because I recognise its importance for colleagues across the House.

On children's education, we have amended the school admissions code to prioritise service children and service families, so that they can now apply for and be allocated school places before they move to the area. That positive step is helping to reduce the effect of short-notice deployments on children's education.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) raised the issue of spousal employment. She will be delighted to hear that we have launched a two-year trial to give service spouses additional employment training and support. Indeed, I visited one such trial in Cyprus recently and was very impressed. There are now also dedicated armed forces champions in every jobcentre region.

On commercial disadvantage, with the greatest respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View, he was slightly dismissive of our recent progress in getting the four main mobile phone providers to agree that service personnel and their families can pause their contracts when posted overseas. I was very much

[*Mark Lancaster*]

involved in the process to get that agreement, and it did not seem like a minor step. I am delighted that we are now in this position and can only thank the providers for their support. These small steps, when taken slowly and added together, provide the progress we all need. I know it does not simply stop here; we need to continue to improve the support we offer, and I am determined to do so.

The annual report includes unedited comments from key representatives of the armed forces charities sector and the three service families federations, which I meet on a regular basis; I enjoy that, and it is a valuable experience. That ensures the report is accurate and gives a clear indication of where those groups think further action is required. Ministerial colleagues are due to meet with representatives from those groups next week, to discuss their feedback. This is a cross-government effort.

I have listened intently to the points raised today and hope to demonstrate to colleagues that their points will be taken into consideration as we move forward. To that end, I would like to update Members on our priorities for next year. Improving delivery of the community covenant will be key. While I do not favour legislative targets, we have committed to review delivery in order to identify best practice and robustly promote that across local authorities.

Recognising the importance of independence in the review, we are collaborating closely with colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Local Government Association and the charitable sector to meet our shared objectives. I addressed local authorities at the community covenant conference in November, and I will continue to work with the chair of the LGA, Lord Porter, to ensure that local authorities understand their covenant commitments and are committed to improving the support they offer their local armed forces community. Equally, as Members of Parliament, we have a responsibility to ensure that local authorities in our constituencies are doing their bit.

To respond to the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who is no longer in her place, I understand that many local authorities publish their reports online and help to share their best practice. I certainly encourage all local authorities to do that. I intend to speak at next year's LGA conference in order to do just that and to raise many of the points that Members have raised today.

I will move on to Northern Ireland—the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) looked up when I said that. I was impressed by and enjoyed listening to his very moving speech. Delivery of the covenant extends, of course, to the whole of the United Kingdom. The annual report includes input from the Welsh and Scottish Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive. It is important that we continue to work together to ensure there is universal support for the armed forces wherever they work and live, and that must extend to the whole of the United Kingdom.

I have listened to the concerns regarding delivery of the covenant in Northern Ireland. I was delighted that two local authorities in Northern Ireland signed a community covenant last year. That is clearly a big step forward, but we need to ensure that support extends

across the region. In 2013, the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs assessed that over 93% of covenant measures applied in Northern Ireland. It is sensible that in 2016 we update our assessment of how the covenant is being delivered in Northern Ireland and look at the areas where we could do more. That will be a priority. However, I do not believe Northern Ireland should be treated any differently to Scotland, Wales and England; our focus must be on improving delivery for all. To that end, I intend to visit Northern Ireland shortly to see what more I can do.

I have regular meetings and discussions with the hon. Member for South Antrim, who is a dear friend, colleague and veteran—I was going to say he is a fellow veteran, but I am still serving—of service in the Province. I am equally pleased to see on the Order Paper the Armed Forces Covenant (Implementation) (United Kingdom) Bill—the private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling—which highlights that we need to make progress on the application of the covenant in Northern Ireland.

I am pleased that there are now 785 corporate covenant signatories. Next week, the Defence Secretary will present awards to 16 employee recognition scheme gold award winners, recognising the very best support for our armed forces. We will continue to tackle the key areas of commercial disadvantage and look at how the finance and insurance sector can do more to support the armed forces community and tackle the effects of overseas postings. I expect to announce new commitments later this month.

We must also continue to build on our work to support employment opportunities for reserves, veterans and spouses. The MOD has set up a relationship management team to engage with employers, which has not only encouraged an increase in the rate of new signings but, crucially, enabled us to work with existing signatories to deepen and enhance their pledges.

I hear the call from the hon. Member for York Central to look at effectively forcing, through contracts, companies that deal with the MOD to sign up to the corporate covenant or, indeed, to employ reservists. I am happy to be corrected, but I fear she may be unintentionally making an argument for leaving the EU, because I believe what she calls for is not possible under European procurement rules. I am happy to check that.

**Rachael Maskell:** A document called “Buy and Make a Difference” looks at how social clauses could be put into procurement contracts. It would therefore be quite feasible to put the corporate covenant into a list of social clauses to be included in that contract.

**Mark Lancaster:** Without prolonging the debate on the issue, I am happy to commit to the hon. Lady to have a look at that, which I hope is reasonable.

It would be remiss, given this opportunity, not to reiterate this Government's commitment, as set out in our manifesto, to improve the support we offer to military families. I am pleased to say that we will shortly publish the first families strategy, setting out a comprehensive programme of activity to ensure that military families receive the support and help they need. The strategy has been drafted in consultation with the three service families federations to ensure it truly reflects

the needs of 21st-century military families. This year, we will deliver £20 million of investment in childcare infrastructure for military families, but we must also ensure that the new spousal employment programme is meeting its stated aims and objectives, and I have mentioned the two trials that are in place.

Members will be aware that the Government have committed to a £10 million annual fund in perpetuity to support delivery of the covenant. Several Members mentioned accommodation. I recognise concerns about accommodation for our armed forces community. We have allocated £85.5 million to help more than 5,600 personnel to buy or improve their home through the Forces Help to Buy scheme, and I am pleased that the Defence Secretary wants to double that number to 10,000 by this October. The Government have committed that from 2016, no service family in the UK will be allocated service accommodation that does not meet the decent homes standard. I have heard the calls from several hon. Members to work more closely with and improve the MOD's relationship with local authorities when it comes to supporting families to get into local authority housing. I should point out, however, that we already have the MOD referrals scheme, which assists service leaders.

Looking forward, although I am not in a position today to give details about the future accommodation model that will be proposed for our armed forces, I hope to be able to do so in future. The model is an attempt to tackle issues related to encouraging and helping families to get into a home of their own.

Equally, I mention the Army basing scheme and the broader footprint strategy, part of which is to try and create greater stability for our armed forces, so that we do not see quite so much movement. Only yesterday, I visited 26 Engineer Regiment down in Wiltshire, where as an example, around Salisbury plain, the three armoured engineer regiments will now be pretty closely collocated. Those armoured engineers are likely to be posted between the three regiments but very much in the same part of the country, giving greater stability for families and spouses.

To touch on veterans—I realise I am going on—support for our veterans is an issue close to the heart of many, as shown by the recent publication by King's College London on creating a sustainable model for veterans' care in the United Kingdom post-2015. I am familiar with the proposals in that paper and congratulate all those involved in producing it. It is an interesting document that adds great things to the debate. I have asked my officials to attend an event on 12 January to discuss it and the evidence basis for it, and I look forward to engaging fully after that with the authors, to see how we can move forward and work together.

The Government have confirmed that funding for the nine enhanced prosthetic centres for veterans will continue. We have also allocated £10 million to the Royal British Legion to launch a veterans' hearing fund and £3 million to help veterans access high-specification wheelchairs.

Several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling in a very powerful speech, raised other issues that are perhaps summed up as "lawfare". The Conservative party committed at the last general election to deal with this issue. A lot of work has been going on in the MOD over recent months to try and move that forward. I am not in a position right now to give further details, but that is being led by the Minister for the Armed Forces and I am sure that in due course, she will come to the House to address that.

On interpreters, I share my hon. Friend's concern, having worked with them in Afghanistan. I have looked into the matter. I think the MOD has a very positive programme at the moment. There are different elements, partly about helping to improve security for families, about potentially relocating families within country, and ultimately, if necessary, about relocation to the UK. The programme that the MOD is pursuing at the moment is a good one.

Prisons were mentioned and I recognise that there are veterans in prison. I do not think the number is disproportionate, but they face unique challenges. To that end, I intend to visit HMP Grendon in Aylesbury next month and I will look at some of the work being done there to support our veterans.

I believe the covenant is working, but we need to make it clearer and easier for members of the armed forces community to access the available support. We know that delivery of the covenant is not uniform and we need a mechanism to identify and address localised problems. That will be our priority in 2016.

Although we have collectively achieved a great deal, much more remains to be done to ensure the covenant fulfils the nation's promise to support the brave men and women who serve our country with honour and distinction. It is a long-term aim and the Government are committed to its long-term delivery.

I have endeavoured to answer all the points raised by hon. Members and if I have not done so, I will write to them in due course.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2015.

4.14 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 7 January 2016

## ATTORNEY GENERAL

### Serious Fraud Office (Contingencies Fund Advance)

**The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland):** I would like to inform the House that a cash advance from the Contingencies Fund has been sought for the Serious Fraud Office (SFO).

In line with the current arrangement for SFO funding agreed with HM Treasury, the SFO will be submitting a reserve claim as part of the supplementary estimate process for 2015-16.

The advance is required to meet an urgent cash requirement on existing services pending parliamentary approval of the 2015-16 supplementary estimate. The supplementary estimate will seek an increase in both the resource departmental expenditure limit and the net cash requirement in order to cover the cost of significant investigations and the settlement of material liabilities.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £21,137,000 (twenty one million, one hundred and thirty seven thousand pounds) will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Serious Fraud Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £15,500,000 (fifteen million, five hundred thousand pounds) will be met by a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid upon Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.

[HCWS449]

## TREASURY

### National Infrastructure Commission: Consultation

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Hands):** Today I have laid the "National Infrastructure Commission consultation document" CM 9182. The consultation will be an opportunity for the public to respond to suggestions about the governance, structure and operation of the National Infrastructure Commission. The consultation will last for 10 weeks until 17 March 2016.

On 5 October 2015, the Chancellor announced the creation of the National Infrastructure Commission to provide expert independent analysis of the long-term infrastructure needs of the country. The commission has been operating in shadow form since then. This consultation document envisages primary legislation to put the commission on a permanent footing and give it the power to access the information and analysis necessary to fulfilling its functions.

It is proposed that the commission will produce a national infrastructure assessment once in every Parliament, setting out its analysis of the UK's infrastructure needs over a 10 to 30-year time horizon. The Government will then be obliged formally to respond to the commission's

recommendations. The commission will also examine the most pressing and significant infrastructure challenges in studies commissioned by the Government.

This consultation document proposes to set a remit for the commission which will ensure that it recommends infrastructure that is sustainable and affordable and that offers real economic benefits. The Government welcome responses to the consultation document.

[HCWS454]

## COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Housing and Planning Bill

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis):** I am today placing in the Library of the House the Department's analysis on the application of Standing Order 83L in respect of the Government amendments tabled for Commons Report stage for the Housing and Planning Bill.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements>

[HCWS455]

## DEFENCE

### Armed Forces Pay Reform

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon):** I am today announcing the introduction of a new pay model for armed forces personnel which will provide a modern, simple and credible remuneration offer for our armed forces that attracts and retains motivated people to deliver our operational commitments.

The current pay system, introduced in 2001, was the first integrated "tri-service" pay system. While a major advance at the time, it is now seen as overly complex with significant shortcomings and inefficiencies, which have led to dissatisfaction among service personnel.

We therefore plan to reform core pay from 1 April 2016 for all armed forces regulars and reservists up to the rank of commodore, brigadier and air commodore, except specialists such as professional aviators and special forces on bespoke pay scales. The new pay model will be both simplified and fairer.

In introducing a new pay system it is important that we recognise and value the contribution of service personnel who work so hard to keep us safe both at home and abroad. This is not a cost-saving exercise, and there will be pay protection to ensure that no service personnel take a pay cut on transition to the new model. Pay reform is integral to work to modernise the overall offer to service personnel and will sit alongside initiatives such as forces Help to Buy, the tenancy deposit loan scheme, the introduction of flexible working options, and of employment support to service spouses.

Rank will continue to be the main determinant of pay and incremental progression will remain a key feature of the new system, though it will be rationalised for both officers and other ranks—up to warrant officer level.

For other ranks where we require a breadth of trades there will also be four pay supplements which will better differentiate pay across the trades, removing the illogical characteristics of the current system. It will substantially reduce the number of pay journeys from potentially 128 different journeys to just four, with an associated reduction in administrative overheads. Crucially for service personnel this will provide a pay system that will be easier to understand and allow individuals to more accurately predict their future pay.

[HCWS453]

### Future Reserves 2020

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon):** I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of a letter that I have sent to Lieutenant General (Retired) Brims, the chair of the Future Reserves 2020 external scrutiny team, to update him on the programme, and particularly on the recommendations that his team's report made. I am grateful for their work.

[HCWS451]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Disclosure and Barring Service

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley):** PricewaterhouseCoopers' report on the second and final phase of its review of the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) will be published today and will be available at: <https://www.gov.uk>.

The review examined DBS's data retention policy, its application within the organisation and the teams responsible for its implementation. Its findings do not raise any safeguarding risks to children or vulnerable adults. The DBS is addressing the four recommendations proposed. It has also set out its plans within the report.

A copy of the report will be placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS452]

## JUSTICE

### Prison and Probation Inspectorate

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Michael Gove):** I am pleased to announce that Peter Clarke has been appointed as Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons for three years, commencing 1 February 2016, and Dame Glenys Stacey has been appointed as Her Majesty's chief inspector of probation for three years, commencing 1 March 2016.

Peter Clarke is a retired senior police officer, who served in the Metropolitan Police Service for more than 30 years. He rose to the rank of assistant commissioner and also served as head of the anti-terrorist branch and national co-ordinator of terrorist investigations. In 2014 he was appointed education commissioner for Birmingham, to conduct an inquiry into the allegations concerning Birmingham schools arising from the "Trojan Horse" letter. Peter also served on the board of the Charity Commission until January 2016.

Dame Glenys Stacey is currently the chief executive of Ofqual, the exams regulator in England. She is a solicitor by profession and has 17 years' experience leading public sector organisations, having previously served as CEO of Standards for England, Animal Health, the Greater Manchester Magistrates' Court Committee and the Criminal Cases Review Commission. In August 2015 she announced her intention to leave Ofqual when her current term finishes at the end of February 2016.

These appointments have been made after a recruitment process for these posts which followed the Commissioner for Public Appointments' code of practice. Both roles were advertised online and candidates were then assessed against the criteria for the posts. An independent selection panel produced a shortlist of candidates deemed appointable. As required under the rules, I then selected my preferred candidates from that shortlist. Peter Clarke and Dame Glenys Stacey appeared before the Justice Select Committee, which concluded both were appointable to the roles of HM chief inspector of prisons and HM chief inspector of probation respectively.

Both appointments are subject to security clearance.

[HCWS450]

# ORAL ANSWERS

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