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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 17 January 2013

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND TRANSPORT FOR
LONDON (No. 2) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now considered.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be considered on Thursday 24 January.

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rail Fares

1. **Heidi Alexander** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What the maximum regulated rail fare rise was in January 2013.
[137492]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): The average increase in regulated fares was 4.2%. An extremely small number of fares will have risen by 9.2%, but those will have been offset by reductions elsewhere. The “5% flex” policy was introduced by the previous Government.

Heidi Alexander: Commuters using Hither Green station in my constituency have seen their annual season ticket rise in the past two years from £856 to £944, yet overcrowding on routes into London remains horrendous. What guarantee can the Secretary of State give my constituents that this time next year overcrowding will be less and that there will not be huge profits going to train operating companies?

Mr McLoughlin: One of the problems we face is that there is a huge demand and we have seen huge increases in the number of people using the railways. Matching that, the Government are pulling in huge investment. We have set out our plans for 2014 to 2019, as has Network Rail, which published its plans last week. I understand the concerns of the hon. Lady’s constituents, but I have to say that a lot of work needs to be done on investment.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): If I am pressing my right hon. Friend, as indeed I am, to invest more in track capacity on the West Anglia line and to

ensure that there is a purchase of new rolling stock soon, do I assist my constituents if at the same time on their behalf I ask him to peg fares, or even reduce them?

Mr McLoughlin: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I met him this week and he made the case very strongly for extra and faster capacity for his constituents in the feed-in to Liverpool Street. He highlights the exact dilemma: people want extra investment and it has to be paid for. The Government are prepared to subsidise the railways and are doing so, but the passenger also has to pay for extra capacity and new trains.

Tom Greatrex (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents, whether they are using local or cross-border services on the west coast main line, are frequently confused by the times at which they can use their tickets. Would it not be a sensible step to print on the tickets the precise time when they can be used, so that we end confusion and people do not end up paying fines.

Mr McLoughlin: In some cases, those times are printed on pre-booked tickets. We are conducting a fares review, and I would like to see a much simpler ticket operating system so that people understand the fares they are being charged. The review is due to report in May, and that is one of the points I am looking at.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): The franchise agreement imposed by the previous Labour Government has meant that my constituents travelling from North Thanet have faced year-on-year increases way and above the average level. It now costs a huge sum of money to travel to London from Kent. It is an appalling service. Will my right hon. Friend seek to ensure that Railtrack and Southeastern now deliver what my constituents are paying for?

Mr McLoughlin: I have met with my hon. Friend to discuss the service in his constituency and in the rest of Kent. He has made a number of points that I will be discussing with Network Rail in due course.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Very straightforward: will the Secretary of State categorically rule out “super peak” fares? A simple answer will do: yes or no.

Mr McLoughlin: As I said, the Department is undertaking a review of fares. That is not to look at a way of making fares more expensive, but to ensure that people understand how fares are delivered.

South West Rail Network (Flood Resilience)

2. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Network Rail on improving the flood resilience of the south-west rail network.
[137493]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): I had a number of conversations with Network Rail throughout December about improving the flood resilience of the south-west rail network. I also visited works on the west coast main line on new year’s eve, where I was able to discuss the issue in person with David Higgins, Network Rail’s chief executive.

Mr Bradshaw: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. Between the end of November and the end of December, Devon and Cornwall were effectively cut off from the rest of the country by rail for two periods lasting more than a week each. That is not acceptable for rail travellers or our economy. Will he impress on Network Rail the absolutely urgency of tackling the problem at Cowley bridge in Exeter, which is the cause of most of the problems?

Mr McLoughlin: The situation that people in the south-west faced over that period was unacceptable. It was the result of weather that we do not see often. I have talked to many Members who have made representations to me on that, and I have asked Network Rail to give a briefing to Members from those areas. That will take place in early February, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will attend.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Further to the point by the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), the Tiverton to Exeter line is extremely low and will be affected by flooding not only this year, but in future years. A substantial job needs to be done on that particular track of rail, so I urge the Secretary of State to do as much as he can to get Network Rail to put a package in place.

Mr McLoughlin: I accept what my hon. Friend says and I hope that he will come to the meeting I am organising with Network Rail, which I will also attend. I am trying to break it into regions in the parts of the area served so that Members can discuss their concerns directly with Network Rail.

Mr Adrian Sanders (Torbay) (LD): There are two other important areas within the south-west that raise potential problems for the resilience of rail services. One is the rail line between Exeter and Honiton, which also floods, but most crucially there is the coastal route between Exeter and Newton Abbot, which for decades has required a great deal of maintenance. We want certainty about the future of the resilience of our rail services in the south-west.

Mr McLoughlin: The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Norman Baker), and I are aware of the problems affecting the hon. Gentleman's constituents and the area he represents. As I said, at the meeting with Network Rail, we will be able to discuss in detail all the problems that Members are facing and—I hope—come to some solutions.

West Coast Main Line Franchise

3. **Mr David Crausby** (Bolton North East) (Lab): What his latest estimate is of the cost to the public purse of cancelling the award of the west coast main line franchise; and if he will make a statement. [137494]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): I have stated that bidders will be remunerated in full for the reasonable costs of putting together and submitting their bids. As I reported to the Transport Committee on 10 January, I expect that figure to be in the region of £45 million.

Mr Crausby: I come from the world of industrial manufacturing, where incompetent mistakes get someone the sack. It occurs to me that in this Government no one gets the blame, while hard-working, travelling members of the public pay the price for the mistake through higher rail fares. Will the Secretary of State tell me exactly which Minister, if any, will take responsibility for his Government's humiliation in this affair?

Mr McLoughlin: I think I have been very open with the House. I have made two or three statements to it about the incident involving the west coast main line, and I have commissioned two reports that have broadly been welcomed, I think, by the House. Both those who wrote the reports have given evidence to the Transport Committee, during which, Sam Laidlaw, who wrote the report on what went wrong in the Department, said that Ministers were not made aware.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for being so open with the House about this matter. It is an issue not just about the cost to the public purse, but about the potential for franchises to be delayed. In my constituency in Deal, we want a hard-won commuting high-speed service to be made an all-day high-speed service. Will he tell us what the impact of the delay might be?

Mr McLoughlin: As I said, two reports were conducted, one by Sam Laidlaw and the other by Richard Brown. I published the latter last week, and in the near future will make a statement to the House about how I intend to implement Mr Brown's recommendations.

Mr Speaker: As the Clerk has very originally observed, the Secretary of State has brought the matter back on track. We are grateful to him.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The Laidlaw report is clear about where the blame lies for the west coast franchise fiasco—it was Ministers who decided to carry out a botched reorganisation of the Department that left no one in charge of rail, cut one third of the Department's staff and axed external audits of procurement. Is it not a disgrace that with the well over £45 million of taxpayers' money that the Secretary of State admits down the drain, every single one of those responsible Ministers is either still in the Cabinet or has been promoted to it?

Mr McLoughlin: There are many ways in which one can read the report. The hon. Lady means to put her interpretation on it, and whatever I say will not change that interpretation. It is quite clear in the report that Ministers were not made aware of some of the problems, and if they had been referred up, different actions could have been taken.

Maria Eagle: If the Secretary of State will not accept what Laidlaw says about ministerial responsibility, perhaps he will accept the verdict of the Brown review, which is also clear about where the blame lies. It was the mistaken decision by Ministers to move to longer franchises as the rule, not the exception, and experiment with this risky new policy on the most complex franchise route.

Instead of repeatedly blaming civil servants, who cannot answer back, when will Ministers finally take responsibility for this staggering waste of taxpayers' money?

Mr McLoughlin: I think I have been very open with the House, and I have also commissioned inquiries. Initially the hon. Lady questioned their independence. I am glad that she is now happy to abide by those reports, which were clear that, had Ministers been warned, different actions could have been taken, which is exactly what the permanent secretary said before the Select Committee on Transport.

Rolling Stock Contracts

4. **Chris Williamson** (Derby North) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on the Thameslink and Crossrail rolling stock contracts; and if he will make a statement. [137495]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Simon Burns): We aim to reach financial close on the Thameslink rolling stock contract early this year. The Crossrail rolling stock procurement is a live procurement exercise being run by Crossrail Ltd. It is due to announce the de-selection to two bidders in spring this year, with contract award expected in spring 2014.

Chris Williamson: The Chancellor says it is essential to cut unnecessary public expenditure, but the review of the inter-city express programme by Sir Andrew Foster shows that the Thameslink rolling stock programme will cost hundreds of millions of pounds more than necessary. How can the Transport Secretary justify wasting British taxpayers' money to create highly skilled manufacturing jobs in Germany when he could have re-run the procurement process in a matter of months, with a tender process that better ensured that this massive investment of taxpayers' money led to manufacturing jobs in Britain? I am worried that the same thing is going to happen with—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are grateful to the hon. Gentleman; we have got the gist of it.

Mr Burns: Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that the procurement process that was adopted in this tender process was established by his Government, not this Government?

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I welcome the Government's recent announcement on new trains for the Southern railway franchise. Can the Minister confirm what this will mean for workers in Derbyshire?

Mr Burns: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend. I pay tribute to her for the work she has done on behalf of her constituents and Bombardier. The announcement before Christmas is extremely good news for Bombardier. I also know that, like me, she will be pleased that Bombardier is among the suppliers who have bid for the new Crossrail rolling stock order. Southern Rail has commenced a competitive procurement process for 116 rolling stock vehicles, with an option for a further 140 at a later date. Train manufacturers, including Bombardier, are bidding for that as well.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Siemens was announced as the preferred bidder for Thameslink rolling stock in June 2011. The contract has still not been completed. One of the consequences is a delay in the cascading of rolling stock from Thameslink to the north. When will that cascading now take place?

Mr Burns: I accept that there have been delays. A part of that is because this is a complex procurement process, and it obviously has to be done correctly and within the rules. In direct answer to the hon. Lady's question, we expect the Thameslink contract to be finalised by the spring of this year, so that things can then move forward.

Colchester-London Rail Network

5. **Sir Bob Russell** (Colchester) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the potential to increase the capacity of the railway network between Colchester and London. [137496]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Simon Burns): The Department has reviewed where capacity is required on the line between Colchester and London. We are also considering what capacity might be required in the period beyond 2019. There are plans to improve the rail service on the line between Colchester and London by providing additional infrastructure in the Chelmsford area, with a new station, possibly at Beaulieu Park, and possibly by increasing the speed of the line.

Sir Bob Russell: I welcome that answer. I also welcome the fact that the Government are making a record national investment in our rail network, but there is a feeling along the whole of the Greater Anglia line that there has been some neglect. Will the Minister give the House an assurance, in advance of the major investment, that in the meantime one or more passing loops will be provided?

Mr Burns: We are determined, through record levels of infrastructure investment, to improve the quality of journeys for passengers. As someone who uses that line, however, I accept that there is room for improvement, and that has been ongoing. We have seen a total upgrading of the track, we are seeing an ongoing process of replacing the overhead cables, and stations are being refurbished, but more has to be done, and that will happen.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When did you last use the train?

Mr Burns: This morning.

Road Bottlenecks

6. **Nicola Blackwood** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (Con): What progress he has made on reducing bottlenecks in the road network. [137497]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Stephen Hammond): In the 2010 spending review, the Government committed £168 million for small schemes on the strategic road network. In the 2011 autumn statement, we introduced a new pinch point fund of

£217 million to address the hot spots on the network. We have committed £188 million of that to deliver 65 schemes so far. In the 2012 autumn statement, that was increased to £317 million for the strategic road network, and a new £170 million pinch point fund was established for local authorities.

Nicola Blackwood: I thank the Minister for his answer, but the A34 in my constituency is still plagued by congestion and accidents. That causes daily misery for commuters on a personal level, and it also has a debilitating effect on the local economy. If the work force are stuck in gridlocked traffic, they are simply not being productive. Will the Minister come to Oxford West and Abingdon to meet local community and business leaders to hear their concerns at first hand?

Stephen Hammond: Like my hon. Friend, I recognise that the A34 is an important, busy and strategic route. We are developing route-based strategies as a key mechanism to inform what is needed on such routes. As she says, the ability to work with the local economic partnership and to look at the benefits to the local economy are key assessment criteria. I look forward to visiting her constituency.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): The House, and the whole country, will agree that one of the ways of reducing bottlenecks on the roads is to get more people on to bikes. When Ministers in the Department for Transport and the Department for Communities and Local Government consider new road schemes and other major urban developments, why cannot they agree to British Cycling's request that the impact on cyclists should be considered at the outset of all such schemes, rather than being treated as an add-on later? If that were to happen, we could avoid problems such as those at Bow roundabout and Vauxhall Cross, which have had to be put right later at enormous cost.

Stephen Hammond: I am aware that the hon. Gentleman is a keen cyclist and vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on cycling—

Ian Austin: Co-chair.

Stephen Hammond: I am sorry—co-chairman of the group. I look forward to seeing its report, which I am sure will cover a number of those issues. He will be aware that we have committed a local sustainable transport fund of £650 million, and a number of the schemes being developed under that have exactly the cycling element that he is asking for.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's recent announcement on the improvement of the A160 into Immingham docks. The next part of the network that needs improving to provide access to the Humber bank ports and industrial areas is the A15 between Lincoln and Scunthorpe, which is in urgent need of dualling. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet a delegation of Members from the appropriate constituencies to discuss the matter?

Stephen Hammond: I would be delighted to accept my hon. Friend's request. I have been meeting a number of Members and groups from their constituencies to

discuss the possibility of their qualifying for route-based strategies, and I look forward to talking to him about this matter.

Rail Electrification (Wales)

7. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential benefits of electrification of railway lines into Wales. [137498]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Simon Burns): The Welsh valley lines to Cardiff and the Great Western main line from London to Cardiff, Bridgend and Swansea will be electrified. Electrification will deliver trains that are cleaner, quieter, faster, and cheaper to operate, with more capacity for passengers. It will help to create jobs and boost growth across south Wales.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Government were right not to scrap the last Labour Government's plans for electrification. What work is the Minister doing now, in conjunction with the Welsh Government, to ensure that the Welsh economy gains the maximum economic benefit from this investment?

Mr Burns: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his rewriting of history and on his seeking to take the credit for what this Government have done in deciding to increase electrification. I can tell him that we are in close contact with the Welsh Government, because we are determined to help stimulate the regeneration of the Welsh valleys and the connectivity between London, Cardiff, Bridgend and Swansea. That is why we are investing this money to improve the communications. We will ensure that the deadlines laid down for this to come into operation will be met.

West Coast Main Line Franchise

8. **Stephen Mosley** (City of Chester) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on securing an operator for the west coast main line franchise. [137499]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): Since the cancellation of the west coast competition, the Department has negotiated an agreement for Virgin Trains to continue running the service for up to 23 months until November 2014. This will be followed by a long-term contract.

Stephen Mosley: My right hon. Friend will be pleased to hear from a regular west coast main line user that, so far, the interim service seems to be of high reliability and quality. During the original bidding process, both Virgin and First Group promised substantial longer-term improvements to the west coast main line service. Will the Secretary of State encourage future bidders to be similarly ambitious?

Mr McLoughlin: I assure my hon. Friend that I am grateful for his update on the service he is receiving and pleased to hear about the satisfaction he and his constituents

are getting from it. We are always looking for improvements. I hope that when we come to negotiate the next longer-term contracts, a number of improvements will be included in them, but I also hope to see some improvement on this particular line before 2014.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): What lessons will the Secretary of State apply to the west coast franchise from the experience of the not-for-profit east coast main line, not least in respect of the return of a £190 million dividend to taxpayers?

Mr McLoughlin: I am always looking to learn lessons from everything that happens on the railways. I believe that the private sector has brought tremendous growth of passenger numbers and improvements in services on the railways. Like the last Government, I am committed to seeing the east coast main line offered to franchise as well.

Road-building Projects

9. **Eric Ollerenshaw** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Con): What steps he is taking to accelerate major road-building projects. [137500]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Stephen Hammond): The Highways Agency is undertaking pilot schemes to demonstrate how four major road schemes can be delivered more quickly. So far, these have been accelerated by 18 and 21 months. We have achieved this by making widespread changes to the planning, design and construction regime.

Eric Ollerenshaw: I thank the Minister for that reply. I understand that the planning inspectorate's report on the possible M6 link road to Heysham port around Lancaster may be on the Minister's desk. Given that the plans for that were first sketched out in 1948, could somebody speed things up a little bit, as this will be a vital route for Lancaster, the north-west and indeed Northern Ireland?

Stephen Hammond: We received the examining authority's report and recommendation on the scheme from the planning inspectorate on 19 December. The report is being considered carefully. We are obliged under the Planning Act 2008 to decide whether to grant a development consent for the scheme by 19 March 2013. I am looking to see whether we can accelerate that even faster.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): When the Minister next meets the Mayor of London, I urge him to discuss the Silvertown link between North Greenwich and Silvertown on the north side of the river. More importantly, many people are concerned about the need for public transport links along that stretch of the river, so will the Minister discuss with the Mayor the need to introduce a link for the Docklands Light Railway to come to North Greenwich, as it is essential for that to be part of the river crossing.

Stephen Hammond: I regularly meet both the Mayor of London and the commissioner of transport for London. I will make sure that that subject is on the agenda the next time we meet.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): In 1948, the very same county plan for Lancashire—under a Labour Government, I duly note—recommended a new A585 trunk road to improve links to both Fleetwood and the northern parts of my constituency. This remains a key local priority, but what guidance has the Department issued to the local enterprise partnerships to ensure that when decisions about regional structural priorities are taken, they are evidence based rather than based on economic fashion?

Stephen Hammond: We have encouraged local enterprise partnerships to involve themselves with other local groups in order to ensure that suggestions, plans and designs for new routes take economic potential into account. Many LEPS throughout the country have taken that on board, and I trust that the one in Lancashire will do the same.

Mr Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): In his reply to the question from the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), the Minister referred to the autumn statement of 2011. Will he now tell us how many of the schemes that were announced at that time have so much as seen a spade in the ground? In how many instances has construction actually begun?

Stephen Hammond: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that 90% of the projects announced in the 2011 autumn statement are under way, and that 13 have been completed.

London Midland

10. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What assessment he has made of the level of service provided by London Midland trains in the last six months; and if he will make a statement. [137501]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Norman Baker): The Department is continually assessing London Midland's performance, and holds monthly review meetings with its senior management. As the Secretary of State announced on 20 December 2012, London Midland's performance between September and December breached its contractual benchmark. The Department has therefore negotiated measures with London Midland to ensure that a reliable passenger service is restored, as well as a £7 million package of benefits for passengers.

Michael Fabricant: If there have been improvements, most of my constituents have not really noticed them. They have been stranded at Four Oaks—and believe me, Mr. Speaker, you would not want to be stranded at Four Oaks—hanging around for an hour and a half waiting for another London Midland train to take them back to Lichfield. How bad does it actually have to get before the Minister decides to take away the service and readvertise the contract?

Norman Baker: I shall try not to be stuck at Four Oaks, where there is evidently a problem that limits the ability to run through trains. However, we are continuing to monitor London Midland's performance, and if it breaches further benchmarks, we will take further action. I can say now that it is expected to make losses for the

remainder of its franchise period, and that, in my view, given that it created this mess, it is up to London Midland to sort it out on behalf of the taxpayer.

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: May I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that his question should relate purely to the subject of London Midland trains? [*Laughter.*]

Mark Lazarowicz: If passengers are delayed on London Midland, and indeed on other lines—[*Laughter*—]they are entitled to compensation. However, when London Midland provides such compensation, it takes the form of paper vouchers, which, as a constituent of mine has pointed out, cannot be exchanged online. That is inconvenient, and it means that they cannot obtain the full benefit of lower fares. Will the Minister look into that when the Government review the fares system?

Norman Baker: I am happy to say that that point has been raised by a number of Members, and that we are looking into it. People should not be discriminated against on the basis of the method that they use to buy their tickets.

Railways: Private Sector

11. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the role of the private sector in the UK's railways. [137502]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Stephen Hammond): Since privatisation, the number of passenger miles travelled has nearly doubled. Rail freight has increased by over 60%, the level of passenger satisfaction has risen by 10% in the last decade, and the level of punctuality has risen by nearly 14 %.

Peter Aldous: The delay in tendering for new longer rail franchises is holding back much-needed private sector investment in trains in East Anglia. Will the Government consider the proposals that have been drawn up to fast-track the provision of those urgently required new and upgraded trains?

Stephen Hammond: The Government commissioned Lord Brown to advise on the future of franchising. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, his report has now been published, and the Government are looking at it. I understand that proposals have indeed been drawn up, and the Government will happily consider those proposals. I suggest that my hon. Friend should try to meet my right hon. Friend the Minister of State at the eastern rail summit, which will be held in the spring.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Do not the failures of the east coast and, now, the west coast franchise demonstrate that the policy of reusing a bad system is a bad one? Will the Minister please consider alternative models such as the mutualisation adopted by Welsh Water, which has led to increased private investment, efficient services, and reasonable charges for customers?

Stephen Hammond: Throughout the country, privatisation and the franchising model have brought huge benefits to the system and to the rail traveller, and, as I said earlier, the level of passenger satisfaction has risen by more than 10% in the last decade.

Mr John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): The best way of assessing private sector rail franchises is to have a public sector comparator. Does the Minister therefore agree that we should consider retaining the east coast franchise as a public sector comparator, and look at having a local and regional service as a public sector comparator, too?

Stephen Hammond: I disagree with that suggestion. The hon. Gentleman will remember that although subsidy was slightly lower when we had nationalised railways, underinvestment was a major feature of that era. Fares continued to rise and passenger satisfaction declined.

Bus Fares

12. **Tom Blenkinsop** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What assessment he has made of bus fare rises in non-metropolitan areas; and if he will make a statement. [137504]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Norman Baker): The Government recognises that the price of public transport is an issue for many people, including those in non-metropolitan areas, and we are putting measures in place to keep down the cost of using the bus, including retaining the bus service operators grant and the concessionary travel entitlement, and encouraging more reasonably priced multi-operator tickets.

Tom Blenkinsop: Following cuts imposed by this Government, Mayor Mallon in Middlesbrough is proposing to axe the teen mover scheme that helps young people afford public transport, and Redcar and Cleveland borough council has already had to scale back its similar scheme. As a result, coupled with bus fare increases, young people risk being plunged into transport poverty. Will the Minister hold discussions with his colleagues at the Departments for Education and for Communities and Local Government to ensure that young people in Middlesbrough and east Cleveland can afford to travel by public transport?

Norman Baker: The hon. Gentleman rightly draws attention to the issue of young people and buses, and I have given considerable attention to it. I have had discussions with the industry, and there is a new website giving young people more information about bus fares and the best offers in their area. We are discussing what further steps we might take to help young people, and, indeed, I have met colleagues at the Department for Education to discuss this very issue.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that community transport and concessionary fares are particularly important in rural areas? Will he therefore consider a further roll-out of the wheels to work scheme in rural areas such as Thirsk, Malton and Filey?

Norman Baker: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and I agree with her point. We have given two tranches of £10 million to aid community transport across England. We have also funded wheels to work schemes under the local sustainable transport fund, and will continue to do so.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): The Government's own figures show bus fares rising by double the rate of inflation, and many passengers face even higher increases; the Arriva Midlands annual saver ticket has increased by 20% this year. When will the Minister accept that his Government's decision to cut local transport funding by 28% and to cut direct support for bus services by a fifth has increased the financial pressure on households who are already struggling to make ends meet?

Norman Baker: I welcome the hon. Lady to the Front Bench. She may not be aware that this is not a new phenomenon. In 2009, the retail prices index fell by 0.4% and bus fares increased by 8.6%—far more than they have risen this year. Steps are being taken to cut bus fares, and the hon. Lady may be interested to know that fares are being cut by First Bus in both Sheffield and Manchester.

Topical Questions

T1. [137512] **Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): May I take this opportunity to thank the emergency services who responded so professionally to yesterday's helicopter crash in London, in which, sadly, two people lost their lives? The Air Accidents Investigation Branch is continuing its investigation, and I will keep the House updated on its findings.

Since I last addressed the House at Transport questions, I have published the Richard Brown independent review into franchising, which concluded that it remains a fundamentally sound model. I will make further statements on rail franchising in due course. Over the Christmas period I also announced details of a new £170 million local authority pinch point fund, targeting the most congested points on local roads, as well as the allocation of an extra £215 million to councils to maintain roads.

Mr Thomas: The cost of travelling by train and tube from the suburbs of London into central London—for example, from West Harrow in my constituency to Westminster—has increased by 25% in the last two years alone. What discussions do Ministers plan to have with the Mayor of London about ameliorating the impact of high fare rises on those whose budgets are already squeezed?

Mr McLoughlin: The current fare regime and price increases are exactly the same as those under the last Government, and I do not remember him complaining about them then.

T4. [137516] **David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con):** The new Mersey Gateway bridge will be tolled, with the risk of significant extra traffic through Warrington. The inspector at the planning inquiry stated the toll

should be set no higher than that of the nearby Birkenhead tunnel. Will the Secretary of State confirm that in any evaluation of a change to the tunnel toll, he will also look at the situation of the bridge and of Warrington?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Stephen Hammond): The Government have no plans to fund the reduction or abolition of tolls on the Mersey tunnels. Tolls on the new Mersey gateway bridge will be set by the Mersey gateway crossings board, an independent subsidiary of Halton borough council set up to manage the scheme. My hon. Friend knows that the indicative and maximum toll levels were agreed as part of the public inquiry, and were set out under the Transport and Works Act 1992.

T3. [137515] **Mrs Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab):** A couple of days ago, Carlos Tevez, the Manchester City striker, admitted to not having a valid UK driving licence. It was said that the theory test would be difficult for him as it is conducted in English. Given that many people who are legitimately and legally in the UK need to drive after the 12-month grace period, does the Department offer the theory test in other languages? If not, why not, given that in the interests of road safety it is more important that people are encouraged to take the test, rather than have them worry about whether their written English skills are up to scratch?

Stephen Hammond: I can confirm that the test is offered in more languages in this country than it is in any other in Europe. I am, however, consulting on whether to reduce the number, because it is clear that a key aspect of road safety is involved: if people cannot understand the test in English, they might not be able to understand the road signs.

T5. [137517] **Priti Patel (Witham) (Con):** Will my right hon. Friend continue to champion Essex commuters and ensure that the recommendations of "Once in a generation—A rail prospectus for East Anglia" are considered by his Department and implemented, so that our commuters can have outstanding rail infrastructure, bringing us into the 21st century?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Simon Burns): I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and I pay tribute to the tremendous work that she, other hon. Members and local authorities in East Anglia have done in producing that excellent document, in which I was involved before becoming a Minister. She can have my assurance that we are completely committed to investing in infrastructure, not only in East Anglia and Essex but throughout the country. I look forward to meeting her, Government Members and other Members of the House to discuss that important report shortly.

T7. [137521] **John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab):** Bolsover district council, Chesterfield borough council, North East Derbyshire district council and Bassetlaw district council have all proposed that devolved major scheme funding should be allocated to a local transport body based on the Sheffield city region. Does the Minister agree that that is a sensible way to allocate resources in order to help regenerate the economy?

Mr Burns: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point, although it is obviously equally important to listen to local views. My understanding is that both Derby and Derbyshire, and Nottingham and Nottinghamshire did not think it was right that they be linked with Sheffield because of different considerations in their geographical make-up and in their needs. We have decided that, in the interim, we will not link Sheffield with Derby/Derbyshire and Nottingham/Nottinghamshire, but we will leave it to the local communities to seek, in the short term, an agreement that will be mutually acceptable to all communities.

T6. [137518] **Chris Heaton-Harris** (Daventry) (Con): My question is further to that asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) about services on London Midland trains. Staff shortages and other issues have led to an unbelievably poor service, with London Midland's chief executive saying earlier this week that he was "embarrassed" by the service being offered. What will the Government do to ensure that London Midland improves the service it offers my constituents?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Norman Baker): As I mentioned earlier, there have been discussions between the Department and London Midland, and they are ongoing. London Midland has taken steps to improve its rostering and to recruit more drivers to try to ensure that the very poor service that my hon. Friend's constituents have had is not repeated this year. We continue to monitor the situation, and we will take further action if necessary.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): If Britain is to see a substantial modal shift of freight from road to rail, it is vital to construct dedicated rail freight capacity capable of carrying full-sized lorry trailers on trains. Will the Government give serious consideration to practical schemes to provide such capacity?

Mr McLoughlin: I will always look at practical schemes that come forward. I am pleased to say that the amount of freight being carried on the railways has dramatically increased, and I very much hope that our plans in the near future will show that we want it to increase even further.

Mr Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (LD): The Minister is aware of my concern about the apparent reinterpretation by the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland of the very welcome £50 million that the UK Government announced in their 2011 autumn statement for sleeper refurbishment. Will the Minister comment on his understanding of the position, and could we perhaps discuss it later in a meeting, not least in the context of the new Caledonian sleeper franchise?

Mr Simon Burns: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question, and I know he has campaigned vigorously for improvements to that rail service. I understand that the Scottish Government decided to reroute funding allocated for improving sleeper services to capital investment in Scottish Water—a short-term measure taken, apparently, for accounting reasons. The future funding of Scottish Water will be fully adjusted to ensure the commitment to fund the sleeper improvement programme is met,

although I think it is sad that there has been this delay. I would be more than happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman if he felt that would be useful.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): My constituent, Mrs Hinet, suffered the tragedy of losing her daughter and grandchild. They were pedestrians who died when a car driven by an 89-year-old who had had a heart attack at the wheel mounted the pavement. There seems to be a lack of assessment of drivers such as that 89-year-old, compared with that of those who are 70. I know that regulations are in place for drivers who are over 70, but there seems to be a problem in that the deciles of the 70s and 80s are aggregated in the data. Will the Minister look at the data and how they are collected for those in their 70s and 80s and accidents on the roads?

Stephen Hammond: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. We have looked at that data and at some of the evidence from some incidents, particularly a number of tragic incidents such as the one he describes. The most important thing is that the current plans and regime are backed by the evidence, and I will review that. More importantly, it is a question of experience and not necessarily of the driver's age.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): To what extent does the Secretary of State plan to rely on private sector money to fund HS2? Have the Government approached or received any expressions of interest from potential funders, including any foreign sovereign wealth funds?

Mr McLoughlin: First and foremost, I want to get the Bill for HS2 through the House. We will make further announcements on HS2 in the near future.

Mrs Linda Riordan (Halifax) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State outline when the Caldervale line that runs through my constituency will get new rolling stock to replace the current Pacer units, which are unpopular, uncomfortable and outdated?

Mr McLoughlin: I promise the hon. Lady that I will write to her, bearing in mind the concerns she has just expressed.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Electrification of the Lakes line from Oxenholme to Windermere would probably be the least expensive and most straightforward electrification project in the network. It would also provide a massive boost for the £3 billion tourism economy in Cumbria. Will the Minister meet me, rail operators and rail users to take forward this project?

Norman Baker: I am very happy for me or my colleague the Minister of State to meet my hon. Friend about this matter. We have a major programme of electrification, as he knows. It will not be finished when we have completed all these schemes, so we are looking forward to further schemes post the present programme.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Houses of Parliament

1. **Thomas Docherty** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): What progress the Commission expects to make in the remainder of this Session on the renovation and renewal of the Houses of Parliament. [137522]

John Thurso (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): At its October 2012 meeting, the Commission agreed to publish the report of the previous feasibility group and ask for a full independent analysis to be carried out of the various high-level options other than the option of a new building away from Westminster. The House Committee of the House of Lords reached a similar view. The results will be available in 2014 and will provide the basis for an informed decision about how exactly to proceed.

Thomas Docherty: I am most grateful for that answer. Given the need for an informed decision, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is vital that all stakeholders—the public, the press, those who work here and, of course, Members of both Houses—are fully engaged in the process leading up to that decision?

John Thurso: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point and the Commission is grateful to him for the part he played in advising the study group last year, together with the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) and two Members of the House of Lords. This will be a major project that will affect us all, and good consultation with all those involved will be vital to ensuring its success. I look forward, as I am sure the Commission does, to working with the hon. Gentleman and others to ensure that that happens.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If the cheapest and quickest option for a complete renewal of the fabric of the Houses of Parliament is to close the Houses of Parliament and temporarily relocate them elsewhere, will the hon. Gentleman ensure that that option is put before the House so that Members can vote for or against it?

John Thurso: The purpose of the feasibility study now being undertaken is to ensure that there is accurate information, properly gathered by outside independent experts, so that all the options are based on fact, without any optimism bias. I cannot personally imagine a circumstance in which the House would not wish to express a view on what is best, but when the decision is made, after the information is available, it will be for the usual channels, whichever they are, to work out how to do that.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If we were to move out, which I would not particularly object to if it were more cost effective, and if, for instance, we were to move to a round chamber, such as that at Church house, where would the Liberal Democrats sit? Would they sit

between Labour and the Conservatives? Would they sit to the far left or to the far right, or would they sit in the bishops' seats?

John Thurso: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question. That is beyond my pay grade in this role, but I assure him that wherever it was it would always be the right place.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

The Leader of the House was asked—

McKay Report

2. **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): When he expects to receive a report from the Commission on the consequences of devolution for the House of Commons. [137523]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Tom Brake): A report from the McKay commission is expected by the end of the current Session of Parliament.

Harriett Baldwin: I am delighted to hear that we will get the report in this Session of Parliament. Does the Deputy Leader of the House share my aspiration that by the end of this Parliament we will ensure that English-only legislation is voted on with a majority of English MPs?

Tom Brake: I am aware that my hon. Friend is pursuing this matter vigorously—indeed, she made her own submission—but it is right that we wait until we have carefully considered the arguments and options in the report before taking a view. I am sure the House will want to do the same.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Before we make any further changes, the House will know that we already have two classes of Members of Parliament—those who take their seats and are properly accountable in parliamentary terms for their expenses, and those who do not take their seats and can spend representative money on party political campaigning, with no accountability. When will the Government address that issue?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. It is slightly outside the scope of the McKay commission, but he has put his concerns on the record again. I am sure it is a matter that the House will wish to consider in the future.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Following the question from the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), will the Deputy Leader of the House ensure that Members of Parliament such as me, who represent constituencies in Wales but have constituents who work in England, receive health services in England and use transport in England, also have an opportunity to vote on those matters as Members of Parliament?

Tom Brake: Again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. It is appropriate, as I said earlier, that we should wait until the report has been published. Clearly,

a wide range of options is available, such as the status quo, federalism and many different approaches that many Members would want to advocate.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

House of Commons Dining Rooms

3. **Mr Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): What use the Commission is making of price mechanisms to ensure maximum utilisation of House of Commons dining rooms on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings. [137524]

John Thurso (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): The recently endorsed Catering Services business improvement plan proposes the return of a variable tariff structure in the Members Dining Room. The Administration Committee will be consulted on the details shortly. This is in response to feedback from Members who had stopped using that service following the introduction of a fixed tariff. Catering Services has a three-month rolling marketing plan that highlights offers and promotions in all the catering outlets to generate more business. This plan will include the Dining Room.

Mr Chope: I thank my hon. Friend for that response. Last week, I dined on all three nights in the Dining Room and almost nobody else was present, but the service was fantastic because there were three servants for each person sitting down. [HON. MEMBERS: "Servants?"] Exactly. Does my hon. Friend think that one way of engaging Members who do not use the Dining Room would be to offer them much cheaper rates when there is an opportunity for them to come along?

John Thurso: There is clearly a balance to be struck between attracting people in at the right price and prices being so low that they do not recover the appropriate cost. The House authorities strive to strike that balance appropriately. Work is being undertaken, particularly by the Administration Committee, but the key, driving factor is that the footfall in the Palace is dropping because of the change in hours, and I do not think any of us can do a great deal about that.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

The Leader of the House was asked—
Programming

4. **Ann McKechin** (Glasgow North) (Lab): Whether he plans to give evidence to the Procedure Committee inquiry on programming. [137525]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Tom Brake): We have received confirmation of the Procedure Committee's decision to undertake an inquiry into programming together with a request to set out the Government's views. We will submit our views shortly.

Ann McKechin: Given how light the Government's legislative programme is, does the right hon. Gentleman think that now is the time to consider whether we can debate private Members' Bills not only on Fridays but on other days of the week, rather than having the countless pointless debates that we currently have to endure?

Tom Brake: I am surprised that the hon. Lady considers that the Government have a light programme; that is certainly not the view on the Government Benches. The House has expressed a view on private Members' Bills. It has thought it appropriate to leave them where they are.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): When the Leader of the House and his deputy prepare their evidence, will they consider holding the Committee stage of the Bill on equal marriage on the Floor of the House?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Lady for that question about a matter that has been raised before. The Government want to allow suitable scrutiny of the Bill and I am sure that the Government will provide it.

Public Reading Stages

5. **Sarah Newton** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): What assessment he has made of the pilots of public reading stages for Bills. [137526]

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Andrew Lansley): We have conducted pilot public reading stages for the Protection of Freedoms Bill and the Small Charitable Donations Bill, and an online consultation was conducted on the draft Care and Support Bill.

Following evaluation, I have today informed the House in a written ministerial statement that public reading stages will form part of a tool kit to consider legislation on a case-by-case basis. I hope we will continue to improve public engagement in the legislative process—for example, through pre-legislative scrutiny and evidence sessions in Public Bill Committees rather than by adopting a uniform approach to legislation.

Sarah Newton: I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's response and congratulate him and his predecessor on the great innovations in this Parliament to make this place more relevant to the people who sent us here. I urge that we use the new tool in our tool kit as often as we can.

Mr Lansley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, with whom I share an appreciation of my predecessor. Over the past two and a half years, the House has made considerable progress in engaging the public directly with legislation. We can do that through a number of routes. Sometimes, pre-legislative scrutiny on draft legislation or evidence sessions before Public Bill Committees are very effective, and public reading stages are a further option. We do not want to specify in relation to any particular legislation that all those things must be applied, but we have the mechanisms to engage the public more fully.

Private Members' Bills

6. **Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): What recent consideration he has given to the procedure for private Members' Bills; and if he will make a statement.
[137527]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Tom Brake): Hon. Members will be aware that the Procedure Committee is undertaking an inquiry into the procedure for private Members' Bills. My hon. Friend gave evidence to the Committee yesterday and raised a number of issues relating to the timing procedures and motivation for private Members' Bills. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will give evidence on behalf of the Government in due course.

Charlie Elphicke: As a tool for prompting dialogue and discussion or for the furtherance of a parliamentary campaign, private Members' Bills are really useful, but many Members think that the way in which Friday sittings work is little short of a farce. Should programming and the tools used for Government legislation be applied to private Members' legislation, to enable votes to take place and more legislation to be passed?

Tom Brake: Many Members have experienced some frustrations regarding the private Members' Bill process. I know that the hon. Gentleman has made a suggestion to the Procedure Committee along the lines of his question, but he will be aware that existing procedures of the House allow for a closure to be sought on debates and to impose time limits on speeches. He will be aware that sometimes when a Member presents a private Member's Bill there will be other ways of ensuring that it is reflected in Government legislation, in the way that his proposed measures on children and families will be reflected in that Bill.

Government Bills (Report Stage)

7. **Simon Hughes** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): Whether he has considered guaranteeing a minimum amount of time for the consideration of Government Bills at Report stage.
[137528]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Tom Brake): This Government recognise the value of parliamentary scrutiny of legislation. We have provided more days than the previous Administration for Report stages and, where necessary, we will provide more than one day for Report stage.

Simon Hughes: I recognise the Government's commitment to better scrutiny of legislation, but one of the perennial frustrations, under all Governments, is that we get to Report stage and the allocated time is used up by urgent questions or statements and we end up with almost no time to do the job of the House. Will Ministers look at changing that so that we have injury time for any time lost because of earlier business?

Tom Brake: I understand my right hon. Friend's point. The Government have sought to address his concerns by providing more time on Report, but he

might want to consider making a submission to the Procedure Committee, which is looking at programming. I am sure that the Government will want to consider his submission, along with others, when the report is published.

Sitting Hours

8. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the introduction of new sitting hours on managing the business of the House.
[137529]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Tom Brake): No assessment has been made of the effect of the new sitting hours on managing the business of the House.

Kevin Brennan: I think the Deputy Leader of the House should make an assessment but should not listen to those who are calling for private Members' Bills to be brought into the middle of the week. Would it not be a ludicrous outcome if those who argued for our hours to move to earlier in the evening were then to vote for private Members' Bills to be discussed after 7 o'clock so that the hours were extended from 11.30 am to 10 pm instead of running from 2.30 pm to 10 pm, which is what applied before?

Tom Brake: Clearly, the House has made a decision in relation to sitting hours, but the Procedure Committee is looking at the matter, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman's concerns will be taken on board as part of that process.

Policy Announcements

9. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his ministerial colleagues on the requirements of the ministerial code relating to making policy announcements to the House before the media.
[137530]

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Andrew Lansley): The ministerial code is clear:

"When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of Government policy should be made in the first instance, in Parliament."

I regularly remind my colleagues of this.

Diana Johnson: We know from the Government's relaunch that they are planning to make 12 policy announcements over the next 12 weeks. Will the Leader of the House assure us that those announcements will be made first to the House of Commons, and that there will be penalties if that does not happen?

Mr Lansley: I reiterate to the House and to the hon. Lady that the ministerial code is clear and that I regularly remind my colleagues of it. It is our intention and our practice that the most important announcements of Government policy be made in the first instance to Parliament. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is saying from a sedentary position that I am inaccurate. I have quoted directly the ministerial code to him and to the House.

Horsemeat (Supermarket Products)

10.33 am

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister if he will give a response to the finding of horsemeat in supermarket meat products.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr David Heath): This is a very important and extremely serious issue. Consumers should have full confidence that food is exactly what it says on the label. There are strict rules requiring products to be labelled accurately.

The Food Standards Agency is urgently investigating how a number of beef products on sale in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland were found to contain horse and pig meat. Twenty-seven beefburger products were analysed, with 10 of the 27 products, or 37%, testing positive for horse DNA and 23, or 85%, testing positive for pig DNA. In nine of the 10 beefburger samples, horse DNA was found at very low levels. In one sample from Tesco, the level of horse DNA indicated that horsemeat was present and accounted for approximately 29% of the total meat content of the burger.

Yesterday the agency met representatives from the food industry from all parts of the UK. Industry representatives confirmed the existing processes that they follow to ensure that the products that reach consumers are of the highest standard. These include quality controls in place at all stages of the food chain. They also set out the actions that they have already taken in response to this incident.

The FSA has now set out a four-point plan for its investigation, which it will implement in conjunction with Government Departments, local authorities and the food industry. The first point is to continue the urgent review of the traceability of the food products identified in the Food Safety Authority of Ireland survey. The retailers and the UK processor named in the survey have been asked to provide comprehensive information on the findings by the end of Friday 18 January.

The second point is to explore further, in conjunction with the FSAI, the methodology used for the survey, to understand more clearly the factors that may have led to the low-level cases of cross-contamination. The third is to consider, with relevant local authorities and the FSAI, whether any legal action will be appropriate following the investigation. The fourth is to work with my Department, the devolved rural affairs Departments and local authorities on a UK-wide study of food authenticity in processed meat products.

Mary Creagh: I thank the Minister for that reply, but perhaps he could have made a statement to the House yesterday, rather than have to respond to an urgent question today.

There is understandable public anger that supermarkets have been selling beefburgers and other products containing horsemeat and pig DNA. Consumers who avoid pork for religious reasons will be upset that they may have unwittingly eaten it, and eating horse is a strong cultural taboo in the United Kingdom. It is not illegal to sell horsemeat, but it is illegal not to label it correctly. Customers must have the confidence that the food they buy is correctly labelled, legal and safe.

The UK is part of a global food supply chain. The food industry lobbies vigorously for a light-touch regulatory system from Government. Testing, tracking and tracing ingredients is expensive, but not testing them will cost retailers, processors, British farmers and consumers much more.

This is not just about the supermarkets. The adulteration scandal raises serious questions for the Government to answer about how we as a nation regulate our food. First, the adulteration was detected in Ireland, not the United Kingdom. Why was it not picked up here? Will the Minister consider introducing DNA testing of meat, as happens in Ireland, to reassure consumers that they are actually getting what they pay for?

In 2010, the Minister's Government split the responsibility for food labelling between three Government Departments: the Department of Health is responsible for dietary and nutritional labelling, and the Food Standards Agency is responsible for allergen labelling, but the 25 staff and the budget responsible for the compositional labelling has been transferred to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Is that not an absurd situation, and will the Minister now review the system that he has created for food labelling in this country? How many of those 25 staff are still employed by DEFRA on those issues, and why was no national system put in place at that time to audit labelling and composition to protect consumers from this type of fraud?

The FSA inquiry will test the robustness of supermarket audit chains. How confident is the Minister that they will meet Government standards? Has the loss of 700 trading standards officers in three years made this type of consumer fraud more widespread and less likely to be detected? Is the Minister confident that the FSA's Meat Hygiene Service can be cut by £12 million over the comprehensive spending review period without its ability to detect breaches of the law or tackle a disease outbreak being affected? These invisible regulatory services protect our consumers and our food industry and allow the industry to export all over the world.

Horses are killed for meat in this country, but there are dozens of different types of horse passport and the system is a mess. Will the Minister look at the system for horse passports?

The coalition agreement stated:

"We will introduce honesty in food labelling so that consumers can be confident about where their food comes from and its environmental impact."

On the evidence of the past few days, the Minister still has quite a way to go.

Mr Heath: Let us be clear: the hon. Lady is right to say that consumers have a right to expect that the food they eat is what it says on the label. The cases that were picked up in Ireland are a serious breach of that principle. That is why we are taking the measures that we are taking.

The hon. Lady was completely wrong, however, in what she said about responsibility for labelling. Let us be absolutely clear: the responsibility for policy on labelling lies with the most appropriate Department, but the responsibility for checking the content of food lies with the Food Standards Agency—which, of course, is the responsibility of the Department of Health—and only the Food Standards Agency. It is the body charged with that responsibility.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Where are the Health Ministers?

Mr Heath: The hon. Gentleman does not seem to understand the difference between a policy responsibility and implementation. It is precisely because of that difference that we split it—to make sure that implementation was with the body charged with that duty.

I believe that the Food Standards Agency carries out its duties in a responsible and professional way. It takes a risk-based approach to testing, based on intelligence. It is right to do so, because that is how it gets the most effective results.

The hon. Lady asked about trading standards officers. Of course these officers have a duty to their local authorities and to the people in their area in relation to the standards that traders employ in that area, but they are not a responsibility of central Government. Local government will take the decisions on what are the appropriate levels.

The hon. Lady seems to think that there is some difficulty with horse passports. I simply do not think that that is the case. I would happily set out the difference between the route for horses going to slaughter and the routes for others.

May I make one final point that is absolutely essential? It is important that neither the hon. Lady nor anyone else in this House talks down the British food industry at a time when the standards in that industry are very high. That something has been discovered in Ireland that is serious and may lead to criminal proceedings does not undermine the serious efforts that are taken by retailers, processors and producers in this country to ensure traceability and the standard of the food that is available to consumers. She should not put that at risk by making unguarded comments.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Notwithstanding the importance and urgency of this matter, I remind the House that business questions are to follow and that we then have two heavily subscribed debates under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. I will not be able to call everybody as I usually wish to do, but to maximise the number of contributors, I appeal to colleagues for single, short supplementary questions and to the Minister for appropriately pithy replies.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Minister has to answer the question why this problem was picked up not in this country but in Ireland. Will he take this opportunity to explain what the role of DEFRA is in food safety and where the cross-contamination occurred? I understood that all checks on imported meat, in which we understand the cross-contamination was found, occur at the point of entry. Will he confirm what checks are conducted on meat imports?

Mr Heath: Let me make it very clear, as I have already said, that food safety is the responsibility of the Food Standards Agency. I have no reason to suppose that it does not do an extremely good job. We have a robust screening process with a network of food safety organisations. I see nothing to be ashamed of in the fact that we collaborate successfully with food standards

agencies in other countries, because this is a European trade. The meat in question almost certainly came not from the UK but from a third country, to be processed in Ireland. It is not surprising, therefore, that the UK authorities would not have picked that up. However, we are investigating fully and there may well be criminal prosecutions as a consequence.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I have to tell the Minister that he is striking a very ill-judged tone. Where is the Secretary of State? Will these retailers be prosecuted? Was it not total folly to remove any responsibility for food safety or standards from the independent Food Standards Agency to his Department?

Mr Heath: I have already explained that we have not done that. It is the policy on food labelling, which is considered at Agriculture Council, that is within DEFRA. I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman's other comments require a reply.

Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): At a time when commodity prices are very high, food adulteration is likely to become a bigger problem. When we have high-priced beef and—as I understand it—low-priced horsemeat, some unscrupulous food processors are likely to take advantage. Will the Minister therefore ensure that when commodity prices are high throughout the food chain, the Food Standards Agency has responsible processes in place to ensure that adulteration cannot happen in this country, and that British food maintains its high status?

Mr Heath: We certainly need to do that—that is one of the things that is in train. I have said that the FSA operates on the basis of intelligence—it will continue to do so, because it is important that we find where adulteration takes place. However, it is important to say that manufacturers and retailers have a responsibility to establish very clearly the provenance of the food they supply. Most retailers and processors in this country do an extremely good job of exactly that, but when the system falls down, we must investigate and take appropriate action.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): People trust brands such as Tesco to have precisely sourced their supply. The Minister rightly said that it is not illegal to sell horsemeat in this country, but he also rightly said that it is illegal to sell horsemeat if it is not properly labelled as such. What steps have been taken to prosecute Tesco and others for their failure to label properly the food they were supplying to their customers?

Mr Bradshaw: Answer the question this time.

Mr Heath: I am so grateful to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) for his advice.

The investigations will precede the prosecution process. That is the way we do things in this country. We investigate first and take prosecutions to court if it is appropriate to do so. I do not think—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand the strength of feeling on the matter and the considerable expertise of the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), but I would look to him ordinarily to behave in a

[*Mr Speaker*]

statesman-like manner, and he fell short of the standard on that occasion. He must calm himself. Let us hear the answer.

Mr Heath: As I was saying, if prosecutions are required, they will of course take place, either in this country or in the Republic of Ireland as appropriate. However, it is important to gather evidence before mounting a prosecution.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Although I welcome the fact that Tesco has today widely advertised an apology, does the Minister share my disgust on hearing the news yesterday that such a profitable and large British organisation could have let down consumers so very badly? Should not Tesco go way beyond that advert to rebuild trust with its customers and prove to us what it will do about this situation?

Mr Heath: The hon. Lady makes an extremely good point. I am impressed at the speed with which Tesco has responded to what is clearly both a very embarrassing situation and a potentially damaging one. It is essential that retailers and processors rebuild trust in the products available in this country, and that the Government do whatever we can to support that. Only on that basis can we have a successful trade.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Food manufacturing is an important part of the British economy and employs a lot of people in my constituency. The shadow Secretary of State is not undermining the industry by bringing those issues to the House; she is safeguarding its future by allowing people to have confidence in it. The Minister needs to tone down the rhetoric, tell us that you are on top of this issue, and let the British public know that they can have confidence in the regulatory system for which you are responsible.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not responsible for these matters, but we look forward to hearing the Minister.

Mr Heath: I have set out exactly what the FSA is doing in response to the immediate problem. The point I am trying to make is this: yes, this is probably an example of criminality—we must wait and see—but it has been detected and is being dealt with. It is quite wrong to extrapolate from that and say, “This is common across the whole of the food industry.” That would be a mistake, and it would undermine an important industry.

Sir Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): There are a finite number of abattoirs, slaughter houses and renderers both here and in the Republic of Ireland, so must it not be possible, in fairly short order, to discover where the horsemeat entered the food chain and react accordingly?

Mr Heath: Of course, the first responsibility for that lies with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, which is carrying out investigations and we are assisting with them as far as possible. I think we will quickly identify where the meat came from and discover whether it was falsely labelled at the point of origin, which I suspect may be the case.

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Is not the problem fragmentation, split responsibility, enforcement, the role of trading standards officers and cuts to local government? Has the Minister had a meeting a Cabinet level, across all Departments, to get a policy that is fit for purpose?

Mr Heath: As I have already said, I do not accept that there is any difficulty with split responsibilities. The responsibility for food safety lies entirely with the Food Standards Agency.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): In this country, there are robust rules to separate the processing of beef and horse meat. Is that not the case in Ireland?

Mr Heath: That will be the subject of the investigations being carried out. The low-level contamination suggests that it may not have been through deliberate falsification of labelling. It may well be that it is simply cross-contamination by error, but I am sure that the Irish authorities will look carefully at this. We are co-operating with them as far as we can, and we are very eager to know the answer.

Mr Dave Watts (St Helens North) (Lab): The Minister said, “It’s not my fault” and puts the blame back on the Food Standards Agency. He has already made cuts and is proposing £11 million more. Will he stop those cuts in order to protect the vulnerable people in Britain from having food they should not have?

Mr Heath: I know that it is a convenient fiction, but I can honestly say that I am not personally responsible for having mislabelled horsemeat in the Republic of Ireland. I am confident that the FSA is doing a very good job in this country and will continue to do so.

Stephen Mosley (City of Chester) (Con): There are suggestions that the future of the red tractor mark may be at threat. The red tractor mark guarantees the high quality of UK produce. Is this issue not a sign that we should be backing such schemes and increasing their use in the future?

Mr Heath: Producer-led and processor-led quality assurance schemes are a valuable tool for consumers, enabling them to know exactly the provenance of what they are eating, and the welfare conditions under which the animals, in the case of meat, have been kept. That is to be recommended to the industry and the consumer.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): This scandal illustrates the failure of one of our largest companies to ensure that its supply chain reflects the values it purports to uphold. I sponsored the Transparency in UK Company Supply Chains (Eradication of Slavery) Bill as a ten-minute rule Bill and my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Michael Connarty) is the promoter of its Second Reading on Friday. It provides a tool for the companies themselves to ensure that their supply chains reflect the values they purport to uphold and do not include such criminal practices. Will the Minister talk to his colleagues in the Whips Office to ensure that the Government do not prevent the Bill going through, so that we can change this situation?

Mr Heath: I do not honestly believe that there is any legal impediment at the moment to retailers doing a proper job of establishing the provenance of the food they serve on their shelves.

Kris Hopkins (Keighley) (Con): We already have strict rules, with penalties, relating to food tracing and labelling. Should we not review those penalties to provide a greater deterrence to companies?

Mr Heath: We continue to keep our policies on labelling under review. In this case, however, it appears that it is not simply a labelling error. We are almost certainly talking about real criminality, and there are very clear laws in place to deal with such criminality.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): This scandal—because that is what it is—has affected supermarket chains in this country. What investigations have been carried out of the beefburgers that go into the fast food chains, and how confident can my constituents be that they are getting a Big Mac rather than a Shergar Mac?

Mr Heath: Those investigations are under way to ensure that if this scandal is replicated in other low-cost beefburgers, it is picked up and we take appropriate action.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given that the FSA has responsibility for food safety, I am surprised and disappointed that a Health Minister is not at least sitting in on the Minister's response to this urgent question. Likewise, no shadow Health Minister is present either. Will the Minister send a signal to the authorities in the Irish Republic that if there is any criminality, exemplary sentences should be handed out?

Mr Heath: The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who has responsibility for the FSA, has apologised, because she is abroad today. That is why she is not here. Yes, we clearly want these matters to be prosecuted and dealt with with appropriate severity, and we will continue our dialogue with the Irish authorities to ensure that whatever they do is consonant with that.

Cathy Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab/Co-op): I do not eat meat, but the majority of my constituents do, and I think that looking on today they will be surprised and disappointed by the tone of the Minister's comments suggesting that those of us standing up for consumers are somehow talking down the food industry. Will he revisit the proposed cuts to the FSA's budget to ensure that meat hygiene inspections are not compromised?

Mr Heath: As I have explained many times, the FSA is a responsibility of the Department of Health, but I have no reason to suppose that its activities will be compromised by future budgetary constraints. I am absolutely clear—let me repeat this—that we ought to be very concerned about this matter on behalf of consumers in this country, but we also ought to recognise that it does not mean that food across the country sold by all retailers is suspect. It is not, and that is the point that I am trying to make. At such times, consumers need to be reassured that systems are in place—systems that, in fact, caught this cross-contamination in this case.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): As a result of this serious incident, several supermarkets in Britain have removed a lot of products from their shelves as a precaution. Does my hon. Friend agree that this demonstrates a responsible attitude on the part of British retailers in dealing with this serious issue?

Mr Heath: I think that the great majority of businesses in this country take an extraordinarily responsible attitude to their duties to the consumer. That is precisely the point I am trying to make. It makes it all the more important that where we find that abuse has taken place, we act urgently and effectively to prevent it from happening again.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Many of my constituents, like those of other Members, rely on brands such as the Tesco everyday value brand, because of the high price of food. Does the Minister understand that his remarks and tone today give the impression that he has been captured, stunned, trussed up and served to the nation as the Minister for the producer interest?

Mr Heath: That is clearly not the case and is clearly not reflected in anything I have said. I have said all along that the interests of the consumer are paramount.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Is it more or less likely that this sort of food safety scandal will happen again in view of the reduction in food safety surveillance and the downgrading of food safety regulations?

Mr Heath: As I have said, I do not think that there is a downgrading of surveillance. We take the matter extremely seriously and ensure that what we do is targeted in the most effective way in order to pick up irregularities when they occur. It is very important that people recognise that. It is also important to recognise that we had here a system picking up a defect, not ignoring it.

Mrs Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): Earlier the Minister said that there was collaboration on these issues. Given that the Irish Food Safety Authority's tests were undertaken in November, could he advise the House when DEFRA was informed of those tests?

Mr Heath: DEFRA would not have been the first port of call, because this is a matter between the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and the Food Standards Agency in this country. I understand that they had a dialogue earlier this week.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On such an important issue, where is the Secretary of State and when did Ministers know about it?

Mr Heath: I am the Minister of State for agriculture and food.

Thomas Docherty (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): Mr Jeff Rooker, the chairman of the FSA, is due to stand down in just a few months' time. Will the Minister ensure that the Department of Health fills the post before June? [*Interruption.*]

Mr Heath: I am sorry; because of the noise, I did not quite catch the tenor of the question.

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a lot of noise in the Chamber. I understand people's consternation on this matter, but let us hear Mr Docherty's question and then the Minister can answer it.

Thomas Docherty: I am most grateful, Mr Speaker. Mr Jeff Rooker, who is the chairman of the FSA, is due to stand down in just a few months' time. Will the Minister of State ensure that the Department of Health fills that important role before June?

Mr Heath: He is actually Lord Rooker—and somebody who in the past has filled the position that I currently occupy. He is standing down—that is absolutely right. Of course the post will be filled, because it is an extremely important one, and I have no doubt that the timetable will be consonant with the time of his departure.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Tessa Munt (Wells) (LD) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady is too late. If she had risen earlier, she would have got in. We were drawing matters to a close. I thank the Minister and other colleagues for their co-operation.

Business of the House

11.1 am

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Andrew Lansley): The business for next week will be:

MONDAY 21 JANUARY—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Welfare Benefits Up-rating Bill.

TUESDAY 22 JANUARY—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House on the Succession to the Crown Bill.

WEDNESDAY 23 JANUARY—Opposition day [15th allotted day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 24 JANUARY—Debate on a motion relating to reducing the voting age, followed by general debate on the Holocaust memorial day. The subjects for these debates were nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 25 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the following week will include:

MONDAY 28 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Succession to the Crown Bill.

TUESDAY 29 JANUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill, followed by remaining stages of the HGV Road User Levy Bill.

WEDNESDAY 30 JANUARY—Opposition day [16th allotted day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 31 JANUARY—Consideration of opposed private business nominated by the Chairman of Ways and Means, followed by business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 1 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 31 January will be:

THURSDAY 31 JANUARY—Debate on the 30th anniversary of S4C, followed by debate on the military justice system.

Ms Eagle: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the forthcoming business. May I also thank him for the written statement today on public reading stages for Bills?

We welcome the announcement that the House will debate, on a Back-Bench business motion, Holocaust memorial day. It is right that we remember the premeditated murder of millions of people, mostly Jews, during the holocaust.

We agree with the Government's decision to provide logistical support for the French operation in Mali. The brutal rebel regime has been terrorising the civilian population. Its links with al-Qaeda pose a security threat. The killing of two oil workers in Algeria and the kidnapping of more than 20 of their colleagues shows that the threat from al-Qaeda remains serious. This is

an extremely dangerous and, for the families, deeply worrying situation. We recognise that Ministers might be limited in what they can say in public until the situation is resolved, but will the right hon. Gentleman undertake to ensure that the Government keep the House updated when it is appropriate to do so?

We are less than three weeks into the new year, and three major retailers have gone into administration. First Jessops, then this week HMV and Blockbuster. More than 10,000 retail jobs have gone or are at risk, impacting on communities across the country. The growth of online business has had a major impact on the structure of the retail economy, but the hollowing out of our high streets has a detrimental effect on local communities. The Government could support the change in the retail sector by ensuring that global online retailers paid their fair share of tax here in the UK. It has also been revealed this week that Ministers have been including unpaid work experience posts in their employment figures. So, while real jobs are disappearing on the high street, Ministers have spent their time conniving to boost artificially the employment figures. May we have an urgent statement on that from the Business Secretary?

Students at Stanford university were last week regaled by Mr Steve Hilton's accounts of his time in No. 10. He told them:

"Very often you'll wake up in the morning and hear on the...news"—

a Government announcement—

"...and you think...it's not just that we didn't know it was happening, but we don't even agree with it!"

None of us was in the least surprised by that observation. After all, Mr Oliver Dowden, the deputy chief of staff at No. 10, said he was

"surprised on a day-to-day basis"

by his own Government's announcements. The fact that the Government's aides wander the world saying that No. 10 is a shambles does raise the question of who is responsible.

This week, we learned that Ministers have found someone new to blame: the civil service. The list of those the Government have blamed for their difficulties keeps on growing. We have had the weather—at different times, it has been too hot, too cold, too windy or too wet for the economy to grow. We have had Her Majesty, for having a diamond jubilee, we have had the Olympics for distracting us, and the Deputy Prime Minister has been blamed for just about everything. Next, they will be turning on each other. Oh—they are.

That brings me to Europe. The Prime Minister told *The Sun* in 2009 that

"if we win that election, we cannot afford to waste time having a row with Europe."

Well, the Conservatives did not win the election, and they are having a row about Europe. The Prime Minister has decided that crossing the North sea to Holland will put sufficient distance between him and his Back Benchers to allow him safely to deliver his European speech. No doubt the Dutch people are eagerly anticipating his remarks, but will the Leader of the House suggest to the Prime Minister that he might choose to make a statement to this House?

Yesterday at Prime Minister's questions, we had questions but no answers, so perhaps the Leader of the House could tell us this: is it the Government's intention that

the UK will be a full member of the European Union in five years' time? The Prime Minister refuses to answer, but Cabinet Ministers have been falling over each other to offer different answers. The Local Government Secretary said that he might vote to leave; the Minister without Portfolio, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) thinks the idea is barking; the Education Secretary thinks that it might be a good idea to leave; and the Deputy Prime Minister thinks that it would have a chilling effect on our economy. I can quite understand why the Foreign Secretary, witnessing all that, decided to go and spend some time in Australia. Given that we had two statements on Leveson, are we now going to have three on Europe: one by the Deputy Prime Minister, one by the Prime Minister, and one by rebel Tory Cabinet Ministers? There we have it: the Government are divided, the Prime Minister has lost control, and party management is trumping the national interest. It is Maastricht all over again.

Mr Lansley: I am grateful to the shadow Leader of the House for her comments, and particularly for her welcome for the written ministerial statement on public reading stages. I also share her welcome for the Backbench Business Committee's decision to timetable a debate on Holocaust memorial day. I am a supporter of the Holocaust Educational Trust and a member of its council, and I have been with students to Auschwitz-Birkenau, as I know many Members have done. Holocaust memorial day is an occasion on which we can commemorate and understand the nature of that horror. It helps us to understand the applications of that genocide to the issues of today, and the horrors that man unfortunately still tends to visit on other members of mankind.

The shadow Leader of the House asked about Mali. She will recall that the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Mark Simmonds) made a statement on that matter earlier in the week. I know that my colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence will ensure that the House is updated on that issue, and, when it is appropriate to do so, on the events in Algeria. The Government condemn what has happened there. We are acting in concert with our allies in response. We send our condolences to the families of this and other countries' nationals who have been killed and captured, but we will not rest from trying to recover those who have been kidnapped.

The hon. Lady asked about the high street, and she will recall the Portas review. The Government are supporting regeneration in the high street, but she and the House must understand completely that the Government cannot stand in the way of change in the economy—and changes are taking place, which will impact on high-street retailers. Some high-street retailers will succeed and prosper; others unfortunately will not. One of the key things that this Government have set out to do is always to try to ensure that we give the private sector an opportunity to grow. The evidence for that—the hon. Lady neglected to put it before the House—is the creation of more than 1 million jobs in the private sector since the general election. That is precisely what this Government are doing.

I was amused, but I was not much questioned by the shadow Leader of the House on some other issues. A former civil servant myself, I have seen press reports

[Mr Lansley]

suggesting that the Prime Minister referred to “Yes Minister” as a documentary, but I am not aware that he did; I think I did in the House.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): A leadership bid!

Mr Lansley: I am pretty sure that is not going to happen. For the purposes of “Yes, Minister”, I have been both Bernard and Jim Hacker. What I can say with great confidence—I know it is true of this coalition Government—is that as my esteemed colleague Lord Fowler once said, “Ministers decide.” That is true; Ministers do decide. We take the decisions and we take the responsibility.

Finally, I do not want to chide the shadow Leader of the House too much, but once again she and her colleagues have not given notice to the House today of what the business might be for the Opposition day next Wednesday. I wonder whether they lack options. If they feel that they do, let me suggest gently, given that the hon. Lady was talking about and asking questions about Europe, that the Opposition might like to have a debate on Europe. Then we might discover the Labour party’s policy on Europe. As far as I can see, the Leader of the Opposition is willing to go on the radio and say that there are areas in which Britain needs powers back, but not to endorse the idea of a negotiation, the purpose of which is to achieve that. I thus have no idea what the Labour party’s approach might be.

Following the right hon. Member for South Shields (David Miliband) saying in a debate on the welfare benefits uprating that he was

“happy to debate priorities within”—[*Official Report*, 8 January 2013; Vol. 556, c. 217]—

the spending envelope, perhaps we could have a debate on that so that we can hear the Labour party’s proposals. Otherwise, we could have a debate on the elasticity of money supply, since the Labour party has made proposals for additional taxes, which would raise something over £2 billion, but appears to believe that that money is capable of matching spending pledges of more than £30 billion. Elasticity of money supply seems to be the Labour party’s approach.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is heavy pressure on time today, as I have already indicated, making it imperative that contributions from Back Benchers and Front Benchers alike are brief. Moreover, I remind the House that, in accordance with convention, hon. and right hon. Members who came into the Chamber after the Leader of the House had begun his statement or who exited during it, should not stand and expect to be called.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that from January next year 29 million Bulgarians and Romanians will potentially have access to the UK under the free movement directive. This Government are at risk of exhibiting institutionalised torpor on this issue. There has been no proper liaison with local authorities, no proper analysis of the likely numbers coming here and no analysis of whether we can vary the free movement directive to protect our core

public services and our employment market. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Prime Minister to look at this matter as a matter of urgency, because we have only 11 months left?

Mr Lansley: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Government are actively considering the issue. Rather than adopting the last Government’s attitude to the accession of member states, we are deploying as much of the extension of transitional measures as is available to us. My colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government are in contact with local government representatives, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration is leading a ministerial group which is considering matters relating to access to benefits and other services for those who come here. We do not want to exaggerate, as it were, the pull of this country rather than others for people exercising free movement in the European Union as a result of the differential in that regard.

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Moor View) (Lab): We already know from the former policy adviser to No. 10 that the Government are not in control of some of the policy announcements that are emerging, but this week we heard from Ministers in the Ministry of Defence that they were unable to check 70 A3 pages relating to apparently low-impact cuts. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Defence to come to the House to explain exactly what was in those documents, and to reveal whether he is actually in charge of his Department and the decisions that it makes?

Mr Lansley: I am not sure that the hon. Lady knows my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence very well. I do, and I can assure her that he is very much in control of his Department—as, indeed, are my other right hon. Friends.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): May I join my right hon. Friend in calling for a debate on Europe? In view of the Prime Minister’s important speech tomorrow, may I also encourage him to offer the Prime Minister some advice? Will he advise the Prime Minister to ensure that the timing of a referendum is right, that the question of a referendum is right, and that the politics of a referendum are right?

Mr Lansley: I am happy to assure my hon. Friend that I have every confidence that the Prime Minister’s speech will be correct in all the respects that he has identified. Personally, I think that a lot of nonsense is being talked about this matter. The Government are undertaking a review of competences, and we are very clear about the necessity of understanding how we can create a new settlement with the European Union. The Prime Minister is very clear about that, and I entirely share his view that we want to be in a European Union, but a changed European Union. The EU is undergoing changes in the eurozone and in other areas, but this is an opportunity for us to have a better, more flexible and more competitive Europe, and that is what we will seek to achieve.

Mr Dave Watts (St Helens North) (Lab): May we have a statement on changes in mobility benefits that will affect both children and adults, given that they were sneaked out without any consultation?

Mr Lansley: I will of course talk to my right hon. and hon. Friends at the Department for Work and Pensions about the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman, but I can assure him that I will always work with my colleagues to ensure that nothing is “sneaked out” and that Parliament and those who are affected by changes in benefit arrangements are kept informed.

Sir Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): A further consequence of the collapse of Jessops and HMV is that thousands of customers have been left with worthless gift vouchers. May we have a debate on consumer protection in the gift voucher market, which is worth £4 million a year? Interestingly, figures from the industry show that £250 million-worth of vouchers are never used.

Mr Lansley: I am sure that many Members will have the utmost sympathy for the people who held gift and credit vouchers, some of whom may not have been able to afford to lose them. The law provides for all unsecured creditors to be treated in the same way in the event of an insolvency, and the list of preferential creditors is kept to an absolute minimum. However, the hon. Gentleman has made an important point. He may wish to establish whether there is scope for a debate about the issue on the Adjournment, or through the Backbench Business Committee.

Mr Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford South) (Lab): Has the Leader of the House seen reports in the press this morning that, for the first time since 1994, Camelot is to increase the price of a lottery ticket, from £1 to £2? Will a Minister from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport come to the House and make a statement? I fear that that price increase may have an impact on contributions to good causes.

Mr Lansley: Yes, I have seen those reports. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman appreciates, after the passage of so many years the initial £1 ticket price could not possibly start rising by small increments, and it was only a question of the point at which it was appropriate for it to be adjusted substantially. Obviously Camelot and, presumably, the Lottery Commission will have to consider the potential impact on money that is raised for good causes, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to hear more from my colleagues at the DCMS, either during Question Time or on some other occasion.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): The local government settlement has just been announced. Before next year’s settlement, may we have a debate to discuss the difference between urban money and rural money? That still presents a problem, and now is the time to discuss it so that we can get it right for next year.

Mr Lansley: That is a matter of concern to many Members, including my hon. Friends at the Department for Communities and Local Government. Ministers agree that the evidence shows that rural areas are comparatively underfunded, and that a correction should be applied so that there is proper recognition of the additional costs of delivering services in rural areas. I will not elaborate on the details of those adjustments, although I could do so. Although we will want to have

transitional stability in local government, the Government recognise that such costs need to be understood and reflected in the formula.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health on the performance of the Food Standards Agency? We have just had a poor performance from the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath), who failed to reassure the House about the FSA’s performance. There are concerns that if horsemeat can be labelled as beef and enter the food chain via supermarket shelves, other sources of meat that have been banned—perhaps because of concerns about BSE—could also enter the food chain. Will the Leader of the House ensure that we have a statement from the Department of Health, so that we can be reassured about the performance of the FSA?

Mr Lansley: It sounds as though the hon. Gentleman missed asking his question of my right hon. Friend the Minister of State. To my knowledge, my DEFRA colleagues have no plans to make a statement about the performance of the Food Standards Agency, but I will of course ask them to respond to the hon. Gentleman about that. I recall from my time as Secretary of State for Health that we exercise ministerial oversight, although the FSA is a non-ministerial department.

Nicola Blackwood (Oxford West and Abingdon) (Con): Hundreds of my constituents spent Christmas and new year on flood alert, like many others, but now that the immediate danger has passed, they still have to cope with the worry of an uncertain future for their flood insurance. May we please have an urgent oral statement on the progress that the Government are making with the insurance companies on agreeing a statement of principles?

Mr Lansley: I share my hon. Friend’s sense of frustration that the negotiations with the Association of British Insurers have not yet reached a successful conclusion. My hon. Friends at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Government Policy are actively engaged in those negotiations. I would advise my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood) that it is not necessarily helpful to make statements or offer a running commentary in the midst of such negotiations. Our objective is clear: to do something that will offer the necessary protection to householders and, of course, also be fair and responsible to taxpayers.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Bob Dylan named himself after Dylan Thomas. We in Swansea will celebrate the centenary of Dylan Thomas’s birth in 2014, and I have asked Bob Dylan whether he would be prepared to give a centenary concert in Swansea, in order that he could blend his music with Dylan Thomas’s poetry. Sony Music has come back and said that Mr Dylan is thinking very positively about the idea. Would the Leader of the House welcome such a concert, and does he agree that it would add to the reputation of Swansea, the popularity of Bob Dylan and the legacy of Dylan Thomas? Also, would the Leader of the House be interested in coming along, or is his answer “Blowing in the Wind”?

Mr Lansley: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. If I can attend, I will do so, and I will look forward to it. Perhaps others will join me. Many who come from Swansea might contemplate revisiting it. My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) is from Swansea, as is the First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means—and, indeed, the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Can the Leader of the House confirm whether the Prime Minister will be making a statement in the House next week on his speech on Europe? Such a statement would give us all the opportunity to congratulate him on the fantastic speech that the Leader of the House confidently predicts and would also expose how out of touch with public opinion the Opposition are on this issue. Given that the shadow Leader of the House was leading with her chin in demanding such a statement, surely it would be a shame to disappoint her.

Mr Lansley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. It is not unusual for Prime Ministers of all parties to make speeches, and they sometimes do so in an international context. In this instance, it is important that the Prime Minister does so, because is it important that we communicate not only to the people of this country, but to the people of Europe our determination to achieve changes in Europe that enable the whole of Europe to be more competitive and more flexible. That is sought not only by this country, but by people in many other countries; this is about enhancing democratic accountability. On issues that require reporting to the House, I will, of course, discuss with my right hon. Friends whether it would be appropriate for a statement to be made and ensure that the House knows of any such statement as early as possible.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May we have a debate in Government time that allows Ministers from the Northern Ireland Office to come to the House to explain what work the Department is doing with the Treasury to assist the Northern Ireland Executive in the current serious situation in Northern Ireland, and to address issues such as under-investment in education and housing, and social deprivation? The serious cuts to the block grant in Northern Ireland are having a detrimental effect on people on the ground in Northern Ireland. Will the Leader of the House give us some assurance on that point?

Mr Lansley: The right hon. Gentleman will know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is having discussions today with the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and, I believe, the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Ireland. I have no doubt that the discussions will be very helpful. The right hon. Gentleman will note that questions to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will take place on Wednesday next week, which may afford an opportunity for a response, but I will of course ask the Secretary of State whether there are further ways in which she can respond to the points that he makes.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Last Friday, I was very pleased to visit the NHS Blood and Transplant centre in Colindale to listen to the concerns of management

and staff. One concern that was raised with me was the low level of blood donations from ethnic and minority groups. That is a particular problem because that blood is used to treat people with sickle cell anaemia. Will a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to advise on how the Government are trying to encourage people from ethnic minority groups to give blood?

Mr Lansley: I agree with my hon. Friend that we owe blood donors a huge debt of gratitude. Each unit of blood donated helps us to save the lives or improve the health and the lives of three people; on average, one donation helps three people. That is important and I hope that everybody will recognise it. He raises an important specific point. NHS Blood and Transplant runs regular donor recruitment campaigns, including those to encourage blood donations from black and minority ethnic donors. It works with the media, particularly those of particular relevance to those communities, and with celebrities who have support in those communities. In addition, the Department of Health has established the National Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Transplant Alliance, which brings together organisations to tackle the issue of low donor and transplantation rates in those communities.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Can we not have a debate in Government time on the state of the high street? Now that we understand the shakiness of the Government's jobs figures, does it not make the Leader of the House's assertion just now that market forces will prevail look worrying indeed?

Mr Lansley: The hon. Lady may wish to go, with others, to the Backbench Business Committee to seek such a debate. The employment figures are not shaky; they are absolutely robust. They are telling us that a great deal of private sector job formation is taking place, and that is very important. It stands in direct contrast with the situation in many other countries. We know that we are suffering from the economic effects of the eurozone crisis, but in contrast with a number of countries in the eurozone we have relatively robust employment figures. That is evidence of the Government's support for the private sector.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire local medical committee, which represents local GPs, has written to me and other MPs to raise its concerns about people coming to this country to access free health care. It says it wants help on this issue, so may we have an urgent debate on how we can offer that?

Mr Lansley: I understand very well the point my hon. Friend is making. The Government have concluded a major review of the rules and procedures on charging visitors for NHS care. It is important that we understand that those who are here, on whatever basis, have access to emergency care, but that there are rules about those who have access to non-emergency care or continuing care beyond primary care. I hope that Health Ministers will be able to make an announcement about the results of that review soon.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I do not want just a statement on Europe; I want a full debate on Europe in Government time. In the old days, we used to have

four debates a year before European Councils and four statements after European Councils so that the Government's policy could be scrutinised by the House. I know that they were pretty tedious affairs, with single transferable speeches delivered time after time, not least by myself. It would be good if we could have a bell fitted behind the Speaker's Chair, so that every time the word "Europe" is mentioned all Pavlov's dogs on the Government Benches could start slobbering—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: There is nothing disorderly about that remark, but I leave Members to make their own assessments on the question of taste.

Mr Lansley: You are absolutely right, Mr Speaker—there is a distinction between what is in order and what is charming, and that was charmless. I also noted that following oral questions earlier, the hon. Gentleman did not take the trouble to apologise for being completely wrong in suggesting that I had incorrectly informed the House about what was in the ministerial code, but be that as it may.

I think it is a tremendously positive innovation that a substantial proportion of the House's time is not in the gift of Government but is available to the Backbench Business Committee. That includes time that was previously allocated to a range of general debates for such purposes. If the hon. Gentleman feels strongly about the need for a debate on Europe, he should get together with other Members and go to the Backbench Business Committee to seek it.

Tessa Munt (Wells) (LD): The Glastonbury road run is an established, popular and safe annual charitable fundraising event, supported with great good will by our local police and other services. Should the council choose to use the Town Police Clauses Act 1847 because the street is "liable to be obstructed", local charities lose no funds, but if the council elects this year to use the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, the organisers will receive a demand for £1,000, which will have to be paid from charitable donations. Will the Leader of the House raise the matter of clarifying the regulations to separate commercial from charitable street events so that the latter are treated with reason and common sense and not as a county council fundraising effort at the charity's expense?

Mr Lansley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question and will of course raise the issue with my hon. Friends at the Department. I might be wrong, but I think that in such circumstances the local authority has the discretion to waive those fees in certain cases.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Despite a 400% increase in the demand for food banks since 2010, the Prime Minister has neglected to give clear answers to me or to my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) about whether he will visit one. May we have a debate on the subject of food banks in this Chamber so that we can bring the facts to the Prime Minister, if he is unwilling to go and see them for himself?

Mr Lansley: I heard the Prime Minister's reply during Prime Minister's questions yesterday, and the hon. Gentleman might recall that during business questions

last week I made it clear that my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and I have visited a food bank. We rightly appreciate the service that is being provided by food banks and the Department for Work and Pensions operates a food bank referral service that works with them, including, in particular, the Trussell Trust. The Government are also working independently, not least through the Healthy Start scheme, which helps about 500,000 very low-income families across the UK to buy milk, fruit and vegetables as part of a healthy balanced diet.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): According to TripAdvisor, the town of Llandudno in my constituency has some of the best guest houses in the world. However, if they want to increase business by offering a complimentary glass of wine to their residents as part of an evening meal, they face the disproportionate cost of acquiring a licence. May we have a debate on the Government's proposals, as set out in the alcohol strategy, for reducing licensing burdens on these ancillary sellers of alcohol?

Mr Lansley: Yes. I am grateful to my hon. Friend. If I recall correctly, there was very positive coverage of at least one hotel in Llandudno earlier this week—

Chris Bryant: Over here.

Mr Lansley: Yes. If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I was referring specifically to Llandudno in my hon. Friend's constituency for a second. I sometimes wonder, Mr Speaker, whether the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) wants to be in charge of the order of the House. It seems rather impertinent, does it not? If I were disorderly, you would call me to book. I do not need the hon. Gentleman for that to happen.

I can give my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) some reassurance. On 28 November the Government launched a consultation on whether to reduce the burdens of licensing on businesses that sell alcohol only as a small part of a wider service. That includes guest houses or bed-and-breakfast accommodation that wish to provide alcohol to guests as part of an evening meal. That consultation can be found on the Home Office website. I encourage him and all interested parties to respond before the closing date of 6 February.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): May we have a debate on Government waste by Departments? Figures that I have uncovered show that Government Departments have produced more than 5,500 circulars, consultation documents and publications since May 2010 at a cost of over £1.3 million, including such exciting titles as "Code of Practice on Noise from Ice-Cream Van Chimes", "Understanding the relationship between taste and value in culture and sport", and my personal favourite bedtime reading, "Is your dog barking too much?" Is this really a good use of taxpayers' money?

Mr Lansley: I do not have comparative data, but I suspect that under the previous Government there were at least equivalent numbers, but probably much larger numbers of consultations taking place, and the hon. Gentleman knows that perfectly well. Our responsibility is to make sure not only that we engage the public by consulting fully and adequately, but that we make effective progress with business. That is why we introduced in the

[Mr Lansley]

latter part of last year a new structure for consultations that means that they will be conducted more expeditiously. We will make more progress more quickly and we will help business, not least as a consequence of that, to get certainty more quickly, and it will help us in the process of reducing the burden of regulation.

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): Some 1,080 people from Tamworth started apprenticeships last year. May we have a debate in Government time on the new traineeship programme so that we can explore how we can further help young people successfully to compete for jobs and avoid the welfare trap that all too many of them endured under Labour?

Mr Lansley: Yes, I hope we might find an opportunity, by one route or another, for further discussion of the announcements made by the Minister for Schools. Traineeships are a welcome addition to the armoury, so to speak, to ensure that all young people get access to the right skills and that all employers find young people in this country who have appropriate skills and attitudes in order to go into work. My hon. Friend is right. Since the election more than a million people have started apprenticeships. The budget has been increased, and even where apprenticeships are not appropriate, through the youth contract work experience and other support to the young people who most need skills have been growing under this Government.

Andy Sawford (Corby) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the uses and abuses of zero-hours contracts, which plague many people in my constituency, particularly the most vulnerable workers?

Mr Lansley: If the hon. Gentleman specifically wants to raise abuses, I am sure my right hon. and hon. Friends at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills would be interested to hear from him. I encourage them to respond to him about the nature of those contracts. In some cases—for example, in relation to the NHS—I looked at some of those contracts, and they can play a part in the effective management of a work force and may sometimes be in the interests of workers themselves, as well as their employer. It is all a matter of what the appropriate circumstances are. The hon. Gentleman might like to look for an Adjournment debate or some other opportunity in order to raise these issues.

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): In the light of the recent rioting in east Belfast, some have suggested that some of the youngsters involved feel that they are not included in the decision-making process. At what stage does my right hon. Friend think Parliament should assess progress on the Good Friday agreement, especially as far as community relations are concerned?

Mr Lansley: I further remind the House and my hon. Friend of the opportunity to raise such issues with my right hon. Friend the Northern Ireland Secretary and her colleagues on Wednesday next week.

My hon. Friend will be aware that the 1998 Belfast agreement clearly set out the constitutional position in Northern Ireland and the accountability mechanisms that follow from it. I also say to my hon. Friend that the violence and public disorder in Belfast is completely unjustifiable; I do not think it is justified or excused by reference to any issues of that kind.

Natascha Engel (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Has the Leader of the House had the opportunity to make a decision about bringing e-petitions fully in-House, so that people are aware that they are petitioning Parliament and not the Government? If he has not yet had a chance to make that decision, will he sit with me and construct a timetable to make sure that it can be done as quickly as possible?

Mr Lansley: As the hon. Lady will know from our discussions and a previous answer in business questions, I am keen for us to make progress on this issue. No decisions have been made, of course; in any case, I hope that such matters would be for the House.

I hope that we can get together and consider how we can take forward what has been a substantial success. There are now a large number of petitions; there have been some 8 million signatures on 40,000 petitions since the e-petitions website was created. We must not prejudice that, but we must try to make it as relevant as we can to the work of the House, and the hon. Lady's Committee has done a great deal on that. I am very open to further discussions, and we are working on the issue now.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What on earth is going on at the UK Border Agency? It has never had the best reputation in the world for the timeliness of its responses to Members' inquiries, but in the past two or three months, it seems to have got many degrees worse; many of my constituents in Kettering are awaiting replies to correspondence that is two or three months old. May we have a statement from the relevant Minister to make sure that the UK Border Agency sorts out its correspondence protocols?

Mr Lansley: My hon. Friend will recall that during questions last week and previously I said that the chief inspector acknowledges that the Border Agency still has a great deal of work to do, but that the situation has started to turn around and is now improving. However, I share with my hon. Friend and many other Members a sense that there is still a way to go. There is a huge volume of correspondence, which is why the agency is introducing a national operating model in March, under which correspondence from hon. Members will be managed through a single process. Guidance has been issued to staff, stressing the need for all correspondence to be dealt with promptly. However, I will take up my hon. Friend's question with the relevant Minister at the Home Office.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): From the official figures, which are going to be announced next Wednesday, it will no longer be possible for Members to obtain constituency statistics on the number of jobseekers after each job in their constituencies. That is a real issue in my constituency, which has been top for many months—50 jobseekers after every vacancy. There is no legitimate reason for that statistic not to be provided, so

may we have a debate on why the Government are choosing to suppress the inconvenient figures that give a real indication and insight into what is happening with local employment around the country?

Mr Lansley: I will, if I may, talk to my right hon. and hon. Friends at the Department for Work and Pensions about that. I am not familiar with the background to the hon. Lady's point; the availability of statistics through Government Departments is normally approved through the UK Statistics Authority. I will certainly inquire through the Statistics Authority or the Department to ensure that the hon. Lady gets a proper reply, which I can see, too.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): The equal marriage Bill will be published next week. Will there be a statement to explain the rush to redefine marriage and will it address the information from the Commons Library that in the past 12 years no Government Bill determined by a free vote has been announced before the Queen's Speech?

Mr Lansley: My hon. Friend seems to have constructed a very particular question about something that may not have occurred because relatively few Government Bills are conducted on a free-vote basis, but I will gladly look back to see what the precedents are. Let me reiterate what I said in last week's business questions: we have not yet introduced this Bill. My hon. Friend seems to be more knowledgeable than I am. I do not have a timetable for its introduction; I know that we will do it soon but I have not established a date. When the Bill is introduced, we will of course make it very clear how it is properly to be considered.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): It is

"a terrible time to have the diversion and uncertainty which build-up to a referendum would entail".

Those are not my words but those of the Business Secretary, reported in the *Financial Times* as what he is going to say today. Is not the reason the Prime Minister will not come to the House with a statement following his speech the fact that he cannot speak on behalf of the Government he leads because they have no coherent policy on Europe, and that is damaging British business and British interests?

Mr Lansley: I am afraid I simply do not accept a word of that. The Government are very clear about what we are doing. We are conducting a review of competence the purpose of which is to enable this country to engage in a negotiation that would lead to a more competitive and more flexible Europe. I heard the hon. Gentleman's leader saying on a radio programme this morning that he was in favour of a more flexible European Union and that he believed that there were powers that needed to be brought back to this country. He and his party appear to be willing the end but denying the means.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Will the Leader of the House make time for a statement on the performance of the NHS bursary unit? One of my constituents, Thomas Petch, is among a large number of students who have

failed to receive the bursary to which they are entitled, causing massive inconvenience as they rely on it to fund their everyday living.

Mr Lansley: My hon. Friend makes an important point on behalf of his constituent. The changes in the NHS bursary application procedure mean that continuing students need to reapply for their bursary each academic year. A large number of continuing students did not reapply as requested, and this has led to a backlog. I know that the NHS Business Services Authority will take every measure it can to reduce and manage that backlog quickly. May I assure my hon. Friend that his constituent, Mr Petch, will receive his January payment in the next week?

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): On 14 February it is an international day of preventing violence against women, and MPs from all parties have supported the notion that this House should contribute to events and debates on that day. If the Leader of the House were to make an early decision and inform the Backbench Business Committee that 14 February would be a day on which it could allocate time, it might allocate it to such a debate. Will he tell the House now that we can have that debate on 14 February?

Mr Lansley: I am afraid I am not in a position to make that announcement now, but I entirely understand the hon. Lady's point, not least because I heard her and other Members make it to the Backbench Business Committee at its meeting on Tuesday. I will discuss with my colleagues whether we are able to meet her request and the requests of other Members and liaise with the Committee on that.

Kris Hopkins (Keighley) (Con): On Sunday 10 March the Sue Ryder Manorlands 10 km race will take place in Keighley—an event that has raised £120,000 over the past four years. May we have a debate not only celebrating the moneys raised but on how such great events bring communities together?

Mr Lansley: Yes, I am glad to have the opportunity to share in my hon. Friend's support for the 10 km run, the money that it raises and the good causes that it will be supporting. It is an illustration of something that Members across the House understand from their communities—that this kind of voluntary action enables people to have a great deal of fun, in this particular instance, to be healthier, and to offer a great deal of support to other people who are in need.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we have a debate on the cost of ministerial travel? Further to what my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian Lucas) said earlier, it is clear that the Prime Minister will not be making his speech in Holland as Prime Minister and leader of the coalition Government, as other Ministers have said, but as leader of the Conservative party on what the Conservatives will do in five years' time in the unlikely event that they will be in government, so should not the Conservative party be paying for this trip?

Mr Lansley: I will say two things. First, I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is wrong. The Prime Minister will speak tomorrow in the Netherlands as Prime Minister.

[Mr Lansley]

[*Interruption.*] The position is very clear—he will speak as Prime Minister and if, during the course of that speech, he refers to the Conservative manifesto or beyond the next election, he will, of course, be referring beyond the scope of the coalition agreement. That is quite usual—there is nothing unusual about it at all.

I do not have the figures in front of me, but if the hon. Gentleman wants to have a debate about the cost of ministerial travel in this Parliament relative to its cost in the previous Parliament, we would be very happy to have it.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I have raised in previous business questions the potential negative impact on the organ donation system in England of plans by the Welsh Government to change the system in Wales to one based on presumed consent. Yesterday I received a copy of a letter to the Welsh Government from the UK's foremost expert on the issue, pointing out that the consultation process adopted by the Welsh Government was fundamentally flawed. Will my right hon. Friend arrange an early opportunity for MPs to discuss this crucial issue before damage is done and it is too late?

Mr Lansley: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. These issues do not relate solely to Wales; they also relate to England, because they have direct implications for the organ donation system in England. I made that clear to the Welsh Assembly Government when I was Secretary of State for Health and I know that my right hon. Friend the Welsh Secretary will have done so, too. I do not know what opportunities there may be for a debate on the matter in this House or, indeed, in the Welsh Grand Committee, but I will certainly discuss it with my colleagues.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): This week the Legal Services Commission confirmed a £655,000 cut to the Law Centres Network, the Advice Services Alliance and the Royal Courts of Justice's citizens advice bureaux service. May we have a debate on what that will mean for those organisations, the organisations they support and, most importantly, the people who will no longer be able to use them?

Mr Lansley: The hon. Lady may have an opportunity to raise that issue at Justice questions on Tuesday 5 February, but if that seems far off and she would like a response on the specific implications, I will gladly talk to my right hon. Friend at the Ministry of Justice and secure it for her.

Backbench Business

Atos Work Capability Assessments

11.53 am

Mr Michael Meacher (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of Atos work capability assessments.

I warmly thank the Backbench Business Committee for enabling me and cross-party colleagues to introduce this debate on Atos work capability assessments. There is enormous concern about the issue both in the country and in this House, as witnessed by the fact that more than 30 Members wish to speak on a Thursday. To try to ensure that they can all do so, I propose to speak for no more than 10 to 15 minutes. I hope that colleagues will accept that, for reasons of pressure on time, I do not propose to take interventions.

As knowledge of the debate has spread, I have been sent nearly 300 case histories, many of which make heart-rending reading. I cannot begin to do justice to their feelings of distress, indignation, fear, helplessness and, indeed, widespread anger at the way they have been treated. Nor can I easily contain my own feelings at the slowness, rigidity and insensitivity with which Atos and the Department for Work and Pensions have responded—or very often not responded—to the cries of pain that they have heard repeatedly. I have time to cite briefly only three examples which show how extreme is the dysfunction and malfunctioning of the Atos assessments.

The first example concerns a constituent of mine who was epileptic almost from birth and was subject to grand mal seizures. At the age of 24, he was called in by Atos, classified as fit for work and had his benefit cut by £70 a week. He appealed, but became agitated and depressed and lost weight, fearing that he could not pay his rent or buy food. Three months later, he had a major seizure that killed him. A month after he died, the DWP rang his parents to say that it had made a mistake and his benefit was being restored.

The second example, also from the Oldham area, concerns a middle-aged woman who was registered blind and in an advanced stage of retinitis pigmentosa. She was assessed at 9 points—well short of the 15 that are needed—and her incapacity benefit was withdrawn. On review by a tribunal, the Atos rating of 9 points was increased to 24.

The third case—I could have chosen from hundreds of others—also comes from the north-west and concerns an insulin-dependent diabetic with squamous cell cancer, Hughes syndrome, which involves a failed immune system, peripheral neuropathy, which meant that he had no feeling in his feet or legs, heart disease, depression and anxiety. Despite his life-threatening condition, he was placed in the work-related activity group.

Those and myriad other examples illustrate incontrovertibly that Atos's current work capability assessment system is drastically flawed, and for several reasons. First, Atos is an IT firm and it uses the so-called Logic Integrated Medical Assessment, which is often described as “rigid” and “tick-box” because computer-based systems make it difficult for health professionals to

exercise their professional judgment. Because such a mechanistic system has little or no regard for the complexity of the needs of severely disabled or sick persons, the British Medical Association and others have condemned the current WCA as “not fit for purpose”.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Meacher: Despite my hon. Friend being my colleague in Oldham, I really must keep strictly to what I said, but I very much hope that she will be called.

Secondly, assessed persons regularly felt that the opinion of their own doctor or of other specialist medical personnel who were treating them was either ignored or overridden. That is all the more serious when Atos’s practices simply do not adhere to the guidance for doctors set down by the General Medical Council.

Thirdly, because of the failure of so many initial assessments, the appeal procedure is grossly overloaded and hugely expensive. No less than 41% of decisions are appealed, of which 38% are won. At £60 million in a single year, the appeals have cost the taxpayer more than half of the £110 million that was spent on the original assessments. Moreover, the National Audit Office has castigated the Department for failing to penalise Atos for what it politely calls its “underperformance” and for not setting “sufficiently challenging” targets.

Fourthly, there are concerns about the responsibility for work capability assessments, in particular that of the Atos chief medical officer. Professor Michael O’Donnell joined Atos from the American company, Unum, formerly UnumProvident, which had a very poor reputation in the US, where it was described as an “outlaw company” by the US authorities, partly because it was regarded as a “disability denial factory”. In that situation, the responsibilities of the Minister and the Secretary of State need to be established clearly.

Against that background, it is frankly not good enough for the Minister to respond to the debate by saying that there have been three Harrington reviews, and that the Department is doing the best it can to improve procedures. The fundamental issue is this: how can pursuing with such insensitive rigour 1.6 million claimants on incapacity benefit, at a rate of 11,000 assessments every week, be justified when it has led, according to the Government’s own figures, to 1,300 persons dying after being put into the work-related activity group, 2,200 people dying before their assessment is complete, and 7,100 people dying after being put into the support group? Is it reasonable to pressurise seriously disabled persons into work so ruthlessly when there are 2.5 million unemployed, and when on average eight persons chase every vacancy, unless they are provided with the active and extensive support they obviously need to get and hold down work, which is certainly not the case currently?

I therefore want to conclude by asking the Minister five specific questions to which I want a specific answer before the end of the debate. First, it is true that Harrington has produced minor adjustments—implemented at a glacial pace—but the underlying system remains largely undisturbed. The BMA and the NAO have therefore called for a thorough, rigorous and transparently independent assessment of the suitability of the work capability assessment. Will the Minister now implement that?

Secondly, will the Minister accept that the current criteria and descriptors do not sufficiently—or even at all—take into account fluctuating conditions, especially episodic mental health problems? How will he rectify that?

Thirdly, will the Minister provide full and transparent details of the Atos contract? They should not be hidden by specious claims of commercial confidentiality when Atos is the sole provider of what is clearly a public service. Better still, given that Atos has failed so dramatically, why does he not in-source the work back into the NHS?

Fourthly, how will the Minister ensure that the medical expertise of disabled persons’ doctors and related professionals is fully taken into account before assessments are completed?

Lastly, I want to provide a full dossier to the Secretary of State so that he fully understands what is being done today in his name, and to bring a small delegation to see him from some of the excellent organisations of disabled people who have heroically battled to highlight and tackle the distress and pain caused by Atos. Can I please be assured that the Secretary of State will see such a delegation?

I repeat that I am sincerely grateful for this debate, for the co-operation of colleagues from all parties, and for the detailed responses I have received from so many hundreds of victims of Atos, but I assure the Minister of this: the debate is important, but it will certainly not be the end of the matter.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. If everybody could resume their seats, I just want to inform the House that there are 28 Members who wish to participate in this relatively short debate. My responsibility is to protect Back Benchers’ time and get as many Back Benchers in as I possibly can. While we are starting at six minutes, you should start to think in terms of a four-minute contribution if you possibly can, so that as many Members as possible can get in.

12.4 pm

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I offer my hearty congratulations to the right hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher). He has long been known as a champion in this area. I listened carefully to what he had to say and I am afraid that my experience, and that of the people I have been talking to, mirrors much of what he is saying.

I would like to address the debate from the perspective of people with autism. There is a great deal of concern on both sides of the House, and among our constituents, about the way this process handles people with autism. The National Autistic Society, which provides advice to so many of us in this House and on which we rely a great deal, believes that the work capability assessment should be delivered differently so that it is fair and appropriate for claimants with autism.

More than 2,000 people have signed a National Autistic Society petition to Atos, which was launched following the “Dispatches” and “Panorama” investigations, with which many of us are familiar, into the company last year. The programme claimed that Atos was working to internal targets on the numbers of people being put into

[Mrs Cheryl Gillan]

the work-related activity group, the support group or as being fit for work. Atos has indicated that it is open to working with the National Autistic Society and other charities, including in the context of this petition, but I have a specific question for the Minister. Will the Minister provide assurances that no such targets are in place?

There have been key concerns with the face-to-face assessment process. The work capability assessment model can certainly prove to be challenging in the context of claimants with autism. Most people with autism have difficulties with social interaction, and some will also lack insight into their difficulties. They may also have difficulty understanding the questions being asked and with communicating a response. Even travelling to the assessment centre and engaging with the process may be difficult to understand and create great anxiety. Therefore, face-to-face assessments may not always result in a fair and accurate assessment of claimants' ability to work. The NAS has had a lot of inquiries relating to the quality and appropriateness of the WCA for claimants with autism, and that feeds into a broader picture of widespread concern.

There is also concern about the awareness of, and training for, assessors. In the cases of claimants with autism, including high-functioning autism and Asperger's syndrome, difficulties in the workplace may not be obvious and may not become apparent in the course of a face-to-face assessment. That could be due to the hidden nature of the disability and a desire to appear more able than they really are to an assessor, or to other difficulties with this form of communication associated with the condition. It is therefore a strongly held view that it is vital that claimants with autism are assessed by professionals who have received autism-specific training. That would ensure that assessors have a better understanding of autism and routinely make reasonable adjustments as part of their assessment.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Gillan: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I have only a short time to speak.

I think people are pleased that the Government have committed to having mental and cognitive champions, but I believe that people are concerned at the number of champions, their level of training and their expertise in autism. Our understanding is that there about 60 across the UK and it remains unclear what, if any, expertise they have in autism.

On collecting evidence, the NAS has consistently called for a tiered approach to assessment, both in terms of the WCA and the assessment process, for the personal independence payment under the new benefits system. I hope that the Minister, who has met recently with the NAS, Mind and other organisations, has listened carefully, and I am looking for reassurance in his response that all these points will be taken onboard.

In summary, I have a few questions for the Minister. What steps will the Government take to ensure that Atos collects existing evidence relating to a claimant's capability to work, which would create a more cost-effective and streamlined system? Do WCA assessors receive autism-specific training? If so, of what does it consist?

How many of the mental and cognitive champions currently operating at Atos assessment centres have specific autism training? How will he monitor the effectiveness of the introduction of those mental and cognitive champions?

I am sorry I could not give way to the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), because I know she has a great track record and a special interest in this matter, but I hope that she will make her own speech. I hope that I have reflected in my contribution the widely held concern about this process among those least able to speak for themselves, and I hope that the Minister will respond positively.

12.10 pm

Natascha Engel (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) and thank him for bringing this debate to the Backbench Business Committee. We were delighted to schedule it, and the number of Members present from both sides of the House demonstrates the importance of this issue mainly from a constituency perspective. I, like all other Members, have received a huge amount of correspondence about awful, tragic cases of individuals who have been badly treated by Atos during their work capability assessments.

The fault lies not with Atos, but with its employer, which, in this case, is the Department for Work and Pensions. When we look at the other employers for which Atos works, such as Royal Mail and the NHS, we see numerous cases of people who have been signed off work—not just their current work, but for any work ever again, with a recommendation that they be retired from all kinds of work—going back to Atos, but this time when it is employed by the DWP, and being assessed as entirely fit for work. They get no points and are deemed fit for work. As my right hon. Friend said, the number of people who are not just not fit for work but who die after being assessed as fit for work, is a reflection not of Atos but of the DWP. That is where the questions need to be asked.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am sure that my hon. Friend will not be surprised to learn that in Gateshead, of the 1,400 cases taken to appeal by the citizens advice bureau, more than 1,200 were successful. I am worried about the CAB's lack of capacity to deal with other cases that it could have taken but which have been unsuccessful because they were not advocated at tribunal.

Natascha Engel: I am glad that my hon. Friend has made that point as I want to come to that.

The proportion of original Atos decisions that are overturned is shocking—it is about 30% or 40%. I would be grateful if the Minister replied to that point. Precisely how many people deemed fit for work by Atos have their decisions overturned on appeal and are signed off work? I have asked about that in the past. The number is very high, but I would like to have the precise figure.

The welfare rights organisations dealing with the people who are being deemed fit for work—for instance, the unemployed workers centre in Derbyshire and the CAB—are swamped at the same time as they are having their funding cut. Not only are they swamped with

work, but volunteers are leaving in droves because they cannot cope with the amount of work and the stress of seeing all these cases.

How many people deemed fit for work who do not take their cases to appeal then find work? As has been said, the employment situation, especially the further north we go in the country, gets worse and worse. In my constituency, there are 15 people applying for every job. Is it really for the best to sign people as fit for work when there are no jobs to be had? I would like answers to those specific questions.

We all want people to go back to work if they can, but the welfare state is there to protect those who cannot. People who are not fit for work would love to work if they could, but they cannot. The jobs are not there, but they are being signed fit for work. How many of them are getting a job, and how many of them are just being signed over to destitution?

12.15 pm

Stephen Gilbert (St Austell and Newquay) (LD): I join hon. Members in congratulating the right hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher), the Backbench Business Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Dan Rogerson) on securing this timely debate.

As the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel) said, we need to separate two things. The first is the principle of assessing those on out-of-work benefits to establish whether they can rejoin the workplace. As everyone in the House accepts, that must happen if we are to be responsible guardians of the public purse and if we are to help people who can work to get back into work. The second is the need to look in detail at the practice of how the assessments are being conducted.

Mr John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way so quickly. A number of people who have been assessed reasonably recently had their incapacity benefits stopped but then reintroduced on appeal are now being reassessed and found fit for work once again. Surely people who have recently been assessed and won on appeal should not be being recalled by Atos.

Stephen Gilbert: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and what he says goes to the nub of the points I wish to make. This debate should focus on the practice of how these assessments are being conducted. He, like me and probably every Member, will have had scores, if not hundreds, of constituents experience a similar problem as they go through the system.

There is a consensus in the House on the principle of making assessments. The last Administration set up the WCA and the Atos contract in 2008, and it was right that in 2007 Liberal Democrat Members pressed for and secured the annual review of how the WCA was being implemented. Over the last few years, as every hon. Member will know, these reviews have revealed a catalogue of errors, and, to their credit, the coalition Government have taken action: there has been increased flexibility for assessors to take additional evidence, not least from consultants; there has been better communication with people undergoing assessment; and new standards have been implemented for descriptors. All that is having

results. The numbers going into the ESA support group have risen to 26%—from 11% under the last Administration—so fewer people are now being found fit for work.

None of us can underestimate or undervalue the human effect that some of these assessments are having. I would like to read into the record an e-mail I received from a constituent. It is probably similar to e-mails that all hon. Members have received. It reads:

“They never asked about the amount of pain I have to contend with or how tired I get from coping with it. After the interview I was told I was to be disallowed ESA benefit. I could probably go down the route of appeal but I really don’t feel like fighting for a benefit that I have already been made to feel that I do not deserve, neither do I have the energy”

to appeal. If we in this House cannot give voice to these people, who are some of the most vulnerable in our society, I really do not know what we are for.

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): To illustrate one of those cases, I shall cite a letter I received from a constituent, Janine, in Liverpool. Her dad was thrown off sickness benefit in November after an Atos work capability assessment and was declared fit for work despite suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Six weeks later, on Christmas day, Janine’s father died. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this example clearly highlights the fact that the work capability assessment, run by the DWP, is fundamentally flawed?

Stephen Gilbert: As I have said, and as I am sure the hon. Gentleman would acknowledge, the point is not the principle of conducting assessments but the practice—how they are rolled out and how millions of our constituents experience them. Constituents have told me that they find the process dehumanising and degrading and that they are often seen by people who are unqualified to make an assessment of their condition. We have to get the assessment process right. That is right for the individuals concerned, but it is also the decent, moral and humane thing to do.

I am particularly concerned about those with fluctuating conditions such as ME—myalgic encephalomyelitis, or chronic fatigue syndrome—and those with lifelong degenerative conditions, who will never recover from the illness from which they are suffering but who continue to be called in for repeated assessments. The principle is the right one; the practice, however, is failing many millions of the most vulnerable people across the country. Although the coalition has made welcome efforts to get right a system that it inherited from the last Government, much more still needs to be done to ensure that we are doing things in a humane way.

Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that most people were extremely pleased that Professor Harrington convened his working group to look at the descriptors for fluctuating conditions? However, whatever has happened has not solved the problem for people with ME, multiple sclerosis or mental health conditions. It is therefore imperative that the DWP get on with this and make the system work for those people.

Stephen Gilbert: I could not have put it better. This is not about the principle of assessments; it is about how they are conducted in practice. We owe it to some of the most vulnerable people across our country to ensure that we get this right.

12.22 pm

Pamela Nash (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Nothing has shocked me more as the Member of Parliament for Airdrie and Shotts than the sheer scale of anxiety and hardship caused by the flawed work capability assessments, which is apparent in the number of people visiting my office every week. I am sure that that experience is replicated across the House and that we will hear many such stories today. I have had a frail lady sitting in my office who had only recently finished chemotherapy but had been told she was fit for work. I have had a lady who suffered 90% burns to her body—she spends every day in severe pain—and was told that she was now ready to join the Work programme. I could list hundreds of others—sadly, these are very familiar stories. These people are having their lives ruined by a system that was designed to support them.

Last year the whole country came together to celebrate the Paralympic games. I have to say that the vast majority of the country joined those booing in the Olympic park when the Chancellor took the spotlight, but he was not the only unpopular person at the games. Atos's sponsorship was also widely condemned, leading to protests throughout the country, including by our very own Team GB. Unfortunately, the Scottish Government have not listened to the Scottish people on this. In fact, our Deputy First Minister has welcomed Atos's sponsorship of the Commonwealth games next year. She has tried to wriggle out of it by saying that Atos is only carrying out the will of the UK Government. However, the Scottish people disagree not only with the structure of these work capability assessments but with the incompetence with which they are being carried out.

As I have such limited time today, I will restrict the rest of my comments to the recording of work capability assessments, which I have raised before on the Floor of the House. I know that there has been a pilot of recording work capability assessments as a result of Harrington review. The result was that the majority of those being assessed do not wish to have their assessments recorded. However, recording should continue to be offered to everyone being assessed, and the reason for doing this—the huge number of assessments whose results are overruled when they go to appeal—should also be explained to every claimant.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. Does she agree that the Atos assessment process is not only humiliating and demeaning for those involved—and often plain wrong—but counter-productive, in the sense that it adds to the stress they are under, making sick people even sicker?

Pamela Nash: I thank the hon. Lady for that contribution. I am sure she has had the experience, as I have, of seeing people who have claimed employment and support allowance as a result of a physical disability or illness ending up with mental health problems owing to the stress of going through the system.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it says a great deal about the nature of the work capability assessment that not only do many people win their appeals but that so many are appealing that this can lead to delays of up to 25 weeks for them to be heard?

Pamela Nash: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We have heard that one in six of those claiming ESA ends up eventually winning their appeal, but in North Lanarkshire—the local authority area that I live in—60% of appeals are being won by those lodging them.

To return to the recording of assessments, the Minister's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), made it clear in a Westminster Hall debate last September that he felt that Atos

“should make recording available on a voluntary basis”.—[*Official Report*, 4 September 2012; Vol. 549, c. 42WH.]

However, not a single constituent of mine who has come to see me about work capability assessments has told me that they have been offered the prospect of having it recorded. In fact, one constituent told me that she had asked for her assessment to be filmed, following her previous assessment, which resulted in a report that bore little resemblance to that assessment. On that occasion she was found fit for work, but she subsequently won her appeal. She was informed that recording would indeed be possible, but that she would have to pay for a private, independent company to come in to record her assessment. Equipment was not made available to her. She had hoped to take a family member in to film the assessment, but was told that this would not be allowed or appropriate. How on earth is a person living on benefits—living on the breadline—supposed to be able to afford to pay a private company to record their assessment?

The Minister's predecessor also stated in that debate that additional audio recording machines had been ordered for work capability assessments. I hope that the Minister can today update the House on the progress made on that and on whether visual recording equipment is being purchased for that purpose. I would also like clarification on the right of the claimant to request a recording. If claimants have that right, will the Minister make it clear whether Atos is obliged to provide a recording? Will Atos reschedule an assessment date if the person concerned is told that equipment is not available on the original date? In the event that a claimant refused to go through with an assessment without a recording, would they be sanctioned in terms of their benefits?

This is an important issue to raise in the House today. Not only does it affect those going through the assessments directly, but there is a huge cost for the taxpayer, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher), who has brought this matter to the House today, illustrated in his speech. This process has cost £60 million in the last tax year, which is more than half the original cost of the contract with Atos to perform the work capability assessments.

12.28 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I supported the right hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) at the Backbench Business Committee and I congratulate him on securing this debate.

Briefly, I want to make three points. Britain is rightly generous to its disabled people. That is a good thing and something that unites the whole House. That said, there have always been problems with Atos. As a major contractor, it has repeatedly failed to inspire confidence and needs shaking up. Thirdly, whatever the party politics,

we must clear our minds of hyperbole and focus on the evidence and the facts. People are always fearful of change. Whatever our differences on this issue, we must focus on the politics of fairness, not the politics of fear. It was suggested in the other place that disabled people were facing “ghettoisation”. I think that is a trivialisation of the real evil of the holocaust, which is why I say that how we use our language and the facts that we set out are so important.

Debbie Abrahams: Like many Members here today, I feel very strongly about this issue on behalf of the hundreds of constituents who have come to see me with heart-rending cases and told me about the dehumanising process that they have been put through. Why does the hon. Gentleman think the Department for Work and Pensions and Atos have been unable to accept the recommendations of the British Medical Association and the Royal Colleges for more specific diagnostic tests that would make the assessments more appropriate?

Robert Halfon: I am here today because I care about this issue as much as the hon. Lady does. The fact remains, however, that it was the previous Government who signed the contract with Atos that led to all the problems and started the work capability assessment. This Government have accepted in full the recommendations of the Harrington review.

The disability living allowance was first introduced by John Major’s Conservative Government in 1992 as a way of helping people with the cost of their care and mobility needs. It is partly because of that reform that we now spend £50 billion a year on support for disabled people, which is one fifth higher than the EU average. I am glad that the coalition has rapidly expanded the access to work budgets, helping more than 30,000 people to retain and enter work. By this April, the disabled worker element of the working tax credit will have risen by £285 a year since the Secretary of State started in his job in 2010. The element for the severely disabled will have risen by an extra £125 a year on top of that. The Minister has said before that Britain is acknowledged as a world leader in its support and care for disabled people, and that that is something we should all be proud of.

I have initiated and signed early-day motions on these matters, and hon. Members will know that I have been an outspoken critic of the French multinational Atos in this House since November 2010, because of its treatment of a number of my constituents in Harlow, and I will go on to talk about that in a moment. I want to emphasise that this Government are expanding on what subsequent Labour Governments did after 1997.

Mr Dave Watts (St Helens North) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Halfon: I want to carry on for a moment.

The Labour Government were right to introduce the work capability assessment in the last 18 months before the 2010 election. The right hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs McGuire), the shadow Minister for disabled people, was also right at the Labour conference to defend the idea of testing in the personal independence payment, when she said:

“The principle of an arm’s-length assessment is not wrong.”

Whatever party politics might be involved, there is consensus on the principles and on what our aims should be, and that is welcome.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is correct in saying that the first contract with Atos was introduced by the previous Government, but why did the present Government renew and extend that contract even though they knew about all the problems that he and others have raised in the House?

Robert Halfon: This is where I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I was very disturbed when Atos got the contract for the personal independence payments.

Mr Jones: That happened under this Government.

Robert Halfon: Yes, that is what I am saying. The reasons that were given included the fact that the infrastructure was already in place, and the cost of changing the contractor.

Mr Watts: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Halfon: I have given way twice; I need to carry on.

As I have said, Atos has not covered itself in glory. It was the main contractor when the coalition came to power, but the problems are significant. For example, the Atos benefit assessment centre for my constituents in Harlow is in Romford, 20 miles away, and it has been a source of complaints and genuine disappointment to many. I have met Ministers several times to make these points and, to be fair, they have listened to and acknowledged them. I have also made a trip to an Atos centre in London to try to understand what occurs there.

I welcome the changes that have been made by putting in place champions with expertise in mental, cognitive and intellectual conditions, but the objections from many Harlow people are not about the principle of testing, but about how it is done. We have to remember that whenever a disabled person goes for a test, that creates an enormous amount of fear inside them, because they worry that something that they rely on might be taken away. Their objections are simple ones, but the problems have massive implications for ordinary people.

The problems include centres that are inaccessible, and a long distance away. It can be difficult to travel to them, and there might be no parking there. There are sometimes no rails on the walls. People might have to lose a whole day’s earnings to attend, or use up a day’s annual leave. Some centres are on the second floor, with no proper lift. The testing centres can be hard for people in wheelchairs to get into. Some of my constituents tell me that they have been tested by doctors who do not even speak English properly. All of that is totally unacceptable, especially when people are going to those centres in fear and apprehension that that their benefit will be taken away.

I accept that, because of the contractual history, it is difficult to unwind the arrangement. What matters, however, is that we should learn lessons from what has happened to people who have been tested by Atos and use that information for the future. It is essential that those people who are tested for the new personal

[Robert Halfon]

independence payment should go to a local centre and not have to travel far. I can understand why people should not be tested by their own doctor, but I do not understand why they cannot go to another surgery in their area to be tested. It is unacceptable that they have to travel so far, as those journeys take up an enormous amount of time. I urge the Government to look at radical localisation, and to consider the use of spare rooms in local buildings, including jobcentres.

The people who bring their complaints to me do not have an axe to grind. They just expect a public service to be as good and professional as the private sector. Given the experience of my constituents, it seems that the system that Atos has set up is still not good enough.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. The time limit on Back-Bench speeches is now five minutes.

12.36 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): My caseworker, like those of many Members, is inundated with cases that are tragic and heart-rending. The telephone line to my office is often clogged with crying people. They often ring several times a day, as they are unable to cope with the stress that they are facing. Many have mental health problems, and are unable to cope with the paperwork. They are unsure what to do with it, and they ring me to ask for help in the most tragic and personal way.

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend raises the issue of people with mental health problems. Does she agree that that is an area of great concern, along with other conditions that can fluctuate, such as HIV and AIDS? Such conditions are difficult to assess in a 15-minute interview. Does she also agree that it is the framework of the assessment that is at fault, and that Atos might have something to answer for as well?

Mrs Moon: It is absolutely clear that the framework of the assessment is unable to clarify realistically whether someone is able to work. The assessment is not valid for the purpose for which it was set up, unless that purpose was deliberately to deny people access to benefits.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The head of Atos was recruited from Unum in the United States. Is it not disturbing that the lieutenant governor of California has stated that Unum was operating “claims denial factories” for working men’s compensation? Does not that disturb my hon. Friend?

Mrs Moon: It disturbs me a great deal. Quite honestly, the lieutenant governor was right to say that, because that is what we have found in this country too.

I want briefly to describe some of the cases that I have been dealing with. I shall start with 53-year-old Mrs E, who was employed as an accounts officer. She was a very able and capable woman. She suffered a vicious sexual attack, and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Her health problems caused her difficulties with working, and she was forced to take redundancy. She started claiming employment and support

allowance, and attended her Atos assessment. The doctor who saw her is well known to me. I have received many complaints about him. I regularly receive complaints about his rudeness, arrogance and total lack of compassion towards the people whom he is assessing. He made unprofessional remarks to Mrs E, and bluntly told her carer to shut up, saying that he did not want to hear from him.

An official complaint was made, but Mrs E was found fit for work. An appeal judge overturned the decision maker’s decision and she was placed in the support group. Three months later, she faced another Atos medical, and it was decided that she would be fit for work in six months. She was then placed in the work-related activity group. A month later, because of the stress, her mental and physical condition had deteriorated, and medical advisers told her to apply for disability living allowance. DLA was refused because of the original Atos report. When it was pointed out that the report was negative, but had been overturned on appeal, a reconsideration was requested. The DWP insisted that the information from the first Atos assessment was sound and that the only option was to appeal to the first-tier tribunal.

My constituent then faced two tribunals. We should remember that this is a lady with post-traumatic stress disorder. She faced two appeals. The first was for DLA. The decision to award the lower rate for mobility and care was backdated. Since then, another DLA application has raised the mobility and care components to the higher rate. The second appeal tribunal was for the employment and support allowance. She was placed in a support group and her benefit was backdated.

That was not the end of this lady’s trauma. Her mental health had deteriorated to the extent that she attempted to take her own life. Her carer has to remain constantly vigilant. A few months later, she received a letter saying she had been transferred back to the ESA work-related activity group from the support group. Payment for the ESA support component was stopped. Following some investigation, the DWP apologised and said that that was a random “administrative error”, but it affected the lady very badly and her mental state became even more fragile.

Despite that, incredibly, on Christmas eve last year the same “administrative error” occurred. My office was contacted, and I have to say that we were extremely angry. The additional stress was placing this lady in a suicidal position again. The application process started again, and yet again there has been an apology for an “administrative error”. This lady is being hounded by the state: there is no other way of describing it. There is no excuse for this behaviour. This is a company that is not playing fair by this country’s most vulnerable people.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Moon: I am afraid I cannot; I have only a short time.

Atos received £112.8 million in 2010-11 for its DWP services. About 60% of all claims are judged fit to work; 41% of those people appeal, and 38% of those appeals are successful. Last year, appeals cost £54 million.

How can that be seen as value for money? How can this be seen as evidence of a supportive and caring Government in action?

Here are my questions to the Minister. We are told that specific support staff for mental health will be provided. Are they in place? Are they aware of the trauma of post-traumatic stress disorder? Is sensitivity training available, because it has certainly not been made available to the ex-GP who works as an Atos assessor in my area? Has the DWP looked at the cost—to Members, to citizens advice bureaux and to welfare rights organisations—of fighting this iniquitous system?

12.43 pm

Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I rise to make just a few comments, particularly on fluctuating conditions. I have received many representations from people with mental health conditions, as have other Members. Some of the individual cases and stories that sometimes come from mothers with adult daughters about what has happened during the assessment process have been absolutely heartbreaking.

Let me read out a few comments from one of my constituents, who says:

“I do not believe that the WCA is working for people with mental health problems. Too many people are found fit for work when they are not, and are becoming trapped in a distressing and expensive cycle of appeals and reassessments. Too much of the decision making is inaccurate and too often the WCA and related processes worsen people’s mental health.”

Mr Watts: Does the hon. Lady agree that, given that everyone in the House knows that Atos is not fit for purpose and given that we know the Government have taken no action on it, we can believe only that the Government are supporting Atos as long as lots of people are getting signed off and put back into work?

Annette Brooke: I think we are here today to point out that there certainly are problems, and I await to hear the Minister’s response to them. We need to remember that a great deal of improvements to the system have been made since the Labour Government set it up in the first place. That does not mean, however, that the situation cannot be improved. I think it is right and proper for us to point out where we feel improvements should be made.

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Con): I have visited my local Atos and have sat in on an appeal at the local tribunal, but I do not share the universal condemnation of Atos that I have heard in this House. Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that Professor Harrington reviewed the system three times with particular reference to mental health and that he concluded that the improvements were starting to have an impact so that, in his view, no fundamental reforms were needed to the current work capability assessment?

Annette Brooke: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and reiterate that it was a positive move by the coalition to ask Professor Harrington to do this work.

I would like to refer briefly to the issue of ME—myalgic encephalomyelitis. I understand that although the discussions on ME were very productive, the changes

that we all want are not coming through individually. What we are looking for today is a means of unlocking some of the frictions that are causing the individual problems.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ME, so I have obviously received many representations on this matter. I would like to draw the Minister’s attention to a survey on the work capability assessment carried out by the charity, Action for ME. It had 203 responses. I commend the report to the Minister and hope he will read all the conclusions. I shall refer only to several of them as I do not want to take up too much time.

The conclusions included one to the effect that “all face-to-face interviewees should be automatically given a copy of the Atos medical report”,

which I understand is not always happening. That is an area where the Minister could intervene to make sure that it does happen. Another conclusion was that

“more efficient communication is needed between the DWP and Atos”—

and that is almost certainly true. I believe we can have a positive and constructive debate when we look at those sorts of points. One further conclusion was:

“Atos healthcare professionals who carry out the face-to-face assessment should receive specialist training about fluctuating conditions, developed in consultation with organisations that support people with M.E. Training needs to be as frequent as the staff turnover at Atos requires”.

Those are really important points to which I would like the Minister to pay some attention.

We had a meeting in the House this week, but it was not possible to get a Minister to attend it. I would like to request that the offices of the all-party group be used for a meeting to talk about ME, the work capability assessment and fears about the personal independence payment in the future.

12.49 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke). I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) and the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Dan Rogerson) for initiating the debate, and to the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to it.

We are all here today because constituents have come to us and told us their stories. Constituents have come to me in their wheelchairs with their carers because they have wanted me to know about the difficulties that they are experiencing. They cannot understand why, in the face of overwhelming medical evidence, they are still being called in for interviews. Some cannot understand why they have been told “If you make it to this interview, you must be fit for work.”

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my utter despair at the sheer amount of money that is wasted on calling in people whose well-documented histories clearly show that they suffer from conditions which, sadly, will not improve in any way, rather than being spent on trying to find ways of helping those who are in a better position to go back to work?

Valerie Vaz: I agree with my hon. Friend.

My constituents cannot understand why, although 40% of appeals are upheld, the Minister's predecessor said that the system works. When I asked him, in a written question, how many people in Walsall South had been declared "not fit to work", his response was:

"Please note that constituency information on the work capability assessment process is not available."

It is no wonder that the Government have no idea why my constituents are suffering, but I will tell them now.

SD has cancer and is undergoing radiotherapy; she has been declared fit for work. SH suffered seven strokes, and also suffers from type 2 diabetes and a liver condition; she has had to appeal against a decision. KH was placed in a work-related group; she has incontinence of bowel and bladder as well as diabetes, and is partially sighted. CS has received zero points despite having a spinal disc prolapse. SA suffered a stroke and is blind, but has still been declared fit for work. LM has arthritis of the spine, and has had to appeal against a decision. Stephen Nye was so angry that he came to see me on behalf of his father, and said "I want to let you know what is going on. Sick people are being persecuted: the assessment system is flawed, and they are being harassed by the jobcentre."

Meg Hillier: Does my hon. Friend agree that the tenor of the debate about "strivers and skivers" says a great deal about what the DWP intended when it set up the assessment system—as do my sheaf of papers relating to constituency cases and the list of cases that she is reading out?

Valerie Vaz: I entirely agree, and I do not subscribe to the "strivers and shirkers" nomenclature.

MD came to see me with her husband, who is blind and deaf. They told me that the work capability assessment did not take account of the issues faced by blind and partially sighted people. I wrote to the Minister's predecessor, who replied that Professor Harrington had had considerable engagement with the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Sense, and Action on Hearing Loss. However, that was only at the time of the professor's third review—it should have happened before the assessments had even been devised—and only at the time of his second review did he suggest the introduction of sensory descriptors and an additional descriptor addressing the impact of generalised pain and/or fatigue.

I am pleased to say that, at their annual conference, GPs called for the scrapping of the computer-based work capability assessment. They should know: they make the medical assessments every day, and they see the sick and the vulnerable every day. There is no common sense in these assessments, and there is no humanity or dignity for the most vulnerable members of society. I urge the Minister to listen to those who have to undergo these assessments, and to instruct Atos to start again.

12.53 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) on securing the debate, and the Backbench Business Committee on enabling it to take place. I am pleased that the Minister is present, because I entirely agree with his statement last year that there must be

"continuous improvements to the process to get the right outcomes for claimants".—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2012; Vol. 549, c. 136WH.]

I want to mention a few improvements that I should like to see implemented immediately—I am glad that the Minister is listening to this—all of which were brought to my attention by constituents. The first relates to the frequency of recall for people with long-term medical conditions. Last year the Minister wrote to me:

"A claimant for whom a return to work is considered unlikely within two years will be reassessed after two years."

I want to be sure that these decisions are being monitored, and that people are not being recalled more frequently even than the DWP has suggested.

Secondly, as we heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr Leech), there are cases in which people have had to wait for up to a year before winning appeals and then immediately face another work capability assessment, so the whole process starts again. Why cannot such people be given at least a considerable period of grace? Surely that would be possible.

Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) (LD): Would not speeding up the appeal process also relieve stress and bring about certainty much more quickly?

Jeremy Lefroy: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Thirdly, there is a category of people who are being considered fit for work although they have had, for instance, a severe stroke or are awaiting a back operation. One constituent was told that if people could move an empty cardboard box, they could go to work. Do the health care professionals employed by Atos always take account of the fact that people have to get to work in the first place, or that, while they may be able to perform an action once, they may not be able to perform it repeatedly when it causes severe pain?

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my fear that the reputation of Atos may be so damaged that it can never really be effective? Perhaps the time has been reached when we need to park Atos and move on in a different direction.

Jeremy Lefroy: The Minister has definitely heard what my hon. Friend has said. I would only add that even if that is not the case, Atos is in the last chance saloon.

Fourthly, as the right hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton pointed out in his excellent opening speech, there are people whose conditions fluctuate. They may be all right on one day, but completely incapable on the next. At least two of my constituents have made that point.

Fifthly, there is the disregarding of expert medical opinion. I understand that there are marginal cases, but I have seen cases—as, I am sure, have all Members—that bear absolutely no relation to the WCA reports. Because I always make a point of visiting constituents at home if they have a problem with Atos, I see for myself that in some cases the reports bear no relation to the reality. I believe that appeal tribunals that overturn such reports should highlight blatant instances of that, because it clearly constitutes a misuse of public money when the reports are written so badly.

Finally, there are people who are not considered fit for work—for instance, those who are awaiting operations with no idea of the time scale—and who are put into the work-related activity group although they cannot work. That strikes me as a contradiction in terms.

Nic Dakin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Lefroy: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not. I am about to end my speech, and I know that others are waiting to speak.

I know from past experience that the Minister certainly listens. I welcome his willingness to make those “continuous improvements to the process to get the right outcome for claimants”,

and I urge him to do so.

12.58 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Atos and the work capability assessment should be seen in the broader context of the UK Government’s assault on, and demonisation of, disabled people. We have seen first the reduction in the disability living allowance and then its replacement by the personal independence payment, about whose workability we have grave concerns.

Many disabled people’s groups say that the reductions in benefits have had a catastrophic effect on recipients, and there have been a number of reports of suicides and untimely deaths brought on by immense distress. In my surgeries, I have heard several harrowing and very sad accounts from constituents who have been subjected to impersonal and inhumane work capability assessments by Atos. One has been diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumour, which cannot be completely removed because that would leave her paralysed. In August and September of last year she had radiotherapy to slow down the growth of the tumour, but in October she was told that it would grow back even more quickly, and that she would have to have further radiotherapy or she would die. I should add that this lady also has polyarthritis and asthma. Why has this lady been placed in the work-related activity group? Her doctors and consultants have specified that she should be placed in the support group as she is fighting for her life. Her only concern should be winning that battle.

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman said the disability living allowance has been reduced. Can he explain that, because benefits went up by over 5% last year and are not subject to the 1% increase this year?

Jonathan Edwards: I was speaking about my constituents’ experiences, and I think I should concentrate on that in the limited time available to me.

Another constituent contacted me who had been ill for two years and was eventually diagnosed with cancer following a serious bout of pneumonia. Prior to her illness, she had an unblemished employment record. She was certified as unable to work by her GP and had attended many DWP hearings about the employment and support allowance, with the final one being in April 2012. She won her tribunal hearing against the Atos decision. She had not received a single penny in state benefits from before April 2012 until she died at the end

of November. She faced immense distress and was denied any financial assistance at a time when she was vulnerable and in desperate need of assistance.

As with a lot of current UK Government policy, this is a matter of completing the job left by the last UK Government; it is another example of the Labour-Tory tag team in action. Labour introduced WCAs in 2008 and signed up Atos. As a Welsh nationalist and a socialist, I believe an independent Wales would choose a different path, where Governments do not offer contracts to private companies to make profits from inflicting misery and suffering on the most vulnerable people in our society. We would treat people who need support with the dignity and respect they deserve.

1.1 pm

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) for leading the effort to secure this debate. I was happy to accompany him and the hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) when they appeared before the Backbench Business Committee, and I am grateful to the Committee for having found time, in what is a busy schedule, for a debate on this issue. It is of great concern to many Members and, more importantly, to those who have been assessed under the WCA system and those who work to support them and are inundating us with case studies.

We have heard a lot about the history of this issue, so I will not rehearse what has been said on that. I am pleased that an annual review of the system is in place and that it is highlighting the concerns, which we are then able to address in this House. The coalition Government have moved to tackle some of the concerns, but they need to do more, such as by addressing the issues raised by Professor Harrington.

I remember a case that arose during the last Parliament—when this system was introduced—involving a constituent of mine from one of the north-coast villages. He was told he had to attend an assessment, and printed information on how to travel to the assessment venue by public transport was sent to him. The suggested journey involved an overnight stay on a railway platform. It was hardly helpful to send such a suggestion to someone who was travelling to attend a WCA.

We have moved on a little since then. As we have heard, however, people attending WCAs are often nervous and fail to get across all the points they want to make, and they frequently feel that, as a result of the process, they are railroaded into responding in a certain way. As we heard from the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), the people who accompany them are sometimes shut out of the process, too, even though they can perform the valuable role of giving their companion the confidence to represent themselves thoroughly.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Pamela Nash) raised the important point that the process is recorded. As we all know, telephone calls to many organisations are routinely recorded and people, including those undergoing WCAs, should realise that the recording of proceedings is for their benefit as well as that of the organisation concerned. Those undergoing WCAs can get a copy of that recording, too. That point was raised with me by a woman whose son had to wait for seven months to get his assessment, which serves to highlight

[Dan Rogerson]

that we must also speed up the process. Work needs to be done to help Atos understand the problems that might be leading to those delays.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we must make Atos understand that in remote rural constituencies such as those we both represent some people have to travel long distances? That problem is leading to a lot of no-shows at the Truro Atos centre, which in turn is leading to lots of delays in assessments, thereby causing a great deal of anxiety.

Dan Rogerson: That is also a common problem in respect of visiting district general hospitals. I have repeatedly asked hospitals to make sure that people travelling long distances are seen in the middle of the day, rather than early in the morning. Sensible decisions like that would help.

A constituent who would rather I did not reveal her name also raised the issues of delays and recordings, and others have mentioned the lack of expertise. If Atos has practitioners with different areas of expertise—some in physical disability, others in mental health issues, for instance—it should arrange assessments in such a way as to utilise that.

The language that is used and how people are treated are also important issues—some Members of this House could probably moderate the language they use in discussing this subject.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): We are, in effect, trying to put a sticking plaster on a gaping wound. Atos and the WCA are not fit for purpose. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should bin them both, and start again with the idea of looking after disabled people, rather than the opposite?

Dan Rogerson: The problem with that suggestion is that all the people who have been through the process and have won appeals will have to go back to square one. I am therefore in favour of improving the current system. Every time we renew a system, we go back to square one. Those who have been through an assessment and an appeal and have finally got the right result should not be sent back to square one. The hon. Gentleman articulates the anger that is felt, and there are clearly problems with the process, but I do not think scrapping it and going back to square one is the best way to proceed. Professor Harrington has not suggested that course of action, either. What he has said is that there are problems that need to be resolved.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dan Rogerson: No, I want to conclude so that others can have a chance to speak.

There are certainly questions to be asked about the company operating this process. The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) said it was drinking in the last-chance saloon. We have heard in other contexts that people can remain in that saloon for a long time, however, and this debate serves to show the Government that we are taking this issue very seriously.

There is another issue, too. Those who are found capable of work even after an appeal should be supported into work. We must do that properly. I hope we will address that issue on another day, as it is the second part of this process and there are problems to be solved.

1.7 pm

Mr Iain McKenzie (Inverclyde) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) on securing this important debate. There is a huge groundswell of discontent about Atos and the work capability assessment. It is deplorable that our sick and disabled constituents are experiencing immense hardship after being deprived of benefits having endured an Atos WCA. We all recall last year's television programmes exposing the way people are treated across the country by Atos, and I have heard from a number of my constituents who have been badly treated—treated without care, compassion or understanding.

Ian Mearns: I am sure that, as a Scot, my hon. Friend will share my concern about the fact that Atos will now be carrying out the personal independence payment assessments as well. The Government have already determined the outcome of those assessments. The Minister for disabled people, the hon. Member for Wirral West (Esther McVey), told this House that by October 2015 560,000 claimants will have had their assessments, and 160,000 will get a reduced award, 170,000 will get no award, and 230,000 will get the same support. How can we know the assessments are valid when we have had such a prediction?

Mr McKenzie: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. The accuracy of assessments is essential, as I will go on to discuss later.

Let me outline briefly some of the cases that have been brought to my surgeries, on the back of a recurring issue now being referred to by my constituents as the “Lazarus letter”. This is a letter they receive instructing them to make their way to Glasgow for assessment and containing many connotations about what will befall their benefits. A constituent who suffers from severe cerebral palsy and could not travel was refused a home visit and told to go to Glasgow to be tested. Another constituent who was recovering after being seriously injured in an accident was advised to attend an Atos assessment in Glasgow. Both those constituents could not possibly travel because they were in so much pain, and I had to get involved and ask for a home assessment for them. It does not end there because they then had their benefits cut or stopped because Atos sent the assessment forms to the wrong address. If it cannot get the address right, what chance does it have with assessments?

Clearly many of my constituents have not been treated with the fairness and decency they deserve. Although I realise that we need to see whether people can work, we need a system that is humane and fair, not one that causes fear and loathing. It is time the Government realised that they are driving many sick and disabled people into poverty. What does the Minister think of Citizens Advice's detailed year-long study “Right first time?” on the controversial work capability assessment run by Atos, which has revealed evidence of widespread inaccuracies in the medical reports that help to determine

whether individuals are eligible for sickness benefits? Citizens Advice also tracked a group of people through the process of claiming employment and support allowance and looked at how their claims were handled. The report's conclusions are stark: 37 individuals were tracked and had their reports examined, with serious levels of inaccuracy revealed in up to 43% of the reports. That level is significant enough to have an impact on the claimant's eligibility for benefits—surely our sick and disabled deserve better than this.

The low rate of accuracy is worrying because the reports are used in deciding entitlement to other benefits. Is it not better to have an accurate, fair and just system of medical assessment, one that claimants know will treat them fairly and with the humanity they deserve, rather than a system that is, frankly, unfit for purpose and that uses a company, Atos, that instils fear and loathing in people, resulting in a system where people are continually appealing against decisions? We have already heard that the success rate against the decisions is about 60%.

Pamela Nash: Although the Department has made much of the fact that Atos does not actually make the decisions, with that being done by decision makers in the job centres, I have never seen evidence of the decision makers taking account of any evidence apart from the Atos assessment and the questionnaire, unless the case goes through appeal or reconsideration. Does my hon. Friend agree that decision makers should in every assessment be seeking the opinion of the person's GP and of other professionals who are offering the person care at that time?

Mr McKenzie: I thoroughly agree with my hon. Friend on that point. It is ridiculous to have people making an assessment based on a tick-list that looks like it should be used for an MOT on a car.

We need to ensure that the people who are going through the system are treated well, justly and fairly. The British Medical Association has called for the work capability assessment to end immediately and be replaced with a system that does not cause harm to some of the most vulnerable people in society. I call on the Government to change course and look again at this process.

1.13 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is an honour to follow a thoughtful contribution from the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Mr McKenzie). It is fair to say that the mark of a civilised society is how it treats the most vulnerable people who live within it, so it is important that we have this type of debate in order to review how we are treating vulnerable people. I add my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) on securing the debate and to the other hon. Members who have contributed so far.

In 2006, I was serving on the Greater London assembly and we carried out a report and review on the huge number of people consigned to permanent disability—they were written off by the previous Government as not being capable of working. The one key issue is the sensitivity in determining whether someone is capable of work and therefore should be employed or seeking employment, or is clearly not able to work and is therefore in need of the maximum support.

Sheila Gilmore (Edinburgh East) (Lab): It is important that we acknowledge that we now have to look at how this test is working. After all, it is not good enough for us just to trade insults and say that the previous Government left people to rot, because the system was actually introduced by the previous Tory Government. We could therefore pass these comments backwards and forwards, but the important thing is to ensure that if we are going to test people, we get it right.

Bob Blackman: I share that view, and I was coming on to discuss some of the issues raised in my constituency about the tests and some reforms that we could reasonably request the Minister and Atos to implement.

My constituency has a relatively low unemployment rate, but I have received a succession of complaints from constituents who have been put through the work capability assessments and clearly believe they have been treated unfairly—I agree with many of them. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) described how he visited his constituents at home, and I have had a similar opportunity to visit some of my constituents at home to see the position they are in and the lives they lead. These people are and should be entitled to full disability benefits, yet they have been denied them.

I want to discuss one specific example, that of a constituent who came to see me in late 2011 to make a complaint against her employer. She suffered from a degenerative spinal condition and struggled to stand for long periods of time. She had asked her employer to split her two eight-hour shifts into three four-hour shifts so that she would be able to continue to work. After some discussion, her employer eventually consented to changing her shift pattern. The point is that this woman was committed to work for as long possible and in a job that she could clearly do. After receiving higher rate mobility allowance and lower rate care allowance for several years, my constituent had her claim reviewed as part of these reforms. Following an Atos work capability test, all her benefits were suspended and she spent the following year appealing the decision. She got full support from me and my office, and I am delighted to say that after the appeal process and a successful tribunal she had her benefits fully restored. Of course, the pain and suffering for a full year was outrageous.

It is worth pointing out some of the medical conditions from which my constituent suffered. She has had a disc removed from her spine, and I understand that its removal caused a mid-posterior annular tear. Those conditions have brought a lifetime of mobility problems and associated side effects, amounting to a debilitating spinal injury. When we add that information to my previous comments about her keenness to work, we see that this is not someone who seeks fraudulently to claim benefits; she seeks only what she is entitled to. At the original work capability assessment my constituent was assessed by a physiotherapist. I have no doubt that the physiotherapist was reputable and qualified, but as an assessor they were clearly not sufficiently qualified to understand the complex medical needs of my constituent. Having had the opportunity to review some of the cases brought to me, I can say that it is clear that Atos and its employees do not have the required expertise.

Ian Lavery: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have a situation where the likes of physiotherapists are assessing people with acute mental health problems. Does he agree that that is wholly unacceptable?

Bob Blackman: I agree. One reform we could quite reasonably ask the Minister and Atos to introduce would involve ensuring that the assessor was qualified to assess the type of problem from which the individual suffers. That could take the form of a referral by the Atos assessor to a proper medical professional in a given field where there was expertise. That would save the individuals from the trauma of the appeals process and would save money as it would mean that the medical professionals could properly undertake an appropriate assessment. I urge the Minister to consider that as a way of improving the system.

It appears to me that there is a tick-box mentality among the Atos assessors. I could refer to a stream of cases in which people have conditions that come and go and have good days and bad days. When Atos assessors make the assessments, those people can often be having a good day and the tick boxes do not allow the right decision to be made.

Meg Hillier: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Blackman: I will not, because I have given way twice and I want to conclude.

The clear point is that there needs to be a fundamental reform of the process. It is right that we should assess people to see whether they are capable of work, but the people subjected to horrendous trials and tribulations as a result need further support and deserve to have the whole process reconsidered so that it can be improved for the benefit of all.

1.20 pm

Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The number of MPs who want to speak today and the passion that has been shown are testimony to the fact that the system has not worked, is not working and ought to be scrapped. I hope that the Minister is listening, because that is clearly a strong concern on both sides of the House.

The key weakness of the system is the perfunctory, mechanical, inhuman and rushed process of assessment. I have to point out to the Minister that as the system has been handed to the private sector, the more perfunctory the process of assessment, the greater the profit made by Atos and the assessors.

Meg Hillier: Other Members have raised the issue that Atos is a private company. I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that it would be helpful if the Minister could reveal the profit margin, as this is public money being spent by a private company, which one would expect to make a profit. Would it not also be useful if the Minister could tell us whether there has been any change in the profit in the years for which Atos has been doing the assessments?

Austin Mitchell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. That was one of my concerns as a member of the Public Accounts Committee and it was to have been part of my passionate penultimate ringing

declaration when I intended to ask the Government to tell us how much profit has been made, but I can now omit that from my speech.

The system is perfunctory and totally inadequate. I will not repeat the cases that have come to my surgery after the assessment—that has been done brilliantly by some of my colleagues—but it is clear that the assessment fails patients with mental health conditions, particularly schizophrenia, which are very difficult to assess and treat. It fails when conditions are intermittent and emerge one day only to fade away the next. It fails on degenerative conditions, too. The system of assessment does not take into account any of its own inadequacies in those areas.

In the Public Accounts Committee, I was able to voice a suspicion that there was a quota for the number of disabled people that should be shaken out in what appears to be an enormous attempt to do that rather than to provide them with the support and help that they need and with encouragement to go back to work. The process is more concerned with shaking them off benefit than with treating their cases properly. We were assured by Atos and the Department that there was no quota, but I think we can guarantee that any medical assessor for Atos who finds that the total or a high proportion of the number of people he is examining are not fit for work will not advance his career in assessment, his career in Atos or his contact with the Department. Inevitably, there are those pressures on the assessors.

As our Committee was told, 38% of the cases that go to appeal—I advise all my cases to go to appeal—are successful in reversing the verdict. That demonstrates its inadequacy and the enormous cost in the reassessment process at appeal, a cost that is not taken into account in the Government's estimates of the savings produced by the system. Those reassessments are usually done with the help of the patient's own doctor, so I do not see why their doctor's view cannot be invoked and used at an earlier stage in the process. After all, the Government are giving more power to the doctors and claiming that they represent the patients. The doctors know the long-term conditions—they are treating the patient—so why are their views not taken into account by Atos at the start?

Our PAC report on the system was pretty damning—one of the most damning we have done. Our concerns included the rate of profit, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) has mentioned. The Minister should tell us the rate of profit made by Atos and what efforts the Department is making to reduce that and to ensure a more efficient service and more efficient assessment processes. We were concerned, too, that this is a monopoly contract with no great risk to Atos. The monopoly is continuously reinstated and Atos is put back in power. Monopoly processes go slack, and if such tasks are going to go to the private sector—I do not think that they should—the companies should be subject to competition and to more regular reviews. The weakness of the assessment system shows that Atos is not working effectively. There should not be a long-term monopoly in this area.

If the Minister reads Twitter at all, as I do avidly—normally to see people abuse me—he will see the widespread concerns about people's treatment by Atos. If he listens to this debate, he will hear the same. If he listens to the disablement groups, he will hear the same. Instead of backing an inhumane system and refusing to change it

or tighten the terms and conditions under which Atos operates, it is time that the Minister showed some concern and changed the system.

1.26 pm

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): I was not expecting to be called to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I shall say a few words.

The debate has been very valuable and there has been cross-party consensus, which shows that there is a great deal of concern about how Atos is performing against its contract. That is not to say that all the language used today is acceptable, and I feel that some of the constructive changes that have been implemented have been ignored. For example, when I was on the Welfare Reform Bill Committee, one of the key issues of concern for me was how the work capability assessments would deal with cancer patients. It is a fact that more cancer patients now qualify for unconditional support than ever before, yet we have had no mention of that. In the midst of making constructive and, in many cases, justified criticisms of Atos, it is important that Members are careful not to frighten people listening to this debate who might be cancer patients and might feel that they have no hope whatever of a fair hearing from Atos. I also want to highlight the fact that more people—double the number from two years ago—now qualify for unconditional support.

Those two points—about cancer patients and the number of people getting unconditional support—are important reasons why the proposal made by some Opposition Members that we should simply throw the whole system out and start again is dangerous. It does not take into account some of the constructive changes that have been implemented.

Sheila Gilmore: I do not deny that there have been some improvements—although one speaker said that they had happened at a glacial pace, which was probably a fair comment—but we must bear it in mind that the unconditional support is not available without the person being re-subjected to an assessment. One complaint is about the frequency of reassessment, even for people whose conditions are so serious that they have been put in the support group but who sometimes, a year later, still have to come back and go through the whole process again.

Guto Bebb: The hon. Lady's point is important, because although we all subscribe to the principle of a review, when a condition has been assessed as demanding unconditional long-term support there is a question about whether an annual review is justified. That is an issue that a constituency MP who takes case work seriously would not ignore, so I take her point on board.

There are a couple of aspects that I welcome, but about which I still have concerns. One is the way in which the system deals with patients who suffer from mental health problems. Mental health services are often the Cinderella service of the NHS, but when it comes to people who have difficulty accessing work and feeling confident to do so, the way that Atos deals with such patients has been less than acceptable. I understand that the Department and Atos are putting in 60 champions, but given the number of issues that I have seen in my own constituency, I question whether 60 will be sufficient

for the whole of the United Kingdom. The way in which we deal with people with mental health problems is not acceptable in the health service and it is not acceptable at this point in time in Atos, even though the problem has been recognised and work is being done to try to deal with it.

The other matter, which has been touched on by several hon. Members, is the issue of people with chronic long-term illnesses. The problem that I have seen in my constituency surgeries is that quite often somebody may turn up at an assessment centre and on that particular day would be capable of a certain type of work, but the situation could be completely different the following day. The problem with the system that we have put together is that it does not take into account those long-term chronic conditions that could result in somebody occasionally being able to take on work, but not on a long-term basis. That is another weakness in the system.

Meg Hillier: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that people with HIV/AIDS, where the side-effects can cause many day-to-day problems, are not properly assessed in the work capability assessment?

Guto Bebb: I entirely accept that point. The same is applicable to cancer patients, for example. However, there is a counter-argument that often people who suffer from HIV/AIDS or who are dealing with cancer would enjoy the opportunity of working. My father, who passed away owing to lung cancer, was working until three weeks before he died, and there is no doubt that being able to work for such a long period was a contributory factor to the way in which he fought the disease. We need to make sure that we do not categorise everybody who has a long-term chronic illness as incapable of any type of work.

On a specifically Welsh issue, despite the promises made by Ministers in the Welfare Reform Bill Committee when I tabled an amendment to allow assessments through the medium of Welsh, I have encountered numerous examples where assessments have been requested through the medium of Welsh but that service has not been provided. An excellent example was that of a young woman in my constituency who had a stroke at the age of 42, I believe. As a result, she largely lost the ability to communicate through the medium of English. Despite numerous requests for the service to be provided in accordance with the promises made by the Department, as yet we have not been able to ensure that she has that service through the medium of Welsh, which is her right under the Welsh Language Act 1993.

I subscribe to the general views expressed in the debate that the system is not performing as it should and that there are real concerns about the way that Atos is performing. However, I believe that what the Government are trying to do is right, as it is important that we recognise that we have a higher number of long-term unemployed in the United Kingdom than any comparable western state in Europe, and we need to question why that is so.

I do not think it is necessarily wrong, harsh or unreasonable to say that people who could work should be supported into work, but we need to do that in a way which recognises the dignity of individuals going through the system. Despite my support for the welfare changes that this Government are making, the examples that

[Guto Bebb]

I have seen in my own constituency surgery leave a lot to be desired. We should not throw out the baby with the bathwater, but we need to make sure that the recommendations that have been made time after time are implemented as soon as possible. We owe that to the constituents we represent.

1.33 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Today we have heard a litany of problems with the work capability assessment, not least the problem that it persistently reaches the wrong outcomes in assessing people's ability to work.

Aberdeenshire was part of the pilot scheme for the work capability assessment, so ever since I was elected, I have faced a steady stream of sick and disabled constituents, distraught, worried and in some cases angry about the process that they have had to endure. These are not anecdotal or isolated instances. The citizens advice bureau has kept close track of the issues brought by clients over many years, and it has documented the sharp increase in demand for advice and help on matters related to work capability assessments. In the past year alone the Turriff citizens advice bureau in my constituency has seen a 60% increase in this type of case, on top of a sharp increase last year. I suspect that we are seeing only the tip of the iceberg.

In spite of three reviews by Professor Harrington, the work capability assessment still is not working well enough. Too many decisions are being appealed, and 38% of those appeals are successful, rising to a 70% success rate when people are supported by the CAB and other advocacy groups. That system failure is costly not only in financial terms, but in human terms.

One of the things that has disturbed me most over the past couple of years is the way in which disabled people have found the process an assault on their dignity. I am also disturbed by the failure of the Government to take remedial action and manage the contract with Atos more effectively. Public money is being spent on these assessments. There is a substantial body of evidence to show that they are failing to deliver, yet the Government continue to hide behind commercial confidentiality in declining to make public the details of their relationship with Atos. That lack of accountability is not good enough.

As an MP, I am dealing with increasing numbers of constituents who are distressed and desperate because they have been told that they are fit for work when they manifestly are not. The very first constituent who came to me for help and who had been found fit for work was a man who could not climb the stairs in his own house to go to the toilet. He came to one of my surgeries which had disabled access, but he needed help from relatives to do so and it was quite an ordeal. His GP rather euphemistically told me that the man had "a poor prognosis", and the man has absolutely no prospect of getting back into the labour market. He successfully appealed against the decision, but it emerged in that process that no account had been taken of his GP's documentation or of the evidence supplied by his hospital consultant.

I have encountered incontinent patients being asked to make four-hour round trips on public transport. I have also encountered constituents who have had to

make very long journeys by public transport only to find that their appointment is not double-booked, but triple-booked. My biggest ongoing worry, though, is about people who have found themselves placed in the work-related activity group with very little realistic prospect of finding a job. I think of one constituent, disabled since birth, who has wanted nothing more than a job since she left her special school. Now in her 30s, she has been on endless training courses. She has enthusiastically embraced work placements but she has never had a mainstream job, despite her efforts. Possibly, she could work, with the right support in place.

In Aberdeenshire we enjoy levels of employment much higher than the average. It is probably easier to find a job there than anywhere else in Scotland, but jobs still do not grow on trees. Many of the jobs that new entrants to the labour market might have a chance of getting are physically demanding. They require strength, dexterity, co-ordination and a degree of endurance. My constituent could not stand on a food production line. She does not have the balance or the motor skills to work in a retail outlet. Her speech impairment would make telecommunications work difficult. She can type, but not nearly fast enough for a modern office. She will lose her benefit in a few months, even though she has always sought work, and is just looking for someone to give her a chance.

I worry that, instead of becoming independent, my constituent is going to become even more dependent on her ageing parents, who are themselves in failing health. They are not a wealthy family. Bringing up a disabled child often impairs a family's wealth and erodes their assets and their ability to cope with setbacks. I am worried about the impact of increased caring on her family and on their health and financial well-being.

Finally, I want to say a quick word about the situation facing people with serious mental health problems and long-term fluctuating conditions. There is a world of difference between being potentially fit for work, given the right support, and being an attractive prospect to a potential employer. The elephant in the Chamber today is the fact that many employers will think very long and hard before taking on a member of staff with a serious long-term or fluctuating health condition. Anyone with a chequered work history knows that they are perceived as a risk to prospective employers. Many employers will admit this in private but will not come out and say it publicly. I do not think the Government are being realistic enough about the stigma attached, for example, to degenerative conditions or mental illness. These hurdles are not insurmountable, but we must admit that they exist if we are to challenge them. I hope that today's debate will inject a dose of realism into the Government and that they will stop hounding and persecuting disabled and sick people for their disabilities.

1.38 pm

Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): I apologise for not being in the Chamber for the beginning of the debate, owing to another commitment. Mr Speaker kindly put my name towards the end of the list for today's speeches.

Interestingly, the scheme has worked relatively well in South Derbyshire. We have quite a high level of returners-to-work as a result, but equally, issues have come to my

surgery and I have had occasion to write to the Minister and his predecessor. I welcome the Backbench Business Committee's decision to hold the debate.

I have had conversations not only with my local citizens advice bureau but my jobcentre, which has highlighted a few points that I hope the Minister will take on board. I hope that he will answer them in his winding-up speech. I heard about a number of harrowing cases—not from the CAB, interestingly, but from the jobcentre, whose staff see people coming back into training and what have you after the assessment. Those staff are incredulous at times at the cavalier approach of Atos to people's health conditions.

Long-term disabled people have come back into the work arena; unbelievably, within three months of being told that they are perfectly fit for work, they have dropped down dead. I would not like that on my conscience, and I find it surprising. I am sure that such cases are relatively rare, but when do they happen? If the Minister does not know the answer, perhaps he will be kind enough to write to me.

Does anybody go back through the files to check on what happened with Atos? There needs to be a review. Folk in the Chamber know that I used to be the leader of a district council. Our job was to put out contracts and make procurements, but we always had penalty clauses, clawback arrangements and the ultimate option of getting rid of a firm if it was not performing.

One of my early letters to a previous Minister asked about the point when we say that the system is not working; frankly, I have not had an adequate reply. When someone drops down dead within three months of being assessed as being perfectly capable of going back to work, what is the review process for Atos?

We have heard about the Harrington report and the need for mental health champions. Only last week, a constituent, who, frankly, did not know what time of day it was, went through the process. Not only were they not allowed to have their carer with them, but no mental health champion was there.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am sorry, but I do not think the hon. Lady understands the notion of mental health champions. They are not for the clients but to advise the health care professionals doing the assessment.

Heather Wheeler: I do get that point; I am saying that the champions ought to be there when the interviews are taking place. I find the juxtaposition astonishing—according to Professor Harrington's report, people need that extra bit of care. I find it interesting that we have just heard that there will be 60 champions in the country. Patently obviously, that is not enough. Perhaps the Minister will advise us that that number represents a pilot and, notwithstanding what we are saying in this debate, it will be increased in short order.

Sheila Gilmore: In Scotland, there are mental health champions in only Edinburgh and Glasgow. This is not a pilot; the Minister has previously said that he has implemented Harrington as far as mental health champions are concerned.

Heather Wheeler: I am sure the Minister has heard every word that the hon. Lady said.

I finish on two final points because time is short and many people want to speak. People have mentioned the tick-box nature of the interview; my constituents find it hugely frustrating that they cannot expand on an answer. After all this time, perhaps the interview process could be tweaked to allow that. My last point is about the absolute frustration of GPs and consultants who feel that no account whatever is taken of the fact that they take their time to write the letters. That is desperately frustrating and a huge waste of public money.

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Mr Mark Hoban): We do ask GPs and consultants to provide medical evidence; we send a form to them. Only 37% of those are returned in time.

Heather Wheeler: I thank the Minister for putting that on the record. I will gladly go back to my GPs and consultants and say that they will be taken into account if they please return the forms on time.

I will finish now, because many hon. Members want to get in. I am delighted that we are having this debate because I genuinely feel that there is an opportunity to get the issue right. The people deserve it.

1.44 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Someone said that what we are debating is a party political issue. Let me be clear: I opposed the system when it was introduced by the last Government and I oppose it now—for the same reason. I see it as a brutal attack on the weakest and most vulnerable individuals in our society and an exercise by private companies to profiteer at those individuals' expense.

I started raising the issue in Parliament early on. My first constituency involvement was like that of many other hon. Members: it involved someone who was mentally ill, went for the assessment and had a nervous breakdown. That had an impact on the whole family—the mother, in particular.

I was then contacted by a range of organisations, which came together and produced the Spartacus report. I urge Members to read it. In the last debate on this issue, in Westminster Hall, we read some of its case studies into the record. They are horrendous examples of human suffering and what can only be described as abuse by the system itself.

I also refer Members to Calum's List, which has a website. It is a list of people who have died, including by suicide, as a result of, or where there has been a contribution from, the loss of benefits. The first example on the list was that of Paul Reekie. Some Members may have known Paul, an award-winning writer and poet in Leith, Scotland. He did not leave a suicide note, just two letters on the table beside him. One was about his loss of housing benefit and the other was about his loss of incapacity benefit. He died.

The other example is that of Mark and Helen Mullins from Bedworth. They could not access their benefits. They were walking 10 miles a day to a Salvation Army soup kitchen. They committed suicide together because they could not access their benefits. Read Calum's List, which has example after example of the brutal effect of the system.

[John McDonnell]

This is at least the sixth debate that we have had on the issue. The concern expressed by Members about an issue of public administration in all those is unprecedented in recent decades. There is example after example of human suffering on a scale unacceptable in a civilised society. That is why 117 Members of Parliament have so far signed our early-day motion calling for the scrapping of the system.

I have read Mind's briefing for today's debate and I urge other Members to do the same. It has put forward what is wrong with the system. Yes, it has recommended improvements, but one of the key factors coming out of its survey of people facing the work capability assessment process was that 51% of them said it made them have suicidal thoughts. Any system involving that level of risk is irretrievable and unreformable. That is why I believe it should be scrapped and why the British Medical Association has said it should be scrapped.

I say the following, and I do not say it lightly: we now know that the system does not work. We know the human suffering that is occurring. The responsibility is now on us to do something about it. We will be to blame for every injury, harm, suicide and other death as a result of the system if we do not scrap it now and bring in something that is fair and based on proper medical knowledge—assessment by a person's own GP, reinforced by expertise. We need something that gives advice and emotional support for people when they go through the system, not something that leaves them at risk.

Ian Lavery *rose*—

John McDonnell: If my hon. Friend does not mind, I shall not give way as other hon. Members want to speak.

I conclude by saying that we all have a responsibility to say, "Let's end the system now, start again and make something fair." We will be to blame for all the injury and harm if we do not.

1.48 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) on securing this important debate.

The system is not working for those suffering from mental health conditions. My hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington has just mentioned the Mind survey. Some 87% of those surveyed said that the system caused distress and 75% said that it had worsened their mental health condition. As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, 51% said that they had suicidal thoughts as a result of it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton referred to the deaths of people who have been through the Atos system. Through a freedom of information request, I understand that the DWP keeps a figure for the number of people who have died but does not record the causes and how they died. It has been asked to record the suicide cases, for example, but has not done so. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington eloquently demonstrated, there

are a number of well-publicised cases where people have taken their own lives because of this system. It is not too putting it too strongly to say that this coalition Government have blood on their hands for the deaths of those individuals.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), a lot of constituents come to see me at my surgery about this, and I should like to give an example. I also referred to several cases in the mental health debate on 14 June. I suggest that people look at the Mental Health Matters website, which gives some very heart-rending examples of people in the north-east with mental health conditions. The individual I mentioned is a 59-year-old who suffers from severe schizophrenia. He failed the Atos interview and is now being told by the DWP that he should be retrained as a security guard because that was the last job he did 10 years ago. What a waste of resources. This is despite his GP writing a letter on his behalf, which I have seen. I know his GP, because he is my GP as well.

Much has been made of the Harrington reviews, and we have heard a lot about the mental health champions, but they are there not to help applicants but to give advice to the health care practitioners. There are only 60 of them, and there are some 140 assessment centres throughout the country. Paul Farmer, the chief executive of Mind, who was on the scrutiny panel, resigned because the system was clearly failing people with mental health conditions. The Minister's predecessor then tried to rubbish him by saying that he had been asked to resign because Mind had a conflict of interest in a legal case, but it did not. Mind is very clear that the system is failing.

The system is also costing the taxpayer money, not only through the additional health care provision for those with mental health conditions but through the extra work load on GPs, the tribunal system, which is at breaking point, and the reassessment system. The other week a 60-year-old nurse with osteoporosis, who has spent 38 years in the NHS, came to see me. She failed the work capability test. She is 61 in April and is now being told that she will be retrained for a new career until she is 62, when she gets her pension. What on earth is the point in wasting money on individuals like that? There are also cases such as the 21-year-old young lady who ended up in the local psychiatric hospital because she failed the Atos interview. What is the cost of that to the NHS?

I raise serious questions about the capability of the individuals who are doing the Atos assessments. We see from today's very welcome briefing from the BMA that it is concerned about the turnover of GPs. Let me tell people—I do know a bit about mental health—that GPs are not experts on mental health. It is wrong to get someone who has no training in mental health to assess these cases. We need a new start for people with mental health conditions. We need to take them out of the system and we need a separate work stream for dealing with them. They should be assessed by people who are qualified psychiatrists and people who understand mental health. If we do not do that, we will continue to have the torture—I will use that word—that people are going through in this system and the deaths to which my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington referred. If the Minister can have that on his conscience, so be it; I do not think that I could if I were in his shoes.

1.53 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) on securing this very important debate.

Over 5,000 of my constituents are on incapacity benefit or employment and support allowance and they are facing this terrible system. I should like to give a few examples. Mr H, a double-leg amputee, was told to undertake an 80-mile round trip for his work capability assessment. Mr W, who has serious mental health problems, had a panic attack and was physically sick during his WCA but was told he was fit for work. His wife believes that he is being victimised by Atos. Mrs D, a district nurse who broke her back at work, was told that she is fit for work. Mrs M, who was treated for cancer in July 2010, was deemed fit for work before the results of the operation came through. Her appeal will not take place until next month. Mr E, who is one of the people the RNIB is worried about, had been completely blind for 16 years and forced to give up work, but was told by Atos that he was fit for work.

As the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr Byrne) has said, we need fundamental reform of the system, including the descriptors. There are problems with the descriptors not only for mental health but for physical health, in every category. I will read out the conditions that have a score of 9, which means that people with all these conditions are deemed capable of going to work. A person who

“Cannot mount or descend two steps unaided by another person even with the support of a handrail”

is deemed fit for work; a person who

“Cannot, for the majority of the time, remain at a work station, either...standing unassisted by another person...or...sitting...for more than 30 minutes, before needing to move away in order to avoid significant discomfort or exhaustion”

—fit for work; a person who

“Cannot pick up and move a one litre carton full of liquid”

—fit for work; a person who

“Cannot use a pencil or pen to make a meaningful mark”

—fit for work; a person who

“cannot use a suitable keyboard or mouse”

—fit for work; a person

“Unable to navigate around unfamiliar surrounding, without being accompanied by another person, due to sensory impairment”

—fit for work; a person

“At risk of loss of control leading to extensive evacuation of the bowel and/or voiding of the bladder, sufficient to require cleaning and a change in clothing, not able to reach a toilet quickly”

—fit for work. And only scoring 6, a person who

“At least once a month, has an involuntary episode of lost or altered consciousness resulting in significantly disrupted awareness or concentration”

—also fit for work. As the RNIB points out, it is possible for a person to have an epileptic fit once a fortnight and be deemed fit for work. As it happens, Mr Deputy Speaker, my husband suffers from epilepsy, and last time he had an epileptic fit he had the headache and the hangover for several days, so the notion that anybody can do a job if they experience this once a fortnight is completely absurd.

Also supposedly fit for work is someone who

“Cannot learn anything beyond a simple task, such as setting an alarm clock”,

or whose

“Reduced awareness of everyday hazards leads to a significant risk of...injury to self or others; or...damage to property or possessions such that they frequently require supervision”.

The situation is not even safe for their colleagues, but somehow they are deemed fit for work. The same applies to someone who

“Cannot cope with minor planned change”,

such as a change to lunchtime, or a person who

“Is unable to get to a specified place with which they are familiar, without being accompanied by another person.”

A person in the following category is also deemed fit for work if:

“Engagement in social contact with someone unfamiliar to the claimant is always precluded due to difficulty relating to others or significant distress experienced by the individual.”

This is a cynical exercise and Ministers know it. In the current situation, none of those people are ever going to find work. It is a cruel and demeaning system and it should be changed now.

1.58 pm

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my fellow north-eastern MPs, my hon. Friends the Members for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and for North Durham (Mr Jones).

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland, I want to demonstrate to the House, through a series of examples from my case load, the crass, degrading and unprofessional way in which my constituents are being treated. A constituent of mine—let us call her Mrs J—is 51-years-old and suffers from diverticular disease. This leads to a compacting of her bowels, which means that she soils herself on a daily basis, requiring a change of clothes. Often she requires hospital treatment because when her bowels are heavily compacted she is unable to deal with the matter without medical intervention. She was on contribution-based ESA, but was allowed to be on it for only 365 days, and that period expired in 2012. She asked to be reassessed on the basis of her condition, and her assessment stated that she was fit for work. She appealed against this decision, but the appeal was declined. She had to go down the tribunal route but, as she told me in an e-mail last September:

“So I’m now faced having to go to a tribunal which I was told today will take months. I’ve got no representation. I’m unable to go to the CAB as when I attempted to do this I’d soiled myself on route so ended up going home in tears. What can I do? I’ve not got a penny to my name. I’ve borrowed just to survive since April...I’m now faced with another 3-4 months with a tribunal decision again without money...I don’t know what to do and cannot carry on like this. Surely this isn’t how you expect people who legitimately cannot work. And the likelihood is I’ve failed my appeal just because I’ve not worded my appeal correctly when clearly my medical records and specialist have stated otherwise. Please, please help before I end up on the streets.”

A gentleman in my constituency—let us call him Mr D—served in the forces for many years and is now in his late 50s. In the past 18 months, he has undergone extensive surgery to the brain, following a tumour, and in November 2011 he was informed that he required further surgery, this time to his neck, to remove the growing tumour. At the same time—in precisely the

[Mr Iain Wright]

same month—Atos assessed Mr D as being fit for work. That assessment was undertaken by someone who was not trained as a doctor at a time when Mr D was going to assessments with a gaping wound in his head and still undergoing treatment. Does it not make an entire mockery of the whole process if that is allowed to happen? Does it not cast real doubt on the effectiveness and accuracy of the whole system? Most ominously, does it not reveal the system's true intention?

Several of my constituents—far too many to be isolated incidents—have told me that they were asked by the person carrying out the assessment whether they just sat around all day watching Jeremy Kyle. I expect uninformed, unprofessional and crass comments from the likes of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but not from medical professionals with the serious task of determining whether a person is fit for work in, presumably, an objective and non-prejudicial manner.

Another woman in my constituency—let us call her Mrs M—left school at 16 and worked diligently for 33 years. She paid her taxes. She was made redundant a couple of years ago at just the time that she was starting to suffer from ill health. Mrs M suffers from Crohn's disease, which has led to severe diarrhoea, incontinence and abdominal pain. She has had surgery to remove a large section of her bowel, but the symptoms are getting worse. As Members may know, there is no cure for Crohn's disease. Mrs M will not recover. There will be a gradual and irreversible increase in the severity and frequency of her symptoms. Mrs M is a proud and dignified woman who is embarrassed by her condition. She wants to do nothing more than work, but is unable to do so. She suffers from about two bouts of diarrhoea a day, for which she has no more than a second's notice, and she cannot leave the house unaccompanied.

Mrs M was assessed as having 15 points with limited capability for work. Her assessment and appeal were degrading, insensitive and unprofessional. She was described throughout her appeal notes as a man. Incorrect dates and fictitious telephone calls were placed on her files—in other words, lies. Mrs M was told that she could wear a nappy for work. What sort of country have we become? What sort of ethical values do the Government have, if that is the degrading and crass way in which decent, law-abiding constituents of mine are being dealt with?

I believe that everybody who can work should be entitled to work and that the role of the state is to help achieve that, but all the evidence in my constituency demonstrates that the system is not working and the most vulnerable and ill constituents in Hartlepool are paying the price. The Government are treating my constituents like dirt and that needs to change.

2.3 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Last week I held a meeting in my constituency for a number of disabled constituents, their carers and family members, and the organisations that support them. I want to highlight to the Minister two or three messages that build on some of the things that have been said this afternoon.

First, and most importantly, the Minister needs to understand how totally discredited this whole system has become. My constituents told me categorically last

week that they believe that the whole system was deliberately designed and operated to trick them—to make them incriminate themselves and to catch them out. They firmly believe that the system is deliberately designed, not to assess and then help them into work if they are fit for it, but simply to stop paying benefits wherever possible. I regret that they continue to believe—I know that this is not the case—that Atos is paid to bring that about.

Whether or not the system is deliberately designed to trick them, it is clear that there are far too many instances of trickery and misleading people and of distorting what they have done, said and reported and drawing conclusions from that. That is happening far too often. It is an absolute disgrace that we should run a public assessment process in such a discredited way.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Green: I will not, because others wish to make speeches.

The Minister has to either sort out the process or address the fundamental scepticism and mistrust of the system. Many Members have already said that we do not believe that that is possible unless the system is scrapped and we start all over again.

I say to the Minister—because I think I know what he will say in his response to the debate—that I understand that this is an occupational assessment, not a medical assessment. I understand why it is not just doctors, but other occupational health professionals who can carry out the test, but it is disgraceful when those professionals have no understanding of the underlying medical condition and can arrive at such distorted judgments on a person's fitness for work.

I also want to report to the Minister that, of the couple of dozen constituents I met last week, about half of them had no idea that they could take a companion to the assessment process. They said that they had not been told. Of those who did know that they could take a companion and who had sometimes done so, that companion was not made to feel welcome and was not able to assist them. Someone who suffers from autism is likely to behave in a particular way when responding to the questions asked—by trying to please and to give the answer that they think is wanted, rather than accurate—so I am sure that the Minister will appreciate that a companion who can support them and, if necessary, intervene is very important indeed. This bit of the system is not working and the Minister needs to look at it very carefully.

When the work capability assessment was introduced, we knew that it would be difficult and that we were trying something new. We built in the review process that led to the appointment of Professor Malcolm Harrington and some of the early improvements, which I think we all welcomed. Today, however, we have to face up to the fact that it is no longer possible to make the kinds of improvements that would make the system viable.

I get the impression—perhaps the Minister will correct this—that the Government have moved from trying to improve the system to either defending it or, to be frank, washing their hands of it. I honestly do not believe that

that is a good enough response. If the Minister intends to say that there is not a problem, that improvements can continue and that these are simply still early days teething troubles, I say to him that the extent of the reports from throughout the House and the country of repeated, systemic problems means that it is time to look again.

I am sure that the Minister and many Members will remember—I most certainly do—the last time we had such a failure, whatever the intentions, of public policy implementation: the Child Support Agency. It took us 20 years to realise that the design that had been put in place simply could not work. Please let us not wait 20 years to realise that this system cannot work and must be started again.

2.7 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): As a member of the Backbench Business Committee, I was delighted that we scheduled this topic for debate. I believe that it is an example of the exact reason why the Committee was set up on the insistence of people who were Members way before us. This is about Parliament doing business. It is not about petty, party political point scoring; it is about issues that face thousands of our people every day. Those issues might one day face some of us or our family members. The issue also impacts on this country's taxpayers, who are not getting value for money. It is about a system that has failed.

The Prime Minister said in May 2010:

“The test of a good society is how you protect the poorest, the most vulnerable, the elderly and the frail.”

I agree with the Prime Minister on very little, but I certainly agree with him on that. That is the test that should be held today.

People say that the jury is out on Atos, but it is not—it has been out and has come back in, and the evidence is that Atos is failing miserably. We have already heard that 40% of appeals are successful. Evidence published this week has shown that, when people are represented, 70% of appeals are successful. The system is broken. This is not just about the financial cost of appeals; the human cost and suffering of people waiting to go through appeals is drastic.

I will not go through individual cases. I want to draw the Minister's attention to evidence from those who represent people. First, I ask the Minister whether he has read “The People's Review of the Work Capability Assessment”, which was produced in November 2012? It contains 67 pages of indictments of the system. It was supported by people across this House and by professionals inside and outside the system.

I asked my caseworker, Sheila Stevenson, how the work capability assessment was affecting people in my constituency. She said, “How many people do you want me to tell you about?” I asked her to give me her view. This is a woman who for seven years was a legal officer for the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians and has worked for me for four years. She said that about every third call is about benefits—mainly about ESA and people being found fit for work. People are being found fit for work despite an NHS GP, a consultant or psychiatric reports saying that they are not. Atos does not seem to take medical reports into account when deciding on someone's capability. About

90% of my work is now benefits-related, whereas two years ago the figure was about 20%. As the citizens advice bureaux and jobcentres cannot cope, they refer cases to their local MP.

Recently, the all-party parliamentary group on coalfield communities, which I chair, heard evidence from Keith Lamb from the Durham Colliery Mechanics Trust and Mick White who works for the Yorkshire miners about their experiences from decades of representing people at work. They have had a huge increase in their work load and a very low success rate in overturning these decisions. They talked about how people have been failed. Doctors have made a number of mistakes. Assessors have been used whose first language is not English, so they cannot discuss clearly with claimants what their problems are. Claimants have signed medical reports and doctors have filled them in afterwards, when they were not even present at the medical. Claimants have been told that they do not have a disease.

I will give a classic example of the last point which the Minister should know about because, like me, he comes from a part of world where diseases such as pneumoconiosis cripple people. The Americans call it “black lung”. It is where somebody has a lung full of coal dust. People who have pneumoconiosis never improve and there is no way of getting better. And yet, people who are inexperienced are saying that people with the disease are no longer suffering and are capable of work. That is utterly out of order.

I spoke last night to Dave Hopper, who is the general secretary of the Durham Miners Association, an organisation that has represented people in this country for almost 200 years. He said:

“The system is breaking down.”

He told me that decades of close, professional relationships that had been built up between the association and the examiners and the chairmen of the tribunals are being undermined by the aggressive attitude of the people from Atos. He said that claimants are in dread of examinations and many refuse to appeal because of their initial experience. Surely that has to be wrong.

We are told in this House time and again that we need evidence-based policy. The Minister has today heard evidence from both sides of the House of where the system is breaking down. I suggest that he takes the evidence on board, listens to the people out there in the real world who are dealing with this matter day in and day out, gets them to sit around the table with Professor Harrington, and puts the system right. The system has failed, we need to put it right and we need to do so now.

2.12 pm

Julie Hilling (Bolton West) (Lab): There is so much to say and so little time. Let me start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) on securing this important debate.

The Government have many questions to answer about the way that work capability assessments are being carried out and about Atos. The way in which decisions are made on the ability of disabled people to work is nothing short of scandalous. The attack on people who are unable to work, in which they are labelled as skivers and scroungers, has demonised them in the eyes of the public. Yet fraud in disability benefits

[Julie Hilling]

is very low—so low that it is not even under continuous review. Why are Atos and the Department for Work and Pensions cruelly finding people fit for work or putting them in the work-related activity group when they are clearly unable to work?

About 40% of appeals against the assessments are successful. Interestingly, the figure rises to 70% for claimants who are represented by a benefits expert. Of course, the success rate is only half the story because some people are too ill to appeal, others decide to resubmit their application from the start, and still others die before they get to the tribunal.

There are real questions about Atos and the Government. If I had a contract with anyone who failed in 40% of their decisions and cost me a lot of money, I would not continue to use them. However, the Government have just given Atos the contract for the personal independence payment, so they cannot be dissatisfied with its performance. There are questions to answer. Are the Government giving targets to Atos, either covertly or overtly? Have the Government discussed their expectation of reducing the number of people on benefits or is Atos doing that of its own accord? Everybody says officially that there are no targets, but workers report a different story.

When Dr Steve Bick went undercover for the “Dispatches” programme, he was told more than once that the process is meant to take people off benefit, and that if he did not find enough people fit to work, his assessments would be monitored. He was also told that if he found more than 12% or 13% of people unfit for work, he would be told that his rate was too high.

My surgery is full of people who have been cruelly treated by the DWP and Atos. I wish that I could tell all their stories, but I will tell just a few. I have changed their names. Sylvia’s husband came to see me because she was too ill to come. She had a subarachnoid haemorrhage four years ago, but aged 41, has now been found fit for work. She suffers blackouts, cannot dress herself, cannot self-medicate, cannot climb stairs by herself and cannot go out alone because she cannot remember where she lives or where she is going. Three to four times each month, she gets hemiplegic migraines, which last between two and six days, and mean that she becomes paralysed on her right side and loses her speech. Despite that, she has been found fit for work. The jobcentre, however, will not sign her on because it says that she is not fit for work. Needless to say, the stress sets off her migraines. One wonders what is the matter with her assessors.

Susan, a sufferer of fibromyalgia and hypermobility syndrome, told me that she felt like she was on trial for benefit fraud at her assessment. Bill, a former long-distance lorry driver, had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart disease and diabetes. He thought the fact that he could not breathe would be reason enough to find him unfit for work, but of course he was wrong. He did not tell the assessors about his cerebral brain ascension, which means that he has terrible memory problems, because he is ashamed of having the condition. Of course, he has now had to tell them. He waited for nine months and then the decision was overturned.

There are many more people I could talk about, but I will finish with Clare, who has severe mental health issues and scoliosis. She scored 15 points and was

placed in the work-related activity group, even though she will clearly never be able to work. She appealed the decision and had to wait for 12 months, which made her condition far worse. She was then put in the support group.

People being placed in the work-related activity group is the next scandal. When people score 15 points and are found not fit for work, but are put in the work-related activity group, they will lose their benefit after 365 days. Is that another way of saving money, but one that also puts disabled people into abject poverty and causes them terrible stress?

There are so many questions. Why do the assessors give more weight to work capability assessment descriptors than to professional medical assessments? Why do they reassess people who have just won their appeal? Why do they not record the number of people who die through illness or suicide when being rejected for disability benefit? Why do they not track people who have been found fit for work and people who no longer receive benefit? How much do all the botched assessments cost us?

We believe that we have a contract with the state. We work and pay our national insurance and tax in the belief that when we can no longer work, the state will look after us. The Government seem to have broken that contract. Surely the Minister cannot accept this cruel and heartless treatment of ill and disabled people. What is he going to do about it?

2.17 pm

Sheila Gilmore (Edinburgh East) (Lab): Like everybody else, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) for securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to it. Clearly, we could have done with double the time or even more. Most of us could probably speak for at least an hour on these issues.

Getting the system right is hugely important for individuals. People have spoken about the effects on people’s mental state and their well-being, but I will mention some of the financial effects, which the last speaker began to touch on, for people who go into the work-related activity group. If that decision is not right, those people lose their contributory benefits after a year. The people who suffer the most from that are those who have a working partner—that partner may only work part time—and who have built up some savings, because they cease to get any benefit. If they want to get their national insurance credits, they still have to go through the assessment or they will not get the credits that will help them in the future with their pension. They may not be getting any money, but they are still going through the assessments.

Depending on the prognosis that is given in the recommendation—we are told it is not a “decision”—by Atos, many of the people in the work-related activity group will be mandated into the Work programme. That happens if the prognosis is that they might be fit within six months, but we are told that that will shortly be increased to twelve months. That means they could experience sanctions if things go wrong with the Work programme. If something goes wrong, perhaps because they have a learning disability or a mental health problem, and they do not turn up or are deemed not to be co-operating, they could be sanctioned. I have a constituent

in that position who was sanctioned for six months for that reason. The people in that group are the ones who are most affected by having only a 1% increase in benefits for the next three years, although it must be said that people in the support group are in large part also affected, contrary to what has been said.

Getting it wrong can mean that people slip off benefits altogether. Research commissioned by the previous Government, which I understand is not being continued by this Government—the Minister might reassure us on that—found that 43% of those found fit for work were neither in work nor in receipt of an out-of-work benefit a year later. We must ask where they are. What is happening to them? We should know and we should care. It is not good enough for Minister to say, “We have reduced the number of people on out-of-work benefits,” and to imply that those people are happily in work when that is almost certainly not the case.

The Minister will probably say that things are improving, but the work on the descriptors shows that the pace is glacial. In November 2011, Professor Harrington suggested that new descriptors be tested. The Government said then that they would look at the suggestion in early 2012. The current position is that the testing has only recently begun, and we will be lucky if we get a full response and report on it by autumn 2013, which is nearly two years since Professor Harrison made that suggestion.

Another problem—this has already been touched on by others—is that some people are falling into a hidden trap. They are found fit for work, but are told that they cannot sign on for JSA, which is the only benefit for which they are eligible, because they are not fit for work and hold a medical certificate. Potentially, people in that situation get no benefit. I am not sure whether Ministers are even aware of that procedural issue.

On appeals, finally, after a lot of pushing, tribunal judges are giving limited information on their reasons, but it is not good enough—it is too general. But that information is being used by Ministers, and it was used by Atos in a briefing that I presume was sent to all MPs, to say that all is well, because it was found that Atos was found to be at fault in only 0.5% of cases. That is very misleading, because people are winning their appeals on the basis of new oral evidence.

2.22 pm

Cathy Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow so many passionate speeches this afternoon and to say a few words on behalf of some of the constituents who have contacted me. Like many hon. Members, I have held meetings in my constituency. I have also met Parkinson's UK and the local branch of the Multiple Sclerosis Society, and received representations from many cancer patients. I hope the Minister can say something about their situations and about how descriptors affect cancer patients.

However, I want briefly to highlight other issues. There is a perception—notwithstanding what Atos or the Department for Work and Pensions says—that there are targets for placing numbers of people in the various groups. One constituent got in touch with me when he found out about this debate. He states:

“Getting a copy of the ESA85 report...to which everyone examined is entitled was like getting blood out of a stone.”

The man was found fit to work despite being on crutches and in constant pain at the time. He said:

“When I eventually received a copy I found that the examiner had stated clearly that I was found unfit for any kind of work and would remain so for at least two years.”

He tells me that when he tried to follow that up via the DWP, he was left with the distinct impression that staff had been advised, encouraged or instructed that everyone was to go into one of the employment support groups rather than be deemed completely unfit for work. I am sure the Minister will be able to comment on that.

Another issue that people frequently raise with me is about consultants. People who have seen consultants for medical conditions for a number of years feel that their consultant and general practitioner know their condition well, but they suddenly find that the Atos examiner takes a very different view. I have one example of a gentleman who was brought to my constituency office by a neighbour. He had had his third WCA in May 2012 and was zero rated. On the previous two occasions he appealed, and his appeals were upheld on the basis that the tribunal decided that he had reduced awareness of everyday hazards, leading to a significant risk of injury to him or others, and was therefore not fit for work.

That gentleman was brought to my office in August 2012 because he was awaiting his third appeal and was distressed by the process. Obviously, we gave him advice. On 8 October, the neighbour contacted me to say that the gentleman had passed away. We have heard a few such examples in the debate, but I hope the Minister realises the stresses and strains and the problems caused to family and friends when people are waiting for extended periods for their appeals.

I should briefly mention mental health, which was mentioned by a number of hon. Members, and again quote a constituent who contacted me this week. He says:

“I have been treated by my GP for over seven years for this illness, he is aware of the ups and downs, and the debilitating effects I am subject to. How can a registered nurse make a decision on my mental health in 41 minutes, most of which was asking questions about my physical health? This is what happened at my Atos WCA...There must be a change to the way people with mental health problems are dealt with by the system. I have spent the time since my WCA in June in misery, and the weeks leading up to the tribunal hearing in a mix of terror and stress. I was terrified at the tribunal itself.”

That is no way to treat people in a civilised society. The gentleman says that he is

“part of the last generation of ‘stiff upper lip’ and ‘put the best face on it’ people.”

He says that that “works against” him because he does not fit what he describes as the stereotype of someone with a mental health problem.

We need a system that is sophisticated enough to deal with those situations, but also one that is fair enough to ensure that people who are in the last weeks of their lives are not left in misery while they await tribunals.

2.27 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): We have heard a large number—26, I believe—of extraordinarily powerful speeches in the debate. There is no doubt that the current WCA arrangements are causing immense problems and anxiety for people for whom all hon. Members want anxiety to be minimised.

[Stephen Timms]

In opening the debate, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) mentioned the distress, indignation, fear and anger that have been caused. His assertion was amply supported by contributions from both sides of the House. We should not allow the system to continue. It needs fast and fundamental reform. I put it to the Minister—this struck me as I am sure it did him—that calls for such reform have come from both sides of the House, which does not often happen. It certainly happened today.

Part of the background to the debate is that a very small proportion of people who are placed by the WCA in the work-related activity group of ESA are getting into work. The invitation to tender for the Work programme said that the minimum performance standard would be that 5.5% of new applicants for ESA get into sustained job outcomes within one year, but the data published in November show that the proportion was 1%. The Work programme has performed terribly for the group of people we have spoken about in this debate.

What has gone wrong? The structure of the employment and support allowance is right. In the 1980s—my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Sheila Gilmore) was absolutely right to remind the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) of this—thousands of people were encouraged to move from unemployment benefit to invalidity benefit in order to reduce headline unemployment. People who worked in benefit offices at that time have explained to me how staff were given incentives to encourage people to make that shift. Once they had gone on to invalidity benefit, later incapacity benefit, that was it—they were abandoned. No further support beyond the cash benefit was provided. It was only in 1997 that that began to change. It was recognised that the vast majority of people in receipt of incapacity benefit would prefer to be in employment, if they could be. Starting with the new deal for disabled people and later with pathways to work, new ideas were developed. Nothing previously had been done to practically support people with serious health impairments into work. The approach can be summarised as: work for those who were in a position to work, and support for those who were not.

Out of that experience was drawn the design of the employment and support allowance. From that, the work capability assessment was designed to allocate people into the three groups: fit for work, work-related activity group, and support group. That is the right structure and architecture for the benefit, but it is the assessment—the topic of this debate—that is now in doubt. The key problem is that very soon after the election, the Government announced that they would reassess the entire incapacity benefit case load on a very fast timetable. At that time, the WCA had been introduced less than two years previously. Problems were still being ironed out and the organisation had not properly bedded down, yet on to this still developing system was placed the enormous burden of reassessment. Atos tells us it carried out 1 million work capability assessments last year. The load has just been too much, resulting in the problems that we have heard about, and which have been expressed so impressively in this debate.

The Minister will be aware of a good deal of concern among disability rights organisations about the Employment and Support Allowance (Amendment) Regulations 2012.

They were laid before Parliament just before Christmas on 17 December, and come into force on 28 January. They include the changes that will allow people recovering from cancer to go more frequently into the support group—a welcome change that was referred to by the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb). He said that the changes had already happened, but in fact they will take place on 28 January. A lot of people are worried that the regulations appear to give Atos permission to take account of non-existent, imaginary adaptations or medication in the assessment, and introduce a false distinction between physical and mental impairments. There is a lot of concern and I am sure the Minister is aware of it. Will he be able to say anything to address it?

The Government have recognised that the WCA needs modification. However, as we have heard from a number of speakers, they have gone about the task in an extraordinarily leisurely way, which has been described as “glacial” by a number of Members. I hope that the Minister can encourage us and tell us that the Department will now get a move on. I want to put to him a number of specific points. When will the changes to the descriptors for fluctuating conditions and mental health conditions, which were recommended months ago by the disability organisations, be implemented? He answered a question that I tabled last week on this, and there still seems to be a terrible, lackadaisical approach. He said:

“The Evidence Based Review (EBR) remains a priority for the Department and work is continuing at pace. The final report is due in 2013.”—[*Official Report*, 7 January 2013; Vol. 556, c. 180W.]

That was the first alarm signal, because his predecessor, in an answer on 25 June 2012, had told me that the final report would be due in spring 2013. Now the Minister is saying it will be in 2013. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East suggested that it will not be until autumn 2013. If that is right, that is another six-month delay. We really need to get a move on.

In his reply to me last week, the Minister said:

“We have undertaken extensive work with these charities throughout the summer”—

that was an answer last week, and the summer was the season before last. What happened in autumn?—

“to ensure that the ‘alternative’ WCA assessment combines recommendations from both the mental functioning and fluctuating conditions groups, and that the descriptors are suitable for testing.”—[*Official Report*, 7 January 2013; Vol. 556, c. 181-82W.]

The mental health descriptors were signed off by the charities in March last year. I really hope that the Minister will get the Department to get a move on and not just try these things out, which is what the evidence-based review—when it finally happens—will do, but introduce the changes that are clearly so urgently needed.

On progressive conditions, does it make sense to push everybody with a progressive condition, such as Parkinson’s disease, through regular reassessments when we all know that those conditions are only going to move in one direction and get worse. My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) made that point in an intervention. The Minister answered a question from me recently about this. He said:

“Around 360 people with Parkinson’s disease in the Work Related Activity Group have undergone a repeat assessment following their initial assessment... Of these, around 20 people... were found Fit for Work at their first repeat assessment.”—[*Official Report*, 15 January 2013; Vol. 556, c. 725W.]

No doubt some of them will have appealed and had their appeals upheld. Is it really worth putting 360 people with Parkinson's disease through reassessments in order to find that perhaps 20 should be fit for work—although, as I say, a number of those would no doubt have been overturned? I also asked how much the reassessments were costing. As a number of Members pointed out, the Minister simply will simply not answer any questions about cost, on the grounds of commercial confidentiality. This is public money, and we need to know where this money is going and how it is being spent.

We need to make better provision for people to be able to supply their own supporting medical information in their assessment—a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton in opening the debate, and by the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). The application form should be amended to invite people's own supporting medical information, and Atos assessors need to be more open to being informed by that information.

Atos assessors should be told why previous assessments were overturned on appeal—a point raised with me by Atos itself some months ago. We have heard how often people have won their appeal, gone back to Atos and immediately been found fit for work again. Part of the problem is that Atos was never told why a person's appeal was upheld. I believe that changes are in hand or perhaps have been introduced to assess that problem. My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Pamela Nash), however, was among those who referred to the seriousness of this revolving door problem. It needs to be addressed. I was also troubled by what she said about the difficulties people had getting their assessments recorded. That was supposed to have been sorted out, but her comments, and those of others, suggest otherwise.

Sheila Gilmore: Is my right hon. Friend aware that although tribunal judges are giving brief statements of reasons, these are not enough to help the decision makers or Atos understand?

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend makes a telling point. That information needs to be provided.

The architecture of ESA is sound, but the assessment system is clearly not up to the load it is being asked to bear. That is why we need fundamental and much faster reform, with a much greater sense of urgency than we have seen from Ministers so far.

2.39 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Mr Mark Hoban): I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) on securing this helpful debate. It gives me the opportunity to address some of the concerns expressed on both sides of the House about this process.

“For too long, too many long-term sick and disabled people have been written off by the welfare system to a life of dependency, entirely reliant on benefit and devoid of experience of the labour market.”—[*Official Report*, 9 January 2007; Vol. 455, c. 246.]

Those were not my words, but the words of the right hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Mr Murphy) when he was employment Minister on Third Reading of the

Welfare Reform Bill in January 2007. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) was a DWP Minister at the tail end of the previous Government, so I am sure she made her concerns known at that time to her ministerial colleagues—or perhaps not. This measure was introduced by the previous Government. The argument of the right hon. Member for East Renfrewshire was right then, and it is right now.

Helen Goodman: Government Members are constantly asking Opposition Members to say sorry. Actually, about the way this has run, I am sorry.

Mr Hoban: I welcome the hon. Lady's candour. It would be good if more of her colleagues expressed similar candour.

One aspect of the Welfare Reform Act 2007 that has been referred to frequently throughout the debate is the establishment of the independent annual review. The last three have been undertaken by Professor Harrington, a distinguished occupational physician. What evidence has he put forward? In his first report, he stated that he did

“not believe that the system is broken or beyond repair”.

In his second report, he noted that the WCA had

“noticeably changed for the better”,

and in his third report, he said that

“real progress has been made”

and stressed that

things are beginning to change positively in the best interests of the individual.”

It is important not to lose sight of that.

Mr Anderson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Hoban: I want to make a bit more progress, because a lot of detailed points were raised and I want to address as many of them as possible.

Despite the improvement, it is clear—today's debate reinforces this—that the WCA continues to generate heartfelt and passionately held views, but some of the worry experienced by claimants is a result of adverse media coverage and risks being fuelled by incorrect anecdotal information and—indeed—total myth. We have heard some of those myths today, and I want to set the record straight. This is an opportunity to address the facts behind the process and to set out what is happening in the Atos process.

Several hon. Members suggested that Atos had targets for finding people fit for work or placing them in a particular group. Let me be absolutely clear—let nobody in or beyond the House be in any doubt—there are no such targets. There are no targets for who should be put into which group. Instead—hon. Members would want this—there are quality-control checks. We want the right decisions to be made for our constituents and we want to ensure consistency between physicians and practitioners, and assessment centres. That quality control—saying that we should all be familiar with things we do and come across in our daily life—is not the same as a target. Atos has no targets to recommend that people go in particular groups.

Mrs Gillan: I am grateful for that assurance, because it is a matter of great concern. Will the Minister go a step further and say whether he is aware of any internal targets? Will he give us an assurance that there are no internal targets at Atos?

Mr Hoban: There is nothing in the contract with Atos to suggest that there should be any targets for whom they recommend gets placed in particular groups. I want to be absolutely clear: there no targets and it is absolutely right that there should be no targets, because what all of us want, whichever side of the debate we are on, is to ensure that we get the right people in the right groups for the right support. We cannot do that with targets. We have to treat everyone individually. That is the dignity that we should accord the people going through the process. They should know that they are going to be treated with dignity. There are no preconceived targets.

Julie Hilling: The question then is not whether the Government are putting targets in place, but whether the Minister is 100% convinced that Atos does not set targets for any of its work force in any way, because that does not seem to be the evidence coming out. Is he utterly convinced about that and if not, will he investigate whether that is the case?

Mr Hoban: We have these discussions; there are no targets in the system. Indeed, the proportion of people who have been placed in the support group has doubled. To my mind, that suggests that there are no targets—it is very clear evidence of that.

Natascha Engel: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hoban: No, I am not going to give way. I want to make some more progress and the hon. Lady raised some questions that I want to address.

It has also been suggested that Atos health care professionals make decisions on benefit entitlement. They do not. Those decisions are made by DWP decision makers. They take the ESA50—the form people complete when making an ESA claim—any further medical evidence produced by a GP, consultant or health practitioner with whom the claimant is working, and the Atos assessment, but they look at all that evidence. The decision is made by DWP decision makers, not Atos. That is why there are a number of cases where the DWP decision maker's decision has been different from any recommendation made by Atos. It is up to the DWP—the decision is made by the Department, not Atos—to decide who goes into which group.

Pamela Nash: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hoban: Let me make a bit more progress.

People say that the number of appeals overturned at tribunal is evidence of poor Atos reports—a point raised by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Sheila Gilmore). When we asked judges why they overturned DWP decisions, they said that an error in the Atos assessment was the primary reason for an overturn in only 0.3% of cases. However, although it happens very rarely, I agree with her on one point: I would like to get more information from the judges.

Mr Iain Wright: You're a Minister!

Mr Hoban: The hon. Gentleman says that I am a Minister, but the judges are independent—one of the strengths of our system. I hope that the judges have heard the comments that have been made—not only in this debate, but in other debates—about the need for more detail. To get the system right we need better feedback from the judges, but let us not forget that where we ask judges for the reason for an overturn, in a large proportion of cases they say it is the presentation of fresh evidence. They are very explicit in saying that the primary reason for overturn in only 0.3% of cases is the Atos assessment.

Sheila Gilmore: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, because this is an important point, especially as it has been briefed on so often. What I want to know—the Minister has to ask this question too—is this. I suspect that the question of overturns is simply one of some fairly simple error in the form, but according to the same judges, in 40% of cases they made their decision because they disagreed with the presentation of the case. That still suggests something wrong with the initial assessments—whether because the people concerned did not present them well or because the Atos assessors rushed them through. In 40% of cases the judges came to a different decision.

Mr Hoban: Just because the statistics do not suit the hon. Lady's argument does not mean that they are wrong. A lot of this debate is about constituency casework and experience. Sometimes we also need to look at the overall stats and figures behind this issue to put those cases in context, which is why I made the point about the overturn rate.

It has been suggested that GPs should make the assessment. The British Medical Association has been prayed in aid. Let me quote what the BMA said about that idea:

“However, it is not part of the GP's role to provide any opinion...on the patient's capability to work as part of this process. It is vital that these two roles are kept separate and that GPs are not asked to provide an opinion on their patient for the purpose of receiving the Employment and Support Allowance; doing so could damage the doctor-patient relationship.”

It has also been said that the work capability assessment does not take full account of mental health conditions. Let me say a bit about that important issue. We have sought to improve the process and the support for the health care professionals who are undertaking the assessments. All Atos health care professionals receive specific and additional training in assessing mental health conditions—

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hoban: No, I am going to continue.

Mr Jones: You are talking rubbish, that's why.

Mr Hoban: We do ensure that those professionals receive the support that they need to assess those conditions.

Following Professor Harrington's recommendation, Atos has 60 mental health function champions in place to spread best practice. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) asked whether

they had specific training in autism. I can assure her that that is the case. She also asked, as did other hon. Members, whether we could review the effectiveness of the mental health champions. It is not for me to dictate the work that Professor Harrington's successor will undertake as part of the fourth review, but I think that that is a good suggestion. We need to look at the effectiveness of the recommendations that Professor Harrington has made.

Mr Anderson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hoban: I am going to make some progress, as I have only a few minutes left to speak before the next debate starts.

In March 2011, we also implemented the recommendations of a Department-led review of the work capability assessment, which included the expansion of the support group to cover more people with certain communication problems and severe disability due to mental health conditions.

Hon. Members have suggested that the assessment does not take account of fluctuating conditions, but that is not the case. It gives people with a fluctuating condition the opportunity to explain how their condition varies over time. It is not a tick-box assessment, as some have suggested. There is a discussion between the health care professional and the person making the claim for ESA to determine how their condition varies over time. The questionnaire that customers are sent has been redesigned for that purpose, and people are now asked to give more details about how their fluctuating condition affects them as an individual. If a person cannot carry out a function repeatedly and reliably, they will be treated as unable to carry out that function at all. We all recognise that the capacity of people with a fluctuating condition can change, and it is important that proper regard should be given to that fact.

I want to pick up on a point made by the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). We have committed to a review of the descriptors for fluctuating conditions, and we are working closely with charities on that. We also need to ensure that any new descriptors are as good as, or better than, the existing ones, for the purpose of assessing someone's condition. That work is going on at the moment.

Stephen Timms *rose*—

Mr Hoban: I know that the right hon. Gentleman is keen to find out when that review will be published, but let me just say this. We want to make changes, if there is evidence to support such changes, and we need to ensure that that evidence is gathered and evaluated. I am as keen as he is to ensure that changes are made as quickly as possible, and that we make the right changes and the best changes to improve the process. I am not in any way seeking to delay the process—we want to ensure that it happens—but we have had to work quite hard to get the right descriptors that will provide the evidence on functional ability, and we are now assessing them.

Stephen Timms *rose*—

Mr Hoban: I will not give way. I have only three or four minutes left and there is a bit more to say.

Some criticism has been made of Atos, with suggestions that—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister is most courteously attending to the issues, and he refers to three or four minutes. I know that he will be leaving at least two, if not three, minutes for the right hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher) to wind up at the end. I think that we are clear on that.

Mr Hoban: I am, Mr Speaker. I am aiming to finish at 2.58 to allow the right hon. Gentleman his two minutes. I would quite happily continue for longer, but I know another debate is to follow in which hon. Members are also interested and another time limit applies.

Mr Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab) *rose*—

Stephen Timms *rose*—

Mr Hoban: I have only four minutes left and I want to address some more questions.

Let me deal with the issue of Atos's capability. Atos deals with 100,000 cases every month and its consistency meets the quality thresholds. Only 3.6% of assessments are below standard compared with a threshold of 5%. It receives complaints about only 0.6% of assessments. DWP decision makers return to Atos assessments that are inadequate for reaching a decision in only 0.2% of cases.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel) asked about the appeal rates. Let me be clear about the rate of successful appeals. Of all the fit-for-work decisions taken by the Department, only 15% are overturned on appeal. Only 15% of all the decisions we take, then, are overturned on appeal, which I think demonstrates that while we need to ensure that there is a proper appeals process, we should not be bandying around figures that misrepresent the level of successful appeals.

Natascha Engel: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hoban: No. I have two minutes left and I want to make some more comments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) talked about quality. The tribunal service can refer substandard reports back to Atos as an appeal for further action. It has exercised that right only 23 times in the past year. Rigorous checks are in place to ensure that quality applies.

Much has been said about employment and support allowance not working—that is untrue. What we are seeing is people coming off ESA and getting into work. The number of working-age people on ESA and incapacity benefit in February 2012 was 2.56 million—the lowest level since the introduction of IB in 1995. Early estimates to September 2012 suggest that overall numbers for this benefit are falling and will for the first time be below 2.5 million.

Finally, although there are many other myths, the last one I shall address today is the myth that the WSA is not fit for purpose. Professor Harrington has made it quite clear that the WSA, designed as a first positive step for work, is the right concept for assessing people who need our support. There is a need to improve it. No

[Mr Hoban]

one doubts that, which is why we have implemented Professor Harrington's recommendations. The assessment we inherited needed refinement. That is why we accepted and have largely implemented more than 40 of his recommendations over the past two years. That is why twice as many people have gone into the support group in comparison with when ESA was introduced.

Overall, the proportion of people with mental health conditions being awarded ESA has risen from 33% to 49%. We are seeing improvements and more will be introduced later this month on the categories of cancer treatment that allow people to go straight into the work-related activity group. These changes are happening. We should recognise that change is important and that it is happening. This is the right approach; demonising the work capability assessment does not help our constituents and does not address their concerns.

2.58 pm

Mr Meacher: I cannot remember attending such a compelling and powerful debate, combining passion, analysis and a very powerful demand for radical reform. It is absolutely clear that the consensus of the whole House is that the current Atos system has failed irretrievably and needs to be replaced by a wholly new and fair system.

I have to say that the Minister's response just now was extremely disappointing. He gave no assurance whatever that the present failed, mechanistic, tick-box system used by Atos will be replaced, or that the evidence of GPs and other medical personnel who know the disabled person will be taken into account. He could thus give no assurance that the original decisions will be made any more accurate or fairer. As a consequence, the appeals system, already overloaded, is going to remain choked.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel), the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, made the forceful point that when Atos works for another employer, such as the NHS or Royal Mail, it produces very different results in terms of fitness for work—which strongly suggests the very uncomfortable truth that perhaps the DWP is entirely prepared to accept the results that we all deplore if that is only way of getting hundreds of thousands of people off benefits.

That is not just the view of the Opposition. I think that the mood of the House was caught by one of the Minister's very senior colleagues, who said—I noted it down at the time—that the reputation of Atos was so damaged that it was necessary to park it to one side and move off in a different direction. That is exactly what is needed.

This issue is a test of the Government's accountability to the House. In my opinion, the incontrovertible message conveyed by today's debate is that until the Government and the DWP listen to, and act on, the unanimous view that has been expressed today—I have never seen such unanimity across the Benches—and introduce a wholly different system, the House will not let the matter go.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of Atos work capability assessments.

Nuclear Deterrent

[Relevant documents: *The Fourth Report from the Scottish Affairs Committee, on The Referendum on Separation for Scotland: Terminating Trident-Days or Decades?*, HC 676, and the Government response, HC 86.]

Mr Speaker: Interest in this debate has led me again to impose a six-minute limit on each Back-Bench contribution.

3 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the nuclear deterrent.

The motion stands in my name, and that of the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn).

Obtaining the debate involved a genuinely collaborative effort across the political divide. Part of the beauty of the Backbench Business Committee process is that it compels people who disagree profoundly about issues to work together to ensure that those issues are brought to the Floor of the House. No fewer than two dozen colleagues representing both sides of the argument supported our application for the debate at various stages. They are too numerous to list, but representations were made to the Backbench Business Committee by—as well as the hon. Member for Newport West and me—the hon. Members for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), and my hon. Friends the Members for South East Cornwall (Sheryll Murray), for Crawley (Henry Smith), for Woking (Jonathan Lord), and for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). Others who were particularly supportive include the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman), the hon. Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert), and my hon. Friends the Members for North Warwickshire (Dan Byles) and for Broxbourne (Mr Walker).

I know that several of those Members, as well as others—not least the former Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who is participating in a broadcast on this very subject this afternoon—regret that Committee meetings and other inescapable commitments prevent them from attending today's debate. I am grateful to them all, and I hope that the tone and content of our debate between now and 5 pm will justify the effort that they all put into encouraging the Backbench Business Committee to select this important topic.

Given that we must fit some 20 speeches into just two hours, I shall endeavour to make my own remarks as brief as possible. I wish to outline just five military arguments and four rather more political arguments in favour of our retaining the independent deterrent. The first of the military arguments is the most important argument of all: that future military threats and conflicts will be no more predictable than those that engulfed us throughout the 20th century. That is the overriding justification for preserving armed forces in peacetime as a national insurance policy. No one knows which enemies may confront us during the next 30 to 50 years—for that is the period that we are discussing, when the next generation of the nuclear deterrent will be in service—but it is highly probable that at least some of those enemies will be armed with weapons of mass destruction.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I greatly regret that, owing to a prime ministerial meeting with GPs from my constituency, I shall be unable to take part substantively in the debate.

Does my hon. Friend agree that our independent nuclear deterrent has helped to keep the peace in Europe for the past six decades, and that, because we effectively bankrupted the Soviet Union, it has led to the freeing of millions of people in eastern Europe?

Dr Lewis: I am sure that will be a central topic in our debate, and I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I hope some of the later points in my list of nine arguments will serve to endorse what he has said.

My second argument is that it is not the weapons themselves that we have to fear, but the nature of the regimes that possess them. Whereas democracies are generally reluctant to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear dictatorships—although they did so against Japan in 1945—the reverse is not true. Let us consider what might have happened if in 1982 a non-nuclear Britain had been facing an Argentina in possession of even just a few tactical nuclear bombs and the means of delivering them. Would we then have dared to use our conventional forces against its inferior conventional forces?

The third military argument is that the United Kingdom has traditionally played a more important and decisive role in preserving freedom than other medium-sized democracies have been able, or willing, to do. Democratic countries without nuclear weapons have little choice but either to declare themselves neutral and hope for the best or to rely on the nuclear umbrella of their powerful allies. The UK is a nuclear power already and is also much harder to defeat by conventional means than many other democracies because of our physical separation from the continent.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman arguing for every independent country in the world to possess nuclear weapons?

Dr Lewis: Absolutely not. I am saying that those countries that do not have nuclear weapons already often have other reasons that make it difficult to defend their borders, whereas, fortunately, we find it easier to do so because of our physical separation from the continent.

The fourth argument is that our prominence as the principal ally of the United States, our strategic geographical position—to which I have just referred—and the fact that we are obviously the junior partner might tempt an aggressor to risk attacking us separately. Given the difficulties in overrunning the UK with conventional forces in comparison with our more vulnerable allies, an aggressor could be tempted to use one or more mass destruction weapons against us on the assumption that the United States would not respond on our behalf. Even if that assumption were false, the attacker would find out his mistake only when it was too late for all concerned. An independently controlled British nuclear deterrent massively reduces the prospect of such a fatal miscalculation.

The fifth of the military arguments is that no quantity of conventional forces can compensate for the military disadvantage that faces a non-nuclear country in a war

against a nuclear-armed enemy. The atomic bombing of Japan is especially instructive—not only because the Emperor was forced to surrender, but also because of what might have happened under the reverse scenario. If Japan had developed atomic bombs in the summer of 1945 and the allies had not, a conventional allied invasion to end the war would have been out of the question.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I want to follow on from the question from the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and press the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on the logic of his argument. How can it be right for us to claim that we should have nuclear weapons, yet lecture every other country against trying to acquire them? If we are saying that the UK depends on nuclear weapons to be safe, does it not logically follow that every other country has the right to make the same argument?

Dr Lewis: The answer to that is catered for by the point I made earlier: it is not the weapons we have to fear but the nature of the regimes that have them. I have no desire to lecture other democracies on whether or not they should have nuclear weapons, as that is a question for them and it is about whether they feel they can afford to do that. It does not bother me if democracies have nuclear weapons, but I do reserve the right to lecture dictatorships, and preferably to try to thwart, balk and deter them from having such weapons, because they are the threat, not the weapons themselves.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con)
rose—

Dr Lewis: I will give way, but it will be for the last time as otherwise I will be in danger of taking too much time. [*Interruption.*] I thank my hon. Friend for his courtesy in resuming his seat.

I wish briefly to make four political points. The first political argument is that when people are asked whether it is safer for this country to continue to possess nuclear weapons as long as other countries have them, a large majority of the population consistently take the view that we should do so and that it would be unwise and dangerous to renounce them unilaterally. We can ask different poll questions that seem to point to a different answer, but when that question is asked, the answer is surprisingly consistent.

The second political argument is that in the 1980s, under cold war conditions, two general elections demonstrated the toxic effect of one-sided disarmament proposals on a party's prospects of gaining power. The third argument is that it was and remains widely believed—this refers to the intervention made by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) a few moments ago—that the nuclear stalemate of the cold war enabled all-out conflict between the majors powers to be avoided for 50 years, despite their mutual hostility and in contrast to what happened in those many regional theatres where communists and their enemies could and did fight without fear of nuclear escalation. The final political argument is that the ending of the east-west confrontation has not altered the balance of public opinion on this question. First, that is because a danger could easily re-emerge of a reversion to a confrontation of that sort. Secondly, it is because even today there are unpleasant

[Dr Julian Lewis]

regimes, such as Iran's, on the point of acquiring nuclear weapons and some, such as North Korea's, that have already done so.

The role of our strategic nuclear force remains what it has always been: to deter any power armed with mass destruction weapons from using them against us, in the belief, true or false, that nobody would retaliate on our behalf. The use of our deterrent consists of its preventive effect on the behaviour of our enemies. The actual launching of a Trident missile would mark the failure of deterrence and would presuppose that a devastating attack had already been inflicted on our country.

Because strategic nuclear deterrence is largely irrelevant to the current counter-insurgency campaigns with which the British Army has been involved, some senior Army officers have been suggesting that we must choose between fighting "the war" of the present and insuring against the more conventional prospect of state-versus-state conflict in the future. I say that that choice is unacceptable, and that the underlying message that the era of high-intensity, state-on-state warfare is gone for good is a dangerous fallacy. Every sane individual hopes that such warfare will never return, but to rely on that in the face of past experience would be extremely foolhardy. The lesson of warfare in the 20th century, repeated time and again, was that when conflicts broke out they usually took their victims by surprise. Obvious examples are: the failure to anticipate the first world war; the follies of the "10-year rule" from 1919 to 1932; and the entirely unanticipated attacks on Israel in 1973, the Falklands in 1982, Kuwait in 1990 and the United States in 2001. Conversely, and on a brighter note, the speed with which the Soviet empire unravelled from 1989 left even its sternest critics largely nonplussed.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Lewis: I will not, because I am about to finish. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

Our current counter-insurgency campaigns are very important indeed, but they cannot be compared with battles for the very survival of the United Kingdom homeland. Such existential threats confronted us twice in the past 100 years and, if international relations deteriorate, they could easily confront us again.

My final remark concerns the alternatives. I can see only three possible alternatives to renewing Trident other than getting rid of the nuclear deterrent completely. The first is that suggested by the Liberal Democrats of putting cruise missiles on Astute class submarines. I have said in the past and say again that that would be more expensive and less effective, would put the submarine at risk because of the shorter range of the missiles, which would bring the submarine closer to shore, and could start world war three by accident because no one would be sure whether the launched missile had a conventional or nuclear warhead. Apart from that, it is a great idea.

The second alternative is to come off continuous at sea deterrence, to put the nuclear deterrent on stand-by and to say that we will reactivate it if things get worse. That is an extremely dangerous suggestion as having a part-time deterrent is probably as dangerous as, if not more dangerous than, having no deterrent at all.

The final suggestion is that we could perhaps combine our deterrent with that of the French and therefore have fewer submarines. All I can say about that is that our deterrent is strongly connected with the excellent working relationship we have with the United States, which would not admit of such a solution.

I hope that I have given people plenty of food for thought. We have an hour and three quarters left and I very much look forward to hearing both sides of the argument in the time that remains.

3.15 pm

Dame Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on obtaining this debate. He knows that we have disagreed on this subject for decades and nothing has changed today.

One of the questions that is never adequately addressed in such debates is why people believe, as the hon. Gentleman does, that there could be a nuclear threat uniquely directed at Britain. The 2006 White Paper that argued for a continuation of Trident described three threat scenarios: the re-emergence of a major nuclear threat; new states acquiring nuclear capability; and state-sponsored nuclear terrorism. On the first scenario of the re-emergence of a major nuclear threat, can anyone think of a plausible reason why a future Russia, having enjoyed the fruits of capitalism and democracy, albeit that it is limited, would threaten to attack the UK and just the UK? On the contrary, Russia's interests depend on a peaceful and prosperous Europe.

The second scenario is the potential threat from new states acquiring nuclear weapons, and Iran is the country most frequently cited. Embroiled as it is in middle east politics with a nuclear-armed Israel on one side and a nuclear-armed Pakistan on the other, Iran's ambitions are regional. Condemnation of Iran might unite us all, but that is no reason for not asking why on earth Iran would uniquely target the UK.

The third scenario, sponsored nuclear terrorism, deserves the closest attention. The White Paper explains how deterrence should work. It states:

"We make no distinction between the means by which a state might choose to deliver a nuclear warhead...whether by missile or sponsored terrorists"

and goes on to say that a state identified as the source of the material could expect a proportionate response. The threat of retaliation must be credible for deterrence to work, so how will we determine which is the sponsoring country? Remembering George Bush's conviction that Iraq was responsible for 9/11, we will not be relying on politicians. No, the nuclear material will be sent to the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston to determine where it came from. A decision will then have to be taken.

Let me remind members of Trident's power. The Hiroshima bomb killed more than 100,000 people and injured thousands more. Just one Trident submarine could target up to 48 cities, with each warhead having eight times the effect of the Hiroshima bomb. Does anyone believe that in the cold light of day, after the Aldermaston analysis, a British Government would give the order for nuclear retaliation which would wipe out a nation of innocent people and leave an environmental legacy for many generations? This is not a credible threat.

In my view not one of those three scenarios stands up to scrutiny, but they share a further fundamental flaw. The hon. Member for New Forest East seems to forget that in reality Trident is assigned to NATO. Its purpose is not to deter a unique threat to the UK. Does anyone honestly believe that the UK could use its nuclear weapons unilaterally? Of course not.

In the world we now inhabit the greatest threats to the UK are climate change, international terrorism, cyber attack, global economics, health epidemics and competition for scarce resources. It is received wisdom that every one of these challenges can be addressed only by international co-operation, the building of trust, diplomacy, peacemaking and development. In all these fields the UK under successive Governments has made a positive contribution.

There are far better ways to protect the people of these islands, and in an age of austerity there are far, far better ways to spend the £25 billion capital and the £2.5 billion annual costs of the Trident programme. When our conventional forces—of course we need them, and I have never been a pacifist—are so stretched, when our hospitals, fire stations and police stations are closing, where is our real security? Not in Trident. It is an obscene waste of the public's money and of our precious skills and resources, which we desperately need to put this country back on its feet. We need to face the truth. British nuclear weapons have no utility. The scenarios for use are not plausible, and if Trident cannot be used, it cannot deter.

3.21 pm

Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and the Backbench Business Committee for ensuring that we have this important debate today. Members will know of my special interest in the Royal Navy, as the mother of a serving Royal Naval officer, although my daughter assures me that she has no desire to serve aboard one of the four Vanguard class submarines.

I am pleased that the Government are committed to maintaining the UK's nuclear deterrent. The Government have also approved the initial gate investment, and selected the submarine design for the successor nuclear deterrent. Contracts have been signed for the first 18 months of work on the assessment phase of the successor submarine programme.

Trident has provided a massive amount of employment for my constituents in South East Cornwall. Repair, refuelling and refit of the Vanguard class submarines is carried out in the D154 submarine support facilities at Devonport. The expertise and experience that Devonport now has should be utilised in any future programme. As a local county councillor at the time, I will never forget standing by the banks of the River Tamar in Mount Edgcombe park, and watching the first Vanguard submarine edge her way around Drake's island and into Devonport dockyard for refit. I was pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced that the £350 million contract to refit and refuel the nuclear missile submarine HMS Vengeance had been awarded to Devonport in March last year. It will safeguard up to 2,000 jobs.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that that is also an important part of our skills base, and that if it were to go, we would see a significant diminution in our skills base?

Sheryll Murray: My hon. Friend is right.

Maintaining a continuous at-sea deterrent is essential. It sends the positive message that the UK is always prepared to respond instantly. There is the additional advantage of a moveable location, which assists security against any possible threats. The Government have excellent principles to abide by when considering nuclear arms. These include the use of nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence, a commitment to a minimum nuclear deterrent, and not to use any weapons contrary to international law. In other words, the highly powerful weapons would be used only as a last resort.

It is important to retain nuclear weapons. I was concerned at our going into coalition with partners who stated in their last election manifesto that they would be saying no to like-for-like replacement of the Trident nuclear weapons system. Given the reports in *The Independent* on 19 July last year, I am still concerned that they might scale down our vital nuclear deterrent in increasingly uncertain times.

We need to remember that the UK's nuclear deterrent contributes towards our collective security as part of NATO. If the UK did not have an at-sea deterrent, NATO's collective security would be weakened, leaving the UK dependent on the US and France.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that major wars tend to start when dictators believe that democracies are too weak to stand up to them? For democracies such as Britain to give up their nuclear deterrent would send out entirely the wrong message about how we seek to protect others and ourselves.

Sheryll Murray: That is exactly true.

The UK has a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. We were awarded that position because our nation was one of the most powerful in the world following world war two. The UK's membership of that exclusive club could be called into question without the continuation of our nuclear deterrent.

A British at-sea nuclear deterrent has served us well for 60 years; it can and should serve us well into the future. I hope that refitting work on any future submarines will continue to provide much needed employment opportunities for my constituents in Saltash, Torpoint and throughout the rest of South East Cornwall.

3.26 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): There are two mindsets in this debate: there are those on the other side who are locked in the permafrost of the fear of cold war thinking and there are those who have hope for a better and safer world.

The hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) mentioned the 1980s. I vividly recall what the historian E. P. Thompson said at that dangerous time, when the world had enough nuclear weapons to kill humanity

[Paul Flynn]

57 times over and we were in deadly peril because the geriatric fingers on the nuclear buttons belonged to Andropov, who was on a life support machine and virtually dead from the neck down, and to President Reagan, who was dead from the neck up.

The likelihood of a nuclear war does not come from design, plans or escalation but from accidents. What the hon. Member for New Forest East, who introduced the debate, is arguing—there is no denying it—is for every country in the world to have its own nuclear insurance and nuclear weapons of mass destruction.

Things are changing. George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry and Sam Nunn, the four titans of American foreign policy, have all called for a world free of nuclear weapons and so has their splendid President. That gives a new momentum to the idea and hope that have become the centre of the policy debate—“They are the past and we are the future on this.”

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Dame Joan Ruddock), I have repeatedly asked for anyone to give a plausible future scenario in which nuclear weapons could be used independently by the United Kingdom. There is no such scenario. We are carrying on being comfortable with the policies of the past. We should go back to the vision of previous Governments. In 1968, a UK Foreign Affairs Minister urged the United Nations to sign up to the newly negotiated non-proliferation treaty. He promised United Kingdom support and added:

“It will, therefore, be essential to follow the treaty up quickly with further disarmament measures”.

That was 45 years ago. There was a clear vision and hope of declining stocks of nuclear weapons throughout the world.

The continued possession of nuclear weapons of mass destruction has a pernicious effect on our economy, with resources that could have been invested in research for the NHS, in education or improving our environment being squandered on high-tech killing machines.

Coming into the House today, I met a former Member—a distinguished Committee Chairman who stood down at the last election—and told him what we were doing today. He said, “That was the most difficult decision. I needed a Whip behind me with an arm lock to get me into the Lobby to vote for Trident”, and the Whip had told him beforehand, “I don’t believe in it either.” Ministers give the party line and the deterrence fiction when they are at the Dispatch Box, but we see a remarkable turnaround when they stand down and have an epiphany. Last Friday, Michael Portillo said that Trident was

“completely past its sell-by date”,

and added:

“It is neither independent, nor is it any kind of deterrent because we face enemies like the Taliban and al-Qaeda, who cannot be deterred by nuclear weapons...I reached the view after I was defence secretary.”

So we have nonsense when they are in power, when they can do something, and the truth comes out with their realisation afterwards. Why is good sense invisible to politicians in office but monumentally obvious outside office?

However, there is a glimmer of hope. Even our own Prime Minister is perhaps approaching a moment when he will change. Last October, he said that

“if we are to have a nuclear deterrent, it makes sense to ensure we have something that is credible and believable”.—[*Official Report*, 17 October 2012; Vol. 551, c. 319.]

Trident is neither credible nor believable. It undermines our credentials on non-proliferation, which is the best hope for a safe future. Its replacement should be cancelled, and then we could use the existing stocks of weapons of mass destruction—

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): We should be proud of our role in the non-proliferation treaty and the fact that the nuclear deterrent has helped us to avoid wars in the past and is an insurance policy for the future. The hon. Gentleman seems to be arguing for unilateral disarmament. In that scenario, which other country would disarm because we had disarmed?

Paul Flynn: I am not arguing for unilateral disarmament because it is not a practical possibility; I do not believe that it is attainable. When the hon. Gentleman intervened I was about to say that we can use the weapons we have as part of our bargaining to achieve disarmament and to make the nuclear non-proliferation treaty a practical one. How can we say to other countries, “You can’t have nuclear weapons but we’re insisting on ours”? That way forward will not be possible.

The problem is the return of the mindset that our country is somehow very special. We are going back to the 19th-century view when we had an empire, insisting that we are powerful and determine world peace. That is a very damaging view. We saw it this week in relation to the fact that we have to join almost every war that comes along. It was said here on Monday that by joining the war in the state of Mali, even if there is no mission creep we have already exposed ourselves to the possibility of terrorist attacks. That was pooh-poohed by Ministers, but the attack has happened, a life has been lost, and others are under threat. That is the position we are in.

To some, Trident is a virility status symbol; to others, it is a comfort blanket. The Foreign Secretary of the moment will often say that we have to have it because the UK must punch above its weight. Punching above our weight means spending beyond our interests and dying beyond our responsibilities.

3.33 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Most Members will be aware of this, but for the record I should like to state that I firmly believe in our nuclear deterrent. In this uncertain world where countries that are not necessarily friendly to the west have nuclear weapons, it is an unfortunate fact of life that we need them as well to guarantee Britain’s safety. However, that does not stop us also working towards arms reduction. When President Obama launched his global zero initiative, I very much welcomed it. We also owe a debt of thanks to the Royal Navy and our Vanguard submariners, who are always on patrol, for safeguarding the country and providing the essential British contribution to NATO.

I want to suggest that our commitment to our nuclear deterrent should not just be about the current capability and future plans. There is a legacy from the dawn of our

deterrent that we have still not yet fully recognised. We have to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to another group of people, who also deserve our recognition and thanks, without whom Britain would never have joined the top tier of nuclear powers. They are, of course, our nuclear test veterans.

In the 1950s and 1960s, in the largest tri-service operation since the D-day landings, 20,000 service personnel participated in British nuclear weapon tests in the south Pacific and Australia. These men's service was unique. When they took part, the science was largely unknown. Pre-test precautions were primitive and inadequate and failed to protect individuals fully from the effects of heat, blast shock and ionising radiation. Many veterans believe that their health was adversely affected by those tests, a view substantiated by scientific research undertaken in New Zealand by Professor Rowland that was peer-reviewed and accepted by the then New Zealand Government.

Some years ago, following an inquiry from a constituent, I became involved with the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association and I am now its patron. After a long campaign, the BNTVA and I succeeded in persuading the Ministry of Defence to undertake a health needs analysis of all surviving veterans. It showed that 84% of them believed that their main health condition was caused by radiation. If anybody thinks that that was an easy task and analysis to accomplish, they have not dealt with the MOD, but I thank it for taking that on.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): It was me.

Mr Baron: To a certain extent, yes.

Many helpful, practical measures are now being introduced as a result—for example, small but important things such as markers denoting veteran status on NHS records.

Following the success of the health needs analysis, the BNTVA and I recently started a new campaign with three objectives. The first is to secure a lasting legacy for these men and their descendants. There is still much to learn about the effects of exposure to radiation and how we can continue to make nuclear energy safe. The second is to secure public recognition from the Prime Minister of our debt to these veterans. That could include recognition through the medal system by adding a clasp to the general service medal. The third is to establish a benevolent fund courtesy of Government, the suggested figure being £25 million. This would support atomic veterans and, more importantly, their descendants, who have also suffered medical setbacks that can be attributed to their fathers' exposure.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I am very pleased to hear the hon. Gentlemen's speech and endorse every word he has spoken. I am a member of the group that he has set up and I, too, have been horrified to hear from my constituents about the effects on grandchildren as a result of the tests in which the veterans took part. He is absolutely right: we must not forget the part that those veterans and their families continue to play.

Mr Baron: I thank the hon. Lady for her support; it is much appreciated.

The Government may say that £25 million is an awful lot of money in these austere times.

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

Mr Baron: If I am allowed a second intervention that will add another minute to my speech, then by all means.

Mr Jones: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I was pleased to put in place the health study, against the opposition of a lot of the civil service, when I was a Defence Minister. A generous settlement proposal was put to the lawyers—I got the Treasury to agree to it—but it was rejected. That was an opportunity missed for veterans to get some compensation.

Mr Baron: I recognise the part that the hon. Gentleman played in the health needs analysis. However, let us be absolutely clear about a confusion that is all too readily accepted by the MOD: the BNTVA has never participated in the legal cases that some individual veterans have brought. That is a vital distinction to make and I ask the House to take it on board.

Although £25 million sounds like a lot of money, we should set it in the context of how other nuclear countries have treated their veterans. The US gives each veteran £47,000 plus a further £47,000 for any secondary attributable illness. No causal link is required between the cancer suffered by the veteran and the fact that they were there. If they were at the tests and they have cancer, they automatically get the compensation. Canada pays more than £15,000 in addition to monies from pensions and compensation legislation. The Isle of Man makes an *ex gratia* payment of £8,000 to any resident test veteran.

In all three cases, the service personnel in question have access to free health care provision. The MOD argument that veterans in this country have access to the NHS therefore does not stack up. The fact remains that this country's nuclear test veterans are almost at the bottom of the scale in the international comparisons going by how they are treated by this country. I hope that the House will accept that that needs to be put right. Against those comparisons, the campaign for £25 million, which works out at about £6,000 per veteran, is modest.

I should at this stage repeat what I said to the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and make it clear that the BNTVA has never participated in the legal challenges brought by some veterans.

We have had several meetings at the MOD with successive Ministers for veterans. I wrote to the Government in November to set out the details of our campaign. Despite chase-ups, I still await a response. No doubt the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), will carry that message back to the MOD. Meanwhile, I have written to all Back Benchers requesting their support for our campaign for recognition. As the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) mentioned, many have been kind enough to write back positively. I will be taking the matter further in due course.

In conclusion, as the Government are on the verge of commissioning the next iteration of our nuclear deterrent, it is right that we remember those who first created it and finally, after so long, repay the debt that we owe them.

3.42 pm

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I apologise to the House for the fact that I will not be able to stay until the end of the debate, due to a prior commitment. I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for calling me.

After Labour was massacred in the 1983 and 1987 general elections because of its advocacy, under a charming but useless leader, for unilateral nuclear disarmament, I was appointed by Neil Kinnock to review foreign and defence policy for the Labour party. As a result of that review, Labour became eligible for re-election and was re-elected at long last in 1997.

If Britain did not have nuclear weapons, I would not advocate our acquiring them, but history has bestowed them upon us. Let us not forget that it was a Labour Government in time of peace who decided that the United Kingdom should acquire nuclear weapons.

Mr Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for reviewing the history of the decision making. Would he say that the conclusion that he came to was about politics or policy?

Sir Gerald Kaufman: The hon. Gentleman's question requires a yes or a no, but it is not as clear as that. We are prisoners of history. That history decided that a medium-sized power that was pretty well bankrupt at the end of the second world war should possess nuclear weapons. We are a medium-sized power, and, for better or worse—it is worse in many ways—we would not be listened to any more than anybody else, including Italy, Spain, Greece or Germany, without the unwanted legacy of possession of nuclear weapons.

This is not a question of how we acquired them; the fact is that we are in possession of them. Owing to that fact, unlike those other western European countries and other countries in different parts of the world, we are eligible to participate in international nuclear disarmament. That is essential. We should take into account that it is 58 years since the end of the war. It is remarkable how few other countries have acquired nuclear weapons. India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel have acquired them, but even Iran—an aggressive and objectionable power with foul internal policies—has not yet done so. We have a voice on the international front that exists to try to prevent nuclear proliferation. If we did not by accident of history possess nuclear weapons, nobody would listen to us on nuclear disarmament. For that reason, we should use the result of that accident of history to take part in international negotiations to reduce, and eventually to eliminate, all nuclear weapons owned by any country.

Incidentally, I have a great affection for my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), but Reagan offered the Soviet Union a major internationally agreed nuclear disarmament. He might not have been the greatest President in the world, but at the same time, being there and having what he had, he was able to make the offer. It is deeply unfortunate that the Soviet Union did not grab that offer.

That being so, I say clearly that I do not want nuclear weapons; I am not happy we have got them, but we have got them. Divesting ourselves of our nuclear weapons would be regarded by many as an act of self-indulgence.

We can use our possession of them to persuade others not to use them—there is always a danger that India, Pakistan and Israel will use them—and to take part in international negotiations to reduce and abolish them. That status comes to us by chance and by history. We should use our status.

3.48 pm

Sir Nick Harvey (North Devon) (LD): The UK must decide by the middle of 2016—just three years from now—whether to proceed with a like-for-like replacement of the Trident nuclear deterrent. I do not believe we need a further generation of nuclear weapons based on the scale we thought we needed in 1980 at the height of the cold war, and I do not believe we can afford to have one. I do not believe that national security assessment and strategy suggest we need it, or that our defence posture can stand it—our posture would become lop-sided if we were to commit to another generation on the same scale. In addition, I believe that the opportunity cost of committing so much money and manpower, and such a large proportion of our equipment budget, would have a malign effect on our general military capability.

In 1980, at the height of the cold war, we had a known nuclear adversary—the Soviet Union. It had British targets in its target set, and we had Soviet targets in our target set. There was a logic—I do not say that I necessarily subscribe to it hook, line and sinker—to having continuous at-sea deterrence, because we had a known adversary. Today's circumstances are very different. At that time, we computed that the only way to fulfil the classic definition of deterrence—to put into one's adversary's mind the certainty that we were capable of inflicting damage that would be unacceptable to him—was to maintain the capability of overcoming Moscow's nuclear defences and being able to flatten that city. Moscow was where the Soviet elite hung out and the only things that they valued, and to which they considered damage would be unacceptable, were themselves and their regime. The Russia of the 21st century, for all its imperfections, is very different. It is perfectly possible to deter modern Russia from a nuclear attack on us by a variety of other means, and there are other ways of inflicting on them damage that they would consider unacceptable.

Mr Kevan Jones: Why then have the Russians recently upgraded their anti-ballistic missile protection in and around Moscow?

Sir Nick Harvey: I did not say that they would be willing to see Moscow flattened—most certainly they would not. I am saying that there are other ways of inflicting damage on Russia that it would consider unacceptable.

I mentioned that there will be a vast opportunity cost to be paid if we decide to commit these funds, which, let us refresh our memories, in today's money will be approximately £25 billion to £30 billion on the capital investment in a further generation of submarines. On top of that, we have to factor in the running costs of a nuclear deterrent on this scale for 30 or more years of through-life costs—more than £3 billion a year in today's money. Beginning to total that out and factoring in decommissioning at the end, we are talking about an expenditure of more than £100 billion. We need to look closely at whether that is justified in the context of the

size of our defence budget, and what we are able to make available for other forms of defence and security in an increasingly dangerous and changing world.

Mr Jenkin: My hon. Friend has started to talk about 20, 30, 40 years ahead. Would he like to describe the strategic context in which we might be operating a nuclear deterrent in 20, 30, 40 years' time, or indeed find ourselves operating without one? What is it going to be like then?

Sir Nick Harvey: The truth of the matter is that none of us knows. If we retain a nuclear deterrent of any description and any scale, it is an insurance policy against the unknown. I am saying that the current nuclear deterrent is scaled specifically to overcome the threat that we believed the Soviet Union posed in 1980. As we look to an unknown future over the course of this century, we have to decide what proportion of our defence spend and effort should go into this one part of our defence livery, and the opportunity cost of doing that.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we move to some form of cruise missile-based nuclear weapons system, that would be destabilising internationally and positively dangerous?

Sir Nick Harvey: I am waiting for the Trident alternatives review, which is being conducted by the Cabinet Office and is looking at exactly those sorts of issues. When it reports, I look forward to coming back and debating them with the hon. Gentleman. As a considered study of exactly these sorts of issues is nearing its conclusion at the moment, the time to debate those details will be when the report has been published.

I want to look at the pressures that will face Defence Ministers in the years when the large capital expenditure that I have described would have to be spent. In the same period of time, we will have to put the joint strike fighter aircraft on to the two new aircraft carriers and build the Type 26 frigate. Whatever the next generation of remotely piloted air systems and whoever we do that with, it will fall in the same time frame. Bearing in mind that HMS Ocean is due to leave service in 2018, any future generation of amphibious shipping will have to be paid for in exactly that time frame; and whatever we equip the Army with for the 21st century—it has been the poor relation in the equipment budget for many years—and bearing in mind how little seems to be left of the original future rapid effect system, as conceived by the previous Government, again, it will fall in that time frame. If we decide to give the nuclear deterrent a bye and think it has some magic claim on the money, an opportunity cost will have to be paid across the rest of our defence systems.

I listened to my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Sheryll Murray) talking quite rightly about the part that Plymouth plays in the nuclear deterrent, but I put it to her and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) that if we commit all our money to one system, the opportunity cost will be felt above all else by the Royal Navy. The Royal Navy might fight—and win—to keep the nuclear deterrent on its current scale, but the price will be paid in the scale of the conventional surface Navy, which, in my view, is already trying to do far too much with far too little.

The UK has a sensible range of military capabilities at the moment, and with that we can take part in international operations. We have global interests and ambitions, and uniquely we have the will to use military power when we need to in pursuit of those interests. Ours is still the fourth largest defence budget in the world. Our place on the top table does not depend on our being a nuclear power; we are there in our own right, and besides which any change to the line-up of the UN Security Council would require the UK's assent, which we could simply withhold.

We must make a contribution to disarmament. That is an obligation we have under the non-proliferation treaty. We must wait and see whether the Trident alternatives review can find another system that offers us a way of sustaining a credible deterrent. It would not have the same capability, but there might be a way of doing something at a lesser cost. We should keep an open mind about trying to do that.

3.56 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Devon (Sir Nick Harvey). I am glad that he did not repeat his assertion that the world would be a better place if my constituents were sacked and sent to the Bahamas with the money from the deterrent in their back pockets. It is also good to be back speaking here again for the first time since I banged my head. All will be fine, but if at any point, Mr Speaker, I look confused and ask what all these people are doing in my bedroom, please intervene and reassure me—no, I am not that bad.

The devastation of nuclear war would be an affront to nature itself, which is why I have said on many occasions that, if we could genuinely be confident that the UK disarming would make this horror less likely, that should come ahead of even the many thousands of jobs that the industry supports in my constituency and across the country. I am proud that the last Labour Government shifted Britain's nuclear policy for the first time towards the aim of a global zero, but we should advance non-proliferation in a way that will maintain the security of the UK and, most of all, in a way that will make a nuclear catastrophe less likely, not more so.

That is one reason why I am wary of a party that up until now has been grossly irresponsible on the question of nuclear weapons and has suddenly be given access to the levers of power. It is one thing to be a fringe concern, making up positions that sound good on the doorstep. "When money is tight", say the Liberal Democrats, "Let's have a mini-deterrent"—the nuclear-tipped cruise missiles on the Astute class submarines already being built in my constituency. "They would cost less", they say, "providing more money for schools and hospitals, and they would be much less destructive than those awful Trident missiles to which the main parties are wedded. Vote for us!"

If that policy becomes a genuine possibility that could be enacted by a party of government, it will be put under scrutiny in the run-up to an election and its fundamental weaknesses exposed. The apparent savings evaporate when considered against the enormous cost of procuring new missiles—probably without a cost subsidy from the Americans this time—building new warheads from scratch, making considerable adaptations

[John Woodcock]

to the Astutes and writing off the £3 billion that will already have been spent on the successor by then. When the operational capacity of this “mini-deterrent” is scrutinised, we will come up against the points that the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) made so adeptly in opening this debate. All in all, this option is not a winner.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is really delightful to see the hon. Gentleman back in his place. The problem with using cruise missiles is precisely that they are vulnerable. The whole point of deterrence is that there should be an invulnerable system. Cruise missiles are vulnerable, which destroys the concept.

John Woodcock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Most of all, such cruise missiles are indistinguishable on an enemy radar from conventional cruise missiles, raising the chilling prospect that in the confusion of battle, a conventional attack by the UK could trigger nuclear retaliation against British cities.

Sheryll Murray: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we took up this idea, we could see another tuition fees scenario?

John Woodcock: I certainly know what the hon. Lady means—I am reluctant to compare tuition fees to the ultimate deterrent, but in political terms she is absolutely right.

To those looking to the latest review into the future of the deterrent and hoping that a major—and needed—push on global non-proliferation could make it possible for the UK effectively to wait and see before committing to renew, I put two questions. First, is it really realistic to expect a breakthrough within the next few years in global security—involving not just the former Soviet Union and America, but the whole world—that would give us sufficient hope that a hostile nuclear power could not plausibly threaten the United Kingdom 20, 30 or 40 years hence? That is the judgment that we have to make now. Secondly, what would be the industrial and financial consequences of a further delay, on top of the already significant increase in cost caused by the coalition Government’s delay, which enabled them to kick the main gate decision on a successor into the next Parliament?

Industrially, we must think in terms of jobs now and over coming decades. Let us not forget that we are talking not just about 5,000 or 6,000 jobs in Barrow shipyard, critical to the regional economy though they are, but about the 4,000 jobs and rising in the nuclear submarine supply chain, stretching right across the country. We must also consider the UK’s prized capacity to manufacture submarines of any kind. We rightly say that, for security reasons, we should not procure from abroad, but if we leave another gap in production like the one in the 1990s—the Astute programme is still suffering from the attempt to recover from that—we could lose those highly honed skills from these shores for ever.

Of course we should always examine new evidence, but so far all credible evidence has pointed to the same place: that like-for-like renewal is the most effective—and

the most cost-effective—way of maintaining the UK’s minimum independent deterrent and that the decision to renew should be kept at arm’s length from our profound moral obligation to pursue a world free from the threat of nuclear war.

4.4 pm

Mr Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It is a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) back in his place. He put the case extremely well on behalf of Barrow-in-Furness for the current policy remaining in place and being renewed. I welcome the fact that we are having this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on securing it. We have been brothers in arms on defence, one way or another, for quite a long time. He has really distinguished himself on these issues, and I congratulate him on encouraging the Backbench Business Committee to hold this debate. His position is in the ascendancy and it speaks to his intellectual depth and courage that he is prepared to put his ideas to the test in the Chamber. I also want to congratulate the former Minister of State for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Sir Nick Harvey), on his contribution to starting, and initially leading, the review of the alternatives to Trident. We owe it to ourselves to think rather more deeply about this matter than we have done in the past.

It was interesting to hear the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman) explaining how the Labour party had moved to its present position. Those on the Opposition Front Bench are no longer allowed to think about this issue, because the politics of 1983 were so appallingly scarring. Labour Front-Benchers are now frozen in a position in which any sense of doubt about the continuation of the present policy would be seen as politically catastrophic, and they are not allowed to go there. The only expressions of doubt that we will hear today will come from the old stagers of the 1980s who fought and lost the battles on disarmament at the time. I believe that it was quite proper that they lost those arguments.

We are now in a completely new era, and we owe it to ourselves to review the policy properly, and as openly as we can. That review is now being carried out under the leadership of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and it will report to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, but I am concerned that there has been no undertaking to publish it, and that there will therefore be no opportunity for us to examine the costings.

Sir Nick Harvey: If my hon. Friend studies the coalition mid-term review document that was published last week, he will see that, for the first time, there is an explicit commitment to publish the review. I understand that the review will be concluded in March, and that publication will probably be in May.

Mr Blunt: I am delighted to be corrected on that point.

This is the hub of the issue. We are being invited to engage in an insurance policy that is going to last about 40 years and cost between 5% and 6% of our defence budget. Will that insurance policy ever be cashed in? My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) would probably suggest that it is being cashed in all the time, owing to the fact that it exists. In that sense, the deterrence is eternal.

We need to get into the minds of the likely decision makers who might attack British interests in a way that would engage the use of our deterrent. We also need to get into the minds of our leaders who might then have to contemplate the use of the deterrent in response. There has been a change in the debate on how states conduct these affairs. The question of whether it would be a matter for the International Criminal Court if a leader chose to eviscerate millions of wholly innocent people in pursuit of their state's policy is one that ought to engage us, particularly as we no longer live in a bipolar world consisting of one alliance taking a position against a competing ideology. The world has changed.

I do not pretend to have an answer to this question, but I want the House to have as much data as possible so that we can begin to make as informed a decision as possible. It is the position of the Government—and, I believe, of those on the Opposition Front Bench—that paying a premium of 5% to 6% of the defence budget for the 40 next years would be worth it because of what it would buy. Well, would 10% or 15% be worth it? How solid are the figures of 5% to 6%? Why should that cost be coming out of the defence budget, given the cost of the equipment that is going to the soldiers, sailors and airmen who are carrying out the other tasks that we ask them to undertake? Should the cost be found from outside the main defence vote?

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a compelling case. Given the importance of the deterrent, does he share my concern about what a potential yes vote to Scottish independence would mean, and does he share my hope that the Scottish people will see this as another reason for staying part of the United Kingdom?

Mr Blunt: It could work the other way. It could provide a reason why the Scottish people would vote to leave the United Kingdom, as they could then dispose of having to host the deterrent and of the threat of counter-measures for the people living immediately around the area.

I would like to be exposed to more data about the vulnerability of the future submarine systems. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) intervened to say that what was required of the system was that it be invulnerable. Well, I do not know how he can predict the efficacy of surveillance systems in 40 years' time, just as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex said that we have no idea what the international situation will be in 40 years' time. It is perfectly possible that satellite observations and surveillance of the sea would make it pretty straightforward to trace a submarine in 40 years' time. I do not know, but I would be grateful for the best data available so that we can test whether or not we will need to spend this eye-watering amount of money on something that will do what it says on the tin, to use a current phrase, in 40 years' time.

I believe that we are owed the results of the review instigated by the hon. Member for North Devon. This House needs to be informed about these questions. We need to understand where we are through a cost-benefit analysis of the replacement Vanguard submarine system with Trident missiles, which will mean getting the data on the re-engineering of the Trident missiles and the

new engines they might need during the course of their next deployment, alongside an understanding of issues around the use of tactical nuclear warheads on cruise missiles. In any scenario planning I did when I was engaged as a special adviser in defence and foreign affairs, the only conceivable situation I could see for using the missiles was for taking out pinpoint targets of rogue states or rogue terrorist groups equipped with missiles that had the capability to launch weapons of mass destruction at us—and for that we would want a small pinpoint weapon, not a strategic weapon that would wreak massive and unacceptable collateral damage in the process.

I am extremely grateful for the debate and for the review, and I think we should keep an open mind until we can reach a proper decision on this matter.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am looking to each of the two Front-Bench speakers to take no longer than 10 minutes—20 minutes in total—if we are to accommodate Back-Bench Members who wish to speak. I am afraid that for them, the time limit will have to be reduced to four minutes from now on. My apologies to colleagues, but I am keen to get people in and I know the Front Benchers will want to take account of that.

4.13 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to members of our armed forces and their families for the work they do. In the context of this debate, I particularly commend members of the Royal Navy who work on our independent nuclear deterrent. I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on securing this important debate about the cornerstone of our nation's security.

The security landscape today is both uncertain and unpredictable. New threats such as cyber-warfare and biological terrorism exist alongside the conventional threats. In response, we must have a broad, advanced equipment programme that enables us not only to detect, but to deter and tackle the whole spectrum of threats we face as a nation.

We on the Labour Benches are clear that an independent nuclear deterrent is in our national interest. It has been argued, and it has been repeated today, that our nuclear deterrent was a cold war legacy. It is correct that many of the old divisions of the cold war have gone, but they have been replaced with new uncertainties: the recent unrest in Pakistan, advanced missile testing in North Korea and the intractable problem of Iran. Although it is impossible to predict the future, the one thing that is certain is that it is unpredictable. All that shows how important it is for the United Kingdom to retain an independent nuclear deterrent.

In 2007, Parliament took the view—supported by the Labour Government of the day—that a submarine-based system with ballistic missiles provided for the minimum credible nuclear deterrent, and was the most-effective model to meet our strategic needs. It is also our stated objective to play an active and constructive role in international efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. There is no evidence that a unilateralist posture would advance that goal.

[Mr Kevan Jones]

The United Kingdom is a proud and prominent signatory to the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. That treaty has three pillars, through which we must view our nuclear deterrent: non-proliferation, disarmament, and facilitation of the peaceful use of nuclear technology. That is why I am proud that the last Labour Government reduced the size of the nuclear stockpile. We cut the number of operationally available warheads from 300 at the time of the 1998 strategic defence review to fewer than 160 by the time of the 2010 general election, reduced the number of warheads carried per submarine from 96 to 48, and withdrew the WE177 nuclear capability from service. I believe that it should be a cross-party priority for the UK to continue on that path towards nuclear disarmament, alongside our international allies.

It is essential for our decisions on the future of the deterrent to be based on evidence and on what is in our national interest rather than on any political-party interest. We are therefore committed to examining any new evidence rigorously in order to establish whether there are alternatives to the conclusions of the last review in 2006. That examination must feature two priorities, capability and cost: they must be our guiding principles. We want the UK to have the minimum credible deterrent, in line with our national security needs and our international obligations, and we want to ensure that we achieve maximum value for money. All options must be examined, and we look forward to close examination of the Government's review of alternatives. I consider that to be a responsible and rational approach.

While we must insist on rigorous policy-making, we fear that the review is an exercise in Liberal Democrat and Conservative party management rather than the management of our national interest. We question the validity of a review that has lasted more than two years, and whose conclusions the Prime Minister rejected before it even began.

The president of the Liberal Democrats says that he wants to make the review an election issue, so why is it being run from the Cabinet Office at the taxpayer's expense? Can it have any credibility, given that the Liberal Democrats opted out of ministerial responsibility for defence and foreign affairs, and given that the person in charge of the review, the right hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Danny Alexander) does not even have a pass allowing him to enter the MOD's main building?

The real test of the review, however, should be not whether it allows the Government parties to indulge in a strategy of differentiation, but whether it explores in sufficient detail and depth what is—as has already been explained—an inherently complex and technical subject. If it appears to promote an alternative as an end point in itself, it will have not just failed all those who seek a genuine debate, but punctured the Government's claim to have credibility on this vital issue.

There are a number of potential alternatives to the current nuclear deterrent, which I hope the review will explore. Let me briefly comment on each of them.

The first option is an air-based system. It was considered to be the most costly option of all in the 2006 review, requiring the procurement of new aircraft, a new missile and new operating bases. In addition, its visibility would

increase its vulnerability. The estimated cost of the second option—a land-based silo system—is double that of the current submarine-based system. It has also been questioned on strategic grounds, as it is immobile and unconcealable, and therefore vulnerable to attack. Any review would also need to address where the system would be located. I am not sure there would be many volunteers to have that based in their constituency. Thirdly, any consideration of a surface ship-based system would also need to cast aside doubts about vulnerability and detectability. Fourthly, the review will need to focus on a submarine-based system armed with nuclear-tipped cruise missiles. The costs of this option will need to be examined closely, including the cost of developing a new warhead independently from our US allies. Also, Astutes would have to be adapted or another platform would need to be procured, which could result in a lessening of our current hunter-killer capability. Concern has also been expressed that arming submarines with dual-use cruise missiles could prove escalatory during a crisis, as our enemies would not know whether the submarine was a conventional or nuclear-armed vessel.

International factors must also be considered, such as compliance with the nuclear test-ban treaty, the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and the USA's 2010 nuclear posture review. If we were to go down the cruise missile route, we would need more warheads in order to penetrate targets and it could be argued that that would break one of those treaties.

I do not have time to cover every detail, but we do need to have a meaningful discussion—a function today's debate is fulfilling. This is a delicate topic that sparks strong passions, even within parties. That is why an evidence-based approach free from political positioning is so important. We will consider the technical, military, security and financial issues, and look closely at all the details of the Government's alternatives review. For Opposition Members, the facts that support our national security needs will always be our focus.

4.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Philip Dunne): I welcome this opportunity to speak about such an important element of the nation's defence capability, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for securing this debate and for making so many cogent arguments in his speech. The House has not debated the need for a strategic deterrent for some time, and it is right that we do so.

I echo and welcome my hon. Friend's strong support for the Government's unwavering commitment to retain an operationally independent nuclear deterrent, based on Trident and operating on the basis of continuous at-sea posture. I also welcome the support of the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones).

As many Members are aware, our continuous at-sea deterrence patrols under Operation Relentless have been operating without pause since 1969. It is the UK's most enduring military operation. I pay tribute to the crews of our submarines and their families, and all the men and women, both military and civilian, whose support has been essential to this operation, and I thank them for their unwavering dedication.

Whether we like it or not, we live in a nuclear age, and have done so since the first atomic weapons were tested in July 1945. We cannot put back the clock and un-invent nuclear weapons. Most of us in this House are not, as was alleged by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), locked in the permafrost of the cold war, but we do recall the bipolar stand-off between the west and the Soviet Union. They were dangerous and often tense times, but in contrast to the uncertainties of the present, the cold war years now, almost paradoxically, appear to have been more stable, as we knew then who our adversary was. We are now living in a period of increasing threat of nuclear weapons proliferation. Other states, not all well disposed towards us or our allies, located in highly unstable regions are on the verge of owning these weapons. That makes the current era far less predictable. It is a sobering fact that, although our nuclear arsenal, like those of our allies and Russia, has reduced significantly since the early 1990s, the reductions have not encouraged states that are seeking a nuclear weapon capability to cease their attempts to cross the nuclear threshold.

In April 2009, President Obama said that “the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up.”

I see no reason to disagree with the President’s remarks. We live in a perilous world. North Korea has tested nuclear devices and ballistic missiles, in defiance of the international community, and it maintains a threatening stance towards its neighbours in north-east Asia. Iran is determined to continue producing highly enriched uranium, in excess of any conceivable non-military need, and it continues to develop a ballistic missile capability and maintains a hostile stance towards both the west and many of its immediate neighbours. The actions of those countries reinforce my view that Britain needs a nuclear deterrent to protect us from nuclear coercion, nuclear blackmail and nuclear attack.

NATO has been the bedrock of our defence and security since 1949. At a time when the United States—its main contributor—is shifting focus from the north Atlantic to the Pacific, a non-nuclear Britain would weaken an international organisation that makes a crucial contribution to global peace and security. Would the world be a better place with a weakened NATO—with a NATO that may become less certain of its role and purpose? I do not think it would.

Given those circumstances, it would be an act of supreme folly to abandon unilaterally the nuclear deterrent that has served us, and our allies, well for more than half a century. To disarm unilaterally would send entirely the wrong signal. It would undermine our credibility as a reliable partner and NATO’s credibility as an alliance. NATO is a nuclear alliance, and its recently agreed new strategic concept makes it clear that our nuclear forces, including those based in Scotland, contribute to its overall deterrence and security.

We share the vision of a world without nuclear weapons, but only if that is achieved through multilateral disarmament. We take the disarmament commitments of article VI of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty very seriously. We therefore fully support multilateral nuclear disarmament, when the conditions are right. That is a long-term process which will take many years, although we have taken a leading role in arranging and participating in P5 conferences since 2010. We have already reduced the size of our deterrent considerably since the end of

the cold war, and in the strategic defence and security review we committed to reducing it further, as has been identified by the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). It will decrease from a stockpile of about 300 warheads in the mid-1990s to no more than 180 by the mid-2020s. Under SDSR 10 we undertook to reduce the number of operationally available warheads to no more than 120 by the mid-2020s. That means that we already have probably the smallest arsenal of the P5 powers, and are the only P5 power to rely on a single delivery system. Our disarmament credentials are second to none, yet all this progress has not been matched by emerging nuclear states. It is simply wishful thinking that any further UK disarmament would be a catalyst for disarmament elsewhere.

It has sometimes been argued by hon. Members that we face new security threats in the 21st century for which the nuclear deterrent is not relevant, but nobody has ever claimed that nuclear weapons are an all-purpose deterrent. We have a wide range of capabilities to deal with the wide range of potential threats that we face.

The fact remains that we cannot pick and choose which threats we should face. Not every capability is suitable for every threat and the nuclear deterrent is the only secure way to deter nuclear threats. In making clear to potential adversaries that they cannot infringe our vital interests without risk and in providing reassurance to our allies, our deterrent helps prevent major war and provides a backdrop that enables us to pursue a foreign policy that seeks to enhance international trust and security and to promote conflict resolution.

The abandonment of the nuclear deterrent would deprive us of the means to counter the most extreme threats from adversaries armed with weapons of mass destruction. It would leave us vulnerable to blackmail, coercion and attack from those adversaries. For all those reasons, I wholeheartedly support the decision of the Government to maintain a continuous submarine-based deterrent and to replace the current Vanguard class submarines when they leave service in the late 2020s.

A continuous at-sea deterrent also has considerable diplomatic utility. Let us think of the impact, if we did not have continuous at-sea deterrence, of a decision the Prime Minister might have to make to provide an order to put an intermittent deterrent to sea. That act alone could exacerbate an already tense international situation. Operating the deterrent on an intermittent basis might well require additional conventional military assets to enable the deterrent to put to sea, assets that are not required in the routine of a continuous posture.

By being continuously at sea, the deterrent maximises our political freedom of manoeuvre in crisis. A submarine-launched ballistic missile system offers invulnerability, range and endurance. All promote the credibility of this ultimate safeguard for national security. It is a permanent factor for a potential aggressor.

Hon. Members have also charged that the renewal of the deterrent is an extravagant use of resources at a time of great financial stringency and fiscal uncertainty. The first duty of any Government is to ensure the security of the nation, its people and their vital interests. This Government do not and will not gamble with Britain’s national security. We recognise that people wish to be reassured that the money will be well spent and the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock)—it is a pleasure to see him in his place—rightly highlighted

[Mr Philip Dunne]

some of the reasons Trident is the most cost-effective delivery mechanism available within the necessary timescale. That is why the Government scrutinised the procurement programme for the successor to ensure value for money and will continue to submit it to rigorous scrutiny in the run-up to the main-gate investment decision in 2016. We are talking about maintaining a capability of service until the middle of the century and it is essential that we can protect the UK against future uncertainties that might arise 15 to 50 years from now. I challenge any advocate of unilateral disarmament to predict what threats we might face over that period.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Some time ago, I imposed a limit of four minutes on Back-Bench speeches. I am about to call the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown), and if all nine hon. Members who wish to speak are to get in, nearer to three minutes is what is required. I am in the hands of the House and I know that the House will try to help itself.

4.32 pm

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to make a very short contribution to the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) not only on having secured it, which is a triumph in itself, but on how he argued the case for Britain's independent nuclear submarine-based deterrent. It was the strongest series of arguments that I have heard made in one place for the renewal of the Trident platform. I do not agree with those arguments, but they were strongly made and the hon. Gentleman drew together all the different points that can be made.

Let me make two points back to the hon. Gentleman. First, we are purchasing something we cannot use, and secondly, we are doing it with money we have not got. They seem to me to be two pretty strong arguments to weigh in the balance. The hon. Member for North Devon (Sir Nick Harvey) referred to the cost and the impact on the defence budget. Frankly, we should think about the impact on the public finances more generally. We are in danger of sleepwalking into a commitment of some £80 billion to £100 billion, with a deployment cost of £1 billion a year, without properly discussing it in this place, so I congratulate the hon. Member for New Forest East on having secured this short discussion.

I ask all hon. Members in what conceivable circumstances in the world today they could envisage the United Kingdom taking the decision unilaterally to use nuclear weapons against another nation. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to envisage such circumstances. An independent nuclear deterrent does not address the security demands or the realities of international instability which the United Kingdom faces. This is not to argue that we do not face international threats in the 21st century. Of course we do. What I am arguing is that they are more complex and sophisticated and require a more intelligent response than a big 20th century bomb—a weapon of the cold war whose time, if it ever existed, has most certainly passed.

International terrorism is not combated or deterred by an independent deterrent. Trident does not counter the ever increasing number of cyber attacks on our

nation's digital infrastructure. It does not address political, socio-economic or environmental injustices that lead to global instability. These are the pressing issues that the United Kingdom faces and we hamper our ability to deal with them by focusing our defence priorities and spending on a cold war weapons system.

I am in favour of our membership of NATO. We make a strong contribution to the alliance and we should trust it and rely upon its possession collectively of a strategic deterrent, if there is an argument for the strategic deterrent at all.

In summary, this is a weapons system that we cannot use. The cost is disproportionate to the hard-to-identify benefits and it makes no sense in terms of our alliance with other friendly nations, of our international obligations or even as a response to the security threats faced by the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: A model of pithiness, which I know the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) will want to emulate or better.

4.36 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I shall be as quick as I can.

I was a cold war warrior, as was my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr Blunt), and I spent many of my early years in Germany with tactical nuclear weapons. I also studied nuclear deterrence at university and I came to the conclusion that tactical nuclear weapons were too incredible for us ever to use. I was delighted when we got rid of them. That left strategic nuclear weapons.

I believe that the strategic nuclear deterrent does deter, and for that reason we must keep it. It can work only if it is invulnerable. As far as we can tell, the most invulnerable system involves a submarine. That submarine is currently being renewed. I support the renewal of an independent nuclear deterrent because we have no idea what will happen in the future of our world, and when there is great risk I prefer to have an insurance policy that maintains the status quo.

4.37 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Reference was made earlier in the debate to the period of the Reagan-Gorbachev Administrations. General Secretary Gorbachev in the 1980s called for a nuclear-free world by 2000. Remember that? Of course, the Soviet Union ended and the world we live in, as many speakers have commented, is much more complicated now than it was at that time. None of us knows where we will be in 30 or 40 years, and the decisions that are to be taken make assumptions about a future that we cannot predict.

We have heard references in the debate also to the continuation of NATO. I am a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. I have serious doubts whether in the next 20 or 30 years the United States will give Europe a global commitment of extended deterrence in the way it did at the height of the cold war.

Nobody has so far mentioned China in the debate. China is modernising its military assets significantly. It has nuclear weapons. At some point this century it will

become a global power with projection all round the world, not just within its own coasts and the seas off its coasts.

If we are looking at the future of the world, I do not think any of us can be very confident about what the outcome will be. What we do know is that the non-proliferation regime is under serious threat, not just from countries such as North Korea, which have left the NPT, but from countries that are still within the NPT, such as Iran, and other countries that will follow any decision to weaponise a nuclear capability by the Iranians at some point. In 15 or 20 years' time, there could be 10, 15 or 20 more countries with nuclear weapons. The world that we are going into requires international action. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman) mentioned the Labour party's policy review in 1989. I was the secretary of that review, which changed our policy to deal with the realities that we were confronting at that time rather than the debate that had gone on theologically in the past.

We now need to make renewed efforts, and I wish the Minister and shadow Front Benchers would talk a little more about what role we can play with our nuclear weapons in facilitating new international disarmament negotiations, because they are not happening now. Despite President Obama's Prague speech in 2009, the vision of a nuclear-free world is blocked because the Russians are not interested so long as missile defence is on the agenda. There is the danger of a proliferation of warheads to overcome missile defence if it is ever deployed. I conclude there to give others a chance.

4.40 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), who has just made a powerful contribution to the debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for securing it. I congratulate the Minister on delivering a model speech, which in a short time went through all the key arguments that justify the Government's spending the money.

We need to lay more emphasis not just on how we might imagine the weapons system could be deployed but on the fact that it is in use every single day, shaping the global security environment that we enjoy today. It is no coincidence that the advent of nuclear weapons on the international scene has led to the longest period of peace among the superpowers and major powers of the world that we have ever seen.

War between super-states is now unthinkable because of nuclear weapons. That is rather a good thing and certainly an argument for our maintaining our inherited role of acting as a major democratic, friendly, benign, positive influence in global affairs, with our international role enhanced by nuclear weapons.

The issue is the sort of country that we are and that we want to continue to be. We are a country with global reach, global influence, global interests and the ability to enhance global security—not just for the world as a whole, but for the security of our own people.

Were we, irresponsibly, simply to dispose of our nuclear capability, we would be upsetting a balance that we may not even understand. We are down to fewer than 200 nuclear warheads. China, which has been

mentioned, is increasing its number of warheads pretty dramatically with two new intercontinental ballistic missile systems and a new submarine-based intercontinental ballistic missile system. Russia, with its thousands and thousands of warheads—far more than it could possibly want—is building new nuclear weapons systems and new nuclear submarines for the delivery of those systems. We are not living in a world that is disarming, despite the incredibly generous gestures that our country has made. The next move downwards is not for us, but for others. If others will not make those moves, we must continue to guarantee our security and that of our allies.

I end on one fundamental point. Much is being made of the cost of Trident. I respect the view of those who over the years have been proved wrong but nevertheless carry on with their campaign to disarm our nuclear weapons. However, nothing is less honest than the idea that there is some cheaper system that will maintain the deterrent effect of our nuclear weapons or that somehow our current weapons system is vastly overspecified because of the Moscow criterion, to which completely obscure and mad reference has been made. That has nothing to do with the capability that we deploy today. It is totally irrelevant and a means of spreading disinformation about the credibility of our system so that the Liberal Democrats can get rid of our nuclear weapons system.

The Liberal Democrats know that there is no cheaper system. Just how cheap is it? It represents 0.1% of GDP over the lifetime of the system. I challenge anybody to produce any defence expenditure that can produce so much global influence.

4.45 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I have three minutes to put the case for a peaceful, non-nuclear Scotland liberated from the menace of Trident.

When we secure the levers of power and we have the responsibility for defence, we will not have Trident in Scotland. That is not just the view of the Scottish National party but the desired will of the Scottish people. Opinion poll after opinion poll has found that the Scottish people do not want this menace. The Churches do not want it, the Scottish Trades Union Conference does not want it, and the overwhelming majority of Members of the Scottish Parliament do not want it, as they said when tested in a vote in 2007. Scotland is not going to have it—with independence we will shove it out of our country and it will not be in our waters.

Trident is emerging as an iconic issue in the Scottish independence referendum; in fact, it is probably one of the main issues. Is it not therefore sad and depressing that not one Labour Back Bencher has spoken in this debate? It took an hour to find one to come and inhabit those Benches. Is that not an absolute and utter disgrace?

Sheila Gilmore (Edinburgh East) (Lab) *rose*—

Pete Wishart: I cannot give way; the Whips told me not to.

This is not just about retaining these abhorrent weapons, as the UK is the only country in the world that is indulging in unilateral nuclear rearmament. The hon. Member for North Devon (Sir Nick Harvey) rightly pointed out that Trident will cost, over its lifetime,

[Pete Wishart]

£100 billion—an almost incomprehensible figure. It is a weapon designed for another age. It is designed to take on not the Bin Ladens of this world but the Brezhnevs. Yes, there are new threats in the world, as we are now seeing in Algeria and in Mali, but nothing would delight those insurgents more than our threatening them with nuclear weapons. While Trident is perhaps the least equipped weapon possible to deal with the challenges of the modern world, we are in the middle of a triple-dip recession. We are told that we have to ensure years and years of Tory austerity and that household incomes are going down month by month, yet we have to spend billions and billions of pounds on a weapon that we hope will never be used, and that is a moral abomination.

We will get rid of these weapons. An independent Scotland will make decisions that reflect Scotland's interests and values. We will use our share of the cost of Trident to create jobs that meet the defence, economic and public service priorities of an independent Scotland. Our percentage share of the cost of running Trident is £163 million per year. Let us imagine what we could do with that money in rebuilding our public services and creating the conventional defence force that Scotland needs. [Interruption.] Here we go—every time we get to our feet we are heckled by Scottish Labour Members, and this is another example. They just cannot keep quiet—it is so typical. [Interruption.] They are still at it. I do not know if the cameras can pick it up, but it is always the same in these debates.

The Scottish people have a great opportunity to rid themselves of this evil weapon: if they want Trident out, they can vote yes for Scottish independence. The case for Scottish independence is compelling, and being able to rid Scotland of these evil weapons of mass destruction just helps that case.

4.48 pm

Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con): I want to speak in support of continuous at-sea deterrence—CASD—and explain why it is still relevant and required. Those who disagree tend to mischaracterise the threat in terms of their assessment of the behaviours and future intentions of specific nation states, or underestimate the threat from hostile non-state organisations, or conclude that CASD is a redundant concept because there may be emerging threats that it cannot effectively deter. Such arguments often hinge on the premise that one or more of the necessary conditions for credible deterrence is missing, those conditions being that the aggressor we are seeking to deter has rational political leadership, that the behaviours to be deterred must be a genuine threat to the vital interests of the UK, and that there is a concept of use—an identifiable capability and a declared policy of intent. Opponents of CASD say that there will be no re-emergence of a major direct threat, otherwise known as Russia. They say that other hostile states, such as Iran, fail the rationality criterion to justify the retention of the deterrent, that CASD is of no use against a non-state terrorist organisation whose identity might be unknown and, even if it is known, that there may be no target against which to retaliate.

I say—this is at the heart of the issue—that it is not possible to predict with absolute certainty the intentions or future actions of countries such as North Korea, or what might happen if China, for example, fell under

the control of a malign regime. To dismiss Iran's foreign policy as irrational is also a mistake. It might be unpredictable and it is certainly obnoxious, but that is not the same as irrational. To reject the deterrent—which works in most scenarios—because it does not work in all scenarios is also illogical.

Finally, Russia's behaviour towards NATO is becoming increasingly aggressive. Last year, Russia's chief of general staff spoke openly about a first strike against US missile defence installations in Poland and Romania, and Putin shunned both the Chicago summit and the G8. Most commentators are pointing towards growing instability in Russia, a country that, we estimate, today has 12,000 warheads, 4,650 of which are active. We cannot dismiss the possibility of Russia being a real threat over the lifetime of the next generation of the deterrent.

That is the world we live in and it is the world we must prepare for when we renew our capabilities. If we reject CASD, we ought not to kid ourselves that it is not just the UK's status and influence that we would lose, or that we would successfully achieve our prime duty as parliamentarians and as a Government to protect the United Kingdom, including those who live in Scotland.

4.51 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am grateful to be able to speak in this debate, but sad that I have such a short time in which to do so.

I want to start by considering the overall concept of security and deterrents. I believe that we need a mix of tools for deterrence and security, rather than investing blind faith in voodoo defence based on a cold war weapon that cannot deter, but that certainly can obliterate all of us.

The greatest security threats that we face today are related to climate change and international terrorism. Those are things that nuclear weapons cannot help us with; rather, they deter and take resources away from addressing those issues.

When the leaders of our armed forces and security services balked at the Chancellor's plans to charge the Ministry of Defence the full cost of replacing Trident, they exposed their own lack of faith in the notion that nuclear weapons give us deterrence and security. In a letter to *The Times*, three of those leaders—Field Marshal Lord Bramall, General Lord Ramsbotham and General Sir Hugh Beach—said:

“Nuclear weapons have shown themselves to be completely useless as a deterrent to the threats and scale of violence we currently, or are likely to, face—particularly international terrorism; and the more you analyse them the more unusable they appear”.

If Trident really fulfilled the deterrence myths and claims that underpin the Government's case for spending billions on its replacement, those responsible for our security would surely consider it well worth the money, but they do not. They know full well that Trident is political vanity and irrelevant to our real security needs.

It is time we stopped calling Trident “the deterrent,” as if that were its identity. That was a public relations euphemism from the early days of the cold war. It was meant to cut off debate by making nuclear weapons sound as if they were safe and sensible, so it was made impossible to ask the real questions, such as: does the deterrent deter? If we ask that question, we will soon come to the conclusion that it is short-sighted and dangerous in the extreme for Britain to rely on a weapon

of mass destruction which, if launched, would put our own survival at serious risk, as well as that of many others.

If we are seriously to debate deterrence, let us do so honestly and recognise the complex relationship that requires us to understand the fears, threat perceptions, needs and values of others, and to communicate carefully and effectively. The best deterrence of all is to work with other nations to solve global threats such as fossil fuel-induced climate disruption, transnational trafficking in weapons, and the poverty and desperation that fuel hunger, conflict and violence cause around the world. Calling Trident “the deterrent” does not confer on it the capability to deter any more than calling a cat a dog would give the cat the ability to bark.

Secondly, I will touch briefly on the upcoming inter-governmental efforts to ban nuclear weapons. The Government of Norway, who have worked closely with the MOD and Atomic Weapons Establishment Aldermaston on projects to verify nuclear weapons, are hosting a major international conference in Oslo in early March, where the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons will be addressed by more than 100 Governments. I am pleased that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has told Norway that we will send a delegation to that important conference, but I plead with the Government to play a constructive role. As the focus is mainly on the humanitarian consequences of detonating nuclear weapons, I ask the Government what studies of nuclear weapons and their humanitarian effects they have undertaken that they will be sharing with their colleagues.

The expert studies on the short and longer-term effects of nuclear detonation are shocking. Let us consider the environmental, climate, agricultural and medical effects. If just a fraction of today’s nuclear arsenals were detonated, in what is termed a “limited nuclear war”, the studies point to climate disruption, widespread radioactivity and global famine. In other words, if the Trident weapons that are carried on just one British submarine were launched at Moscow and nearby cities, the effect would be a worldwide humanitarian disaster. That is immoral and obscene, and it should not be done.

4.55 pm

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on securing this debate.

I support maintaining a nuclear deterrent because it is the reason for our seat on the United Nations Security Council, it is the cement in our relationship with the United States of America, and it helps us to play a key part in NATO. This is an important debate. The nuclear licence is vital to my constituency. It is our stake in the ground and we must ensure that lots of work comes out of it. The Prime Minister has made it clear that he is very supportive of Plymouth remaining a strategic naval port. Some 25,000 people in my constituency and travel-to-work area are dependent on the defence industry for their jobs.

I want two things out of today’s debate. First, I want a commitment that the Labour party will not do a deal of any description with any potential coalition partner—whether the Liberal Democrats or any other party—on giving away the nuclear deterrent. Secondly, I do not want any more money to be spent in Scotland until it

has worked out whether it wants to be part of the United Kingdom. In that way, we can ensure that we hold on to our nuclear deterrent and send the simple message that Nelson’s sailors used to give as a toast: “Confusion to the enemy!”

4.57 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I will have to be very brief.

We must be clear that nuclear weapons are weapons of mass destruction and can only kill indiscriminately millions of civilians. We have enough nuclear capability in our 48-warhead submarines for a nuclear kill 384 times greater than that in Hiroshima in 1945—the only time when nuclear weapons have been used.

To replace the Trident system and procure new warheads would cost us £100 billion over 25 years. I dread to think that any Government in 2016, of whatever party, faced with all the social problems of this country—with the stress on housing, health, education, employment and infrastructure—would commit us to £100 billion-worth of weapons of mass destruction. That would achieve precisely what? It does not protect our position as a member of the Security Council of the United Nations. It does not give us moral authority around the world. It has the opposite effect. I ask the House this question: when issues are raised in the world’s councils, who has greater moral authority—South Africa, which gave up its nuclear weapons specifically to ensure that there was an African nuclear-free zone, or Britain, which seeks to rearm unilaterally in order, apparently, to protect its status around the world? It does not defend us. It does not protect us. It does nothing but cost us a great deal of money.

I aspire to live in a nuclear-free world. It has been achieved in Latin America. It has been achieved in Africa. It has been achieved in central Asia. It has been achieved in Antarctica. There is real hope that, with the assistance of the Finnish Government and the UN, we will eventually achieve a nuclear weapons-free middle east, when Iran and Israel are brought together to the conference table to bring that great aspiration about. We live in a time when we can take a huge step forward. Our country can take a huge step forward by saying, “We do not see weapons of mass destruction as a defence; we see them as a threat and a danger. Accordingly, we will not replace the Trident nuclear weapons system, but will instead support the nuclear non-proliferation treaty to ensure that that happy day comes about.”

The MPs around the world who have signed the Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament network statement to bring about nuclear weapons-free zones are to be commended. World opinion is against nuclear weapons, which is also to be commended.

I finish with a point echoing that made by my Friend—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is there any way we can get a Minister from the Department for Education to the Chamber to explain the extraordinary attack in *The Spectator* blog this afternoon on the former Minister with responsibility for children, the hon. Member for

[Kevin Brennan]

East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), by senior sources at the Department, who have described him, among other things, as

“a lazy incompetent narcissist obsessed only with self-promotion”?

I have informed him that I am raising this matter on a point of order. Should not the Secretary of State come to the House to explain whether that vicious attack is his view of his hon. Friend and erstwhile ministerial colleague?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): The very short answer is no, I cannot. That is not a point of order—I think the hon. Gentleman knows that. A point of order has to be a matter for this Chamber, but he has his point on the record, and I am afraid he will have to be satisfied with that.

Jeremy Corbyn: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sorry to intervene on a point of order, but we have just had a good and interesting debate on nuclear weapons, and the time obviously had to be reduced. Some hon. Members did not get in and others withdrew from the debate because they were not going to do so. Could we invite the Backbench Business Committee to look favourably on having another debate on the subject in the foreseeable future, because there is far greater parliamentary interest than was anticipated when the debate was called for by the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and the number of hon. Members who supported him?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Corbyn, I think you know that that is not a point of order either, particularly seeing as the Backbench Business Committee's determination of business in the House is not a matter for the Chair. I am sure that when the Committee reads *Hansard*, it will take his remarks as an early bid, particularly if he has greater support for such a debate.

Mike Gapes: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Given that the Government will publish—at least internally—and consider their review on the alternatives to Trident, perhaps the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who is in his place, will give the House a commitment that we will have the chance to debate the review in this House very soon.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Well, Mr Gapes, perhaps the Minister could do that, but I do not think he will. That is not a point of order. I would like to make progress with business, because I am sure there are not any other relevant or pertinent points of order to take this afternoon.

Street Lighting (Residential Areas)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Mr Syms.*)

5.2 pm

Andy Sawford (Corby) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise in Parliament an issue of great importance to people in my constituency of Corby and in East Northamptonshire. The earliest street lights were used by Greek and Roman civilizations. They were used in Egypt more than a thousand years ago. They were common in the UK by the time wax candles turned to electric candles. Electricity transformed the efficiency and effectiveness of street lighting, which for well over 100 years has illuminated our towns and cities. From the Romans to the Victorians to today, street lights have been a civilising force in our communities. They help us to move about more safely, whether on foot or cycle, or in our cars or on public transport. They help us to be safer from crime, whether that is crime on the person, vehicle crime or burglary. In short, they are essential to our safety and security.

Street lights give us a greater sense of well-being; they give us more confidence as darkness falls; and they help us to go about our business, whether going to or returning from work, including those who work shifts. They help us when we are going to a social club, a pub, a church group, a gym, or when we are visiting family or friends or popping to the shops. Most of us, most of the time, for most of our lives, have taken street lighting for granted, but suddenly, in many communities in the UK, it is not there.

Let us imagine the iconic scene, if you will Madam Deputy Speaker, of Gene Kelly under a lamp post. He is about to sing in the rain, except that he cannot because he cannot see to dance and we cannot see to watch him—his council has switched the street lights off. So it has been in Corby and East Northamptonshire for the past 18 months. A darkness has fallen across our towns and villages; a dark age, rolling back time, as though we live in a time before civilisation, before electricity, and before councils and local government and all the good that they can do to make our places liveable and our communities strong, safe and vibrant.

In 2011, Northamptonshire county council turned off more than 30,000 street lights. The off switch was pressed on approximately half the lights in the county. The general pattern was every other light. In some places, more were off. There was little consultation, precious little listening, and even less consideration of the implications, both generally for people's safety and well-being and specifically about those highways, alleyways and pathways where the arbitrary turning off of street lights would have a particular impact.

Two reasons were given. The first was to save money in the face of drastic cuts from central Government. Let me say that I do not support that scale and pace of the introduction of those cuts to our councils. They have been hugely damaging to our communities and our economy, all part of an approach that has plunged the UK into a second recession and stopped the economy growing. Perhaps the Minister and I can leave that debate to another day and accept that councils need to make efficiencies. They need to ensure that their budgets are balanced.

Local authorities have many important responsibilities and one is street lighting, which at pre-cuts levels in Northamptonshire cost just 0.08% of the council's budget. I will put that more simply and in language that I, and everybody I represent, can understand: it costs each household £1.14 a year to have decent street lighting. That is a very small price to pay for adequate street lighting, and I think all the residents in Corby and East Northamptonshire would see that as good value for money. The council tells us that its cuts had an environmental rationale—to replace the lights with more energy-efficient, cost-efficient and effective lighting. I think that is right in principle, but let us look at what it did in practice.

The council should have had a plan for switching over to newer, more energy-efficient lighting that did not involve turning off half the lights first for several years. It should have had a plan that did not involve putting people's safety at risk. A nine-year-old boy who was taken to hospital after being hit by a car at a pedestrian crossing on Oakley road in Corby. The street lights had been turned off near a pedestrian crossing. The county council stated that because the road has a 40 mph limit

"this meant it required fewer street lights to be left on".

The boy was treated and he recovered. The council did not take responsibility, but the lights were turned back on. It should not take an accident before the council acts properly and sensibly in the public interest.

When the streetlights were first turned off people said, "There will be an accident there before long", and so it proved: prangs and bumps, trips and falls. However, for many more, the fear of accidents prevented them from going out at all, as did the fear of crime. When the county council started turning off lights, more than 1,200 people signed up to the "Corby Street Lights" Facebook page. Across Northamptonshire, people protested. Stefano in Raunds pressed the council to turn street lights back on in Primrose Hill, where elderly residents feel unsafe. Sonia, a mum of three in Corby, told the *Northamptonshire Telegraph*, which is represented in the Gallery today for this debate:

"The main thing is a complete lack of consultation. I have been a victim of crime myself. I have had wing mirrors kicked off and car windows broken. Come winter it is going to be dark at 4.30 pm and it is like imposing a curfew if you are old or infirm."

Those people in my constituency are supported in their concerns and first-hand experiences by much evidence that the Minister will no doubt be aware of. A systematic review by the Home Office on the effects of street lighting on crime found that

"improved street lighting led to significant reductions in crime...with an overall reduction in recorded crime of 20 per cent".

in towns across the UK. I think that the Minister will agree that something that results in a 20% reduction in crime is a good thing.

The Institute of Lighting Engineers believes that

"the many benefits street lighting provides the community far outweigh the limited returns that can be achieved by switching off or removing lighting".

Cambridge criminologist David Farrington said that

"improved street lighting should continue to be used to prevent crime in public areas. It has few negative effects and clear benefits for law-abiding citizens".

Paul Watters, head of policy at the AA, said that turning off the street lights

"may save money in terms of energy, but then you have to look at the cost in terms of security, safety and accidents and it may actually be more".

Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): I am a fellow Northamptonshire MP. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there has been considerable consultation on this matter? The county council has indicated that it consulted via its YouChoose website, comment cards available at libraries, tweeting, e-mails and contacting the local press and other representative organisations. Does he also agree that a lot of the measures that the county council has had to take are because of the profligate spending of the previous Labour Government?

Andy Sawford: I do not agree. If that is the best that the hon. Gentleman has to offer on his constituents' concerns about street lighting, I am very disappointed in him. The things he describes are an example of what people in my constituency call "nonsultation"—when people consult but do not listen. That is what happened in this case.

Let me tell the hon. Gentleman—[*Interruption.*] Let me tell him, if he will listen, about the case of Gary Tompkins, a 25-year-old man in Milton Keynes who died after being hit by a car. Let me tell him what the coroner said—the Minister will be interested in this, too. The coroner found that turning off of the road lights contributed to this death, and that

"no formal risk assessment was carried out by the council before the decision was made".

I am not aware of a proper risk assessment taking place in Northamptonshire, and that is why people such as the nine-year-old child in my constituency were injured.

In Dorset, street lights are being turned back on following a spate of arson attacks on cars. Through these cases, in my constituency and many others, a pattern emerges of councils playing "street light roulette". They over-eagerly turn them off without sufficient risk assessment and proper consultation, someone gets hurt or property gets damaged and the council looks again at the street lights and starts to turn them back on. That is no way to ensure public safety.

The Highway Electrical Association will publish research next month that, following a comprehensive review of switch-offs across the UK, will recommend the following approach for councils to take. First, it will recommend that the local authority should carry out a detailed risk analysis of lighting provision and particular areas of concern, and secondly that the local authority should then determine what can be done with the existing lighting. Lots of councils around the country have looked at whether they can switch off, or dim, the lights at certain times of the night, and they have looked at areas where the lighting is less important to public safety. I think we can all support that as a sensible approach.

Thirdly, the report will advise that local authorities, before taking any action, should consult properly with residents and other stakeholders. Those three steps, which were not taken in Northamptonshire, seem to make good sense. I hope that the Minister will agree and endorse this approach. That is one positive outcome that could come from this Adjournment debate.

[*Andy Sawford*]

If Northamptonshire county council had acted properly, I would not have heard from Mr Robson, who contacted me to tell me that

“when he and his co-workers finish after midnight, they face walking along Willowbrook road. Part of the path here goes into the woods, where all the lights have been turned off”.

Neither would I have heard from Ann Leonard, the secretary of the Corby co-operative women’s guild, who tells me that the group leave all together and help each other into their cars, because they are afraid. Darren Melville told me that he has had to stop going on his regular runs. Not only did he find it difficult to see where he was stepping, which led to a couple of falls, but he no longer felt safe.

Many right hon. and hon. Members, particularly on the Opposition Benches, know how Mr Melville feels, because they too have walked the streets of my constituency. During the by-election, our teams used head torches to get around, and on doorstep after doorstep they met residents who raised concerns about street lights. That is why it is one of my top priorities and remains so.

On Saturday, I was out campaigning in Irthlingborough in my constituency. I met residents on Meadow walk, a road of old people’s bungalows, where all the lights are out. People there not only feel afraid to go out, but feel trapped and afraid in their homes. This becomes even more pertinent in the depths of winter, and not just because of the long nights and short days. My constituent Matthew Reay said to me that

“it is particularly worrying that lights are off during a period in which most paths and roads are covered in ice”.

Northamptonshire county council has not properly addressed the concerns. People have been told, “You need a security alarm”, or, “Get yourself a torch”, when they have complained to the council about specific problems. There is a better way. Sheffield city council has shown a better way of investing in white LED lights, which are better and brighter, and Salford city council has done the same. Looking ahead, I want to see the street lights being turned back on in Corby and investment in more energy and cost-efficient lighting, but we need our street lighting now, in the interest of public safety, and we need a programme of replacement that does not compromise that safety as we go forward.

Perhaps even in the dimly lit corners of Eland House, where the Parliamentary Under-Secretary toils, some thought and consideration is being given to the proper way in which councils should conduct their business. I ask him to use the power of the Dispatch Box this evening and the power of his pen tomorrow to prevail on Northamptonshire county council to light properly the towns and villages of Northamptonshire once again.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Stephen Hammond): I congratulate the hon. Member for Corby (Andy Sawford) on securing this evening’s debate. I am pleased to be responding to what I believe is his first Adjournment debate since becoming a Member of Parliament last November, on what is clearly a subject of great importance to him. I also congratulate him on his speech. He started with a number of clearly well researched historical facts. He could have easily

answered the question “What have the Romans ever done for us?”, although I was greatly pleased that he resisted the temptation to sing and dance.

It might be helpful if I begin by saying a few words about the background on street lighting in residential areas more generally before I talk about the specifics of the hon. Gentleman’s case. Street lighting is often taken for granted, but it is an important service for local communities. Most residential street lighting in England is the responsibility of local highway authorities. Local authorities, such as Northamptonshire county council, which covers his constituency, have a duty under section 41 of the Highways Act 1980 to maintain the public highways in their charge. That duty covers street lighting. That said, authorities do not have a duty to light any particular parts of their networks, but where lighting has been provided, the authority has a duty to maintain it. It is therefore for each local highway authority to decide what level of service it wishes its street lighting network to deliver. It is also up to the authority to decide on the appropriate technical solution to ensure suitable lighting of its highways, as well as deciding what level of funding is appropriate to maintain its lighting networks.

I am aware that many councils are now taking a proactive approach, looking at a number of ways to reduce their overall funding programmes. Some councils are thinking innovatively about how to deliver their services, and that thought is indeed being inspired by the Ministers at Eland House. I, of course, toil at Great Minister House as opposed to Eland House, which is where the Department for Communities and Local Government resides. I know that my hon. Friends who reside at Eland House are encouraging local authorities up and down the country to look at new and innovative ways of delivering services to their communities.

As the hon. Gentleman said, many authorities are looking at ways of delivering their street lighting commitments. Many are implementing a policy of dimming street lights between midnight and 6 am or even turning them off during those hours. Some, such as Northamptonshire county council, have taken further steps and decided to turn some lights off completely. Let me be clear: central Government have no powers to override local decisions in these matters, nor should it be the job of bureaucrats or Ministers in Whitehall to dictate to local government how it determines local solutions.

Let me turn to Northamptonshire’s street lighting policy. I am aware that when considering its budgets—in light of the challenge to everybody after the profligate spending of the last Labour Administration—the county council’s cabinet considered a proposal in 2010 to make £1 million of savings by changing the county’s street lighting policy. As part of that exercise, including the consultation, the council made it clear that its intention was not just to make savings, but to respond to a growing recognition in many parts of Northamptonshire that the pre-switch-off policy had been somewhat over-engineered and was not as energy efficient as it could be. The county council also stated that it wanted to reconsider street lighting as part of its overall environmental agenda.

Michael Ellis: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not only a question of energy efficiency and energy savings, but—as usual—of hearing the Labour Opposition reject any form of savings without offering any ideas on how they would save instead, in times of austerity that are due largely to Labour overspending for many years?

Stephen Hammond: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend.

I shall touch on a solution that Northamptonshire county council offered to Corby in a moment. The council decided in January 2011 that it should find an additional £1 million saving from its street lighting, bringing the total amount of savings that it wished to achieve to some £2 million per annum. The council undertook a consultation on its proposals, which was promoted in the local press as well as on the council's website. I know that many of the hon. Gentleman's constituents had concerns about that process, and felt that it was not sufficiently widespread.

The council commenced switching off lights in April 2011, and the process continued through to August of that year. Out of the council's asset of 67,000 street lights, almost 30,000 were switched off. In Corby, 3,681 of the 8,275 lights have now been switched off. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, in response to some of the criticisms of the consultation process, a further consultation was carried out with county councillors.

Andy Sawford: I am slightly confused by the Minister's approach. He says that it is not his position to direct the local authority, but I have not asked him to do that; I am a localist. I have, however, asked him to advise me on the Government's position, in the light of all the research that I have highlighted, including that of the Home Office. He seems to be reading from a brief from the county council, which can well speak for itself, rather than setting out the Government's position on this matter.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman has made his speech, and if he will forgive me, I am now setting out the Government's overall responsibility and the liabilities and duties of county councils. I am setting out the situation, as he did, and if he will wait a few minutes longer, I will make some comments on the Government's response. It is important to set out the case, so that we can understand it and so that we can all agree on what is actually happening. That is what I am attempting to do.

I have just made the point that, in response to criticism, the county council carried out a further consultation. The chief executives of all of the county's borough and district councils were sent letters and invited to meetings on street policy. Written responses were received from three borough councils in Northamptonshire, including Corby, which asked that the lights be put back on in crime or accident hot spots. I think that the hon. Gentleman would acknowledge that the county council has addressed some of those concerns, and that changes were made to the policy as a result, specifically in regard to the reduction of repair times, as well as to switching the lights back on.

During the switch-off period across Northamptonshire, the public were invited to submit appeals if they felt that the proposed policy was not being correctly applied. In theory, that appeal period was due to end in September 2011, but in practice it was extended until December 2012. During that period, the council considered some 4,000 appeals and, as a result, nearly 1,000 street lights were turned back on.

I understand that the leader of Northamptonshire county council met the leader of Corby borough council—I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was present at

that meeting—to try to come to some arrangement on the street lights in Corby, and offered to switch back on any lights that the borough council wanted to be kept on, so long as the borough provided a 50% funding contribution. I also understand that, although the borough council has made a certain amount of noise, it has not yet taken up that offer.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): My constituents were affected in the same way as Corby residents, but a number of parishes across my constituency pay for their own street lighting. I have thus received almost as many letters complaining that people were having to pay twice for street lighting across the county as I did from those complaining about switching off the lights in inappropriate places.

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point.

Before I leave Northamptonshire, it is worth saying—and it is important to point out—that the reduced energy usage that the change in policy will have yielded by the end of March 2013 is expected to be approximately 10,500 tonnes of carbon saving, and there will be annual savings in excess of 5,000 tonnes in the future.

Andy Sawford: Given that the Minister has chosen to focus many of his remarks on local research about how Corby council responded, let me remind him that my constituency covers two local authorities. I have mentioned examples in Raunds and Irthlingborough in another local authority. In the interests of balance, those people might be interested to know the Minister's views on how their local authority responded, the number of lights turned off in their areas, and so forth. That would be very interesting.

Stephen Hammond: I am happy to come back to the hon. Gentleman with the numbers, but my point is that Corby did respond and it was made an offer. [*Interruption.*] I am saying that Corby did respond to the leader of the county council, who then made an offer to respond to Corby council's demands. So far, Corby council has not responded.

Let me say a few words about the Government's policy on street lighting. It is, of course, right that local authorities, not central Government, consider—in the interests of cost-saving and the environment—whether lighting can be sensibly dimmed or switched off, consistent with proper safety assessments. We are aware that a number of local authorities around the country have commenced similar lighting projects to deliver energy savings and carbon usage reductions. Guidance produced by the Institution of Lighting Professionals is available for any local authority that wants to adopt such a scheme. We are aware that a number of local authorities are taking the decision, following traffic incidents, to switch some lights back to an all-night operation at certain locations, as the hon. Gentleman said. It is, as I have said, the duty of the local authority to ensure that street lighting is maintained if it has chosen to provide it.

The hon. Gentleman raises perfectly reasonable concerns about possible increases in crime. That is understandable, and the reduction of street lighting might cause some people to question their safety and security. However,

[*Stephen Hammond*]

evidence to date from authorities up and down the country that have adopted switching-off policies between midnight and 6 am, or have switched off lights permanently, shows no relationship at the moment between reduced street lighting and increases in crime levels. That has been backed up by a number of police authorities, which have made statements to confirm that crime levels have not increased since councils adopted the policy of switching off lights between midnight and 6 am.

The Department is aware of work undertaken last year by Warwickshire county council, which contacted 30 local authorities to see whether there was any measurable impact on crime or road safety. The evidence is not conclusive, but from the monitoring undertaken by the county council and by these authorities so far, no significant increases in either crime levels or road accidents have been reported. There will be individual cases, and I offer my sympathy to the young gentleman who was knocked down, but nationally recognised research papers, including Home Office research, are similarly inconclusive on this point.

The Government would, of course, advise that any authority should work closely with the emergency services, community safety and other key partners when considering the street-lighting needs of local people. We also advise local authorities to monitor the impacts following implementation of any street-lighting changes and to ensure they have provision for reversing any of the changes, should the need arise.

So, in conclusion, remote monitoring, dimming, trimming and switching off of street lights can play an important part in reducing energy costs, light pollution and carbon emissions. That is clearly a matter for local authorities.

I listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman said. He made a powerful case on behalf of his constituents, and I note the concerns that were expressed. I suggest that he should continue to raise them directly with the county council.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 17 January 2013

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Tax (Developing Countries)

[*Relevant documents: Tax in Developing Countries: Increasing Resources for Development, Fourth Report of the International Development Committee, HC 130, and the Government Response, HC 708.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—(*Nicky Morgan.*)

1.30 pm

Sir Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): The Select Committee on International Development is extremely grateful for the opportunity to debate two of our reports. The first is on tax in developing countries, and the second is on Afghanistan. We think both issues are important, although they are obviously completely different in their scope.

The Committee has long recognised that when British taxpayers put substantial resources into supporting developing countries, it is important that those countries raise their own tax base so that we are effectively working in partnership to develop their economies and services. Of course we recognise that the tax base in poor countries is inevitably low, and that the last thing that many people on very low incomes need is to be harried for tax. Nevertheless, almost every country has a variety of ways in which money can legitimately and properly be raised from different aspects of its economy. I will first mention the internal issues affecting developing countries and the role that the UK Government can play in addressing them. Members of our Committee often hear as a mark of frustration that in many developing countries, willingness to pay tax in the sector of the population who have the capacity to do so is rather low. It is difficult to set a good example if Presidents, Prime Ministers, MPs and leading business people make little or, in some cases, absolutely no contribution to their own Exchequer. Before we consider the international dimension, it is worth putting on record that the Committee says, right at the start, that we should ensure that people who can pay tax in their home countries do so. Performance is variable; I am not suggesting that all countries are the same or equally bad.

Of course, many non-governmental organisations and campaigners focus on tax paid by national and international corporations. I will certainly come to that, and it is extremely important, but equality of treatment seems relevant. If we are to say, as we should and must, that national and international corporations operating in developing countries should pay their full share of tax, it is helpful if, for example, the local directors of those companies also pay their share of tax, and that the approach is seen to be equitable.

Having said that, I want to consider the issues affecting the tax paid by corporations operating internationally, and to make it clear to the House that although we examined tax in developing countries worldwide, we took Zambia as our case study because we felt that it had a growing and diverse tax base, with which we could perhaps test what could be achieved. We had a good visit to Zambia, which I will discuss a little later.

We made numerous recommendations in our report. The Government did not readily accept all of them, but they did accept some, and there are some that we hope they will work on. Indeed, developments in our own domestic circumstances in recent weeks have sharpened the debate and perhaps given the British Government pause to think that some of our recommendations are just as relevant to the UK as to poorer developing countries.

We recommended that the Government introduce legislation, similar to the American Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act, that would require tax authorities automatically to exchange information regarding UK citizens and corporations. The Government did not accept that, saying that there were difficulties—although the US seems to have managed it—but I think that more recently they have softened their line a little.

A number of our recommendations were designed to improve information exchange and transparency. The problem for all tax authorities is that if they do not have basic information about what individuals or companies are earning, it is pretty difficult to tax them fairly or at all. The classic practice for international companies is to move their earnings around to where they can secure the lowest taxation impact, or none. A lot of that might be legitimate, in that international corporations have international transactions that are not really attributable anywhere, although they should be taxed somewhere.

However, when serious, very identifiable economic activity is plainly taking place in an economic jurisdiction but little or no tax is being paid, something is obviously not right. When we engaged with the Zambian authorities, particularly about the taxation of their minerals and especially their copper industry, we got into the nitty-gritty of that. The copper industry in Zambia has operated for about 70 years. It dates back to colonial times and has been under different ownership; at one point it was owned by the state Government of Zambia, who frankly did not make a very good fist of it and ended up losing money on the copper mines. The timing was not good, and the operational management was probably not good either, so the mines were subsequently returned to private ownership.

That has been a good thing for Zambia. Copper prices have risen, the tax base has risen and taxes are being paid, which is making a significant contribution, but there is a degree of frustration and unhappiness. The Zambian authorities feel that the full amount of tax that could or should be paid on the basis of the economic activity within Zambia is not being paid, mostly due to the practice of transfer pricing. Exploring the debate reinforced our view that transparency of information is key to getting the tax base right.

If I give an example of the extreme view, it is easy to understand the issue. If a company had a very large productive mine—an obviously profitable commodity—in a developing country but paid a substantial amount of tax, albeit on a low rate on earnings, in the Cayman Islands, most people would understand that the Cayman Islands is not rich in the minerals on which the company was being taxed, and that that was therefore an inappropriate redistribution of the accounts. It becomes more complicated, of course, when companies have many operating bases and lots of different activities, but the principle is nevertheless the same. We are trying to ensure that companies pay a fair tax on the activities

[*Sir Malcolm Bruce*]

that they conduct in any given geographical area to the Government of that country. That is corporation or related tax.

Zambia has gone through numerous different ways of doing things. It had an excess profits tax and a variable corporation tax. We discovered that the problem with all those approaches was that the licences under which different mines operated had been issued at different times by different Governments on different terms, all allowing companies to claim tax breaks, loss offsetting and so on, which enabled them to pay little or no tax. The resolution to that situation, which has not been entirely popular with the industry but which we understand and broadly support, has been to move to a system of royalties, set at 6% of turnover based on the company's declared tonnages, knowledge of the ore quality and the prices set per day on the London Metal Exchange. The net result of that for those companies that complain is that it is something that is easy for the Zambian authorities to administer. It might be rough justice, but companies must come up with a credible alternative, which they have not done, if they argue that there is a better way of doing it. It looks as though that is likely to lead to a steadily rising revenue base for Zambia. I conclude from that that, on the whole, Zambia emerges as a pretty good case study.

On the copper belt and copper production, we had an extremely good exchange with Ministers and civil servants in Lusaka about the rest of the tax base. There is a ready recognition that as Zambia's economy grows, it should not be totally reliant on copper for its public finances; it wants instead to expand the tax base. It was looking for advice and help on how to do that. In other words, what can they tax efficiently, fairly and not counter-productively and how far down the earnings scale is it sensible to go? Clearly, it is neither administratively sensible nor economically wise to tax people at the very bottom. That made us realise that there was scope for the UK Government to do a lot more in partnership with developing countries to enable them to improve their revenue-collecting capacity. I can quote examples—good and bad—where that is happening. I have already mentioned Zambia. We have evidence that similar success has been achieved in Tanzania where the dependence on UK and other forms of development assistance is falling as a proportion of its overall budget because its tax base is rising. It is absolutely true of Rwanda, which is spectacularly successful in this area.

Interestingly, the head of the revenue authority in Burundi, who was previously in Rwanda and who is a British national with a strong Irish connection, has demonstrated a singular capacity to raise the revenue base in Burundi, which is a very poor country. For the Minister's benefit, let me say in passing that it remains stubbornly the view of the Committee that Burundi should continue to receive UK aid. Whether or not the decision to close down the programme was misjudged, the case for continuing it is strong, and we will continue to make it.

The Committee took evidence this morning on Pakistan, where the position is depressingly unsuccessful. I should probably first mention Afghanistan, which we will be debating later. Thanks largely, but not exclusively, to the support of the UK Government, the tax base in

Afghanistan has risen from almost nothing—3%—to 11% in the last few years, and the potential to raise it further is clearly evident. I can promise my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), who was a bit disgruntled because she did not hear a lot of the presentation we were given, that the content was good in that it showed how much the revenue base had risen, how much more potential there was and how valuable the UK Government support was. All of that was achieved by officials working inside the Ministry to help get a handle on the figures.

The revenue collection in Pakistan is under 10%, which is awful for a well established country. Although it is classified as a lower-middle income country, it is, none the less, a middle income country. Bluntly, the figures are such because the leaders of Pakistan do not believe that taxes are a club they wish to join. Some 80% of MPs and the President pay nothing, so the will to collect tax is almost non-existent. Obviously, the Committee must deliberate further, and we will take more evidence from the Secretary of State next week and then produce a report. We are likely to say that Pakistan cannot go on expecting to receive unconditionally the bounty of the international community while not addressing the issue. That is simply not morally acceptable, economically sensible or fair. I can predict that we will come out with something fairly hard on that issue.

My point is that collection can be improved, and where that is done, it makes a difference. Where it is not being done, it needs to be done. Much more transparency is needed and information should be published on a country-by-country basis. I urge the Prime Minister, through my hon. Friend the Minister, whom I am delighted to see in her position and whose response I look forward to hearing, to look into the matter. What has happened in the UK in the past few months has possibly sharpened the focus of the Government. We will be chairing the G8 and, in that context, we are told that taxation will be a central issue. However, I suggest to the Government that while it is understandable that such an issue is driven by a degree of public anger against companies such as Amazon and Starbucks—Starbucks has been shamed into changing its stance on this—it should be recognised that if it is a problem for us, it is a much bigger problem for very poor countries, which might have a very limited amount of economic activity that is controlled and owned by overseas companies. I urge the Government to ensure that in the process of trying to raise the commitment to get an international agreement on tax, the interests of poor and developing countries are given special attention.

It has been recognised that, at a time of recession when Governments are clearly struggling with deficits, the knowledge that tax, which could or should accrue to a country's Exchequer, is not doing so perhaps causes more anger than it would in normal times. Of course it is right that companies that are operating within our jurisdiction should pay their fair share of taxes. Perhaps it is because we are hurting that developing countries will benefit from a policy initiative that might not otherwise have taken off. We should try to get an international agreement that all countries will ensure a standard of accounting that makes all the relevant information clearly available in the public domain so that revenue authorities can fairly assess where tax should accrue and where it is liable.

In Zambia, we were told that quite a lot of information is available, but it is not quite as easily available to the ordinary Zambian. It is very easily available to any sophisticated westerner with a credit card, but a person with no access to computers or to credit and who does not understand the system has a very small chance of finding such information even though it is available to them. We need to improve that and make information more accessible.

We hope the Government will take on board our recommendations and think about them a little more. We agree, I think, on the capacity to do more. We have suggested that the Government consider a more proactive partnership with our own Revenue and Customs. Where appropriate, of course it should be collecting our taxes, but, where we can, we should second people or support the Revenue to work alongside revenue authorities in developing countries to build up their capacity for tax. It is in the interests of donors, the people in the country, and the international community to ensure that that happens. We hope and understand that the Government are actively considering that matter, but it would be good to hear from the Minister what progress is being made.

The issue of tax has clearly caught the imagination of some of the NGOs, who are making 2013 a big year for tax justice. I am not here to be the mouthpiece of Christian Aid or the NGO consortium, but I am happy to record their views. As it happens, a number of our constituents were visited by the Christian Aid bus over the summer. It certainly rolled up in my constituency—I wonder why! I had a good meeting with both local activists and senior NGO members, who very much welcomed our report. Perhaps not surprisingly, they focused very sharply on the corporate issues that I have been discussing. However, I said that they should not just target the international economic players; it was really important that they also joined the campaign to ensure that rich elites in developing countries accept their responsibilities, because the interconnection between the two is inescapable.

Christian Aid has said that it wants to tackle the issue, that it wants the Government to tackle the issue and that it wants to shine a light on it. It highlights information that may or may not be true, but the figures that are given are huge. It says that as much as £13 trillion of potential taxes are locked up and “hidden in tax havens”. Whether that is true or not—£13 trillion is an awful lot of money, so even if the true figure is half or just a fraction of that, it is significant.

Again, I do not put too much credence on the figures per se, but Christian Aid also talks about a figure of \$160 billion annually that developing countries are losing in tax, which is far, far more than the entire flow of overseas development assistance to those countries. I am not suggesting that to solve that problem we can cut the development budget, but clearly there is not much point in handing out development aid if we are not getting access to the resources that should be credited to the countries concerned, which are entitled to them.

To conclude on this report on tax, I will talk about two simple things—certainly one of them is simple and the other is not as difficult as it perhaps has appeared before—that the Government could and should do. Actually, the Government are doing the first thing, and I just want to hear that they are doing more of it. That

is making raising the tax base one of the key components of our bilateral programmes, particularly where we are engaged in-country, and putting real resource alongside the Governments that we are working with, both to get those Governments to show the political will to raise taxes and to give them the capacity—through revenue collection—to secure the revenue. The second thing is to be prepared to take a lead, I guess, and for the UK to be more transparent and to demonstrate, by example, that we can be more open. Certainly, we must also encourage international agreement to get as much transparency as possible.

I mentioned the subject of minerals earlier when I discussed Zambia. There was one particular issue that was raised with us that the Government did not reply to directly in responding to our report, which is membership of the extractive industries transparency initiative. The EITI was actually a UK Government idea; effectively, it was Tony Blair’s idea. It is a good idea, and the initiative has been signed up to by many countries, including developing countries, but it has not been signed up to by the UK. We understand that the argument against our signing is that it was not considered that the UK was mineral-rich. Well, I represent a constituency in the north-east of Scotland and I think that we are quite mineral-rich still, actually. Mineral extraction may not be a huge proportion of our GDP, but in absolute terms minerals are not an insignificant resource for us. However, that is almost beside the point, Mr Gale—Sir Roger. I beg your pardon. It happens to me all the time, and it happens to you too.

I ask the Government to seriously consider signing up to the initiative, because it would demonstrate that we are serious about the issue too. If the argument against our signing is that we do not have a huge mineral base, then it should not be very difficult for us to comply. As I say, however, the Government kind of avoided answering that particular question on the EITI. I do not know whether my hon. Friend the Minister is in a capacity to commit the Government to do something; if she is not, I hope that she will report our Committee’s view that signing up would be a good step for the Government to take.

With that, Sir Roger, I must say that I am grateful to the House for letting us have this opportunity to debate the issue. I genuinely commend the report. I think that it is about a very important part of what our development relationship with countries should be. We have made good progress, but there is a lot more that we can do.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Thank you very much, Sir Malcolm. I think it is one-all—I owe you an apology as well.

I also apologise to Members for the fact that I had not really grasped the implications of there being two debates this afternoon with no time separation between them. I now propose to deal with that issue, and to explain what I think we will try to achieve.

There is no time limit on this first debate, but obviously there is a limit on the totality of time available in Westminster Hall today; the sitting must end at 4.30 pm. So it really is up to hon. Members to decide how they wish to split that time. I propose to call Mr Burden, Mrs Latham, Mr Stunell and Mr Lefroy, and then the Opposition Front Bencher and the Minister. I will then allow, as I think is traditional, a couple of minutes at

[*Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair)*]

the end if the Chair of the Committee wishes to wrap up the first part of the debate. However, we will treat this as two separate debates.

I suggest at this stage that although we do not know how we will run for time, the Opposition Front Bencher and the Minister might consider taking about 10 minutes each, if that is adequate.

I hope that is clear.

1.54 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Sir Roger. As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and I will address another knight to say that it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce), who is the Chair of our Committee.

The report that we are debating now is, as all our reports have been so far, the product of a cross-party consensus. There is a huge amount of cross-party agreement on the Select Committee about the importance of, and the issues raised by, the subject of this report—tax in developing countries.

A few months ago, Birmingham was one of the cities and towns that were visited by the Christian Aid bus for tax justice, and I was pleased to join a number of local faith leaders, activists, local NGOs and others in welcoming it. It was good to see people from the constituency there as well. They were concerned that, as the Chair of our Committee has already mentioned, Christian Aid estimates that there could be up to \$160 billion annually in taxes that developing countries arguably should be receiving but are not. Whether or not that figure is precisely right, the money involved is big. In short it can mean the difference between children going to school or not, hospitals and clinics being built or not, and jobs and opportunities being created or not.

There are all sorts of reasons for those missing tax billions, and all sorts of issues raised by them. However, if we are going to tackle this issue, transparency is absolutely the key to doing so; the Committee was also united in that respect. If there are companies that are playing off financial rules and prices in one country against those in another, there is a problem if we do not know about that situation and we will not be able to tackle the issue. If we then “stir in” the use of tax havens, in which NGOs have estimated that up to \$13 trillion is stored, we are talking about big, big money.

In relation to tax havens, some people say, and it has been put to our Committee, that they can be an efficient use of money, to ensure that money that is raised can then be used and moved around productively to create jobs and opportunities, and in some cases to boost services, in developing countries. That is okay, but when tax havens are a means of avoiding obligations it is a very different thing indeed.

In just a little while, I will say something about global rules and especially about the need for transparency. Before I do so, however, I will say a word or two about the context, which the Chair of our Committee has already referred to. It is really important that the development that takes place is sustainable.

I am fully behind the UK’s commitment—it is a cross-party commitment—to stick to the 0.7% target on aid; as I say, I am fully behind it. However, in the long

term the future of development will become, and should become, less and less about aid, and more and more about ensuring that developing countries have the means and the ability to sustain economies of their own. That must mean that there are tax systems and tax laws that work. In addition, it certainly means that, as the Chair of our Committee said, the leadership of those countries themselves accept an obligation to pay tax—the evidence from Pakistan in that regard is very concerning—and it also means that they need assistance. The UK has been active, and I welcome the Government’s contribution to this, in giving assistance to develop tax systems and so on, providing the kind of capacity-building and technical assistance that can be so very important.

However, we cannot avoid the fact that it is important that those countries still receive the tax that should be morally due to them. That should be an important matter not only for people who are interested in development, such as everyone in Westminster Hall today, but also for some of the media commentators and critics of the 0.7% target. That is because, when it comes down to it, if people are aid-sceptics then it has to be even more important for them that they should be tax justice enthusiasts if the problems of this world are going to be addressed. The issue is important to developing countries, but as the Chair of our Committee said, it is also important for us domestically. Tax dodging by major companies not only depletes developing countries’ resources but has an impact here.

Our report, which is some months old now, was welcomed by the NGO community—by those interested in development. I do not think that I am letting any secret out of the bag, though, by saying that on hearing that the International Development Committee had produced a report, many people across the country probably did not rush to open it up and read it—it passed a lot of them by. The debate on tax justice and morality, however, has been transformed, as the Chair of our Committee mentioned, by the recent high-profile cases of Starbucks, Amazon and others. All credit to the Public Accounts Committee and its Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Margaret Hodge), for bringing the issue so firmly into the public focus and highlighting that this is the tip of a very large iceberg of creative accounting in the multinational corporate world, which is less than creative as far as the public good is concerned, in the UK and in the developing world.

None of us likes to pay tax, and approaches to taxation and tax policy divide parties, but there is now greater recognition than I ever remember that taxation holds society together, globally as well as in the UK, regardless of any differences between parties on tax-raising mechanisms—on what works and what does not. The consensus that a tax system that works has to be in place, and that the corporate great and good have an obligation under such a system that is equal to that of ordinary citizens, is greater than I can remember it being for a long time.

Against that background, I am a little disappointed that the Government did not go a bit further in accepting some of our recommendations. Given that the climate surrounding the matter has changed a lot since the report was published, I hope that over the coming months the Government will review some of their responses

to the report, particularly when the Prime Minister himself has said that taxation should be a major focus of the forthcoming G8.

I have a few questions for the Minister, and I hope that she will be able to help us with them today. The first is about automatic information exchange. Our Committee recommended that it would be useful for the UK to adopt something like the system in the United States, where there is the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act. The Government have said no to that so far, stating that it would not work. That is a point of view, but I have difficulty marrying it with the Government's now saying that something like that would be a good idea in relation to Crown dependencies and overseas territories. If that sort of thing can be done with them—and I would welcome that—why is it so difficult to do it more widely?

Regarding what works, the Committee recommended country-by-country reporting. This is not rocket science. It is multinational companies reporting, on a country-by-country basis, the names of all the companies belonging to them in each country, along with their financial performance and tax liability, the costs and net book value of their fixed assets and the details of their gross and net assets in each country. That is a really important starting point for getting transparency that works. The Government say that they do not consider that possible either, but I do not follow their logic. They seem to be saying that, at European Union level, they support the mandatory reporting of most of those kinds of things in relation to the extractive industries and forestry, and I agree with that, but why, therefore, can they not go that little bit further and do what our Committee recommended? I just do not understand the Government's logic here. Can the Minister explain it? Unless we have that kind of information flowing through on a country-by-country basis, how in practical terms will we ever know what is going on with transfer pricing?

My third question is about something that the Chair of the Committee mentioned. The extractive industries transparency initiative is a good thing, as is the fact that the Government welcome the strategy review that is taking place, but would we not have a bit more credibility if we said that we were prepared to join the initiative ourselves, particularly as it was our idea in the first place?

My fourth question is about co-ordination in Government. Taxation is, rightly, normally the province of the Treasury, but we know from the fact that this debate is happening—that we have produced our report and the Government's response has come in—that it is also something in which the Department for International Development has a big role. However, it is not always clear to me, and to many others, how far different Departments are in step with each other and how much co-ordination and discussion goes on. Will the Minister comment on the extent and, without breaching any confidences, the nature of any discussions that have taken place between DFID and the Treasury about the draft Finance Bill? As far as DFID policy is concerned, has there been any response to the requests—from a lot of places now, in the UK and elsewhere—for provisions to be included in our domestic tax legislation that would assist developing countries to collect taxes?

My fifth question, which is also on Government co-ordination, is: how far, across Government, is there engagement with the wider community? Draft Finance

Bills and tax systems and so on can seem dry, but the public interest is now greater than ever. Is the Minister prepared to consider or, even better, to commit to some kind of cross-Whitehall consultation with civil society and outside tax experts on proposals for the G8 in relation to tax?

My final question is about clarity. The Committee, along with a number of people outside, have been saying that there needs to be a Minister with responsibility for tax and development in a clearer way than has existed so far. The Government have been fairly silent on whether our recommendations on that matter are a good idea or not such a good idea, so I ask the Minister, would that be a good idea? If the answer is no, what is the alternative, if we are to provide greater clarity across Government on tax and development?

I place on record my thanks to my colleagues and everyone else involved with the Committee for their work. The report has been warmly received outside this place. We were a bit ahead of the game in highlighting the issue's importance. Some of what we said in the report has been borne out by events since publication, so I hope the Government will go a little further by responding more positively to some of the specific recommendations than they did in their original response.

2.10 pm

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Roger.

I am pleased to speak in this debate on the report on tax in developing countries published by the Select Committee on International Development. It is difficult for us to lecture other countries when we do not have our own house in order. I am pleased that the Chancellor is considering how he might tax companies that are not paying their fair share of tax here because, like developing countries, we need tax to address our deficit if we are to continue—and we will continue—to fund international development and many other things. I will be pleased when the Chancellor of the Exchequer returns to tell the House of Commons exactly how he will do that, because it is important. I completely support my two colleagues who spoke before me, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden).

I will focus on the part of the report on the role of the extractive industries transparency initiative, which was mentioned by both my colleagues. I am particularly interested in that topic, on which I have tabled written parliamentary questions, and next month I will be visiting a coal mine in South Africa with the Industry and Parliament Trust. I was going to go to a diamond mine, but I have been downgraded, although there will be no problem with free gifts at the end of the visit.

I currently chair the extractive industries transparency initiative group, which is currently an informal body, but I am hoping for it to become an all-party group very shortly as I have just found a final member. At a meeting of the group before Christmas, our guest speaker was the chair of the EITI, the former Secretary of State for International Development, the right hon. Clare Short, who provided a valuable insight into the EITI's worthwhile work.

[Pauline Latham]

The establishment of the EITI was a massive step forward, and I pay tribute to the previous Labour Government for taking the lead in founding the initiative. The underlying principle of the EITI is that Governments disclose the amounts they receive from corporations in the extractive sectors, including payments of taxes, signature bonuses and royalties, and corporations operating in participating countries make a corresponding disclosure of the payments they make to the respective Governments. An EITI report for the relevant country is then published, reconciling the amounts paid by corporations with the amounts received by the Government. Any discrepancy between the two amounts may indicate that revenues are falling into the hands of corrupt officials, which is not unusual in many of the countries we talk about in the international development sector. The methods used are an extremely effective way of identifying possible corruption, and ensuring that the two figures correspond is one way in which people in participating countries are able to call their Governments to account.

There are two stages of EITI accreditation: EITI candidate status and EITI-compliant status. There are 14 countries with compliant status, although one of those, Yemen, is currently suspended, and 21 countries with candidate status.

The EITI has a robust yet flexible methodology—the EITI standard—that ensures a global standard is maintained throughout the implementing countries. The EITI board and international secretariat are the guardians of that methodology. Implementation, however, is the responsibility of individual countries. The EITI standard, in a nutshell, is a globally developed standard that promotes revenue transparency at local level. The EITI rules establish the methodology that countries must follow to become fully compliant with the EITI.

As much as I am a big supporter of the EITI, however, I believe that more than a decade since its establishment—and a productive first decade it has been—the EITI needs to go further in its transparency work. As the report advocates in its recommendations, the time has come for the EITI to publish contracts between mining companies and Governments. The “Publish What You Pay” campaign suggests that such publication would help to expose any contracts that are patently disadvantageous to the country concerned. We only have to look at many countries in Africa to realise that they are mineral-rich, but money is not going back into those countries for Governments to invest for the benefit of their people, not just the higher echelons in society. It is important that such publication goes ahead.

Sir Malcolm Bruce: My hon. Friend is making a valuable contribution with her important speech, but does she acknowledge that, prior to the emergence of the EITI, we had situations, such as in Angola, where BP, to its credit, wanted to publish information on the taxes it paid and was basically told by the corrupt Minister who was pocketing those taxes that if BP did so, it would be thrown out of the country and not be allowed to continue its activities? The EITI has done an awful lot to prevent such things, thereby exposing those countries and Governments that will not sign up.

Pauline Latham: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Some companies do want to do the right thing by publishing information so that people in those countries know how much money is going to the Government that could be invested in health, education, women’s rights and the whole gamut of things that we try to promote through our international development money. It is important that EITI goes further.

The thing that disappoints me, and has obviously disappointed my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield, is that although we were the founders of the EITI, we are not a member. The report states:

“If the Government genuinely hopes to encourage more developing countries to sign up for EITI, it must be willing to lead by example.”

As with the tax we are not collecting, we must sign up to the initiative.

Recommendation 11 suggests that the UK should become a member and that the EITI should request the publication of contracts. The Department for International Development has responded by saying it “partially agrees,” and I am therefore partially pleased, but I urge the Government to re-examine their position on that recommendation. Rather like the tax that the Chancellor has not been collecting from companies in this country, we must lead by example by getting our own house in order before we tell anyone else how to run their country—not that we should be telling other people how to run their country. We should assist countries by giving them best practice, which is an important point for Britain to lead in the world.

I hope the report will make a real difference to the economies of developing countries, because it is one of the most important reports since I became a member of the Committee.

2.18 pm

Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am delighted to take part in this debate. I have been away from the real world for the past two and a half years, but I have now returned, which gives me an opportunity to join in with some of these things that have wider significance.

Before the last general election, I spent an interesting and helpful year on the Select Committee on International Development. I remember a number of reports from that time, but two seem relevant to the report before us. One was “Aid Under Pressure”, which considered the pressures of the worldwide downturn and climate change. That report stated that development needs in the third world are as pressing now as they ever have been, and that there are significant problems that must be confronted. The second relevant report was on urbanisation, which documented the fact that we are now at the tipping point where half the world’s population lives in urban areas. We live not in an agricultural world, but an urban one. In many cases, that means that there are far more small-scale enterprises with productive outputs, with the possibility of their raising revenue for public services. The challenges of doing that are immense, because so many of those enterprises are informal and the land that they are on is often held informally. I remember visiting Nigeria and looking at a DFID project to facilitate the registration of land rights. Property cannot be taxed if the owner is not known. A business cannot

be made to pay tax on anything if its existence is not known. The report is a logical follow-through on that, considering the next steps that need to happen.

In so far as establishing my credentials goes, I should say that I, too, met the Christian Aid bus when it came to my constituency. Perhaps hon. Members present who did not meet the bus should draw that to our attention!

Successive UK Governments should take pride in the achievements of the UK in supporting and promoting international development and in the aid targets we have set ourselves and are now, under this Government, achieving. But as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) said eloquently, not all our constituents think we are on the right track. They are critical of many aspects of our aid programme. It is therefore important not only that we assert the reasons for having an international development programme, but that we require countries that we are helping to have systems of governance, public administration and taxation that are robust enough to support development in their own right, as far as they can. This document's recommendations seem to point in the right direction. I will make some points about that in a moment.

All this has to be underpinned by a much wider understanding inside the UK about why it is important to support international development. There is a moral case—many people, perhaps including those on the Christian Aid bus, would put that well at the front as the best reason—but we must recognise that for many of our constituents the moral case is ambiguous at best and, at a time when our economy and public services are under pressure, it is not self-evident in every respect.

We need to make the utilitarian argument as well. If we want less worldwide conflict and migration and we want growth in UK trade and more exports and jobs, we need a peaceful, well-developed world. It is in the UK's interests to support that and to encourage it to happen.

Of course, those who would criticise the international aid programme would always centre on the criticism that says that it is all wasted and that corruption and, as this report documents, evasion mean that the people there are not doing all they can to help themselves. I go strongly on the moral case, but I always think it is important to say to my constituents that there is an essential utilitarian case for aid as well.

This document goes some way to showing that you can have your cake and eat it. Part of the aid and development programme is about helping countries stand on their own feet and showing how our aid and development programme, and the UK's policies, can contribute to that desirable aim of having free-standing, self-supporting third world countries that can prosper without the need for subventions from this country or others.

The report contains 16 recommendations. The Government have accepted seven, partially accepted six and disagreed—they do not say “rejected”, which would be too abrupt—with three. Seven yeses, six maybes and three noes. Not all of the 16 recommendations are of equal significance or importance in terms of getting us in the right direction. I am delighted that the Government have accepted seven. Having looked at the recommendations and the Government's responses, there is nothing that I need to comment on. However, I am sorry about the other nine recommendations and I want to spend a little bit of time picking out one or two of those.

On the partial agreement on getting sound, transparent tax regimes, recommendation 4 states that the Treasury should be pressing Crown dependencies to meet those standards. Clearly, what is good enough for the United Kingdom ought to be good enough for our Crown dependencies as well. The Government's somewhat wishy-washy response about whether they thought it was a good thing, an achievable thing or anything to do with them was a little bit disappointing. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister, whom I also welcome to her role, will be a little bit more robust than the Government have been in their formal response and will say that this transparency question is important.

The Government say that they do not want to go any further than the global forum concept, but that does not seem sufficient. They have described it as not being the most fruitful way forward. I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister to tell us what is the most fruitful way forward and how the British Government intend to adopt that, instead of the Committee's recommendation. Obviously, if the recommendation is being rejected because the Government want to go further, I am with them on that. But it is a good idea for them to spell that out to us more solidly.

The Government disagree with recommendation 6, relating to the UK getting something comparable to the US Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act, saying that they are

“fully committed to tackling tax evasion and”

see

“transparency and information exchange as key tools but”

do not think that this is an appropriate means to achieve it. There is some wording that I am almost certain the Minister did not put in—it sounds as though Treasury civil servants added it—saying that that Act

“has created significant difficulties for the US”.

Perhaps the Minister could spell out what those significant difficulties are. The US does not seem to think that it has significant difficulties. It is fine to turn down the best machine tool we have because we think that the blade is a bit blunt, but if the people using the tool find that it is working perfectly well, we should have an independent assessment of that or a reassessment by the Government.

The Government response says:

“The aim of this overall approach is to develop a comprehensive network of tax information exchange agreements which will enable the UK”—

Government—

“and others to gain access”.

It seems as though they are offering to do everything that does not do anything, and not getting down to the nitty-gritty of what will make a difference. The Committee came up with a valuable, practical and operational way of doing it, which the United States Government are putting in place. It is for this Government to say more distinctly what they intend to do instead, not simply that they do not think that that is appropriate to UK circumstances.

Recommendation 10 is about ministerial responsibility. My hon. Friend the Minister and I, until fairly recently, had some shared experience of ministerial responsibility. I tempt her to agree that the time has come to set up yet another of those inter-ministerial groups, which draws

[Andrew Stunell]

together people from different Departments to consider in the round and with professional support exactly how the Government can do things. Unless I am very much mistaken, my hon. Friend has a piece of paper in front of her stating that the Government are always joined up, they always work together and nothing ever drops between the gaps. I entirely support her interpretation of events, but a minor reinforcement of the process by the setting up of an inter-ministerial group could be a further helpful step in the right direction.

Recommendation 13 relates to CDC, which has had what might be called a chequered media profile, and I remember some discussions from when I was on the International Development Committee, as well as the media comment. It is disappointing that the Government have not sought to turn CDC into a much more outward-looking and ethical institution. It ought to be a transparency exemplar when promoting commercial aid and development projects in different countries. There ought to be no question of stuff not being automatically available. Indeed, the Government response is in partial agreement:

“CDC is committed to obtaining further improvements in tax transparency and disclosure, but this will take time.”

Basically, implementation of the Committee’s recommendation would result in CDC overall doing less, not more investment in poorer countries. Paradoxically, however, the response goes on to state that the CDC will continue

“to ensure...fair and full payment of taxes by its investee companies to the countries in which they are based.”

That is fine, but the problem that the Government seem to be claiming is inhibiting their adoption of the Committee recommendation is that they do not want to put the companies at a commercial disadvantage by making them more transparent in their tax affairs, and yet they go on to say that they will ensure that those taxes are paid.

For a company that is supported or invested in by CDC and that is performing in such a country, to pay all its taxes as it should would put it at a commercial disadvantage to every other company in that country, which would not be paying its taxes. The disadvantage is in whether it has paid the tax and not in whether it tells people that the tax is paid. The Government have somewhat confused themselves, and I would like them to convert their partial agreement into full agreement with recommendation 13. We have a particular piece of kit—CDC—that is in British Government hands and ownership, so it should be used as the absolute paradigm of good behaviour and best practice in promoting investment.

I hope that gives a flavour of how I believe the Government should respond, but I also want to make a point to do with the lobbying—the presentation—by my good friends in Christian Aid and the consortium; it relates to the £160 billion. No one, and I am sure that the Government do not make this mistake, should imagine that the £160 billion is floating around, waiting to be used for development in third-world countries. If the money comes from somewhere, it will presumably come from the profits of the companies—some would say no bad thing—but if it comes from those profits, the

companies would be less profitable, which itself has implications. I am afraid, although it is not necessarily a zero-sum game, it is certainly not a £160-billion-sum game, and we need to be realistic about that. [Interruption.] With the embarrassing noises going on in the background, I draw my remarks to a close.

2.34 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I congratulate the Chair of the International Development Committee, the right hon. Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce), on opening the debate. I commend the work of the Committee members on this important report and its insights into and contribution to the subject of tax in developing countries. The Opposition very much welcome the nature of the report and its hard-hitting recommendations. Alongside the recommendations already adopted by the Government, we hope that the Minister and her colleagues will look hard and closely at the others discussed by hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), which have the potential to make a significant contribution if furthered by the UK Government.

Government Members and my hon. Friend have highlighted in the debate and through their work in the Committee and elsewhere that tax and public finance are the backbone of governance, state-building and effectiveness in any society. They are a vital component of public accountability and democracy. If the international community can do one thing to transform positively the politics and governance of developing countries, enabling them to become self-sufficient, it is to support efforts to collect the correct tax revenue and to ensure that it is spent properly, free from corruption.

The right hon. Member for Gordon mentioned a number of examples of progress being made thanks to investment over a number of years by DFID and others. Countries such as Rwanda and Tanzania, among others, give us signs of hope about how much progress can be made if we make the right investments and help with capacity building, supporting those countries to make the transformative changes to build their states and systems so as to be able to generate the kind of revenues to which they are entitled but which are currently being lost. As made clear by the Committee, we can therefore genuinely look forward to the opportunity for developing countries to be much less dependent on aid, which is surely in the best interests of the countries concerned, as well as of those countries contributing to the aid budget. It would not mean that developing countries will not need our support, but it would mean that they become more independent and self-sufficient, which is exactly what people in those countries want. Our duty is to ensure that we make the contribution and the changes, and to show the leadership required to enable that to happen.

A legitimate and accountable system for tax revenue is therefore critical to alleviating poverty, which my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield highlighted eloquently in his speech. He also spoke highly of the contributions of campaigning organisations such as Christian Aid, and I want to mention the campaign efforts of ActionAid, which has done a great deal of work with political parties across the board and with the Committee.

The report points out that in excess of \$13 trillion may be hidden in tax havens, and that the estimated cost to developing countries per annum is likely to be around £160 billion, a figure far exceeding the global aid budget. Imagine what could be achieved if that money was available to deal with global poverty.

I want to focus on a number of themes, some of which have already been discussed. I shall pick out three key recommendations of the Committee. I want to discuss controlled foreign companies and the Government's response to the Committee's recommendation of UK candidation of the extractive industries transparency initiative. Hon. Members have raised both issues, but I have a few questions. The third area is the Government's response to the Committee's recommendation on the Commonwealth Development Corporation.

The report addresses the Government's relaxation of their anti-tax-haven law—the controlled foreign companies rules. As my hon. Friend said, the Prime Minister demanded bold steps from his fellow G8 leaders when the UK took over its presidency. He pledged that the UK chairmanship would, among other things, focus on tackling tax dodging. However, the current reforms to CFC rules do not meet the Government's rhetoric. Although we appreciate the need to reform those rules to provide certainty and an attractive climate for businesses based in the UK, there are, as the report and hon. Members here today pointed out, real concerns among Members of Parliament and organisations that campaign on the issue that that will lead to a setback and damage the prospect of developing countries being able to raise the sort of revenue that they have raised in the past.

Action Aid said of the changes that

“a significant deterrent that discourages UK-based companies from shifting profits from developing countries to tax havens”

will be lost, and estimates that reforms may cost developing countries as much as £4 billion. If that is true, as many have indicated is likely, it is a scandal that the Government will preside over the change, and shameful that they will not consider the matter and take on board the Committee's recommendation to carry out the impact assessment. That recommendation was also made by my party during discussion of the 2012 Finance Bill when an amendment was tabled to ask the Government to reconsider.

Will the Minister work with her colleagues in the Treasury and consider the matter again? As hon. Members have said today, the climate is right, and the opportunity exists—the British public are becoming increasingly aware of the dangers and immorality of tax avoidance as well as tax evasion—for the Minister to work with her colleagues to ensure that the change does not damage prospects for people in developing countries, and that the loss of revenue does not happen. The sum is £4 billion, although the Government dispute that, but even if it is less it is a significant sum, which could make a difference to some of the poorest people in some of the poorest countries in the world.

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) raised the important issue of the EITI, and I want to reiterate her point. Given the leadership role taken by the former Labour Secretary of State, Clare Short, and others—the British Government are recognised as having achieved this important development—it is right and it is time that the Government signed up to the EITI.

We would show not only that we were the initiator, but that successive Governments have led by example, and this seems to be an opportune time to do so. Will the Minister work with her colleagues to reconsider the recommendation, and move from disagreeing to agreeing?

The right hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell) referred to a key recommendation on CDCs, and it is clear that there are inconsistencies in what the Government are saying. Surely it is more appropriate and sensible to put serious weight behind transparency, and this is an important way in which to do so. Will the Minister say whether the Government will reconsider? The issue is tied in with country-by-country reporting by multinationals, not only in the extractive industries, but multinationals generally. Many are increasingly under public scrutiny for some of their actions, which people believe are unethical, and are attempting to improve their behaviour. The Government should show leadership, and one way of doing so is to increase country-by-country reporting and transparency. I hope that the Minister will look at the matter again, consider the views represented in the Chamber and expressed by the Select Committee, and rethink the Government's position.

To reiterate a point that others have made, this issue is critical, but some people will say that it is not the most—

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Alan Duncan): Sexy.

Rushanara Ali: The Minister used the word, and I will not repeat it. The issue is significant. If we get it right, tax and revenue raising for development will be a major contribution. It is not a magic bullet, but if there were something close to one, this is it. The Select Committee's contribution in pulling the evidence together and highlighting the scope for action comes at an important moment. The public are leading the debate through their campaigning in the domestic arena, and people are increasingly recognising the immorality of tax evasion and avoidance, and this is an opportunity for the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone), and her Government to consider how to close those tax loopholes and to ensure that countries receive the revenue that is generated but that they are losing. The Government must provide the necessary support to make that happen. I hope she will take on board the questions and issues that have been raised today.

2.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Lynne Featherstone): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Roger. I thank and congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) on securing this important debate. I also thank him and the International Development Committee for providing a wide-ranging and thought-provoking report. Finally, I thank all those who provided evidence to the inquiry, which included representatives of business, leading academics and non-governmental organisations. Many points have been raised, and I will address as many as possible in the time left to me, but I want so make some general comments.

[Lynne Featherstone]

I agree with the Committee on the significant role that effective tax systems play in helping developing countries to increase their national prosperity and reducing aid dependency, so I welcome the broader parliamentary debate on the issue. Taxation is at the heart of what the Prime Minister described as the golden thread of development. As has been said, helping developing countries to mobilise domestic resources offers the only sustainable alternative to aid for the funding of public services. At the same time, taxation is an important part of governance and state building. It builds the relationship between citizens and the Government, making states more effective. Fair and transparent tax collection promotes social cohesion, shapes Government legitimacy, promotes accountability of Governments to tax-paying citizens, and stimulates effective state administration and good public financial management.

Taxation is a very important part of economic policy, for growth, trade, investment and private sector development, as well as for meeting environmental challenges. The coalition Government are committed to supporting developing countries to access sustainable sources of revenue and to collect the tax that they are due.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell) asked if not this, what is the most fruitful way? That could be applied to many issues raised today. Apart from international negotiations and conferences, the most fruitful way this country can work with and help Governments across the developing world on this issue is through our world-respected and professional technical assistance on tax. We are lucky in this country, because we have Her Majesty's Treasury to tell us how to do things. The rest of the world is not so fortunate and that expertise—[*Interruption.*] Why are people murmuring laughter at our being so fortunate? It is one of our principal talents and skills, and we can offer the world that expertise and really make a difference. I will come on to Zambia in a minute, because as my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon said, there has been a huge achievement in terms of tax revenue collection, but there are also some holes in the system.

The IDC's report acknowledged the value of support that the UK provides to revenue authorities. DFID's work with partner countries on tax includes 48 tax programmes across 20 countries, totalling around £20 million a year. Our support is focused on where we can make the most difference and get the best results for our developing country partners. As several hon. Members have mentioned, we also need to deliver the best value for money for UK taxpayers. Most of DFID's work on tax is at a country level. Projects are managed by staff who live and work in the country, which means that projects can be responsive and demand-led. Tax projects may focus specifically on strengthening revenue collection or on broader objectives, such as public financial management reform or public sector reform.

In Afghanistan, which my right hon. Friend touched on, from 2007 to 2012 we helped increase tax revenues from 4% of GDP to 11.6%, helping the Afghan Government to finance the delivery of basic services. Last month, the Secretary of State for International Development was in Afghanistan, extending that support to the Afghanistan Revenue Department until 2016

with the aim of increasing revenue collection to 15%. In Ethiopia, HMRC's support to the Ethiopian Revenues and Customs Authority, together with other support, helped to reduce average customs clearance times: for example, low-risk imports went from seven days to 10 minutes, and exports from eight hours to 15 minutes. Those are huge barriers to have removed. In Rwanda, the UK helped to provide the laws and regulation under which the Rwanda Revenue Authority was established, and the office building and management systems. The authority reached a point at which it was collecting the full £24 million of DFID's 10-year support programme every three weeks, and its effectiveness has been an important factor in Rwanda's impressive record on development performance.

Building capacity of revenue authorities is important and, as other hon. Members have said, so is ensuring revenues are spent effectively. We do that in a number of ways. We recognise the importance and value of transparency in tackling tax evasion. The global issues referred to in the report have been getting more attention, and are rising up the agenda. Although not good, it has been helpful to see those corporate moves that meant that the large companies referred to in this debate paid so little in this country over a number of years. That has made the issue of how corporations use tax systems in different countries to move around their profits more understandable to the wider public, and that is a great motivator. The Prime Minister has put tax evasion and avoidance right at the top of the agenda for the G8 and is focusing on fixing the issue here, too.

I want to address some specific issues that have been raised. A number of hon. Members raised the issue of the EITI. In terms of our membership, the UK is a real supporter of the EITI, and first thought of it, but we did not implement it in the past because the IMF did not consider us resource rich. Greater transparency in the extractive sector will be an important focus of the UK's G8 presidency in 2013. As others have said, the UK can hardly call on other countries to implement the EITI or live up to high standards if we are not prepared to do so ourselves. That is why the Prime Minister called for an urgent review of the UK's position on EITI. We expect that review to be concluded by the end of January. We provide support to the EITI International Secretariat and the EITI multi-donor trust fund, which provides technical assistance to implementing countries and represents the UK on the EITI board. Our bilateral programmes support EITI candidacy and/or implementation: for example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Afghanistan and Burma.

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

At the moment, a decision has not been taken on the publication process of the EITI review, but the broadening of the scope was also raised. The Government welcome the review of the EITI that is under way to develop a broader standard for consideration by the EITI board, with a view to possible introduction in 2014. The UK is an active participant in the strategy review, which is a multi-stakeholder process, considering a wide range of proposals that could be included in a revised standard. As was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), the proposals include

disclosure of contracts, more disaggregated reporting of data and background on the sector, among other things.

A number of hon. Members raised FATCA, or the US Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act. The Government are fully committed to tackling tax evasion. As we stated in the Government response to the Committee, we do not regard the unilateral introduction of a version of the US FATCA in all its glory—so to speak—in the UK as the means to achieve automatic information exchange, because FATCA is unilateral and extraterritorial in its approach. For example, it imposes severe withholding taxes on those that do not comply. While I cannot elaborate at this point on the significant difficulties that have been created for the US as well as the companies affected by its implementation, I am happy to undertake to write to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove on that issue.

That said, as hon. Members may be aware, the Government have signed an agreement with the United States of America. It is the first of its kind and it will significantly increase the amount of information automatically exchanged between both countries. As announced at the autumn statement, the Government see that as testing a new international standard in tax transparency. Obviously, when we see how that goes, the Government will look to conclude similar agreements with other jurisdictions. The UK and the Isle of Man have jointly announced our intentions to conclude an enhanced automatic tax information exchange agreement, based on the UK-US FATCA agreement. We are also in similar discussions with the other Crown dependencies and the overseas territories. The Government commend the great leadership of the Isle of Man in this area. The G20, of course, is committed to strengthening tax transparency and the exchange of information.

Richard Burden: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. If I understand her correctly—I hope she will tell me if I have got this wrong—in terms of the outline agreements that are being reached with the United States and the work that is being done in relation to overseas territories, are the Government saying that they see those as a kind of pilot scheme for a more extensive automatic transfer of information? If so, that sounds like a good thing. If not, there is still a gap. What about the wider application of automatic transfer of information?

Lynne Featherstone: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I cannot give him the comfort that he seeks that it is the Government's intention, if what he refers to works, to extend it right across the world, but we are extending it and looking at it. If it provides a good model, we will obviously look at it again to see what application it might have in what jurisdictions.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon raised the issue of Pakistan. I believe that hon. Members may have taken representations or evidence this morning. I understand that that is a real issue, because Pakistan has one of the lowest rates of tax collection, averaging only 10% of GDP in recent years. An improved tax regime is the key priority for DFID in Pakistan. The importance of improving Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio is raised regularly in our engagement with senior Government representatives there, as it is by the IMF

and other donors. We raise it; the issue is trying to get an effect and a change in the circumstances there. DFID is involved in strategic dialogue about the World Bank's support on revenue at federal level and also contributes analytical work—for example, on the political economy of tax reform. We are supporting wider public financial management reform in some provinces. That includes the strengthening of revenue policy. This is a major issue, on which we are putting a lot of emphasis.

There was frustration about the willingness of elites to pay tax in developing countries. It is true: the elites are very reluctant to pay. How can we expect everyone else to be paying tax in a country if the elites are not setting an example? As an example, I refer to what DFID has done in Burundi. As ever, I hear what my right hon. Friend says about the Select Committee's view on Burundi. He has made that case both publicly and privately on many occasions. However, there is the recent example of DFID supporting the Office Burundais des Recettes. A public outcry has led to MPs and Ministers paying tax for the first time. It is something if one can raise the issue to the point at which there is a public voice about the accountability of the Government in terms of setting the prime example. My right hon. Friend made the point that if Prime Ministers and MPs do not pay their taxes, it is pretty hard to say to the rest of the country and to the elites, "You should be paying tax."

I do not want to go on for too long. The Chair has changed—it is a great pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Walker—and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon must introduce the second debate. However, I want to address a couple of things. One issue that was raised quite often was the Starbucks effect and what we are doing in this country about that. The Government are taking significant steps to ensure that everyone, including multinational companies, pays their fair share of tax. The response is twofold. There is support for international action. Alongside France and Germany, we are providing additional resources to the OECD to speed up the international efforts on dealing with profit shifting by multinationals and erosion of the corporate tax base at global level. The OECD will deliver a progress report to the G20 in February 2013 on actions to tackle the issues of base erosion and profit shifting.

There is also further investment in HMRC. HMRC will expand its risk assessment capability across the large business sector and increase its specialist transfer pricing resources to speed up its work to identify and challenge multinationals' transfer pricing arrangements. The Government relentlessly challenge those that persist in avoiding tax and have recovered £29 billion of additional revenues from large businesses in the last six years, including £4.1 billion in the last four years from transfer inquiries alone.

A number of hon. Members raised the issues brought up by Christian Aid and ActionAid in relation to the costs of evasion and avoidance. As has been discussed, the estimates are numerically disputed, but the bigger point is that despite suggestions that the estimates of tax evasion and avoidance have been agreed by the OECD, the figures have not been endorsed by any of the OECD's committees. The key point is that evasion and avoidance are undoubtedly significant challenges for developing countries and that the Government are

[Lynne Featherstone]

committed to providing support, but as I have said, tax capacity building and technical assistance are the primary issues.

I want to deal with the country-to-country reporting model or rather the broader one, not the one that is being considered for the EU directive, which is for the smaller view. The big ask is the model whereby all multinationals disclose information that goes beyond payments to Governments. This model has been discussed in the OECD task force on tax and development without any consensus being reached on its merits. The Government believe that the case has not been made for the effectiveness of this model in achieving its objectives while minimising costs to business. It is not being called for by developing countries, but the Government do agree that many developing countries do need to improve their ability to assess transfer pricing risk and detect abusive profit shifting and that other options, such as the transfer pricing transaction schedule described in recommendation 7, could offer more proportionate and effective help.

A number of hon. Members raised the issue of a DFID Minister for tax. I have to say, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove rightly predicted I would, that the development impact of UK tax and fiscal policy is a collective responsibility for all members of Government. DFID, the Treasury and HMRC all work together. [Laughter.] Did my right hon. Friend read my brief? However, the UK is committed to helping developing countries to build robust, fair and sustainable domestic taxation systems and, having listened to what was said, I propose to consider the proposal that was made for an inter-ministerial group. I will take that away with me. I am not promising anything, but I want to look at how that is referenced. There are many discussions across Government. Her Majesty's Treasury is everywhere across Government, as I am sure hon. Members in this room are well aware, but if what was proposed would be a productive way forward, I am certainly prepared to look at it in the future.

The last issue that I will address, because I have gone over my time slightly, is the request by the International Development Committee on scaling up. The report acknowledges the value of technical assistance provided by DFID and HMRC to national revenue authorities in developing countries and recommends that work in this area is scaled up. I agree completely. I have been in post for four months now and have been looking at this issue. Tax is high on the agenda. It is high on the agenda for the G8. It seems to me that the most successful and most useful thing that we have done as a Government in terms of enabling developing countries to operate is to enable them to be the masters of their tax collection and their tax systems.

I was in Zambia, too, and Zambia did fail some of the tests set by the IDC in terms of the provision of information. We are looking at that. But in Zambia, I did meet representatives of the audit committee, the

public accounts committee and the Office of Public Prosecutions. All of them are taking on this agenda in a way that I have not seen in many places. There really is a desire for them to collect the revenue and for us to help them—enable them—to do that and do it well.

I am sorry that I have not addressed all the points that were made. There is unanimity across this room and, indeed, everywhere that it is important to deal with tax avoidance and tax evasion not just because that would enable countries to fund their own public services and to begin to achieve separation in terms of aid dependency, but because there is moral rectitude in paying one's fair share. In this country, as others have said, we stand proudly on our commitment to 0.7% of GDP in a political environment that is challenging; there have been attacks on us for that. We have to show that every penny counts and every taxpayer pound is spent wisely. One of the ways in which we do that best is by helping to ensure that tax revenues can be collected across the world. Those who travel across the world and talk to the Governments of the world and civil society across the world will know that the position is variable across the world. We are making progress, but there is still progress to be made.

I thank all Members for their contributions. I thank the Committee again for drawing attention to this subject and for recognising the valuable work the UK is doing. The IDC has made a valuable contribution to the new shape of our programme for tax.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. May I ask Sir Malcolm Bruce to respond briefly to this debate and then to move seamlessly into his opening remarks for the next debate?

3.10 pm

Sir Malcolm Bruce: I will speak just for the time it takes the Minister of State to assume his place.

I thank the Minister for her response. There are clearly differences between the Committee's recommendations and the Government's view. Even if the Government are not willing to accept our specific recommendations, may I say in a constructive spirit that I hope they will strenuously undertake to do everything they can to encourage greater transparency nationally and internationally, using whatever mechanisms they think will work? We would certainly expect them to pursue that issue, because the domestic and international agendas have coincided.

The Minister's example of the work the Revenue has done shows how difficult transfer pricing is for a country such as the UK, but it is 10 times more difficult for small developing countries with virtually no capacity, which is why they need support. I am therefore grateful to her for saying that the scaling-up of this activity is being actively considered. We on the Committee always say that what we are really interested in is what works, and this activity works, so we need more of it.

Afghanistan

[Relevant documents: Afghanistan: Development progress and prospects after 2014, Sixth Report of the International Development Committee, HC 403, and the Government Response, HC 862.]

3.11 pm

Sir Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): The indulgence of the House has allowed the Committee to bring two reports for debate, and we are grateful for that. Indeed, under the new procedure we had the advantage of briefly presenting the report on Afghanistan in the main Chamber, which enabled us to have a good, topical exchange. Therefore, I do not wish to detain the Committee by repeating too much of what was said; instead, I want to focus on points of difference and points of commonality between the Committee and the Government.

Obviously, the most contentious thing we said in our report was that the Department for International Development's unique mandate in Afghanistan of promoting a viable state, which it was given by the National Security Committee, was—I think this is the best way to express it—unrealistically ambitious. I have read the Government's response, and I did not expect them necessarily to accept what we said, but we thought it was important to raise the issue. Of course we, too, would like Afghanistan to be a viable state. After all the trouble that the people of Afghanistan have been through, they deserve a viable state, and anything the UK Government can do to contribute to that is right, proper and responsible, so I hope we have agreement on that.

Our concern, however, was that there was an over-extended idea of what DFID, specifically, was capable of achieving. That took us away from the fact that DFID is good at promoting development, in the sense of better governance, which is a contribution towards a viable state; encouraging livelihoods; delivering education and health; and generally improving quality of life. In a situation that will be very uncertain and unpredictable post 2014, we felt it would perhaps be better to make that DFID's priority. In any case, the Government have mandated DFID to do that, and I quite understand that it will say, "That is our responsibility. That is what we want to do, and we will say how." However, I hope the Minister will understand that our comments were meant in the spirit not only of saying, "Let's get hold of what's possible," but of establishing what the real priorities should be, given what DFID can realistically do, rather than getting ourselves too hung up on aspirations that require many more players—indeed, the entire international community and all the players in Afghanistan—to deliver.

That said, the Committee decided it was important to revisit the situation in Afghanistan to look beyond the date when the engagement of combat troops comes to an end at the end of 2014. The Committee had visited Afghanistan five years before; the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) was on that visit, and I obviously went on both visits. The visit this time took place between 17 and 21 June 2012. We recorded that we were inhibited by the security situation from getting as deeply into development projects as we would have liked. Nevertheless, we had a useful visit, and we had the opportunity to engage with a number of important players.

Once we had analysed the situation, we felt there was a second significant comment to make. It was impressed on us time and again that the almost defining dilemma in Afghanistan—indeed, the way we could articulate the progress that had been, and continued to be, made there—was the status of women. A lot of the information presented to us—it consisted not just of statements; it was backed up by facts and figures—said that Afghanistan is, without qualification, the worst place in the world to be a woman.

Nicola Blackwood (Oxford West and Abingdon) (Con): The IDC's excellent report makes a number of really important statements on this issue. In particular, you state that

"the treatment of women...post-2014 will be the litmus test"

for success. There has been a lot of progress in the past 10 years, but 87% of Afghan women still face some form of violence. Does the right hon. Gentleman think that one solution would be for the next operational plan to include women's rights, and particularly dealing with violence against women, as a thematic priority?

Sir Malcolm Bruce: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. Yes, the Committee does think that. To be honest, we would like the Government to take a much more explicit position on that. In reply to us, they said that, based on the Tokyo agreement and other measures, they believed enough was in place to protect the achievements so far and the rights of women post 2014. I have to say that that view was not widely shared by the women we met, which was not very many, but the ones we did meet were very vocal. Although we understand the Government's reasoning, when we tried to look at programmes specifically aimed at the rights and needs of women, we found that those programmes really did not exist. The response to that is, "Well, that's mainstreaming." However, the issue of women in Afghanistan is such that mainstreaming simply is not, and cannot be, enough. That is precisely why we used the expression "litmus test".

Those are the two most contentious things we said, and I am quite certain the Committee will stand by them. No doubt the Minister will stand by the Government's response. Even if we disagree, however, I hope we can accommodate the fact that we are looking for the maximum engagement by the UK Government to ensure that the progress that has been made is, to the extent that we have the capacity to do this, continued beyond 2014. I also hope we recognise that monitoring the rights and progress of women is the best single way of identifying what is going on in Afghanistan. I put it as crudely as this: if the position of women in education and employment, and the moves to tackle violence against women, have moved in a positive direction by 2020, we can be sure that Afghanistan has moved in a positive direction; if the reverse is true, the reverse will be true for the whole of Afghanistan.

That does not mean there has not been a lot of progress or that we can make any serious predictions about where Afghanistan will be by 2014. The optimists say, "It's a success. By 2014, we will have achieved a fully trained army, a fully functioning police force and a viable Government. We can withdraw. Afghanistan is secure as a functioning, viable and, to some extent, democratic state." That is absolutely what we would like

[*Sir Malcolm Bruce*]

it to be, but I do not think anybody believes it will be like that. However, it seemed to us that the pessimists, who think Afghanistan will immediately collapse and be taken over by the Taliban, were unlikely to be right either. The picture seemed much more confused and unpredictable. We do not even know who the Government will be, who will be elected President or what the composition of the Parliament will be.

We received some disturbing evidence. BBC correspondent David Loyn is quoted in our evidence as describing Afghanistan as a “rentier state”. In other words, an awful lot of the movers and shakers simply go where the money is and siphon it off for their own purposes. Not all of it is going that way, because clearly if it were, there would not be progress in the number of girls in school and children being vaccinated, or in the delivery of health services and the improvement of roads. It is completely wrong to think that nothing has been delivered. A lot has been delivered, and progress has been made. There are now 3 million girls in school, where there were none before; but there are probably another 3 million who are still not in school, so let us not lose sight of that. We have not cracked the whole problem.

Such things are variable across Afghanistan. One of our difficulties was that we could not go to places we should have liked to visit; but there is plenty of evidence to show that things are very difficult in some places and better in others. That has probably always been true of Afghanistan. It has always been a centripetal kind of state, with a lot of variability. One group in the Committee went to Helmand, and one group, which included me, went to Bamiyan. That is a tale of two completely different Afghanistans. Helmand, which is of course in the headlines as far as Britain is concerned, is where British troops are deployed, where we run the provincial reconstruction team, and where we have suffered substantial casualties.

I do not want to get engaged in the question of the military position in Afghanistan. It has been well expressed and documented, in Helmand in particular, but it is clear to the Committee that we cannot, post 2014 when the PRT is closed and the combat troops are withdrawn, leave the people of Helmand without any commitment from the UK to their future development. However, we must recognise, as the Department for International Development has done, that operating a district office, for example, is unlikely to be achievable in that scenario. Indeed, the decision has been taken that that will not happen, so the programme will have to be run out of Kabul. That means, in our view, that we must have a different approach, involving partners who can, as our representatives, engage locally and win the trust, and the hearts and minds, of people on the ground. It cannot be done from Kabul; it must be done by people who are there, who probably will not be DFID personnel.

On the other hand, those of us who went to Bamiyan—unfortunately it was only for a day trip and we could not stay for a second day as had been intended, or get out and about as we had hoped—saw a completely different picture. It is worth recording that the PRT, which is being wound down, is led by the New Zealanders. We had a spectacular flight into Bamiyan, through the mountains and past the Buddhas on to the airfield by

which the PRT is located and were quickly whisked from the plane to the PRT. The New Zealand commander said he would happily have walked into town with us, as he had done with a three-star American general in full uniform several weeks before. They were able to sit down in a coffee house, and all that happened on the walk to town, a mile there and back, was that the general was stopped every few yards by people insisting on having their photograph taken with him, shaking his hand and thanking him and the NATO forces for bringing what they saw as peace and opportunities for prosperity and development. The records show that in Bamiyan there has not been an explosion of any kind of ordnance in 10 years; so not all in Afghanistan is violence, conflict and insecurity. There is a variation, from one extreme to the other. It is important to note that, because it shows that there are opportunities.

The chancellor of the university in Bamiyan told us that the matriculation of young women students had gone up from under 10% to more than a third of students in three years. As he put it, fathers and young men appreciated the prospect of educated daughters and wives. That was positive and good.

Having gone to the contentious places, we concluded—and I think that the Government agree—that the programme must be flexible and fleet of foot, and will have to respond to rapidly changing and unpredictable circumstances. We suggest that that approach is more likely to work. Indeed, if there is a plan B that recognises that, we will not be inhibited by sudden changes of direction; we shall have enough options.

Others want to speak, so I do not want to detain the House other than to say that we made a particular recommendation about our concern about the security forces, with which the Government did not wholly agree. Some colleagues had a briefing earlier in the week, which I could not attend, and they may say more if they catch your eye, Mr Walker. My understanding is that there are points of concern about the treatment of people in detention, which has deteriorated; about the variable functioning of the police; and, particularly, to return to the gender issue, about the shortage of women police—there are only 1,300—and the clear need for many more of them. In the post 2014 situation, trust between the people and the police will be a crucial part of security and space for development.

Will the Minister tell us something about the future of the community development councils? We did not have much chance to engage with them this time, but we got evidence about them, and have engaged with them in the past. Our view was that they are a good basis for grass-roots democracy and the building up of a more decentralised capacity. In that context we wanted more devolution of decision making to the provinces, because the nature of Afghanistan is that capacity is needed across the country. Kabul does not hold Afghanistan and if there is no capacity for administration and policy delivery outside Kabul the country cannot hold. We are concerned about the extent to which the UK Government, who have a policy in that area, will help to deliver it further.

The Committee has a positive wish that those who believe that the engagement in Afghanistan was a mistake should be proved wrong. Most of us do not believe we should not have been there. Indeed, there was plenty of evidence that an awful lot of people in Afghanistan are

extremely grateful for the improvements in their circumstances since the NATO engagement, compared with the previous 20 years. The optimistic point is that an awful lot of people therefore have a stake in ensuring that those improvements should not be lost. It seems to the Committee that the role of the UK Government, in co-ordination with the international community, is to do all that they can to ensure that those gains will be maintained and, if possible, extended. In those circumstances the priority for DFID is to do what it does best—development—rather than nation building.

3.27 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Walker. It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce). As he said, I was not able to go on the last Committee visit to Afghanistan. Injury, sadly, prevented me from doing so. However, I was on the visit that we paid to the country in 2007. It is the only time I have been there, and is an experience that will stay with me for ever. Afghanistan is one of those places that gets to you.

That leads me to a point about the overall tenor of our report, and what we were trying to say. What we said about the need to be clear as to what we are doing post 2014—particularly in relation to DFID's work in Afghanistan—and about concentrating on such things as poverty alleviation, and focusing less on state-building, attracted comment. It is important to point out that we are not saying that the things DFID and the UK Government have been doing until now were unimportant. We certainly do not say that state-building in Afghanistan is unimportant. However, we are cognisant of the kind of message that has been impressed on hon. Members across the House for some time by the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), who is not a member of the Committee but who has a wealth of experience from Afghanistan and beyond. We need to be clear about what we are doing. I said that Afghanistan is the sort of place that gets to you; but those who want to contribute as positively and constructively as possible need to get Afghanistan. Part of that means not trying to do everything and being aware, to some extent, of what we can do and what we can do best. That is not to say that we should be unambitious and go only for the easy stuff—it is not that we should climb mountains that are flat. We need to concentrate and focus on the kinds of things we say in our report, which are hugely challenging issues. Gender and the position of women are not unchallenging areas in which to be involved in Afghanistan, nor is the accountability of the security forces or what we have said about human rights. It is important to set that in context.

DFID and the UK have done tremendous work there, but as we move to a new situation post 2014, which is uncharted in so many ways, it is important to bear in mind the wise words we have heard from people such as the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border and others.

I would like to touch briefly on one area on which I would appreciate the Minister's comments. To some extent it flows from our report and is certainly topical at the moment: emergency relief and humanitarian assistance as we move into winter. I shall refer to a striking article

in *The Guardian* on new year's eve by Emma Graham-Harrison, who was in Kabul. She quoted the UN deputy envoy and humanitarian co-ordinator in Afghanistan, Mark Bowden, who clearly said that more aid money needs to be dedicated to emergency relief at the moment in particular. The article came out with a striking quote from 77-year-old Shah Ghasi:

“Each family already has two or three people who are sick”.

He has squatted in a camp on the outskirts of Kabul for nearly a decade. He says:

“We only have hot water to try and keep warm—no stoves, no fuel.”

If we look at the forecast, we see that nobody knows how severe the winter will be. It is forecast to be a bit milder than 2011, so the impact of cold on the camps may not be as bad as it was last year, but we are talking about a country with one of the world's worst child mortality rates, rampant malnutrition and other health problems that can make the challenges presented by winter particularly difficult.

The Minister and I have discussed, across the Floor of the main Chamber, other emergency situations on which winter is having a big impact—Syria being an obvious one. The UK is stepping up to the plate there better than a number of other countries are. The scale of the problem in Afghanistan as we go into winter should not be ignored; it could become greater, as violence is still bad and in many ways getting worse. Slightly echoing some of the problems in Syria, Mark Bowden said that only a tiny percentage of aid money coming into Afghanistan, perhaps just single figures, goes to supporting urgent humanitarian needs, and that donors stumped up less than half the cash the UN sought for Afghanistan's emergency response fund this year; at one point the fund was completely empty. Those comments were reported in the article to which I referred.

The situation is serious. A week before the article was written, 10 people apparently froze to death waiting to cross into Pakistan from Afghanistan. When the problems are that severe, in a country as poor as Afghanistan, with its problems of health and conflict, we need to address them, particularly at the moment. If the Minister says one or two things about that, I will be particularly grateful. If he wants to reflect on it and write to us, I would also, obviously, be grateful for that.

3.35 pm

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, for what I believe to be the first time. I visited Afghanistan for the first time with the Committee last year. I particularly want to focus on the rights of women and girls, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce), the Chair of the Select Committee on International Development. It is an appropriate topic to discuss, because the UN theme for international women's day, which is very soon—8 March—is:

“Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls.”

Since 2001, when we went into Afghanistan following the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, we have spent £30 billion on aid to the country, and I still believe that the rights of women and girls have not been fully recognised. I would like to point out, however,

[*Pauline Latham*]

that the aid we have invested in Afghanistan has achieved an enormous amount. For example, as my right hon. Friend said, more than 3 million girls are now in education. Maternal mortality has also been brought down.

Prior to 2001, the Taliban banned girls from going to school. The role of women has been key to transforming Afghanistan. I am pleased that the report, in recommendations 19 and 20, clearly states what needs to be done to ensure that work in that area continues to move forward, and gains need to be capitalised on, not lost. Some women we met when we took evidence here, who were modestly but well dressed professional women, were asked what would happen if they dressed that way in Afghanistan; the simple answer was, “We’d be stoned to death.”

I would like to mention three headlines on three consecutive days in December 2012. One from Reuters states:

“Female government worker shot dead in Afghanistan...Nadia Sediqqi, acting head of women’s affairs department in Laghman province, is shot dead on her way to work. Violence against women appears to be on the rise in Afghanistan...Unknown gunmen have shot dead a senior female government worker five months after her predecessor was killed in a bomb attack, officials in eastern Afghanistan say.”

One on 11 December states:

“Afghanistan women ‘still suffering horrific abuse’...Thousands of Afghan women are being failed by the country’s justice system...Yet the reality suggests many women still live with the daily fear of violence. Last month police said they arrested two men in Kunduz for allegedly beheading a teenage girl after her father rejected a marriage proposal. It came soon after four policemen were sentenced for raping an 18-year-old.”

And on 12 December:

“Afghanistan: Women suffer despite anti-abuse law, says UN”. Things are not as rosy as we would like.

Nicola Blackwood (Oxford West and Abingdon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the point raised by the Chair of the Select Committee about the worrying failure to recruit female police officers highlighted something concrete that the UK can do to improve the situation? More female police officers would help, not only because they would be recruited into economic activity, but because there would be women in the security services who those suffering violence could go to, so they could access protection from the police force, which is often hostile. Afghanistan has a target of recruiting 5,000 female police officers by 2015. Surely we should support that target.

Pauline Latham: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As we know, we also need more female doctors able to examine girls when they have been raped or abused in any way, so that they will share their stories with females, rather than be unable to talk because they are being examined by men or, very often, taken into custody because they have been raped.

To say that women in Afghanistan are second-class citizens is still a vast understatement. The Taliban are still present in Afghanistan and some would argue that they have moderated their view on women, which I believe many of them have, but there is a divide, with some of them wanting to return to their old-fashioned values. For example, I am sure that most people are

aware of the incident in Kandahar, when students were forced to watch as their head teacher was executed for ignoring Taliban orders to stop the schooling of young girls. In addition, only a year ago the current Government, led by President Karzai, supported senior clerics in the country who have allowed husbands to beat their wives in certain circumstances.

The organisation Global Rights has stated that 87% of Afghan women will suffer domestic abuse in their lifetime, and those who stand up to their husbands are punished for their behaviour in disrespecting their husband. In Afghanistan, we met an educated woman who has a good job, but her brother will still decide who she marries. She has no choice in that, and she cannot even tell him the sort of man she would like to marry, because he will ignore it. That is not uncommon there; it happens all the time.

Before I visited Afghanistan, I read a story on the BBC News website about the “I had to run away” report published by Human Rights Watch. The report highlighted that hundreds of Afghan women are in jail for so-called moral crimes, including running away and extramarital sex. It stated that women were punished for fleeing domestic abuse and violence, and that some rape victims were imprisoned. I want to point out what is meant by “extramarital sex” in that context. It is sex outside marriage where a woman is forced to have sex against her will—what I think most people in this room would consider a clear case of rape, but which is in fact deemed a moral crime. The report also calls on the Afghan Government to release about 400 women and girls held in jails or juvenile detention centres.

There has been a sharp rise in honour killings and violent crimes against women. Forced marriages and forced child marriages remain widespread, which, apart from a range of emotional distress, means that women and girls are unable to become independent. They become trapped in a vicious circle that often makes them reliant on their abusive husbands. That is the current situation in Afghanistan, more than a decade after military intervention. My deep personal fear, which is shared by Orzala Ashraf, the independent civil society activist who gave evidence to our Committee, is that as we approach the withdrawal of forces in 2014, women risk “dropping off the agenda.”

I must pay tribute to the former Secretary of State for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). On his appointment to that role, he made the empowerment of women a central theme of his Afghanistan development strategy. Our report points out our slight concern that that may not be being translated into a priority for DFID on location in Afghanistan. Should that be true, I hope that the Government will encourage such a priority and press it as the most important part of what they can do.

It is extremely important that the Government work with the international community to support Afghanistan fully to meet United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. I am therefore pleased that DFID, in its response to the Select Committee report, has agreed with recommendation 19, which is to seek to combat violence against women through support for women’s shelters and legal services, and to continue to ensure that women and girls are a major focus for its education and wealth creation programmes.

However, I urge DFID to rethink its disagreement with recommendation 20, which proposed the creation of a joint donor and Government plan for women and girls during the transition. That would encourage donors to commit themselves to specific programmes and objectives based on evidence and consultation. I believe that, as it states in our report, that

“could help catalyse greater commitment and sustained political will to ensure that women and girls are not forgotten in transition.”

I hope that the report will make a real difference to the people of Afghanistan and to world security. I know that the Minister will do all that he can to support our views.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. I will start the winding-up speeches at 4 pm, and if the Front-Benchers keep their speeches to 14 minutes, Sir Malcolm may have a little go at the end.

3.44 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), who made such a passionate speech about the position of women in Afghanistan. My colleagues on the International Development Committee have covered some areas in detail, so I shall attempt to cover those that have not been touched on.

I want to focus on what our report said about the private sector and DFID's response on that. I also want to say a few words about taxation and the increase in revenue, which has been one of the success stories in Afghanistan but still needs a lot more work. I will then conclude with some remarks about oversight for the Afghan national security forces, and about this week's comments by the UN deputy special representative, with whom we had a meeting.

As we all know, the private sector is the engine for growth, and growth is as important to Afghanistan as it is to the United Kingdom. One of the major areas of disagreement that the Government have with our report is on our comments about DFID's approach to the private sector in Afghanistan. In many ways, I hope that we were wrong and they were right, but we had some concerns about DFID's approach to that extremely important area.

It was difficult for us to see the work on the ground. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) mentioned, we hoped to see some of the work in Bamiyan, but it just did not prove possible, so we had to take people's word for it. I will just cover some of the areas in which DFID is involved. The first is agriculture, which is of course absolutely vital. It is a passion of mine. DFID is involved in the reduction of poppy cultivation, and therefore in the increase of the cultivation of other crops; in de-mining; in strengthening institutions focused on agriculture; in improving productivity of cereal crops through irrigation; in high-value vegetables; and, indeed, in commercial poultry. All of those are essential.

One thing that we noted and wanted to bring to the attention of both DFID and the Afghan Government was the fact that many opportunities for adding value

to agricultural produce do not seem to be taken up. Most agricultural produce went across the border to Pakistan in raw form and came back in processed form, thus denying Afghans the opportunity to add value, income and the employment of their own people. We want to encourage DFID to see how it can further help in adding value to agricultural produce in Afghanistan. Agriculture is of course essential and, by the end of this period in 2015, we want DFID to have made real progress in that area. I am sure that it is capable of doing so, and that the Minister will respond about what is now going on and being achieved.

DFID has a strong programme to support employment and enterprise, particularly through small and medium-sized enterprises that, realistically, as is the case in this country, will be the main generator of employment and growth in Afghanistan. DFID's target is 20,000 jobs by the end of this period. It would be excellent if the Minister gave us feedback on how that programme is going and what it consists of. It would be a great step forward if the programme could achieve that and, indeed, even more.

Another area is good infrastructure, without which economic development is difficult at best, and impossible a lot of the time. DFID has a major programme of developing infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, with more than 1,100 km of secondary road and 1,095 of tertiary road planned. I am very pleased by that, because the emphasis is often on primary roads—asphalt or tarmac roads—that look good and are great if people are near one, but if people are even 5 km away and on an awful road, such roads do not help much to get their produce or animals to market. DFID has concentrated on that, as we saw in the Congo. DFID's work on one road that I had the pleasure of travelling along meant that a journey that would have taken five days took two hours. It makes a huge difference. I would be pleased to hear the Minister's comments on how the programme to develop rural road infrastructure is going.

Then there is the elephant in the room of the Afghan economy: mining. We were told that the value of minerals in Afghanistan is estimated—possibly underestimated—at \$3 trillion. Their extraction would make an enormous difference not only to the Afghan economy but to Afghanistan's tax base and therefore its public services. We were pleased to see that DFID has engaged strongly in the development of governance over mining, particularly taxation. We would be pleased to hear from the Minister what progress has been made since we were there, whether the mining industry, which was developing fast when we were there, has made further progress and whether that has resulted in an increase in revenues to the Government as well as local employment. I think we are all hoping that we were a bit too pessimistic about DFID's private sector programme, and that the Government are right that it is on track and will make a major contribution. I hope that we are proven wrong. That is what we would all like.

On taxation, tax revenues about a decade ago amounted to a mere 3% of a very low GDP: in effect, to nothing, which made Afghanistan completely dependent on aid. With the substantial help of DFID, that has now risen to 11%, more than in Pakistan, which was referred to in the earlier debate, where it is less than 10%. We should congratulate both the Afghan Government and DFID on their work on that. However, 11% is still a long way from where things should be.

[Jeremy Lefroy]

I will make a few comments on taxation, perhaps referring a little to the earlier debate. Taxation is indeed the route out of aid, because from taxation derives the ability to pay for public services. I remember reading in the office of the Tanzanian tax inspector with whom I was having some discussions when I worked out there, “When I pay taxes, I buy civilisation.” That was pretty much the only comment made in that office with which I agreed, but it made the point that taxes are the means of acquiring schooling, health care, security and all the other goods that we take for granted.

There are various types of taxes: income-based taxes, sales tax and VAT, mineral royalties, customs duties and crop levies. Traditionally, in developing economies, the bulk of taxation has come from customs duties and crop levies, because they are easy to collect; you see something—a crop or an imported car—and you tax it. However, those are regressive taxes, in that crop levies affect smallholder farmers and tend effectively to result in a marginal income tax rate, which can often be 30%, 40% or even 50% once the cost of production has been taken into account, and customs duties tend to prevent trade, particularly exports. Concentrating on those taxes is not recommended.

The route upwards in tax collection is clearly sales taxes such as VAT and income-based taxes, whether on personal or company income. Much more needs to be done both in Afghanistan and elsewhere on the collection of corporate and personal income taxes as well as VAT. They require highly skilled and honest revenue authorities, which is where DFID comes into its own. I urge DFID to continue its support to the Afghan revenue authorities for the collection of income taxes and mineral royalties. In Burundi, we saw the tax revenue increase by a substantial amount through DFID’s involvement and the work that it is doing to promote trade and investment in east Africa. I want increased support for the revenue authorities in Afghanistan, because DFID’s work has been so successful up to now.

A final point on taxation: in any country, a follow-up is needed on the discrepancy between obvious wealth and taxes paid. We heard earlier about the fact that some of the wealthiest people in Pakistan pay no taxes. It is blindingly obvious to everybody that they should be paying taxes, and yet they do not. I believe that the same is true in Afghanistan. The revenue authorities need to be able to conduct their affairs without fear or favour, and DFID should be helping them do so.

I turn to the question of the Afghan national security forces. We suggested in our report, although DFID disagreed, that there should be independent oversight. I understand why DFID disagreed—it felt that sufficient checks and balances already exist in the system, and perhaps they need to be given the opportunity to work—but we understand that the United Nations human rights report to be published next week will say something along the lines of “Conditions of detention have deteriorated” and raise concerns, particularly about Afghanistan local police groups. We understand why DFID rejected our recommendation, but can the Minister update us on whether he feels that the inspectorate of police and the other bodies put in place are proving effective, or whether the jury is still out?

In conclusion, I reiterate the comments made by several of my colleagues about the progress being made. It was an honour to go to Afghanistan. I pay great tribute to DFID’s staff there, and to all the staff of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the British Council whom we met, for their warmth, their hospitality and the value of the work that they do. Progress has been made. It is vital that we get the message across. So many British people, particularly our armed forces, have made huge sacrifices to bring advances that are quite apparent to the people in Afghanistan. In my county of Staffordshire we have the Third Mercians, who served in Afghanistan in 2011 and will probably go out again at the end of this year. I want them to know that the work they are doing is vital to the people of Afghanistan, that by and large it is appreciated and that they will be honoured in the memory of what they have done.

3.57 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, not for the first time. It is a great pleasure to be part of this debate. I thank the Chair and members of the Select Committee on International Development for their excellent work in producing this report and the one presented in the previous debate. The issues facing Afghanistan, particularly as we move towards gradual exit post-2014, are critical, and it is right that we focus on what happens next and what the UK Government do, particularly in relation to international development.

I welcome the Government’s commitment to delivering aid to Afghanistan at levels comparable to the present until 2017. However, there are major concerns about what will happen to the country’s aid budget beyond then. As most would agree, an abrupt cut to foreign aid could severely destabilise Afghanistan and have an adverse effect on its economy and people. Hon. Members and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) have raised a number of issues, focusing particularly on the impact on women, who remain among the most vulnerable in Afghanistan and in comparison to others around the world.

Some 97% of Afghanistan’s official GDP comes from spending related to the international military and donor presence, and local businesses currently rely heavily on development aid and foreign military expenditure. The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) focused in his speech on the importance of the economy. I point out that the economy is already contracting as troops leave. It is expected that future growth will be slower, especially in urban and conflict areas. The combination of a drop in aid levels and military withdrawal could have a devastating impact and set back the progress that has been made to date. The World Bank has already warned that an abrupt cut-off in aid could lead to the collapse of political authorities, civil war and a greater reliance on opium profits. Will the Minister assure us that the UK will maintain adequate aid levels and increase measures to improve aid effectiveness beyond 2017? Moreover, given the risks involved, will he also give us an assurance that the UK Government will use their influence to ensure that other donor countries do not withdraw aid abruptly?

The Government’s response says that Afghanistan’s extractive industries will contribute significantly to economic growth, enabling the Afghan authorities to deliver basic

services and reduce the country's dependency on aid. According to the World Bank, the extractive industries could contribute to half of the 4.9% per annum GDP growth projected to 2018-19. However, it will still be many years before revenues from this sector will start mitigating the effects of the military draw-down. What other measures are the Minister and his Department taking to mitigate those effects?

Afghanistan is still in the throes of conflict and lacking in some of the strong governance mechanisms that can drive transparent and accountable government. Given those facts, it is hardly surprising that the report has highlighted the ongoing challenges and problems of corruption. According to Transparency International, Afghanistan remains one of the world's most corrupt countries. Ensuring that each pound spent is trackable and accountable, as the former Secretary of State for International Development promised, is incredibly difficult and important. What steps are the Department and the Minister taking to improve the accountability and transparency of UK Government funding to Afghanistan?

I want to focus now on the very important subject of gender, which has been raised by the Chair of the Committee, the right hon. Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce), and others, including the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), who is the chair of the all-party UN women group—I serve as the vice-chair. She has been working hard with colleagues across parties on the issue of violence against women in Afghanistan and across the world, especially in the light of the recent issues posed by the rape, attack and killing of a woman in India.

The situation of women around the world is of deep concern, even in countries such as India where, despite significant economic progress, women's rights still fall short. The hon. Lady pointed to the huge challenges faced by Afghanistan and the important contribution that Britain and the international community must make if we are to see progress in this area.

I welcome the UK Government's decision to commit to protecting and promoting the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan, but it is important that they follow that through with practical action. The IDC report has highlighted a number of important recommendations. We have constantly heard words of commitment from the Government in relation to women not just in Afghanistan but elsewhere in the world, but what additional steps will be taken to show that genuine commitment?

Women have made important gains in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban. As the report highlights, 2.2 million girls are now in school, compared with only 5,000 under the Taliban. That is a success that we all need to celebrate. However, as the report highlights, the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan, while improved in some ways, remains incredibly troubling. As the Chair of the Committee pointed out, women in Afghanistan are the worst off in the world, and we must ensure that we continue our efforts to improve their position.

In a statement, President Obama said:

"Afghanistan cannot succeed unless it gives opportunity to its women."

Failure to do so will seriously undermine the legacy of the UK's intervention and could lead to a dangerous and uncertain future both for Afghan women and for the nation more generally.

Women and girls still suffer from a lack of access to the basic legal protections. A recent UN report argues that although the law on the elimination of violence against women is being used to secure some convictions, it is often ignored by many in the police and justice sector. Does the Minister agree that DFID should create specific projects in its next Afghanistan operational plan to work on women's protection and empowerment? As has already been mentioned, when it comes to issues of equality, mainstreaming is a challenge even in a UK context let alone in a country such as Afghanistan. Given that there is a real need to keep the pressure up, is it not right that there should be a specific special focus on women alongside the mainstream interventions with which DFID is involved?

Let me turn now to the projects that are targeted at women, especially those that focus on the specific need to protect them against violence and, as the hon. Lady mentioned, rape and other forms of oppression. It is not clear that the Government are fully committed to the kind of interventions that are needed and that require special focus. Will the Minister clarify how many DFID-backed projects target the needs of women?

It is disappointing that the Government's response to this report does not endorse the IDC's recommendation to create a joint donor-Government plan for women and girls during the transition. The report says that DFID's programmes already support the objectives set out in the Government's national action plan for women in Afghanistan. However, the national priority programme has described NAPWA's implementation as "slow and insignificant".

ActionAid has pointed out that the Ministry of Women's Affairs has secured only a fraction of the \$30 million that it needs to deliver the national priority programme, which is just a first step towards full implementation of NAPWA. Will the Minister tell us how his Department will ensure that all Afghan authorities and institutions are fully compliant with the organisation End Violence Against Women and NAPWA?

In conclusion, the coming years will be challenging in Afghanistan. As international attention will inevitably shift elsewhere as troops come home, we must do all we can now to ensure that the Afghan people build a sustainable future for themselves. One of the most important elements of that, as the report rightly points out, is ensuring that the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan is improved. We must build on the achievements that have been made in the last decade and ensure that women and girls are protected from violence and discrimination. That will require a continued commitment from the UK Government. The sacrifice of our troops and the loss of thousands of lives—not just among British troops—will be in vain if we do not secure a sustainable future for Afghanistan. People must not be worse off than they were before the conflict and the intervention began. Our involvement must be about ensuring that we are there with the people of Afghanistan long after our troops leave.

4.10 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Alan Duncan): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) for securing this debate. We in the Department for

[Mr Alan Duncan]

International Development welcomed the International Development Committee's report on Afghanistan, to which we have of course already formally replied. Put simply, the Government strongly agree with the majority of the Committee's recommendations. In particular, we recognise that the next few years hold considerable uncertainty, and we welcome the Committee's judgment that we retain an obligation both to the Afghan people and to British service personnel to continue our assistance for many years to come. That is why, at the Tokyo conference last July, we worked hard to secure long-term support from our international partners for Afghanistan's development beyond security transition in 2014. I can tell the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), who is the Opposition Front-Bencher, that the UK is specifically committed to maintaining its current aid level—approximately £178 million a year at the moment—beyond transition until at least 2017.

We are now working closely with the Afghan Government to ensure that they deliver the essential economic and governance reforms agreed at Tokyo. Although it is still early days, I am pleased to report some good progress. Structures are now in place to monitor performance against the Tokyo commitments. Let me assure hon. Members that we will link our long-term support to progress by the Afghan Government on these critical reforms.

However, we do not support the Committee's recommendation for a mechanistic link between performance and financial support. Nevertheless, the House should be in no doubt that we will act when we need to, as we did, for instance, in suspending Afghan reconstruction trust fund payments following the Kabul bank crisis. And as co-host of the ministerial review conference in 2014, we will engage with our international partners to speak with a unified voice.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon said, Afghanistan is perhaps the worst place in the world for a woman to live, and that point was profoundly echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham). A key commitment at Tokyo was strong action on women's rights. As the Committee's report said and as hon. Friends have highlighted during this debate, Afghan women and girls continue to face enormous disadvantages. The Secretary of State for International Development has made clear the priority that she places on this issue, including on her recent visit to Afghanistan, where she raised her concern directly with President Karzai.

We are already supporting a range of initiatives that we hope will benefit Afghan women. Thanks in part to UK support, there has been considerable progress in girls' education, as my right hon. Friend mentioned; there are now more than 2 million girls in school, when there were virtually none in school in 2001. Almost one in two pregnant women in Afghanistan receive antenatal care today, compared with only one in six in 2003. We have also contributed to improving women's access to justice and jobs.

It is also important for us to say that we agree with the Committee that violence against women remains a significant concern, and I commend the work of NGOs such as ActionAid in trying to combat that violence. The UK will continue to press the Afghan Government to implement the current law on the elimination of violence

against women, or EVAW. Through the Tawanmandi programme, we are also supporting 35 women's organisations to take forward a range of activities, including raising awareness of the EVAW law and providing legal support and shelters to victims of violence.

We continue to look for ways to improve opportunities for Afghan women and girls in all of our programmes. In the next few months, our focus will be on supporting women to participate in the political process and in elections in 2014. However, we do not agree with the Committee's recommendation for a joint Government-donor plan for women and girls through transition. The Afghan Government's commitments to women and girls are already laid out in the Tokyo framework, and it is important that we focus our efforts on ensuring that those commitments are delivered. In our view, drafting another plan risks becoming a distraction.

The UK already supports Afghan women in public life. Our work with the Afghan Interior Ministry is helping the Afghan police to protect and uphold women's rights. The British embassy in Kabul also funds organisations such as the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, to ensure that they can continue to operate effectively and with the necessary security.

In the same vein, and as my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon said, we disagreed with the Committee's proposal for the establishment of a new oversight body to investigate allegations of violence by the Afghan national security forces. There are a number of existing mechanisms, both within the Afghan Government and externally, to carry out that function. And as part of the UK's work with the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Defence in Afghanistan, we already train, advise and mentor staff on a range of issues, including human rights. Given the number of challenges ahead, it is important that we focus our efforts on what needs to be done and avoid any duplication of process. For example, as highlighted on page 45 of the Committee's report, it is absolutely essential that access to education, health care and other basic services is improved for the long-term stability of Afghanistan.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) raised a number of issues, including concern about the development of the private sector. I suggest that DFID's approach to wealth creation is much broader than the Committee's report has suggested. Our programmes range from encouraging international investment and building regional trade links right down to providing support for local farmers' co-operatives and skills training.

For instance, in Nangarhar province we are supporting rural entrepreneurs to produce high-value vegetables, and in Kama district we are successfully supporting poultry businesses that are providing jobs for women in 20 villages. As for extractives, which I totally agree is perhaps the largest and most important sector in Afghanistan and one in which there is of course enormous scope for corruption, DFID has supported the Ministry of Mines since 2010 to develop a regulatory framework, to encourage international investment and to ensure that effective management of the country's mineral wealth can be built up. Furthermore, we are currently developing a package of continuing support in this sector. On the more detailed area of infrastructure, I undertake to write to my hon. Friend with more detail about such issues as roads.

Let me reassure the Committee and the House that our programme is already carefully balanced between developing the capacity of the Afghan Government at the national and provincial level to manage services, and ensuring effective delivery in the districts.

I now turn to the serious issue raised by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden). We agree with the Committee that Afghanistan faces significant humanitarian challenges, and I can confirm to the House that we are committed to continuing to build up our humanitarian programme. Last year, my Department delivered life-saving assistance to more than 5,600 families that had been affected by the 2011 drought, and provided food and other essential household items to around 150,000 internally displaced people in Afghanistan. As recommended on page 80 of the Committee's report, we are also engaging with rural communities to help them to strengthen their resilience to these changes. And DFID is currently developing a multi-year, multi-sector package of support for some of the neediest sectors in Afghanistan, to deal with issues such as nutrition and food security.

We are working hard to ensure that ordinary Afghans have opportunities to make a decent living for themselves and their families, while at the same time helping to stimulate long-term, sustainable economic growth in the country. We disagree with the Committee's finding that DFID's approach to wealth creation is too centralised and disconnected from the needs of ordinary Afghans, as I hope I have illustrated by giving those two examples just now. As I was saying earlier, our programmes range from encouraging international investment support at the regional level right down to the village level. Indeed, UK aid has equipped more than 11,200 young people in Helmand, including 1,900 women, with vocational skills.

Let me turn to what my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon, at the start of his comments, referred to as DFID's unique mandate to create a viable Afghan state. I sense from his comments that he regards that idea as somewhat fanciful. We agree with the Committee that DFID cannot deliver a viable Afghan state on its own, but we do not believe that the objective is a redundant concept. On the contrary, the goal, shared by the Afghan Government and our international partners, is essential to securing Afghanistan's long-term stability and future. In some respects, these are early days in the history of the country.

The goal is also consistent with DFID's approach to working in fragile and conflict-affected states worldwide. The Prime Minister has said, and this encapsulates our thinking, that

"you only get real long-term development through aid if there is also a golden thread of stable government, lack of corruption, human rights"

and

"the rule of law".

By contributing to the objective of the development of a viable Afghan state, we are helping to ensure that the Afghan people have a stake in their own future, through a Government that is more accountable and transparent, and capable of responding to their basic needs.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon mentioned community development councils, and DFID is working with the World Bank, other donor partners and the Afghan Government on the future role of the councils, including how best to integrate them into the government

structure below the level of central Government. The point he made is a valid one, and we are already taking steps to implement the sorts of things I sense he would like to see. We agree, of course, with the Committee that NGOs also play a vital role on the ground in Afghanistan, delivering key services and assistance to the Afghan people, and we will continue to support such essential work.

Finally, we welcome the Committee's acknowledgment of the immense challenges that exist in delivering results in fragile and conflict-affected states such as Afghanistan, and also its appreciation of the efforts of DFID staff. Despite the challenges, we continue rigorously to ensure that DFID programmes are robust enough to deliver real results for the Afghan people, and that there is value for money for the UK taxpayer. I have been encouraged by many of the comments and questions we have heard this afternoon and, on behalf of DFID, I reassure the House that our commitment to this desperately poor country will continue for many years to come.

4.22 pm

Sir Malcolm Bruce: I thank the Minister for his most constructive response to what has been a good debate. Indeed, I thank everyone who has taken part.

In spite of the differences of emphasis, I believe that our report has been well received. It has provided a useful focus for those who are either too positive or too negative about the future. It is much better to be realistic, recognising the challenges and coming up with constructive recommendations on the understanding that there is a need to be flexible. Although we do not agree on everything, the Minister's response demonstrates that we are on the same page as far as the overall objective is concerned.

I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) in pointing out that we cannot say often enough to those British people who will listen that the idea that our engagement in Afghanistan has been a failure and has not made a positive difference is simply not true. It has made a huge difference. The situation is difficult. It is a difficult country and there are lots of challenges, but we have met so many people whose lives have been dramatically improved, and the statistics bear that out.

I am absolutely certain that the successors of the current Committee members in another Parliament will go back to Afghanistan in four or five years' time. I hope that the fears will not have been realised and that some of the hopes will have been fulfilled. I hope that they still have a democracy and a functioning Parliament, but above all I hope that the position of women in Afghanistan is not as good as today but much better, or at least moving in the right direction. I repeat exactly the point that the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood) made: for the Committee, that will be the litmus test of whether the engagement in Afghanistan has delivered real social and political change. We hope that it will have, and we believe that it can, and we absolutely agree that the UK Government have a key role to play. Regardless of the differences of emphasis, DFID in Afghanistan has our full support.

Question put and agreed to.

4.24 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Ministerial Statements

Thursday 17 January 2013

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Employment Law Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Jo Swinson): The Government believe the UK economy should be supported by a framework of laws that ensures we have a strong and efficient labour market which is flexible, effective and fair. We are looking at the laws that affect all aspects of the relationship between employers and employees, and at each stage of the relationship, through the employment law review. Priorities for reform have been informed by the red tape challenge process, and the results of the 2011 resolving workplace disputes consultation.

Today the Government are publishing their response to the consultation on ending the employment relationship, and launching three further consultations relating to the employment relationship, covering:

- How early conciliation should operate in practice;
- A range of proposals to improve the TUPE regulations; and,
- Reforming the regulatory framework for employment agencies and employment businesses.

Our response to the ending the employment relationship consultation details how we will support the legislative changes in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill regarding the inadmissibility of offers of settlement in unfair dismissal claims at employment tribunal, and a power to increase or decrease the limit on the compensation awarded in cases of unfair dismissal.

Settlement agreements offer a dignified, consensual and mutually beneficial way of ending the employment relationship without risking a long, costly and distressing employment tribunal claim. In support of the legislative change, we have consulted on the principles to underpin the system, and the best way for Government to enable employers and employees to approach settlement agreements confidently in a fair and appropriate way. We will ask ACAS to publish a statutory code of practice, which will include template letters for beginning the settlement discussion, and an explanation of the term “improper behaviour”. Accompanying guidance will supplement the code with more substantive practical advice, including guidance on good practice for employers to approach settlement within the broader context of management.

The Government intend to introduce the statutory code and guidance by the summer, in line with the legislative change coming into force. In relation to the unfair dismissal compensatory award cap, the Government intend to introduce a 12 months’ pay cap on the compensatory award for unfair dismissal, subject to parliamentary process. The introduction of a pay-based cap will run alongside a specified overall cap, with the limit the lower of the two figures.

With regard to the overall level of the cap, no consensus emerged in consultation either in terms of whether it should be changed, or, if so, how it should be changed. We are therefore not pursuing a change to the overall cap on the compensatory award for unfair dismissal at this time.

The Government will introduce the necessary secondary legislation to implement the change to the cap after the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill receives Royal Assent.

We are also launching today a further consultation on early conciliation. We announced, in the Government response to the resolving workplace disputes consultation, our intention to introduce an early conciliation (EC) process that would make it a requirement for most prospective claimants to send the details of their claim to ACAS before they are able to lodge the claim with the employment tribunal. This proposal, which has received broad support from all stakeholders, will enable ACAS to offer the parties the opportunity to resolve their dispute without the need for tribunal involvement.

We are taking the necessary primary powers to introduce EC in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill. However, the implementation of EC requires secondary legislation and the development of the necessary administrative process. This consultation sets out how we intend that EC should operate.

Our consultation on proposed changes to the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (TUPE) also launches today. TUPE legislation protects employee rights when the business or undertaking for which they work transfers to a new employer. The call for evidence identified concerns that the benefits intended from service provision changes to TUPE made in 2006 had not been achieved and that the provisions on employee liability information were not required.

The Government consider that there is scope to improve the regulations by removing unnecessary gold-plating and generally eliminating bureaucracy. Accordingly, we are consulting on a range of proposals designed to ease the transfer process, including the repeal of the service provision changes and the specific requirements regarding the notification of employee liability information.

In addition, we are consulting on a number of proposals to change the wording of particular provisions in TUPE to more closely reflect the acquired rights directive and the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union.

One example of this is the provisions restricting changes to contracts. Other proposals will allow smaller firms, in some situations, to inform and consult employees about transfers directly and we will also improve guidance on a range of issues.

Additionally, we are launching today a consultation on reforming the regulatory framework for employment agencies and employment businesses. The recruitment sector plays an important role in the UK’s labour market by improving the efficiency of matching demand for jobs to demand for workers. However, the legislation which regulates the sector is complicated and difficult for businesses and individuals to understand.

We want to reform how the recruitment sector is regulated, ensuring that protections are in place for people looking for work, but removing costly and complex regulations.

We want to establish when it is appropriate for the Government to impose rules on the recruitment sector and when it is more appropriate for the sector and marketplace to decide the rules for themselves. The consultation will also seek views on different enforcement options and whether individual enforcement would be more effective than the current Government enforcement regime.

Copies of the “Ending the employment relationship” Government response, and of each of the consultation documents being launched today, have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Regional Growth Fund

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Michael Fallon): Today my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will announce the opening of a fourth competitive round of the regional growth fund (RGF). A total of £350 million is available for applicants. Building on the RGF over the last two years, this money will continue to support businesses to expand and create jobs.

The additional funding was announced in the 2012 autumn statement as part of a range of measures to target help for businesses and rebalance the economy to drive growth. This brings the overall total of RGF to £2.6 billion—helping create and safeguard thousands of jobs and attract private sector investment.

RGF is delivering jobs and growth through good value-for-money projects and programmes—so round 4 will be a further competitive bidding process, with the same objectives as previous rounds. We still need to build growth in key parts of the country which are overly dependent on the public sector and the RGF is a key part of this because of its success in generating private sector investment.

Round 4 of the RGF is open now and will close to applicants on 20 March at noon. Bids will be appraised as quickly as possible. The accelerated timetable that I introduced for round 3 will be used which means the contracting process will be complete within six months of a bid being selected. Potential applicants should look out for expressions of interest events in their local area for support and further help with the application process. The first of these will be in Manchester on 31 January followed by meetings in Birmingham on 6 February, Leeds on the 19 February and Nottingham on 25 February. Other meeting dates, including one in London, will be announced shortly. These meetings are open to any organisation interested in bidding.

Further information for bidders is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/understanding-the-regional-growth-fund>.

Progress to date

The contracting process for rounds 1 and 2 process is now complete and 89% of all round 1 and 2 projects and programmes have started. In total, 180 projects and programmes have agreed final terms. This means that over £1 billion has been released generating £5.8 billion of private sector investment. A small number of contracts are either at an advanced stage of due diligence or have specific strategic value so have been given a little more

time. However, in order to retain the sense of urgency these have been moved onto the round 3 timetable which means that a final offer will have to be agreed by 19 April.

Selected bidders from round 3 are currently agreeing terms and conditions for their final offers from the accelerated timetable which was announced in October 2012. The deadline for agreeing a provisional offer is 19 January and I will be issuing a further statement following this deadline to update both Houses on progress in round 3.

Exceptional RGF

Ministers have agreed that Government reserve the option to use RGF funding flexibly in order to respond quickly to economic shocks and opportunities or to ensure that viable growth-promoting projects are not terminated because of minor funding shortfalls which need to be met quickly. This will be in exceptional circumstances only and will take place outside the normal bidding process, although detailed due diligence requirements will still need to be met.

Exceptional RGF will be funded through money recycled back into the fund because selected projects or programmes have either reduced in scope or withdrawn. I will include updates on exceptional RGF in my regular statements to Parliament on RGF.

CABINET OFFICE

Standards in Public Life Committee (Fourteenth Report)

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Mr Francis Maude): The fourteenth report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (Cm 8519) has been published by the Committee today. Copies are available in the Libraries of both Houses.

TREASURY

Finance Bill

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): The Government are today publishing draft legislation for inclusion in Finance Bill 2013, in addition to that published on 11 December. This will be open for technical consultation until Wednesday 6 February 2013.

Details of the clauses “Tax Information and Impacts Notes” and “Explanatory Notes” published today are available on both the HM Treasury and HM Revenue and Customs website.

The draft legislation includes clauses on the following policies announced at Budget 2012:

The removal of a tax charge under the remittance basis of non-domicile taxation which can arise inadvertently in certain circumstances;

The definition of trusts with vulnerable beneficiaries. This is a revision of legislation published on 11 December 2012 and contains detailed provisions originally planned to be introduced by secondary legislation but which will now be introduced via Finance Bill 2013.

The draft legislation also includes two other clauses:

As announced at autumn statement 2012, the Government are publishing draft legislation to raise the annual drawdown pension limit from 100% to 120% of the value of an equivalent annuity;

Legislation which amends the Corporation Tax Act 2010 to ensure that, as with police authorities before them, chief constables and the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis are exempt from any liability to pay corporation tax on any profits from chargeable activities. This is a new announcement and the legislation will take effect from the dates the new legal entities came into existence. For the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis the legislation will take effect from 16 January 2012, and for chief constables it will take effect from 22 November 2012.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Ashton of Upholland, has called an extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council for Thursday 17 January in Brussels to discuss the situation in Mali, and take stock of possible EU action in support of the Malian Government and people. I will attend.

Baroness Ashton's statement calling the extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council can be found at:

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/134662.pdf.

As set out in Baroness Ashton's statement, the Foreign Affairs Council will discuss the proposed EU training mission, financial and logistical assistance for the deployment of African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), and will consider other direct support to the Malian Government.

I will report to Parliament the outcome of the extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council, and will continue to update Parliament on future Foreign Affairs Councils.

HEALTH

Plasma Resources UK Limited

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Dr Daniel Poulter): Further to the written ministerial statement made on 13 July 2012, *Official Report*, columns 84-85WS, I am announcing today that the Government have decided to seek private sector investment in the Government-owned limited company, Plasma Resources UK Ltd (PRUK) through the sale of the majority or all of the shares in the company. We are taking this action to support the company and its employees in the next phase of the company's development.

We have carefully examined the strategic options that will best allow the company—which includes the UK-based fractionation facility Bio Products Laboratory Limited (BPL) and the US-based plasma supply company, DCI Biologicals Inc—to grow and be successful in an established and highly competitive global industry. It should fulfil its potential as part of the strategically important bioscience sector of the UK economy. Our conclusion is that this route will best meet those requirements.

Patients will also benefit, as investment will not only allow continued improvements to the existing products but also the potential development of new treatments to create a better product portfolio. Resources will also be used to ensure that the facilities keep pace with the latest technology so the company can achieve its full potential. Overall, the investment will play a key part in ensuring the continued supply of high-quality products to patients.

Potential investors will need to show not just the level of resources they are willing to make available but also set out a credible plan as to how the operations will be grown and how products will be developed.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Public Reading Stage

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Andrew Lansley): The coalition programme for government undertook to introduce a new "Public Reading Stage" for Bills to give the public an opportunity to comment on proposed legislation online.

In pursuance of this aim the Government have conducted two pilot Public Reading Stages on the Cabinet Office website, in respect of the Protection of Freedoms Bill in February/March 2011 and the Small Charitable Donations Bill in August/September 2012. In addition, an online consultation was conducted by the Department of Health on the draft Care and Support Bill, which is currently undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny by a Joint Committee of both Houses.

Levels of participation in these consultations varied: for the Protection of Freedoms Bill 6,600 individuals visited the site; and 256 contributors made a total of 568 comments. Many of these were from members of the public rather than from organisations and made a helpful contribution to improving the content of the Bill. Participation on the Small Charitable Donations Bill was more limited: there were 85 comments from 23 organisations, most of which had already contributed to an earlier consultation on the Bill. There were no comments from individuals without a connection to interested organisations. The online consultation on the draft Care and Support Bill attracted a substantial number of responses, with over around 1,000 comments received. The detailed outcome of this consultation has been submitted to the Joint Committee scrutinising the Bill.

The comments from the Protection of Freedoms Bill and the Small Charitable Donations Bill were collated and presented to the Public Bill Committees, alongside an analysis by the Department responsible for the legislation. The comments and reports were referred to during the Committee Stage for each Bill, although they did not directly trigger any amendments.

The Government remain committed to promoting public engagement in Parliament and specifically in the legislative process. The pilot results indicate that approaches to consultation should be carefully tailored to the Bill. We will therefore seek to make our approach to consultation on legislation in line with the consultation principles introduced last year. These seek to ensure a more proportionate and targeted approach, so that the type and scale of engagement is proportional to the potential impacts of the proposal. We will not, at this

stage, be introducing a Public Reading Stage as a matter of routine for Bills. Instead, an assessment will be made on a case-by-case basis of the type of public engagement and consultation that best fits the nature and timing of individual Bills, taking into account levels of stakeholder engagement in policy development. This decision does not preclude further consideration with a view to improving public engagement, particularly during Public Bill Committees, by this House.

The Government will draw upon the full range of existing consultation and engagement mechanisms available, in line with the development of an open policy making model, as outlined in the civil service reform plan. These consultations may be conducted where it has not been possible to publish the legislation in draft, or either as part of or in addition to pre-legislative scrutiny where this would not duplicate work being undertaken by Select Committees.

PRIME MINISTER

URENCO

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I am today confirming a machinery of government change concerning the management of the Government's stake in the uranium enrichment company URENCO.

Responsibility for this is moving from the Department of Energy and Climate Change to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Sickness Absence

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Mr Mark Hoban): Today the Government will publish a Command Paper giving their response to the independent review of sickness absence in Great Britain carried out by Dame Carol Black and David Frost. We are setting out a new strategy which will help people to stay in work, support employers to manage attendance more effectively, and reduce the number of people falling needlessly on to sickness benefits.

The review identified structural failings in the current system, which typically offers little support to either employees or employers in the early stages of sickness absence and brings significant state resources to bear

only once the individual has become detached from the labour market and significant damage has been done to their future employability.

Our response sets out new measures to support employers, employees and healthcare professionals to minimise avoidable absences and keep more people attached to the labour market. We expect this to yield significant benefits for individuals, employers and the state.

At the centre of our approach is a new state-funded service which will carry out an independent assessment of employees after four weeks of sickness absence and provide advice to the employee, employer and GP. This service will be funded by the abolition of the percentage threshold scheme, which currently reimburses some elements of statutory sick pay but does nothing to encourage employers to reduce it. We agree with the reviewers that existing resources would be better used to support employers to manage sickness absence more effectively.

We will also support employers by retaining existing tax relief on employee assistance programmes and abolishing statutory record-keeping requirements for statutory sick pay. We will consider the introduction of a tax relief on interventions recommended by the new service, and make a decision at the 2013 Budget.

The response sets out how we will use the opportunity provided by wider reform of the welfare system to address the problems the reviewers identified with the way the current benefit system treats people with health or sickness issues. Under universal credit we will ensure that people receive appropriate support to assist their return to work from the start of their claim rather than waiting until they have undergone a work capability assessment. And we will use the universal jobmatch system to help people who are unable to return to their old job due to health issues to find more suitable employment.

The response also announces measures to strengthen sickness absence management within the public sector, following the progress made by the civil service in reducing absence and reviewing the terms of occupational sick pay policies. We will continue to work with public sector employers to bring transparency and accountability to the management of sickness absence.

The response has been informed by close working across Government and the devolved Administrations and input from employers, employee organisations and health care professionals across the country, who have all made an important contribution to the development of these proposals.

Petition

Thursday 17 January 2013

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Wild land and wild places

The Petition of citizens of the UK,

Declares that the Petitioners support the John Muir Trust's call to extend National Park Boundaries, or put in place new National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and to ensure improved environmental protection for the best areas of wild land.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to extend National Park boundaries, or to put in place new National Parks or areas of outstanding natural beauty as called for by the John Muir Trust.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Glyn Davies, *Official Report*, 12 December 2012; Vol. 555, c. 416.]

[P001147]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs:

The Government recognise the importance of protecting our finest landscapes and the health and well-being benefits that access to the natural environment can bring. National Parks and AONB are areas recognised as being of the very highest value for their landscapes, wildlife and cultural heritage. They are protected to safeguard and enhance their special qualities. There are 15 National Parks in the UK and 46 AONB.

In England, it is for Natural England to recommend the designation of a particular area, and a National Park or AONB is created when the Secretary of State

confirms the designation. Approximately 23% of the land area of England is currently designated as either National Park or AONB, with the most recent National Park being South Downs, designated in 2010. Natural England has also recommended extensions to two of England's Parks, the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales. If the proposals are approved, a further 488 square kilometres will be added. Future work on landscape designations will be guided by a Designations Strategy adopted by Natural England in July 2012. A number of potential future AONB boundary variations will be considered later this year by Natural England in consultation with affected Local Authorities.

In Wales it is for the Countryside Council for Wales to make an order designating a particular area, and for the Welsh Ministers to confirm, vary or reject that order as they see fit. Over 24% of land in Wales is designated as either a national park or as an AONB. The most recent designation was confirmed by Welsh Ministers in November 2011 when the Clwydian Range AONB was significantly extended to create the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB.

In Scotland, there is separate National Parks legislation and designation is the responsibility of the Scottish Government. In 2010 Ministers extended the boundary of the Cairngorms National Park to include part of Highland Perthshire. Scotland has two types of protected area with a specific landscape focus—National Scenic Areas and National Parks. These cover almost 20% of Scotland's land area.

In Northern Ireland the designation of National Parks and AONBs is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment. There are eight AONBs designated, including a re-designation of Strangford and Lecale in 2010 which allows for voluntary management plans to be developed. There are no plans to amend the boundaries of any NI AONBs. There are currently no National parks in Northern Ireland, although the DOE is proposing to take forward enabling legislation for a revised NI model. The DOE Minister is seeking the agreement of the NI Executive to this initiative.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 17 January 2013

WORK AND PENSIONS

Deloitte

John Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much his Department paid to Deloitte for consultancy services in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012. [135987]

Mr Hoban: The amount paid by the Department for Work and Pensions to Deloitte for consultancy services in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012 was:

(a) 2010: £9,197,088

(b) 2011: £2,209,580

(c) 2012: £318,726

Design Council: Pensions

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what arrangements for the administration of the Design Council Pensions Scheme have been put in place and monitored by his Department. [137712]

Steve Webb: Responsibility for the administration of pension schemes lies with either the trustee of trust-based schemes or the provider of contract-based schemes.

The Department is responsible for the legislation and regulatory framework governing the operation of workplace pension schemes. This regulatory framework exists to make sure schemes are run properly and are compliant with legislation.

The responsible regulatory authorities are:

The Pensions Regulator, which has powers to regulate the way that company pension schemes are run, and to investigate pension fraud and badly run schemes; and

The Financial Services Authority, which regulates the financial services industry in the UK and can take action against firms if they fail to meet the required standards.

The framework also sets in place bodies that can assist individuals. These are:

The Pensions Advisory Service, which is an independent non-profit organisation that provides free information, advice and guidance about pensions;

The pensions ombudsman, which investigates and decides complaints and disputes about the way that pension schemes are run; and

The Pension Tracing Service, which helps individuals track down lost or frozen pension schemes.

Employment and Support Allowance

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions whether he plans to propose changes to a student's entitlement to employment and support allowance if they have to leave their course because they are diagnosed with (a) cancer and (b) another serious illness. [137362]

Mr Hoban: There are circumstances when certain vulnerable students can access benefits. These include students who are long-term sick and in receipt of disability living allowance (DLA), those who are disabled and some lone parents (subject to the age of their youngest child). Students are eligible for income-related employment and support allowance (ESA) if they are entitled to DLA.

There are no plans to change the eligibility criteria for students to claim ESA.

Sheila Gilmore: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how often on average people with (a) Parkinson's and (b) all progressive conditions are reassessed for their eligibility for employment and support allowance. [137792]

Mr Hoban: For all new employment and support allowance (ESA) claims with Parkinson's disease recorded as the main health condition where there was an initial work capability assessment (WCA) and a first repeat WCA, the average duration between the decision-maker's decision at the initial WCA and the first repeat WCA was 472 days.

The data includes all claims with repeat decisions taken on them up to May 2012 (the latest data available).

Data on the health conditions recorded is based on the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases, 2010 (ICD10):

<http://www.who.int/classifications/icd/en/>

Due to the large number of health conditions described by ICD10 it would be possible to identify those considered "progressive" only at excessive cost to the Department.

Government Procurement Card

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in his Department have use of a Government Procurement Card. [137260]

Mr Hoban: Government Procurement Cards (GPC) are held by staff across DWP to make low value purchases. Currently there are 545 GPCs in issue to DWP staff. Special advisers do not hold GPCs.

Housing Benefit

Margaret Curran: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of the potential saving to the Exchequer following the introduction of house size criteria as a condition for receipt of housing benefit. [137590]

Steve Webb: Estimates of the savings to the Exchequer of the size criteria measure are available in the impact assessment:

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/social-sector-housing-under-occupation-wr2011-ia.pdf>

Housing Benefit: Scotland

Margaret Curran: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the amount of housing benefit payments paid in each local authority area in Scotland has been in the last five years. [137591]

Mr Hoban: Housing benefit expenditure from 2005-06 to 2011-12 by local authority is on the table entitled "Tables showing benefit expenditure by country, region and local authority from 2000/01 to 2011/12" which can be accessed at:

<http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd4/index.php?page=expenditure>

Note:

The breakdown of HB and CTB expenditure is based on a combination of statistical data and local authority subsidy returns.

Margaret Curran: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of the number of people in Scotland who will be affected by the introduction of house size criteria as a condition for receipt of housing benefit. [137592]

Steve Webb: Estimates of numbers affected by the size criteria measure at national and regional level are available in the impact assessment:

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/social-sector-housing-under-occupation-wr2011-ia.pdf>

Margaret Curran: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much has been paid in housing benefit in Scotland in the last five years; and what estimate he has made of the amount of such payments in the next two financial years. [137593]

Mr Hoban: Outturn and forecasts of housing benefit expenditure by country is on the table entitled "Medium term forecast for all DWP benefits" in the housing benefit tab, which can be accessed at:

<http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd4/index.php?page=expenditure>

Note:

The breakdown of HB and CTB expenditure is based on a combination of statistical data and local authority subsidy returns.

Part-time Employment

Ann McKechnin: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what proportion of staff in his Department work part-time. [137024]

Mr Hoban: As at 30 November 2012 (the latest data available) 39% of employees in the Department for Work and Pensions were working part-time.

Pay

Jim Sheridan: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will assess the effects of wage increases on consumer spending power and the economy. [136592]

Sajid Javid: I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Treasury.

The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) is responsible for producing independent economic and fiscal forecasts. The OBR published a forecast for pre-tax labour income (that includes wages), and also household disposable income on 5 December 2012 in their Economic and fiscal outlook.

The OBR forecast that real household disposable income will grow in each year from 2013 to 2017. Pre-tax labour income is forecast to make the largest contribution to real household disposable income growth in each of those years.

Consumption by households accounts for around two-thirds of expenditure in the UK, so movements in consumption have an important impact on gross domestic product and the economy.

Press: Subscriptions

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much his Department spent on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12. [137280]

Mr Hoban: Information on the amount spent on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12 is as follows, and, for reasons of comparison, the amount for financial year 2010-11 is also given.

£		
<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Newspaper/magazine spend</i>	<i>Periodical spend</i>
2011-12	16,632.51	39,955.85
2010-11	27,905.75	80,071.96

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions pursuant to the answer of 31 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 307W, on subscriptions, how much his Department has spent on subscriptions since May 2010. [137287]

Mr Hoban: The information is as follows:

£		
<i>Date range</i>	<i>Newspaper/magazine spend</i>	<i>Periodical spend</i>
April 2010 to date	55,711.27	142,781.00

Redundancy

Mr Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many civil service posts have been made redundant by his Department in each year since 1999; and what the cost of redundancies has been in each such year. [135485]

Mr Hoban: The Department for Work and Pensions was created in 2001, therefore I am not able to provide the information requested for years prior to this, and the information requested is not held in Departmental records for the years 2001 to 2004.

In the following table I have reproduced the information requested, since 2004, which includes compensation paid through the use of voluntary exit schemes, voluntary redundancy and compulsory redundancy.

In all cases, prior to a civil service role ending, employees are given the opportunity for redeployment before a paid exit is considered.

	<i>Exits</i>	<i>Cost (£ million)</i>
2005-06	2,805	173.00
2006-07	2,054	62.00

	<i>Exits</i>	<i>Cost (£ million)</i>
2007-08	3,620	166.00
2008-09	148	3.54
2009-10	42	4.50
2010-11	1,564	71.10
2011-12 ¹	1,113	43.27

¹ Please note that the costs of exits in 2011-12 are currently being reconciled and may change slightly.

Rented Housing: Greater London

Mr Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much each London borough spent on (a) housing benefit, (b) rent rebates to local authority tenants and (c) rent allowances to tenants of other landlords in each year between 2005-06 and 2011-12. [137776]

Mr Hoban: Housing benefit, rent rebates and rent allowances expenditure from 2005-06 to 2011-12 by local authority is on the table entitled "Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit expenditure by Local Authority from 1996-97 to 2011-12" which can be accessed at:

<http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd4/index.php?page=expenditure>

Notes:

1. Published rent rebate expenditure figures consist of Housing Revenue Account Rent Rebate and Other Rent Rebate. For England and Wales, Other Rent Rebate is made up primarily of Non-HRA Temporary Accommodation cases.
2. The breakdown of HB and CTB expenditure is based on a combination of statistical data and local authority subsidy returns.

Social Security Benefits

Mr Raab: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what steps his Department is taking to tackle benefit tourism. [137333]

Mr Hoban: We have a legal duty to provide support to people who come to this country, in line with our national and international obligations. However we have strict rules to ensure that people who come here cannot take inappropriate advantage of our benefit system. We believe that migrant workers who have contributed to the economy and paid their dues should be protected, but free movement should not mean unrestricted access to benefits for economically inactive migrants.

Contributory benefits, such as contribution-based jobseeker's allowance, are payable to anyone who satisfies the contribution and other conditions for the benefit, regardless of nationality.

However, all migrants must satisfy the Habitual Residence Test before they are eligible to claim means tested benefits. The test has two elements: a legal right to reside and an objective assessment of factual habitual residence. Economically inactive EEA nationals and their family members cannot claim income-related benefits. People coming from outside the European Economic Area are subject to immigration control and they generally have an immigration status that allows no recourse to public funds and so would not be eligible for income-related benefits.

My Department hosted a ministerial conference in London last year at which a number of other EU member states expressed their concerns about economically inactive migrants abusing free movement rights to get access to benefits. We are now working with member states to agree a set of principles for sustainable social security coordination in the future.

Social Security Benefits: Scotland

Cathy Jamieson: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many and what proportion of the workforce in (a) Scotland and (b) Kilmarnock and Loudoun constituency will be affected by the proposed one per cent benefits uprating. [137376]

Steve Webb: The Department estimates that of working-age households around 500,000 in-work households in Scotland will be affected by the Welfare Benefits Uprating Bill.

This represents around 30% of all in-work households in Scotland. Of these households around 200,000 are receiving child benefit but not tax credits.

There are around 300,000 working-age households in Scotland where no one is in work who will be affected. This represents around 62% of all out-of-work working-age households in Scotland.

It is not possible to provide an answer for part (b) as there is not sufficient sample size to break the data down to a constituency level.

Notes:

1. This estimate has been calculated using the Department's Policy Simulation Model and is modelled on a consistent basis with the estimates published in the impact assessment of 8 January 2013, which covered the impacts of the uprating changes in 2014-15 and 2015-16 covered by the Welfare Benefits Up-rating Bill.
2. Child benefit will be increased by 1% for two years from April 2014, when the three year freeze announced at the June 2010 Budget comes to an end.
3. An in-work household is defined as one where at least one member is working one or more hours.
4. Numbers are rounded to the nearest 1% or 100,000.

Temporary Employment

Jon Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many temporary staff have been recruited in his Department in each month from July to December 2012. [135212]

Mr Hoban: DWP has not recruited any temporary staff in this period.

Unemployment: Tower Hamlets

Rushanara Ali: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions whether he has assessed the number of people (a) in each ward and (b) of each ethnicity who have been unemployed in Tower Hamlets for (i) six, (ii) 12 and (iii) 24 months. [136617]

Mr Hoban: Information on ILO unemployment is not available at this level of detail. Corresponding information on claimant unemployment is in the tables.

Claimant unemployment in Tower Hamlets by duration of claim and ward, November 2012

Ward	Claiming for six months or more	Claiming for 12 months or more	Claiming for 24 months or more
Bethnal Green North	325	230	95
Bethnal Green South	320	225	95
Blackwall and Cubitt Town	300	195	80
Bow East	285	210	95
Bow West	215	155	75
Bromley-by-Bow	410	290	135
East India and Lansbury	440	340	160
Limehouse	320	220	95
Mile End and Globe Town	250	180	75
Mile End East	340	240	110
Millwall	340	235	100
St Dunstan's and Stepney Green	335	220	85
St Katharine's and Wapping	140	100	50
Shadwell	250	155	70
Spitalfields and Banglatown	260	175	90
Weavers	300	210	90
Whitechapel	245	170	65
Tower Hamlets	5,095	3,570	1,565

Claimant unemployment in Tower Hamlets by duration of claim and ethnicity, October 2012

Ethnicity	Claiming for six months or more	Claiming for 12 months or more	Claiming for 24 months or more
White	1,460	1,035	500
All ethnic minority groups	3,320	2,345	925
Mixed	155	115	55
Asian or Asian British	2,230	1,550	555
Black or Black British	760	565	265
Chinese or Other Ethnic Group	180	125	55
Prefer not to say	290	180	75
Unknown	75	55	25
All ethnic groups	5,150	3,620	1,530

Notes:

1. The total estimates in each table are not the same because they relate to different time periods, reflecting the latest data available in each case.
2. Estimates cover all claimants over the specified duration. For example, the total claiming for six months or more includes all those claiming for 12 months or more, which in turn includes all those claiming for 24 months or more.
3. Estimates are rounded to the nearest five claimants, so may not sum to totals.

Source:

Claimant count, Nomis

Unemployment: Young People

Graeme Morrice: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what steps he is taking to promote the use of TheFutureYou.org.uk and other online support networks to address youth unemployment in the UK. [136691]

Mr Hoban: While we would not take specific action to promote the use of individual external websites, our strategy for supporting young people into work is increasingly helped by the use of online tools and digital media.

Jobcentre Plus advisers are now using a variety of methods to keep in touch with claimants, including e-mail and text messaging. Young claimants can use the Department's online job matching service—Universal Jobmatch which enables them to build a CV which then matches them to jobs. This service speeds up the job search process and it is also free for employers to advertise their jobs.

Jobcentre Plus also uses social media to promote jobs to young people. It promotes specific jobs and information about the Youth Contract via Twitter and is currently testing the use of Facebook to do the same in 10 local areas.

Mr Byrne: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what proportion of incentive payments under the Youth Contract has been paid out to employers to date. [137633]

Mr Hoban: The Youth Contract, including wage incentives, went live on April 2012 and in most cases wage incentives are paid after a young person has been in work continuously for 26 weeks. Following the collection and quality assurance of this data, I expect the first set of Official Statistics on the wage incentive to be available in the early part of 2013. The Department is working to guidelines set by the UK Statistics Authority to ensure we publish statistics that meet high quality standards at the earliest opportunity.

Work Capability Assessment

Rushanara Ali: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many work capability assessments were successfully appealed in (a) Bethnal Green and Bow constituency, (b) Tower Hamlets, (c) London and (d) the UK as a proportion of the total number of assessments carried out in 2011-12. [136697]

Mr Hoban: Data on outcomes of assessments for employment and support allowance (ESA) is not available for the Bethnal Green and Bow parliamentary constituency.

The following table shows the number and proportion of successful appeals (initial decision overturned) heard on fit for work decisions at the initial work capability

assessment. The table covers employment and support allowance claims starting between January 2011 and August 2011 (the latest information available).

Fit for work decisions overturned on appeal as a proportion of all work capability assessments in Tower Hamlets, London and the UK

Area	Initial decision overturned at Tribunal Service	All initial work capability assessments	Overturns as a proportion of all initial assessments (%)
Tower Hamlets	100	1,200	6
London	1,700	35,400	5
UK	14,000	266,900	5

Notes:

1. The statistics are likely to alter over time due to outstanding appeals for ESA claims made in this period. Appeals against incapacity reassessment outcomes are not included.
2. The table includes appeals on initial fit for work decisions only. Appeals made against work related activity group decisions or following repeat assessments or incapacity benefit reassessment decisions have not been included here as they are not yet available.
3. The data presented above come from benefit claims data held by the Department for Work and Pensions, functional assessment data from Atos Healthcare and appeals data from the Tribunals Service.
4. All numbers have been rounded to the nearest 100.

Work Programme

Mr Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many prime contractors will not be receiving in full the outcome fee from June under the terms of their Work programme contract; and if he will make a statement. [137789]

Mr Hoban: The Work programme funding model is linked to the achievement of individual job outcomes rather than the allocation of a single fee for outcomes achieved. Providers can only claim a job outcome payment after a participant has been in a job for three or six months, they can then claim sustainment payments every four weeks if a participant stays in work longer.

The fee structure for the Work programme is available on the DWP website via this link:

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/the-work-programme.pdf>

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Apprentices: Catering

Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills if he will place in the Library a copy of the contract with the provider for the Asian Culinary Excellence initiative. [136669]

Matthew Hancock [*holding answer 14 January 2013*]: A copy of the relevant investment funding agreement between the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and People 1st will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Export Credit Guarantees

Mr Umunna: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills by what date he expects funds to be made available to firms from the monies announced in the autumn statement 2012 to provide loans for small firms to access growing export markets overseas through UK Export Finance; and what milestones, timescales, deadlines and targets he has set in relation to that process. [137815]

Michael Fallon: As announced in the autumn statement, 5 December 2012, *Official Report*, columns 871-82,

funds will be available from 1 April 2013 for a three-year period under the Direct Lending Scheme to be administered by UK Export Finance.

UK Export Finance is working with the British Bankers' Association to put in place arrangements to enable exporters to access the scheme with a view to it being operational as soon as possible after 1 April.

The scheme is intended to fund export contracts involving export loans with a value of up to £50 million and is therefore for smaller and medium-sized transactions rather than being particularly targeted at SMEs. The uptake of funding under the scheme will depend upon UK exporters winning export contracts for which their buyers require loan financing for periods of two years or longer where financing from commercial sources is unavailable.

Government Procurement Card

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in his Department have use of a Government Procurement Card. [137270]

Jo Swinson: The number of core BIS staff holding a Government Procurement Card is 186. The special advisers do not hold Government Procurement Cards.

ICT: Graduates

Chris White: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many computer science students graduated from UK universities in (a) 2008, (b) 2009, (c) 2010 and (d) 2011. [137604]

Mr Willetts: The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collects and publishes data on qualifiers from UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Information on the number of postgraduate and undergraduate students qualifying from Computer Science subjects at UK HEIs for the academic years 2008/09 to 2011/12 is provided in the table.

Information for the 2012/13 academic year will become available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency in January 2014.

Qualifiers¹ from Computer Science² by level of study, UK Higher Education Institutions, academic years 2008/09 to 2011/12

Level of study	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Postgraduate	8,015	9,835	11,390	10,455
Undergraduate	19,155	19,285	19,735	20,060
Total	27,170	29,120	31,125	30,520

¹ Figures are based on a HESA standard registration population and have been rounded up or down to the nearest five, so components may not sum to totals.

² Subject information is shown as Full Person Equivalents (FPEs) in the table. FPEs are derived by splitting student instances between the different subjects that make up their course aim.

Source:

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Student Record

Imports: Israel

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what steps he is taking to ensure that products produced by Israeli settlers in Occupied Palestinian Territories are correctly labelled as being from that source. [137631]

Jo Swinson: There is no mandatory requirement for goods produced in the Occupied Palestinian Territories to be labelled as such. We have no plans to introduce such a requirement.

Where specific EU legislation in the food sectors requires the country of origin to be indicated the Government believes that, for example, "Produce of The West Bank" is a lawful description of the origin of such goods. The west bank is a recognised geographical area within the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

So far as food and drink of Occupied Palestinian Territories origin imported into the UK is concerned, DEFRA has issued voluntary technical advice for the benefit of those importers and retailers who believe that their customers wish to distinguish between products of Israeli settlement provenance and those which originate from Palestinian growers.

More generally the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 ban traders in all sectors from using misleading commercial practices which are likely to distort a transactional decision of the average consumer. This includes statements about the geographical or commercial origin of products.

As with other elements of goods, the Government encourages consumers who are interested in a particular property of goods, including their origin, to ask the seller. If they are not happy with the reply, then they can shop elsewhere. If they suspect that the reply is not truthful, then they can take the matter up with their local authority Trading Standards Officers who enforce the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008.

Local Enterprise Partnerships: Liverpool

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many projects have been funded by the Liverpool City Region local enterprise partnership to date; and how much has been paid to each project in funding. [137801]

Michael Fallon: The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills does not hold this information.

The Liverpool City Region local enterprise partnership is responsible for its own day to day decisions, and for what funding it provides and to whom. More information can be found on the LEP's website:

<http://www.liverpoollep.org/>

Press: Subscriptions

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how much his Department spent on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12. [137281]

Jo Swinson: The financial data held within BIS does not separately identify the amount spent on newspapers and periodicals and such costs are included among all publication costs.

In the financial year April 2011 to March 2012 the amount of expenditure against all publications is £294,500.00. This figure includes a range of publications, including newspapers and periodicals.

The Department does publish details of all individual spend transactions as part of its obligations under transparency. These details are openly available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-business-innovation-skills/series/bis-spending-totals>

Procurement

Mr Umunna: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills pursuant to the answer of 6 November 2012, *Official Report*, column 596W, on procurement, what proportion of suppliers to his Department and its agencies are signed up to the Prompt Payment Code. [137816]

Michael Fallon: The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills paid 95.5% of its suppliers within five working days during the last quarter of 2012 (October to December) and actively encourages and promotes the Prompt Payment Code to its suppliers. In addition, I recently wrote to all FTSE 350 companies asking them to become signatories of the code.

Information on the number of suppliers who are signatories to the code is not held centrally within the Department or its Executive agencies and could be provided only at disproportionate costs.

Publications

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how often his Department produces a staff magazine. [137318]

Jo Swinson: BIS does not produce a staff magazine; we use our intranet as the key internal channel for disseminating information. This conforms with the digital by default policy, which applies to all new Government publications.

Temporary Employment

Mr Umunna: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many staff are currently employed on a temporary basis by his Department and its agencies; and how many of those staff are agency workers. [137817]

Jo Swinson: There are currently 241 staff employed on temporary basis in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (including UK Trade and Investment—UKTI). Of these, 132 are agency staff. These figures exclude consultants.

Temporary workers are employed to cover short-term projects or provide specialist expertise not generally available in the Department. In UKTI, temporary workers are mostly people with deep expertise not easily found within the civil service, e.g. country, sector or marketing expertise.

I have asked chief executives of the executive agencies to respond directly to the hon. Member.

Letter from Dr Vanessa Lawrence CB, dated 16 January 2013:

As Director General and Chief Executive of Ordnance Survey, I have been asked to reply to you in response to your Parliamentary Question asking the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills “how many staff are currently employed on a temporary basis by his Department and its agencies; and how many of those staff are agency workers”?

Ordnance Survey currently employs 80 staff on a temporary basis. Of these 80 staff, 78 are engaged through an agency and 2 are Civil Servants on Fixed Term Appointments. Agency staff are used to cover short term workload fluctuations, which arise either through customer requirements or seasonal or system introductions that affect levels of data processing. They may also be used to backfill extended absence cover, such as maternity leave or secondments to projects for permanent employees.

Ordnance Survey also uses contingency workers to provide skills and expertise in specific areas, via third-party service contracts. An additional 96 such workers are currently being used by Ordnance Survey.

I hope this information is of use.

Letter from Kim Thorneywork, dated 16 January 2013:

Thank you for your question in asking the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, how many staff are currently employed on a temporary basis by his Department and its agencies; and how many of those staff are agency workers.

Please be advised that the Skills Funding Agency currently employs 92 contingent workers on a temporary basis and 8 inward secondees. All 92 contingent workers are sourced and invoiced through an agency.

Letter from Tim Moss, dated 16 January 2013:

I am replying on behalf of Companies House to your Parliamentary Question tabled 14 January 2013, to the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, UIN 137817.

Companies House currently has five members of staff employed on a temporary basis; all are agency workers.

Letter from John Hirst, dated 16 January 2013:

I am replying on behalf of the Met Office to your Parliamentary Question tabled on 14 January 2013, UIN 137817 to the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills.

There are currently 85 people employed on a temporary basis at the Met Office, including 59 agency workers.

I hope this helps.

Letter from Peter Mason, dated 15 January 2013:

I am responding in respect of the National Measurement Office (NMO) to your Parliamentary Question tabled on 14 January 2013, asking the Secretary of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills about the number of temporary staff currently employed by his Department and its agencies, and how many of them are agency workers.

There are three individuals currently working in the Agency on a temporary basis. All three individuals are agency workers supplied under the Government Procurement Service National Framework Agreement for the Supply of Non-medical, Non-clinical Temporary and Fixed Term Staff.

Letter from Richard Judge, dated 16 January 2013:

The Secretary of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has asked me to reply to your question how many staff are currently employed on a temporary basis by his Department and its agencies; and how many of those staff are agency workers.

The Insolvency Service currently employs 140 individuals on a temporary basis, of which one is a secondee, 27 are specialist contractors and 112 are agency workers.

Letter from David Parker, dated 15 January 2013:

Thank you for your question addressed to the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, how many staff are currently employed on a temporary basis by his Department and its agencies; and how many of those staff are agency workers. (137817)

The UK Space Agency is an Executive Agency of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills and has one member of staff on a temporary contract along with two agency workers from Adecco.

Letter from Malcolm Dawson, dated 15 January 2013:

I write on behalf of Land Registry in response to your Parliamentary Question 137817 tabled on 14 January 2013 which asked the following:

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, how many staff are currently employed on a temporary basis by his Department and its agencies; and how many of those staff are agency workers.

I can confirm that Land Registry currently has two members of staff on loan from other Government Departments and two agency staff, making a total of four.

I hope you find this information useful.

Letter from Sean Dennehey, dated 16 January 2013:

I am responding in respect of the Intellectual Property Office to your Parliamentary Question tabled 14 January 2013, to the Secretary of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

The Intellectual Property Office (IPO) is an executive agency of BIS. On 1 January 2013 the IPO had 65 temporary workers, 37 of whom were agency workers.

HEALTH

Cancer

Tessa Munt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which Ministers from his Department have met representatives of (a) Varian Medical Systems, (b) Elekta and (c) Accuray between May 2012 and January 2013. [137327]

Dr Poulter: The previous Minister of State for Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Mr Burns), visited Varian Medical Systems’ and Elekta Ltd’s UK sites in Crawley on 12 July 2012.

Cancer: Drugs

Tessa Munt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients have received Tamoxifen as a chemopreventative measure through the Cancer Drugs Fund in each of the last three years. [137232]

Norman Lamb: Latest information from strategic health authorities (SHAs) indicates that no patients have received tamoxifen through the Cancer Drugs Fund (from April 2011 to the end of November 2012) or the interim cancer drugs funding arrangements in 2010-11 (from

October 2010 to the end of February 2011). A breakdown of patient numbers by SHA by drug for March 2011 is not available.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Mr Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what recent steps he has taken to ensure that every child and adult with myalgic encephalomyelitis receive suitable and appropriate treatment for their condition; [137185]

(2) what recent assessment he has made of the 2007 National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines on chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME) and the Medical Research Council sponsored trial into CFS/ME conducted in February 2011. [137186]

Norman Lamb: We have not assessed the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence's (NICE) clinical guidelines on chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME). NICE regularly reviews its guidance to ensure that it remains up to date and takes into account any new evidence that may influence its recommendations, and when new evidence comes to light, NICE can consider revising its published recommendations.

We have made no assessment of the Medical Research Council sponsored PACE trial: A Randomised Controlled Trial of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), graded exercise therapy (GET), adaptive pacing and specialist medical care for the chronic fatigue syndrome. However, we understand that the trial demonstrated that CBT and GET were moderately effective out-patient treatments when added to specialist medical care, as compared with adaptive pacing therapy or specialist medical care alone, and that all four treatments tested were safe. The findings of the trial have been published and NICE has processes to ensure that as new evidence becomes available, its advice can be reviewed.

Clinicians are responsible, within their area of competence, for diagnosing medical conditions, advising patients on the treatment options available and providing care that takes into account their patients' preferences. In doing so, they are expected to take account of evidence-based guidance from NICE and authoritative advice from other relevant bodies.

Long-term conditions is one of the Secretary of State for Health's priority areas and this was reflected in the prominence with which it featured in the mandate to the NHS Commissioning Board. Following the publication of the mandate we are working with the NHS Commissioning Board to agree the best way to improve care for people with long-term conditions including those with CFS/ME.

Drugs: Babies

Nick de Bois: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many infants were readmitted to hospital with neo-natal withdrawal symptoms attributable to maternal use of illicit or therapeutic drugs following being discharged from hospital in each of the last five years. [137181]

Norman Lamb: Data on the number of infants readmitted to hospital with neo-natal withdrawal symptoms attributable to maternal use of illicit or therapeutic drugs following being discharged from hospital are not centrally collected.

Drugs: Licensing

Tessa Munt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consideration his Department has given to allowing the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency or any other similar public body to act as an applicant for a licence for new indications of existing drugs outside their patent protection periods. [137233]

Norman Lamb: The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) is responsible for approval of new medicines including amendments to approved indications. The MHRA is not constituted to conduct or commission clinical trials and other studies required to evaluate the safety, quality and efficacy of medicines. As it is responsible for review and approval of the results of these studies, a role as the applicant for licences for new or existing drugs would conflict with its impartiality as regulator.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is responsible for providing independent, evidence-based guidance for the national health service on clinical and cost effectiveness. There would be a clear conflict of interest for NICE to have a role as an applicant for a marketing authorisation for new indications of existing drugs, and we have no plans to allow it to do so.

Drugs: Misuse

Nick de Bois: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what funding his Department has allocated for drug addiction services in (a) the London borough of Enfield, (b) London and (c) England in each of the last five years. [137449]

Norman Lamb: Central funding for adult drug treatment services has been provided to primary care trusts through the adult pooled treatment budget (PTB).

Adult PTB allocations to the London borough of Enfield, London and England in each of the last five years are set out in the following table:

	Enfield	London	National
2008-09	2,246,734	86,284,297	373,300,000
2009-10	2,053,159	83,470,533	381,300,000
2010-11	1,792,279	76,933,554	381,300,000
2011-12	1,825,461	74,969,952	381,300,000
2012-13	2,041,437	74,830,263	381,300,000

Government Procurement Card

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in his Department have use of a Government Procurement Card. [137264]

Dr Poulter: There are currently 262 Government Procurement Cards in use in the Department. None of these have been assigned to a special adviser.

Health Services

Mrs Glindon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps the NHS Commissioning Board will take to finalise the service specifications for (a) specialised neuromuscular services and (b) other specialised services following the conclusion of the consultation process. [137803]

Norman Lamb: It is the Government's intention that from April 2013 the NHS Commissioning Board (NHS CB) will directly commission specialised services. These services have been prescribed in a set of regulations. Each service will be supported by a service specification developed by specialised clinicians, expert patients and public health representatives. The NHS CB has also developed a manual that provides detailed information on the scope of services to be commissioned.

A range of national commissioning "products", including a draft service specification for neurosciences: neurology D4c, which includes neuromuscular services, have been developed and are currently subject to a period of consultation, which closes on 25 January 2013. A report on the consultation is due to be published in early March.

Responses to the consultation will be carefully analysed before the NHS CB formally adopts the final service specifications for inclusion in contracts with providers from 2013-14.

Health Services: Greater London

Mr Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many health care assistants there were at each acute hospital trust in London in (a) 2010-11 and (b) 2011-12; and if he will make a statement. [137710]

Dr Poulter: The information is not available in the format requested. The numbers of health care assistants employed by each acute hospital trust in London as at 30 September 2010 and 30 September 2011 are shown in the following table:

NHS hospital and community health services: Health care assistants in acute trusts in the London Strategic Health Authority area by organisation as at 30 September each specified year

	Full-time equivalent	
	2010	2011
London Strategic Health Authority area	6,827	7,215
<i>Of which:</i>		
Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust	595	589
Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals NHS Trust	14	328
Barts and the London NHS Trust	4	26
Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust	163	161
Croydon Health Services NHS Trust	2	2
Ealing Hospital NHS Trust	154	198
Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust	203	203
Great Ormond Street Hospital For Children NHS Foundation Trust	120	113
Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust	272	364
Hillingdon Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	251	261

NHS hospital and community health services: Health care assistants in acute trusts in the London Strategic Health Authority area by organisation as at 30 September each specified year

	Full-time equivalent	
	2010	2011
Homerton University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust	140	136
Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust	385	430
King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust	432	439
Kingston Hospital NHS Trust	191	188
Lewisham Healthcare NHS Trust	185	174
Newham University Hospital NHS Trust	31	7
North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust	2	2
North West London Hospitals NHS Trust	272	286
Royal Brompton and Harefield NHS Foundation Trust	84	90
Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust	253	275
Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust	31	69
Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital NHS Trust	86	102
South London Healthcare NHS Trust	562	541
St George's Healthcare NHS Trust	347	331
University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	349	400
West Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust	141	117
Whipps Cross University Hospital NHS Trust	6	6
Whittington Hospital NHS Trust	137	182

Notes:

1. Health care assistants are defined as those staff coded H1 in the Non-Medical Workforce Census Occupation Code manual. HCAs are those staff who are trained, or under training, in the various competencies related to their job.
2. Full-time equivalent figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.
3. London SHA area totals include primary care trusts (PCTs), ambulance trusts and mental health trusts.
4. As a consequence of TCS (Transforming Community Services) the former provider arm of some PCTs may have transferred into local acute trusts. This can be seen in the large increase in staff numbers at Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals NHS Trust and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust for example.
5. Data Quality: The Health and Social Care Information Centre seeks to minimise inaccuracies and the effect of missing and invalid data but responsibility for data accuracy lies with the organisations providing the data. Methods are continually being updated to improve data quality where changes impact on figures already published. This is assessed but unless it is significant at national level figures are not changed. Impact at detailed or local level is footnoted in relevant analyses.

Source:

Health and Social Care Information Centre Non-Medical Workforce Census

Press: Subscriptions

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department spent on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12. [137284]

Dr Poulter: The Department spent £131,101 on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12 (April 2011 to March 2012). This shows a 3.8% reduction on the 2010-11 figure of £136,223, and 47.4% reduction on the 2009-10 figure of £249,152.

The Department's Knowledge Centre is responsible for central provision of library services—including newspapers, periodicals and trade publications. The figures above do not include expenditure on items for retention by individual divisions, responsibility for which was decentralised in April 2010. Details on this expenditure are not available.

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to the answer of 31 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 263W, on press subscriptions, how much his Department has spent on subscriptions since May 2010. [137298]

Dr Poulter: The amount spent on subscriptions since May 2010 is £262,015. This figure includes journal subscriptions for the 2013 calendar year, but not 2010 as these were paid prior to May 2010. This shows a 66.3% reduction on the figures for the previous 33 month period (August 2007 to April 2010) of £776,420.

The Department's Knowledge Centre is responsible for central provision of library services—including newspapers, periodicals and trade publications. The figures above do not include expenditure on items for retention by individual divisions, responsibility for which was decentralised in April 2010. Details on this expenditure are not available.

Publications

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how often his Department produces a staff magazine. [137313]

Dr Poulter: The Department used to publish a monthly (10 issues per annum) printed staff magazine called 'Link'. However the contract came to a natural end and a decision was taken (based on efficiency savings and our green commitment) to withdraw the magazine. The last issue was published March 2011. Since then we have developed a 'pilot' interactive online staff magazine (published on the intranet), full of features and articles capturing the work of staff across the Department and its priorities. The first issue was published in December 2012. If the magazine evaluates well with staff, the intention is to produce it bi-monthly, six issues per year.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Air Pollution

Mr Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what additional steps his Department takes to monitor emissions from appliances manufactured by companies in receipt of Government grants; and if he will make a statement. [136914]

Richard Benyon: The steps that DEFRA requires for appliance exemption under the Clean Air Act 1993 are the same for all solid fuel appliances, regardless of whether the respective manufacturer is in receipt of any Government funds. Under this Act, local authorities are responsible for the designation and supervision of smoke control areas. DEFRA manages a type-approval exemption process for the approval of appliances for use in smoke control areas. This process assesses appliances' smoke emissions based on criteria published on DEFRA's smoke control website at:

<http://smokecontrol.defra.gov.uk/>

An appliance using an authorised fuel in a smoke control area does not require exemption. Details of authorised fuels are also on DEFRA's smoke control website.

Equality

Kate Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what proportion of staff in his Department have received training in equality and diversity and the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 in each of the last three years. [134811]

Richard Benyon: The information requested is not recorded centrally and can be gathered only at disproportionate cost.

Food: Waste Disposal

Sir Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if he will make it his policy to introduce a ban on food waste in landfill; and if he will make a statement. [136436]

Richard Benyon: Our long-term vision is that no food waste should go to landfill. We have committed to reviewing the case for restrictions on sending particular materials to landfill over the course of this Parliament, including looking specifically at wood, textiles and biodegradable waste. Before bringing forward proposals on restricting any materials, the Government needs to be content that restrictions are the best value way of moving material up the waste hierarchy and that the costs to businesses and the public sector are affordable.

Sir Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent progress he has made on the consultation on limiting biodegradable waste landfill, as set out in the Waste review; and if he will make a statement. [136437]

Richard Benyon: We have committed to reviewing the case for restrictions on sending particular materials to landfill over the course of this Parliament, including looking specifically at wood, textiles and biodegradable waste. We have just completed a Call for Evidence on wood waste, fulfilling the first part of this commitment. This is now being analysed, with a view to making a summary of responses publicly available.

Fracking

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions he has had with Ministerial colleagues on the potential effect of fracking rig installations in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. [136780]

Richard Benyon: No discussions have taken place recently regarding the potential effect of fracking rig installations in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Applications for permits for exploration or exploitation activities in such areas would be subject to the existing planning and environmental controls.

Meat: Exports

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had with the European Commission on the timetable for the review of the moratorium of exports of desinewed meat; and if he will make a statement. [137174]

Norman Lamb: I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Department of Health.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA), which has policy responsibility in this area, has worked closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on behalf of the United Kingdom Government in explaining to the European Commission (EC) the full impact of their decision that desinewed meat (DSM) can no longer be produced from ruminant bones and that DSM made from poultry or pork bones should be labelled as mechanically separated meat. DSM from poultry or pork can still be produced and exported but must be correctly labelled.

The FSA has also made it clear to the Commission that the UK expects working group discussions on this matter to reopen without delay after the publication of the opinion of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) on the production of non-ruminant mechanically separated meat, which is expected at the end of March 2013. The FSA continues to pursue this matter with the EC, making the case for the UK interpretation, and has submitted scientific evidence to EFSA to inform the development of the scientific opinion.

Olympic Games 2012

Hugh Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which events at the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics were attended by each Minister in his Department using tickets or passes for which they did not pay personally; and what the cost was of attending each such event for members of the public who used comparable seats or had comparable access. [135638]

Richard Benyon: The Government pledged to publish these details following the Olympic and Paralympic Games and will do so shortly.

Reservoirs: Greater London

Mr Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions he has had with Thames Water regarding a revised plan for a new reservoir. [136649]

Richard Benyon: There have been no recent discussions with Thames Water regarding a revised plan for a new reservoir.

Thames Water will consult on its new draft water resources management plan in the spring of 2013. This will set out how it proposes to manage water resources to ensure a sustainable water supply and demand balance over a period of at least 25 years from April 2015.

Ritual Slaughter

Sir James Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what his policy is on the slaughter of farm animals for Qurbani/Udhia purposes under the provisions of the Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing Regulations 2012. [R] [136916]

Mr Heath: The slaughter of farm animals for Qurbani/Udhia purposes is currently regulated under the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 (WASK). It will in future be regulated by Council Regulation (EC) 1099/2009 on the protection of animals

at the time of killing and stricter national rules introduced by individual member states. The Regulations for enforcing this law and introducing national rules in England have been consulted on but have not yet been laid before Parliament for approval.

WASK permits slaughter by a religious method, including Muslim slaughter for Qurbani/Udhia, to be carried out in a licensed slaughterhouse which is under official veterinary supervision. It must be carried out by a licensed Muslim slaughterman by the Muslim method for the food of Muslims.

It is illegal to slaughter animals or birds without stunning, including slaughter for Qurbani/Udhia in any other place, even for private domestic consumption.

Social Enterprises

Mr Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had with the Minister for the Cabinet Office on plans to introduce social enterprise zones; and if he will make a statement. [137427]

Richard Benyon: Neither I nor my ministerial colleagues have had discussions with the Minister for the Cabinet Office regarding social enterprise zones.

Waste: Exports

Thomas Docherty: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many tonnes of residual solid waste have been exported in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [135720]

Richard Benyon [holding answer 7 January 2013]: The export of untreated municipal waste for disposal is prohibited.

For exports of refuse-derived fuel for energy recovery, the following data is available for the United Kingdom:

	Tonnes
2008	0
2009	1,330
2010	17,269
2011	272,200

Data for 2012 has not yet been finalised, but based on provisional estimates it is expected to show a substantial increase in exports of refuse-derived fuel from 2011.

Over the past two years UK competent authorities have received an increasing number of applications from waste companies wanting to export wastes for energy recovery, including refuse-derived fuel. The move to divert municipal waste from landfill and increases in landfill tax mean that it can now be more economic for companies to export this material than to send it to landfill.

As with other types of waste, refuse derived fuel is a commodity that can legitimately be exported, as long as this is in accordance with the requirements of the EU Waste Shipments Regulation.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum: Housing

Mr Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost to the public purse was of accommodation for asylum seekers in the last three years for which figures are available. [136650]

Mr Harper: The UK Border Agency has paid the following amounts for accommodating asylum seekers in last the three years:

	£ million
2009-10	397.5
2010-11	287.5
2011-12	200.3

These costs include expenditure on supporting failed asylum seekers as well as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASCs) and former UASCs where local authorities retain some responsibilities beyond the age of 18. The figures include some non-accommodation costs which are included in accommodation costs charged to the agency. It is not possible to disaggregate such expenditure without incurring disproportionate costs.

Other Government Departments and local authorities also make a contribution to accommodation costs for some categories of asylum seekers. The UK Border Agency does not hold sufficient information to make a reliable estimate of these costs.

Crime: Disability

Chris Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many disability hate crimes have been recorded in each of the last five years; and if she will make a statement. [137625]

Mr Jeremy Browne: Hate crime data have only been collected by the Home Office since 2011-12. In 2011-12, there were 1,744 disability related hate crimes in England and Wales.

More detailed information on hate crime can be found in the most recent statistical publication on hate crime at:

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/crime-research/hate-crimes-1112/>

The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) have collected data on the number of disability hate crimes recorded by police since 2009 and this information can be found at:

http://www.report-it.org.uk/hate_crime_data1

These figures are not directly comparable to the figures collected by the Home Office. However, they show the number of disability-related hate crimes recorded in England and Wales (excluding Northern Ireland) to be 1,211 in 2009, 1,512 in 2010 and 1,877 in 2011. The data for 2011 includes hate crimes recorded by the British Transport police.

Entry Clearances: Overseas Students

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions have been held between the UK Border Agency and London Metropolitan University on monitoring procedures for international students; and when she will publish the outcome of any such discussions. [136572]

Mr Harper [*holding answer 14 January 2013*]: Officials from the UK Border Agency met with London Metropolitan University on 26 November 2012 to discuss monitoring procedures for international students. There have been several discussions since 26 November on a wider range of issues.

The UK Border Agency does not publish the outcome of discussions it has with sponsors about their sponsorship obligations.

Ibrahim Magag

David T. C. Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when Ibrahim Magag was given (a) the right to stay in the UK and (b) British citizenship. [136931]

James Brokenshire: As it set out in the statement to the House by the Secretary of State for the Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), on 8 January 2013, *Official Report*, column 161, Magag is a Somali born British national. The Government does not routinely comment on individual cases and having considered the circumstances of this case it would not be appropriate for me to comment further.

Members: Correspondence

Jacob Rees-Mogg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when she plans to reply to the letter of 11 April 2012 from the hon. Member for North East Somerset on behalf of a constituent James Caldwell; and if she will investigate the reasons for the time taken to address the case. [137379]

James Brokenshire [*holding answer 15 January 2013*]: The reply to the letter has been issued today. Mr Caldwell will receive a full explanation for the delay and an apology.

National Wildlife Crime Unit

Mark Pritchard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of the National Wildlife Crime Unit; and if she will make a statement. [137533]

Mr Jeremy Browne: Every six months the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) produces a tactical assessment of progress against each of its priority work areas. The tactical assessment is considered jointly by the Home Office, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and other members of the UK Wildlife Crime Tasking and Co-ordinating Group.

Police: Dogs

Huw Irranca-Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate she has made of the cost of kennelling dangerous or stray dogs to the (a) Metropolitan police, (b) Greater Manchester police and (c) other police forces. [137189]

Damian Green: While the Government provides core police funding, spending decisions are made locally by the chief constables and police and crime commissioners. Data on each police and crime commissioner's expenditure, including the cost of kennelling dangerous or stray dogs, are therefore not collected centrally.

Press: Subscriptions

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to the answer of 26 November 2012, *Official Report*, column 38W, on press subscriptions, how much her Department has spent on subscriptions since May 2010. [137289]

James Brokenshire: For the period from June 2010 to September 2012, the Home Department spent £107,902 on subscriptions.

Publications

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how often her Department produces a staff magazine. [137310]

James Brokenshire: The Home Office staff magazine is produced bi-monthly with six issues in each calendar year.

The Identity and Passport Service (IPS) staff magazine is produced bi-monthly with six issues a year and the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) staff magazine is produced monthly.

The UK Border Agency and Border Force each have a monthly online only staff magazine (e-zine).

Riot (Damages) Act 1886

Mr Lammy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to the answer of 17 December 2012, *Official Report*, column 502W, on the Riot Damages Act 1886, whether the planned independent review into the Riot Damages Act will involve public consultation. [137020]

Damian Green: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given on 17 December 2012, *Official Report*, column 502W. The outcomes of the independent review will be used to shape any future public consultation on possible changes to the legislation.

UK Border Agency

Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment she has made of the performance of the UK Border Agency's Performance and Compliance Unit. [135422]

Mr Harper: The Performance and Compliance Unit was created in spring 2012 to play a crucial role in the UK Border Agency's Transformation programme.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), has asked the independent chief inspector to report on its establishment, and make recommendations on whether any operational or process changes are required to strengthen its set up.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department has also asked that the independent chief inspector conduct a further review once the Performance and Compliance unit is fully operational.

The independent chief inspector's report will be presented to Parliament later this year.

Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment she has made of the performance of the UK Border Agency in processing asylum cases. [135425]

Mr Harper: The UK Border Agency publishes annual asylum performance against 15 key performance measures. The statistics cover the financial year 2011-12, except for the Work in Progress (WiP) figure which is calculated from June 2011 to June 2012.

<http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/aboutus/further-key-data/>

The statistics show a system which is stabilising with the majority of measures showing increases in performance, or remaining the same. Including;

Asylum cases in WiP (down from 37,903 in financial year (FY) 2010-11, to 37,381 in FY 2011-12)

Asylum cases concluded within 12 months (up from 56% in FY 2010-11, to 63% in FY 2011-12)

Asylum cases concluded within 36 months (up from 63% in FY 2010-11, to 70% in FY 2011-12)

Asylum cases removed within 12 months (up from 19% in FY 2010-11, to 22% in FY 2011-12)

Asylum decision quality (up from 88% in FY 2010-11, to 89% in FY 2011-12)

Asylum Unit Cost (down from £15,415 in FY 2010-11, to £15,215 in FY 2011-12)

PRIME MINISTER

Tax Evasion

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Prime Minister what measures to tackle tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance he expects to bring forward for discussion during the UK's presidency of the G8. [137795]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the written ministerial statement I made on 9 January 2013, *Official Report*, column 20WS and to the letter I placed in both Libraries of the House.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Apprentices

10. Robert Halfon: To ask the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, representing the House of Commons Commission, how many apprentices are employed by the House of Commons Service; and what estimate he has made of the number of apprentices employed by the House's major suppliers. [137531]

John Thurso: Since the answer I gave to the hon. Member's written question on this subject in September, there have been two developments. The Catering Service is establishing apprenticeships as part of the business improvement programme that it is currently implementing. The Parliamentary Estates Directorate is also considering options for a new apprenticeship scheme.

DEFENCE

Afghanistan

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many times (a) Hellfire precision guided missiles and (b) laser guided bombs employed by the UK Reaper remotely piloted air system have fallen outside their given circular error probability since operations commenced in Afghanistan. [133762]

Mr Dunne [*holding answer 17 December 2012*]: The Reaper Remotely Piloted Air System (RPAS) currently employs two types of munitions, the GBU-12 laser guided bomb and the Hellfire AGM114 precision guided missile. Both are highly accurate munitions, and every effort is made to ensure the risk of civilian casualties is minimised. I am withholding further information as its disclosure would or would be likely to prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the armed forces.

Mr MacNeil: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of those attacked and either killed or wounded in a Green on Blue attack in Afghanistan had not been issued with a side arm to date. [137241]

Mr Robathan [*holding answer 15 January 2013*]: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), on 19 December 2012, *Official Report*, column 869. All deployed personnel are issued with a personal weapon. The mix of weapons carried on a daily basis, is decided by commanders on the ground reflecting the tasks to be undertaken. I am withholding any further information as disclosure would, or would be likely to, prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of our armed forces.

Mrs Moon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many (a) male and (b) female armed forces personnel have been deployed in each deployment to Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement. [137346]

Mr Robathan: This information is not held in the format requested. However, the gender split of all those military personnel who are recorded as entering Afghanistan

has been recorded centrally since April 2007. The figures detailed cover all those military personnel who were recorded entering Afghanistan for a period of more than one day during a particular calendar year. These figures are not a breakdown of the headcount of personnel actually located in Afghanistan at any one time.

The total number of military personnel recorded as entering Afghanistan, rounded to the nearest 10 by gender for the period 1 April 2007 until 1 December 2012 is as follows:

<i>Calendar year</i>	<i>Female military personnel</i>	<i>Male military personnel</i>
2007 (April to December only)	1,490	25,950
2008	1,800	31,650
2009	2,430	38,780
2010	2,590	41,300
2011	2,740	42,150
2012 (January to 1 December only)	2,250	33,230

Armed Forces: Cadets

Diana Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what proportion of Army Cadet Force detachments are connected to (a) independent schools and (b) state schools; [137704]

(2) how much funding was provided by his Department to support the Army Cadet Force detachments in (a) independent and (b) state schools in the last year for which figures are available. [137705]

Mr Francois: There are 181 Army Cadet Force (ACF) detachments connected to schools and colleges in the UK. Current records indicate that 178 are connected to state schools and colleges and three are connected to Independent Schools, equating to around 11% of the total ACFs in the UK.

Information relating to the amount of funding made available is not held in the format requested.

Aviation

Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many air miles were accumulated by each Minister in his Department in 2012; how such air miles were used; and whether such air miles were donated to charity. [137084]

Mr Francois: Ministerial use of air miles is conducted in accordance with the guidance set out in the Ministerial Code. Any air miles accrued by the Department in respect of Ministers' and officials' travel are used by the Department towards the cost of official travel.

Data Protection

Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions each Minister in his Department carried classified documents on public transport in the last 12 months for which information is available. [137120]

Mr Francois: This information is not held. Ministers handle official information in accordance with Government guidance.

Future Strategic Tanker Aircraft

Mr Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what sum is payable to the Future Strategic Tanker Aircraft consortium in order to access air-to-air refuelling rights for aircraft that chose to use buddy tanks. [137640]

Mr Dunne: Under the Future Strategic Tanker Aircraft contract, Air Tanker will increasingly meet all of the RAF's air-to-air refuelling needs.

The RAF has no requirement to undertake air-to-air refuelling using the "buddy-buddy" concept and hence no liability would arise.

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what information his Department has received on (a) delays and (b) the risk of delays to the Future Strategic Tanker Aircraft programme since May 2010. [137747]

Mr Dunne: The Future Strategic Tanker Aircraft project, known in service as the Voyager, is on schedule to achieve its In Service Date (ISD) of May 2014.

Risks are routinely monitored and mitigated. Risks to the introduction of air-to-air refuelling and to the delivery of specific aircraft are being successfully addressed and the ISD remains on track.

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what meetings (a) he, (b) Ministers and (c) officials of his Department have had on (i) delays and (ii) risks of delays to the Future Strategic Tanker Aircraft programme since May 2010. [137748]

Mr Dunne: The Future Strategic Tanker Aircraft project, known in service as the Voyager, is on schedule to achieve its in-service-date of May 2014. The aircraft was granted a military release to service in the Air Transport role in April 2012 and while some technical issues on the air-to-air refuelling system have needed further work, tests have proved successful and the aircraft is expected to start air-to-air refuelling later this year. The original schedule for the Voyager project included margin to allow for resolution of such issues and hence the in-service-date of May 2014 is not currently at risk.

The Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), and Ministers have been personally engaged in ensuring satisfactory progress on this key programme, which is governed at the official level through a quarterly Joint Board with Industry, informed by subordinate forums to manage the various elements of the programme on a more frequent basis.

Government Procurement Card

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in his Department have use of a Government Procurement Card. [137266]

Mr Francois: Currently, 11,614 Government Procurement Cards (GPC) are in issue with the Ministry of Defence. This is a reduction of over 25% compared to the figure of 16,009 GPC cards in issue in 2009. Not all cards are issued individually to staff on a one to one basis. The special advisers have not been issued with a GPC.

Guided Weapons

Alison Seabeck: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence with reference to his meeting with his French counterpart in November 2012, when he expects to meet his French counterpart to discuss the Future Anti-Surface Guided Weapon Heavy; and what his estimate is of the likely delay before any new guided missile can be deployed. [137721]

Mr Dunne: The Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), communicates regularly with the French Defence Minister on a range of issues. The In-Service date of the Future Anti-Surface Guided Weapon (Heavy) will be confirmed later this year.

Major Projects Review Board

Sir Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the current status is of the Major Projects Review Board. [137404]

Mr Dunne: The Major Projects Review Board was established in June 2011 to ensure that the most significant Ministry of Defence projects keep to the cost and time parameters agreed by the Department's Investment Approvals Committee and HM Treasury at the major investment decision point. The board continues to meet on a regular basis.

Mali

Mr Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when contingency planning began for potential deployment in support of French forces in Mali in (a) his Department and (b) Permanent Joint Headquarters. [137698]

Mr Robathan: The Ministry of Defence, including Permanent Joint Headquarters at Northwood, began contingency planning for potential UK deployments in support of French forces in Mali on 11 January 2012.

Ministerial authority for detailed planning and subsequent execution was granted on 12 January.

Military Aircraft

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessment he has made of the out-of-service dates for the VC10 and TriStar aircraft; [137749]

(2) what meetings (a) he, (b) Ministers and (c) officials of his Department have had on the bringing forward the out-of-service dates for the VC10 and TriStar aircraft since May 2010. [137750]

Mr Dunne: The out-of-service dates for the VC10 and TriStar fleets were reviewed and adjusted during the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review and subsequent planning round and annual budget cycle processes. The

planned out-of-service date for the VC10 is September 2013 and the out-of-service date for the TriStars is March 2014.

The Ministry of Defence formally assessed the operational capability requirement in its annual capability audits conducted in 2011 and 2012, and it is routinely monitored by the capability planning group responsible for the VC10, TriStar and Voyager aircraft fleets. These adjustments were made as part of routine planning activity to align them to our evolving requirements and the build-up of replacement capability. Ministers received advice on these issues from officials throughout this period.

Property

Alison Seabeck: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the value of the sites currently earmarked by his Department for sale in each region of the UK. [137222]

Mr Francois: Details of any pre-sale valuations obtained cannot be released as to do so could prejudice commercial interests.

Submarines and Warships

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what estimate he has made of the current value of (a) HMS Tyne, (b) HMS Severn and (c) HMS Mersey; [131197]

(2) what estimate he has made of the current value of each (a) Vanguard and (b) Trafalgar class submarine; [131198]

(3) what estimate he has made of the current value of HMS Astute. [131199]

Mr Dunne: The current values of the Royal Navy vessels are shown in the following tables. The values quoted reflect the net book value (NBV) of the asset, which is calculated by deducting depreciation from the original capital cost, together with the cost of any major upgrades, of the asset.

Depreciation is a measure of the decrease in value of an asset over time. The NBV of each vessel reflects the effects of depreciation based on the age of the vessel, its time left in service, and any value added as a result of major refits and overhauls.

<i>River class offshore patrol vessels</i>	
<i>Name</i>	<i>NBV (£ million)</i>
HMS Tyne	12
HMS Severn	13
HMS Mersey	15

<i>Vanguard class submarines</i>	
<i>Name</i>	<i>NBV (£ million)</i>
HMS Vanguard	492
HMS Victorious	713
HMS Vigilant	895
HMS Vengeance	534

The total procurement cost of the Vanguard class included £278 million of costs which are shared across the whole class. These costs have not been attributed to the individual vessels and are not included in the NBVs quoted in the table.

<i>Trafalgar class submarines</i>	
<i>Name</i>	<i>NBV (£ million)</i>
HMS Tireless	10
HMS Torbay	124
HMS Trenchant	215
HMS Talent	315
HMS Triumph	396

The NBV for HMS Tireless is significantly lower than the other in-service vessels because the boat has limited remaining service.

The total procurement cost of the Trafalgar class included £687 million of costs which are shared across the whole class. These costs have not been attributed to the individual vessels and are not included in the NBVs quoted in the table.

<i>Astute class submarines</i>	
<i>Name</i>	<i>NBV (£ million)</i>
HMS Astute	1,170

The total procurement cost of the Astute class currently includes £949 million of costs which will be attributed to the planned class of seven submarines. These costs have not been attributed to HMS Astute.

Trident Submarines

Katy Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the effect on the UK's continuous at sea deterrence of the recent damage to HMS Vigilant. [137421]

Mr Dunne: It is our policy not to discuss submarine operations.

USA

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the (a) value and (b) start and finish date was of contracts for foreign military sales procured by the British defence staff in the US in each of the last five years. [131575]

Mr Dunne: Foreign Military Sales (FMS) is the process for foreign governments and international organisations to purchase military articles and services from the US Government. A summary of the value of all FMS cases submitted to US Department of Defence for the years 2007-11 and 2012 to 30 November is as follows:

	<i>Case amendments</i>		<i>New cases</i>		<i>Requirement modifications</i>		<i>Total cost</i>	
		<i>Total cost</i>		<i>Total cost</i>		<i>Total cost</i>	<i>Total cost</i>	
2007	64	158.5	35	182.5	20	-6.9	334.1	
2008	110	403.2	29	546.6	17	-0.3	949.6	
2009	77	116.1	22	76.7	10	-9.2	183.6	

All figures in US\$ million

All figures in US\$ million

	Case amendments	Total cost	New cases	Total cost	Requirement modifications	Total cost	Total cost
2010	79	141.6	30	1,048.1	7	-0.2	1,189.5
2011	86	246.2	29	210.9	5	0.0	487.1
2012 (to November)	74	238.4	22	128.2	4	-0.1	366.5
Grand total	490	1,334.0	167	2,193.1	63	-16.7	3,510.4

This table also separates out the three main areas of case activity, which are:

New cases—new cases submitted for the first time.

Case amendments—amendments to existing cases which are required by UK.

Requirement modifications—a US unilateral change to an existing case.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Arts

Dan Jarvis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what consideration was given to including the measures on the creative industries in the pledges made by the Government in the coalition mid-term review. [137785]

Mr Vaizey: The creative industries are a key part of the UK economy, generating a total of £36.3 billion gross value added, 2.89% of the economy, according to the latest figures. The mid-term review document sets out the Government's focus to maintain a business environment that can support all parts of the economy and further improve on the creation of over 1 million private sector jobs. The document also sets out that we have encouraged innovative industries through the tax system by creating a patent box and by legislating for creative sector tax relief.

Aviation

Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many air miles were accumulated by each Minister in her Department in 2012; how such air miles were used; and whether such air miles were donated to charity. [137089]

Hugh Robertson: Any air miles accrued by the Department in respect of Ministers' and officials' travel are used by the Department towards the cost of official travel.

Gambling

Simon Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions she has had with (a) the Gambling Commission and (b) betting shop operators on the effectiveness of self-exclusion policies in assisting customers who gamble more than they want to. [137570]

Hugh Robertson: I have met with the Gambling Commission and betting shop operators on a number of occasions to discuss a range of matters relating to the gambling industry.

Government Procurement Card

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in her Department have use of a Government Procurement Card. [137272]

Hugh Robertson: As of December 2012 there were 40 Government Procurement Card holders in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. No special advisers have use of a Government Procurement Card at DCMS.

Internet

John Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport pursuant to the answer of 8 January 2013, *Official Report*, column 213W, on internet, if she will estimate the number of (a) pensioners and (b) people on low incomes that do not currently use the internet in (i) Glasgow North West, (ii) Glasgow, (iii) Scotland and (iv) the UK. [137538]

Mr Hurd: I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Cabinet Office.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

Letter from Glen Watson, dated January 2013:

As Director General for the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question to estimate the number of (a) pensioners and (b) people on low incomes that do not currently use the internet in (i) Glasgow North West, (ii) Glasgow, (iii) Scotland and (iv) the UK. [137538]

Estimates of Internet use by adults aged 16 years and over are published quarterly by the Office for National Statistics and are available on our website. These estimates are derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and have United Kingdom (UK) coverage. The latest available estimate, from 2012 Q3, of the number of pensioners who have never used the Internet in Glasgow is 68,000. The estimate for Scotland is 486,000 while the estimate for the UK is 5,630,000. Estimates at parliamentary constituency level are not available.

In the same period, the number people on low incomes (defined as receiving gross weekly pay of less than £200) that do not currently use the Internet in Scotland is 37,000. The estimate for the UK is 358,000. Estimates at parliamentary constituency and city level are not available.

Press: Subscriptions

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much her Department spent on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12. [137276]

Hugh Robertson: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport spent £11,348.21 on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12.

Social Enterprises

Mr Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions she has had with the Minister for the Cabinet Office on plans to introduce social enterprise zones; and if she will make a statement. [137428]

Hugh Robertson [*holding answer 15 January 2013*]: Ministers within the Department for Culture, Media and Sport regularly meet colleagues from other Departments to discuss a range of matters.

Taxis

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much her Department spent on taxis in 2011-12. [137301]

Hugh Robertson: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport spent £24,324.62 on taxis in the year 2011-12 (principal use was the Olympics).

Tour de France

Dan Jarvis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what ministerial meetings have taken place to provide support for the Grand Départ of the Tour de France in 2014. [137711]

Hugh Robertson: I had a meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) on 15 January 2013, as well as with a number of other Members with an interest, during which the event was discussed. We are delighted that Yorkshire is hosting this important sporting occasion. UK Sport is working with the organisers to assess what advice and support it can provide to ensure it is a great success.

Tourism

Dan Jarvis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what consideration she has given to the potential contribution of the Tour de France to the tourism economy of England in 2014. [137794]

Hugh Robertson: Government has not made any specific assessment of the impact of the 2014 Tour de France in Yorkshire. Yorkshire submitted their bid independently and as part of that developed their own economic impact study. UK Sport are working with Yorkshire to assess what support they can give to the event, and I expect that Yorkshire will provide an economic impact assessment as part of this process.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Aviation

Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many air miles were accumulated by each Minister in her Department in 2012; how such air miles were used; and whether such air miles were donated to charity. [137098]

Justine Greening: As part of long-standing practice under the ministerial code, any air miles accrued personally by Ministers from departmental travel are not redeemed and are removed from accounts after a short period of time. Any air miles accrued by the Department in respect to Ministers or officials are used towards the cost of official travel.

Developing Countries: Health Services

Jonathan Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development pursuant to the answer of 17 December 2012, *Official Report*, column 556W, on developing countries: health services, in which countries her Department (a) is supporting and (b) has supported in each of the last 12 months programmes that make abortions safe and accessible; and what independent evidence her Department has used to verify that such services (i) are safe and (ii) save women's lives. [137351]

Lynne Featherstone: As part of our overall commitment to reduce maternal mortality and improve reproductive health, the UK Government is working to reduce recourse to unsafe abortion. Our vision is a developing world where all women are able to exercise choice over the size and timing of their families, where no woman dies giving birth and where all newborns survive and thrive.

The Department for International Development's (DFID) support for Reproductive, Maternal and Newborn Health (RMNH) programmes through government and non-government partners extends to 26 of our 28 priority countries—the only exceptions being the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Tajikistan. Our efforts prioritise expanding access to voluntary family planning and include support for comprehensive abortion care where countries' national legislation permits.

Unsafe abortion is estimated to account for 13% of maternal deaths. Research that shows that access to safe abortion, in addition to voluntary family planning, saves maternal lives, reduces maternal ill-health, does not increase overall abortion rates and reduces recourse to unsafe abortion. In developing its policy position and in programming decisions DFID draws on published evidence and guidelines from a range of sources including from the World Health Organisation, the Guttmacher Institute, the *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* and *The Lancet*. DFID is also commissioning independent evaluations of its RMNH programmes.

India

Mr Ivan Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support her Department is providing to India for programmes to tackle violence against women; and whether such support will cease with the general aid programme in 2015. [137454]

Mr Duncan: In India the Department for International Development is supporting the Government of Bihar to implement India's 2005 Domestic Violence Act and conduct new research on violence prevention; supporting the Government of Madhya Pradesh to implement a new 'safe city' approach in four cities; and funds Oxfam to implement anti-violence campaigns and provide victim support services, including women's centres in police stations. UK support for these programmes will finish by 2015.

From now on, the UK will provide no new financial grants to India. Plans for technical assistance programmes beyond 2015 will be finalised closer to the time.

Mali

Mr Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of whether the deployment to Mali will contribute to poverty alleviation; and whether the marginal costs of the deployment would be a reasonable charge to her departmental budget. [137697]

Lynne Featherstone: The UK is working closely with the French Government, regional governments, the United Nations and other international actors to achieve a short-term resolution to the crisis, and the longer term conditions for security and economic development in Mali. Stabilisation of the situation and the return to a more secure environment in Mali will help the Malian Government in tackling its development challenges.

The cost of UK military assets in a military deployment would not be chargeable to the development budget or reportable as Official Development Assistance (ODA). My Department is able to meet the marginal cost when UK military assets are used to directly support an international humanitarian response, but not in support of a military operation such as is seen presently in Mali.

Mr Ivan Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what recent assessment she has made of the humanitarian situation in Mali; [137699]

(2) what humanitarian priorities she has set for responding to the escalation of hostilities in Mali; [137700]

(3) what assistance her Department is providing to internally displaced people and refugees fleeing conflict in Mali; [137701]

(4) what steps her Department is taking to protect women and support victims of gender-based violence in Mali; [137702]

(5) what steps her Department is taking to provide safe humanitarian access to all parts of Mali. [137703]

Lynne Featherstone: The UK Government remains closely focused on the humanitarian implications of the escalating conflict in Mali.

Latest UN and aid agency assessments report that up to 30,000 additional people have been internally displaced in Mali and over 1,000 people have sought refuge into neighbouring countries as a direct result of the recent upsurge in conflict. In total, over 370,000 Malians have been displaced from their homes since March 2012.

In December 2012, I announced an additional £15 million package of emergency aid for the Sahel to support over 500,000 people across Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. This brings the total UK bilateral and multilateral humanitarian support aid to the Sahel over the last 12 months to £73 million. Our latest humanitarian aid to those directly affected by the Mali crisis includes:

Food for 92,000 people, including internally displaced people (IDPs) and host families;

Therapeutic food to treat 15,000 severely malnourished children;

A comprehensive package of support (food, health care and protection) for 148,000 Malian refugees in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mauritania;

Emergency health care—including support to those injured in the conflict and women suffering from psychological trauma as result of sexual violence; clean water and livestock support to over 100,000 people, including IDPs.

The UK will continue to monitor the regional humanitarian situation closely to ensure that needs are being met effectively and efficiently. We are liaising closely with the United Nations, key non-governmental organisations and others to ensure that a comprehensive response is made to ensure the protection of civilians, including the restoration of safe humanitarian access and full respect for international humanitarian law.

Press: Subscriptions

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) how much her Department spent on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12; [137279]

(2) pursuant to her answer of 31 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 320W, on press subscriptions, how much her Department has spent on subscriptions since May 2010. [137293]

Mr Duncan: The financial records of DFID show the following costs for the printed press subscriptions since 1 May 2010 until 31 December 2012:

Period	£
1 May 2010 to 31 March 2011	8,004.54
1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012	8,919.38
1 April 2012 to 31 December 2012	8,316.32

All of the publications by DFID have either carried pieces of interest to DFID or have written articles relating to DFID's work.

Publications

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how often her Department produces a staff magazine. [137319]

Mr Duncan: DFID does not produce a magazine for staff.

Syria

Mr Ivan Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment she has made of the humanitarian situation in Syria. [137455]

Mr Duncan: The humanitarian situation in Syria and across the region is extremely concerning. 4 million people in Syria are now in need, 2 million of whom have been displaced. There are a further 620,000 refugees in neighbouring countries. In addition, the region has just experienced the worst winter storms in 10 years, leaving people who have had to flee their homes even more vulnerable. The security situation is continually deteriorating making it increasingly difficult to get aid to those who need it.

The UK continues to be a leading donor in the humanitarian response. Our total funding to date is £68.5 million. This funding has already provided over 400,000 food packages, clean drinking water for over 11,000 people each month, and over 40,000 medical consultations. The UN appeals remain severely underfunded however, and humanitarian needs are increasing. We need other countries to step up their support too. We will be using the high-level pledging conference co-hosted by the UN and Kuwait on 30 January to call on the international community for more, and better co-ordinated, funding.

Taxis

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much her Department spent on taxis in 2011-12. [137304]

Mr Duncan: The total DFID spent on taxis within the UK and abroad for year 2011-12 is £228,000. All expenditure is incurred in accordance with the principles of Managing Public Money and the Treasury handbook on Regularity and Propriety.

EDUCATION

Education Maintenance Allowance

Frank Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education how many young people lost funding as a result of the abolition of the education maintenance allowance; and what the average loss was per person. [137075]

Mr Laws [*holding answer 16 January 2013*]: In 2009/10, the last full academic year of the education maintenance allowance (EMA), 645,415 students received average annual payments of £726.

New claims for EMA ended in January 2011 and the £180 million 16-19 Bursary Fund was introduced in September 2011. From that point, the most vulnerable students previously receiving EMA became eligible for an annual bursary of £1,200. This is more than they would have received under EMA. We estimate that approximately 19,000 vulnerable bursaries were awarded in the 2011/12 academic year.

All other students who had successfully applied for EMA in 2009/10 continued to receive payments at the level set out in their EMA guarantee until the end of the 2011/12 academic year. 80,146 students fell into this category and none of these students experienced a loss in funding as a result of the abolition of EMA.

All students who successfully applied for the maximum weekly EMA payment of £30 in 2010/11 received £20 a week until the end of the 2011/12 academic year. 181,103 students fell into this category.

Those students who had successfully applied for weekly EMA payments of £10 or £20 in 2010/11 did not receive any EMA payments in 2011/12. 50,960 students fell into this category.

All students in further education and training in 2011/12, including those whose EMA payments were reduced or came to an end, were eligible to apply for

discretionary support from the 16-19 Bursary Fund. It is not possible therefore to give the overall annual loss for students who had their EMA support reduced or withdrawn, as we do not know if they received bursaries.

Physical Education: Teachers

Nic Dakin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education (1) if he will extend funding for secondary school physical education teachers to be released for one day a week to work with primary schools beyond July 2013; [125567]

(2) what plans he has to support the delivery of physical education and school sport in primary schools following the removal of secondary school physical education teacher release funding; and if he will make a statement. [125568]

Mr Timpson [*holding answer 6 November 2012*]: In November 2010, the Secretary of State for Education announced that he was making funding available to secondary schools to enable the release of a physical education teacher from timetable for one day a week to work with local primary schools to increase opportunities for competitive sport and to encourage them to sign up for the School Games. At the time, the Secretary of State made it clear that the funding was for the two academic years 2011/12 and 2012/13 only. Beyond then, he expects that schools should have embedded this work into their core provision.

The final payment of PE teacher release funding will be made to eligible secondary schools after April next year. This will cover the summer term 2013.

The Secretary of State is considering a range of measures to improve school sport provision from September 2013 and beyond. He will make an announcement in due course.

School Leaving

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education (1) what estimate he has made of the number of additional students in (a) schools, (b) further education colleges, (c) sixth form colleges, (d) apprenticeships, (e) other employment with training and (f) other forms of education and training as a result of the raised participation age; [136706]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of additional students in (a) schools, (b) colleges, (c) apprenticeships, (d) other employment with training and (e) other education in each local authority area as a result of the raised participation age in 2013-14 and in 2014-15; [136707]

(3) what estimate he has made of the cost of introducing the raised participation age by the end of academic year 2014-15 (a) nationally and (b) in each local authority area; [136726]

(4) what additional funding he will make available to further education colleges in relation to the introduction of the raised participation age; [136727]

(5) what estimate he has made of the cost of introducing the raised participation age in 2013-14. [136767]

Mr Laws: As part of the current spending review settlement, the Department for Education secured sufficient funding to provide a place in education or training for

all 16-year-olds able to participate from the academic year 2013/14 and to be on an appropriate trajectory to fund a place for every 17-year-old able to participate from the academic year 2015/16. This underpins our commitment to raise the age of compulsory participation in education and training.

The precise number of places to be funded and the funding needed for 2013/14 and 2014/15 will be determined as part of the annual allocation process. This process determines the funding to be received by each school, college and other provider. The vast majority of funding for places is determined on the basis of recruitment in the previous academic year (known as "lagged" numbers) and these numbers and the funding associated with them are not confirmed until the start of the following calendar year. The allocation process for 2013/14 will inform providers of their allocation by March 2013. The process for 2014/15 will inform providers by March 2014.

For individual schools and colleges, the Education Funding Agency will publish these allocations on the Department's website after they are made. We plan to announce a national aggregation of the allocation of places for 2013/14 and funding for 2013-14 in the Funding Statement in March 2013.

Schools: Finance

Rushanara Ali: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what assessment he has made of the effect on funding for education in each year between 2011-12 and 2016-17 of the projected growth in the school age population. [136623]

Mr Laws: The projected growth in the school age population impacts on the schools budget for both revenue and capital.

For 2011-15 these budgets were allocated in the 2010 spending review on the basis of projected increases in pupil numbers to the end of the spending review period. At the 2012 autumn statement, a spending review to cover only 2015-16 was announced, for which the Department will use projected pupil numbers.

The Government has committed to maintaining schools revenue funding on a flat-cash per pupil basis, which means that this element of education funding increases each year in line with the projected increase in pupil numbers. Significant extra funding is also being provided for disadvantaged children through the pupil premium which in 2013-14 will amount to £900 per eligible pupil. Total funding through the premium will be £2.5 billion in 2014-15.

Youth Services

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education pursuant to the answer of 6 December 2012, *Official Report*, column 869W, on youth services, (1) whether lists of visits were drawn up by Ministers' private offices in preparation for answering the question; and for what reason a list of visits was not published; [134270]

(2) whether he received advice not to publish lists of youth projects visited; and who advised him; [134271]

(3) what advice was provided by special advisers on answering the question. [134272]

Mr Timpson [*holding answer 18 December 2012*]: It was not possible to put together a comprehensive list of visits without incurring disproportionate cost. An initial list was created, but routine checks by advisers and Private Secretaries picked up concerns about the accuracy and coverage of the list, and so a shorter answer was provided.

The incomplete list of ministerial visits to youth projects between May 2010 and October 2012 is as follows:

Secretary of State

None.

Nick Gibb

Ashwell Pupil Referral Unit, Bransholme, Hull
Joint Youth Music and Federation of Music Event.

Matthew Hancock

None.

John Hayes

None.

Lord Hill

Fairbridge Kennington Centre.

David Laws

None.

Tim Loughton

The Salmon Centre, London
Young Carers Festival, Southampton
Prince's Trust Wimbledon
Young Disciples Bristol
Make Space Youth Health, West Sussex
Kids Company, London
Parent Intervention Sheffield
The Soul Project, London
Hove YMCA
Adventure, East Sussex
The Station, Bristol
A Way Out, Stockton
Catch 22, Herne Bay
Horizons Centre, London
Preston Myplace
Carlisle NCS Pilot
Carlisle Myplace
Dorking NCS Pilot
Brighton NCS Pilot
Sheffield Futures
Youth Zone Nelson
Hackney Myplace
Leicester YMCA
Youthnet Leicester
Cooperative/Truth About Youth Drama Project, London
Media Trust Youth Radio Station, London
LEAP London
Philip Lawrence Awards Young Citizens, Lewisham
The Orchard Programme, London
Groundwork UK's Communities Project, London
CRI's Lewisham Young People's Substance Misuse Service
Prince's Trust XI Club London
Brigg Youth Centre North Lincolnshire
Cedars Youth and Community Centre, Harrow
Harold Hill Youth Centre Romford

Open Youth Trust Myplace Project, Norwich
Catch 22 NCS Pilot Devizes.

Sarah Teather

Children and Youth Board Awards Presentation London
Young People's Learning Agency Board, London.

Edward Timpson

British Youth Council.

Elizabeth Truss

None.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Community Infrastructure Levy

Peter Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government if he will make it his policy to ensure that all new houses built in a council's administrative area attract the Community Infrastructure Levy; and if he will make a statement. [137605]

Nick Boles: Local planning authorities can choose to adopt the Community Infrastructure Levy. When they adopt the levy they must determine the appropriate rate or rates. Charging authorities can set differential rates for different geographical zones and by reference to different intended uses of development. This is a local decision based on evidence of economic viability and infrastructure need.

The guidance we have issued makes clear there is no requirement for councils to adopt a levy: they may set a zero rate if they wish.

Hostels: Young People

Julie Hilling: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what statistics and information are collected at (a) national, (b) regional and (c) local level on (i) the number of young people who are turned away from hostel accommodation, (ii) the reasons for any increase in demand in hostel accommodation and (iii) where and how soon young people turned away from hostels find accommodation. [136954]

Mr Prisk: The Department does not collect the information referred to in the question at any geographical level. The most relevant information that it collects from local authorities on the quarterly Homelessness (PIE) return is the number of 16 or 17-year-old applicant households accommodated in hostels at the end of each quarter.

Housing

Peter Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether the purpose of the New Homes Bonus has been amended to include the funding of council care services; and if he will make a statement. [137638]

Mr Prisk: New Homes Bonus funding has always been paid as an un-ringfenced grant, meaning that local authorities are free to spend it as they see fit. There has therefore been no change to the purposes to which New Homes Bonus funding may be put. As with all funding, we expect local authorities to consult local communities on how the Bonus is spent.

Housing: Construction

Mr Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many new planning permissions for housing were approved by each local authority in England in each quarter from 2005 to the latest quarter for which figures are available. [R] [134464]

Nick Boles [*holding answer 20 December 2012*]: A table showing the number of planning decisions and permissions for each local authority in England from 2005-06 to 2011-12 has been placed in the Library of the House.

It has not been possible to provide this information for every quarter as requested in the time available.

The number of granted residential planning applications in 2011-12 is higher than the rate this Government inherited in 2009-10.

Historic figures on the number of minor residential applications are affected by changes in permitted development rights.

There is scope for removing more un-contentious, small-scale minor residential planning applications from the system and we have been consulting on this matter.

Housing: Finance

Mr Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government pursuant to the answer of 20 December 2012, *Official Report*, column 880W, on Housing: Finance, how much expenditure is committed to be paid to each housing authority in England over the next six years as a consequence of allocations of New Homes Bonus made to date. [136301]

Mr Prisk [*holding answer 10 January 2013*]: A table setting out this information, which is based on provisional data and is subject to consultation, has been placed in the Library of the House.

A total of £3.3 billion is committed to local authorities in New Homes Bonus grant over the next six years (from 2013-14 to 2018-19), to reward councils for homes that have already been built. This includes £228 million in affordable homes premium.

Mortgages

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what consideration his Department has given to extending the mortgage indemnity guarantee to banks offering mortgages to first-time buyers of right to buy properties. [137450]

Mr Prisk: The NewBuy Guarantee scheme has brought 95% loan to value mortgages for new build properties back to the market. NewBuy is for both first time buyers and existing home owners.

We are committed to helping tenants fulfil their home-ownership aspirations and we have increased the maximum discount available for the right to buy to £75,000. This Government is exploring ways to further support those wishing to exercise the right to buy.

Part-Time Employment

Ann McKechin: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what proportion of staff in his Department work part-time. [137025]

Brandon Lewis: The proportion of staff working part time in my Department as of 31 December 2012 was 11%.

Railways: Freight

Mr Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government with reference to his letter of 19 September 2012 to interested parties, for what reasons he decided not to hold a conjoined inquiry into the Radlett and Colnbrook rail freight proposals. [137642]

Nick Boles: I refer my hon. Friend to the letter of 14 December 2012 which stated that, having given very careful consideration to the comments submitted, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr Pickles), was satisfied that he could determine the Radlett proposal on the basis of the evidence before him.

Railways: Radlett

Mr Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government if any factors in his decision of 20 December 2012 to approve the Radlett rail freight proposal were brought to his attention after 19 September 2012. [137641]

Nick Boles: The letter of 20 December 2012 sets out the reasons for the decision. It lists the representations taken into account including those received after 19 September 2012. I cannot add to that letter.

Mr Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (1) what meetings have taken place between Ministers in his Department and outside bodies on the Radlett rail freight proposal since 19 September 2012; [137643]

(2) what meetings (a) Ministers in his Department, (b) special advisers in his Department and (c) officials in his Department have held with representatives of the rail freight industry since 19 September 2012. [137645]

Nick Boles: As part of the Department's transparency programme, details of departmental meetings between Ministers and outside bodies are routinely published on our website.

Information about meetings between outside bodies and officials/Special Advisers is not centrally held and could be provided only at disproportionate costs.

All representatives of the Department act in accordance with Guidance on Planning Propriety Issues, which is published at:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/planning-propriety-issues-guidance

I also refer my hon. Friend to my answer given to him today on Radlett representations PQ 137644.

Mr Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what representations he has received concerning the Radlett rail freight proposal since 19 September 2012 other than those previously disclosed as responses to the Government's consultation. [137644]

Nick Boles: Details of all representations received were included in the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr Pickles'), Minded To Allow letter of 20 December 2012. When the final decision letter is issued that will include any further representations received.

Social Enterprises

Mr Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what plans he has to introduce social enterprise zones; and if he will make a statement. [137395]

Mr Prisk [*holding answer 15 January 2013*]: Local areas are best placed to decide their economic ambitions, so we are pleased to see that local enterprise partnerships like the Black Country are intending to launch social enterprise zones as a way of supporting growth. Social enterprises have a key role in boosting local economies, encouraging entrepreneurialism and creating jobs, and can support partnerships to deliver their economic priorities. This Government is working to promote social enterprise and the social investment market through:

a £20 million Social Outcomes Fund to attract investment to complex social problems;

the launch of Big Society Capital—the first social investment institution of its kind; and

the £10 million Investment and Contract Readiness Fund for social ventures not yet sufficiently developed to access Big Society Capital.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Aviation

Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many air miles were accumulated by each Minister in his Department in 2012; how such air miles were used; and whether such air miles were donated to charity. [137100]

Mr Lidington: No figures are held for the number of air miles accrued by Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Ministers on official travel. Not all Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers are registered for air miles schemes. Where a Minister has been registered, any air miles accrued will be used for official purposes, foregone or donated to charity, in line with the Ministerial Code.

British Indian Ocean Territory

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what legal expenses have been incurred by his Department in cases relating to British Indian Ocean Territory since 1983; and what proportion of that total was incurred in relation to the recent case determined by the European Court of Human Rights. [137441]

Mark Simmonds: Since 1990, from when records are available, the total cost incurred by the Foreign and Commonwealth office in cases relating to British Indian Ocean Territory is £2,404,808.72. The cost of the European Court of Human Rights case represents 1.57% of this total.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the US authorities on access by Chagosians to the Chagos archipelago and resettlement by them of that archipelago. [137442]

Mark Simmonds: I have had no recent discussions with the US authorities on access by Chagossians to the Chagos archipelago or resettlement by Chagossians. Officials notify the US authorities in advance of any Chagossians visiting the British Indian Ocean territory as part of our programme of heritage and science visits.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what information he has received on the effects of climate change and sea levels on British Indian Ocean Territory since 2011. [137443]

Mark Simmonds: The British Indian Ocean Territory Administration has received information on climate change and sea level since 2011 from a number of scientific and academic sources. The issue of rising sea levels, and of coastal erosion, in the British Indian Ocean Territory is clearly one of concern to the British Government and we will continue to keep it under close review.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his Department has had with (a) Chagos islanders and (b) other interested parties since the declaration of the marine protection area around British Indian Ocean Territory; and what subjects were raised at those discussions. [137444]

Mark Simmonds: Officials have met with Chagossian leaders, and held telephone conferences with those based in Seychelles and Mauritius, on a number of occasions since the declaration of the Marine Protected Area. Most of these meetings have mainly focused on the organisation of visits to the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) by Chagossians and involvement of Chagossians in environmental projects. Some Chagossian leaders have refused to participate in discussions on the latter. Officials have also had frequent informal discussions with a wide variety of Chagossians during visits, at conferences and during outreach events. The high commissioner in Port Louis has regular meetings with Chagossian leaders in Mauritius and Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Home Office Ministers have met Chagossian leaders, sometimes with members of the All Party Parliamentary Group.

Officials continue to meet with a wide range of interested parties on BIOT. The largest of these groups are scientists interested in research and conservation on the Territory.

Imports: Israel

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to prohibit the importation of products produced by Israeli settlers in Occupied Palestinian Territories into the UK. [137630]

Alistair Burt: There is no specific UK legislation prohibiting the purchase of settlement produce. The UK Government understands that people have different points of view on the issue and that some may not wish to purchase goods exported from the Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories which are illegal under international law. It was in order to enable consumers to make a more fully informed decision concerning the products they buy that, in December 2009, the UK introduced voluntary guidelines to retailers and supermarkets to enable produce from Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories to be specifically labelled as such.

The issue of settlement produce is a subject of discussion with our EU partners. EU Foreign Ministers, at the meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council on 10 December, reiterated the commitment made in 14 May to ensure continued, full and effective implementation of existing EU legislation and bilateral arrangements applicable to settlement products.

This ongoing work includes measures to ensure that settlement produce does not enter the EU duty-free, under the EU-Israel Association Agreement, and that settlement products are not incorrectly labelled as Israeli produce, in violation of EU consumer protection regulations. There are, however, currently no plans for EU or domestic legislation on this issue.

Kashmir

Steve Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the armed contact between India and Pakistan in Kashmir on 6 January 2013. [137345]

Mr Swire: We are concerned about the recent incidents on both sides of the Line of Control in Kashmir. There were two incidents on 6 and 8 January involving cross-border incursions on both sides of the Line of Control in Kashmir and another cross-firing incident on 10 January. These have resulted in the loss of life of two soldiers on each side. Officials in New Delhi and Islamabad are in touch with governments in both capitals. We welcome the call for dialogue from both sides in response to these incidents and highlighted the need not to derail the recent positive developments in bilateral relations.

Mongolia

Sir Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans his Department has to mark the UK's recognition of Mongolia as a sovereign de jure state 50 years ago. [137162]

Mr Swire: There are a number of events planned throughout 2013 to mark the 50th anniversary of bilateral relations between the UK and Mongolia. We are working closely with our embassy in Ulaanbaatar and with the Mongolian Government to make these events a success, and to ensure they further strengthen the relationship.

The celebrations will be opened by a Foreign and Commonwealth Office reception on 23 January, involving government officials from both countries, leading businesses and other key stakeholders.

There will also be a number of high level visits in both directions throughout the year to mark the anniversary, beginning with a visit by the Mongolian Minister of Education in January.

Occupied Territories

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to prohibit UK-based financial institutions from financing (a) the building of Israeli settlements in Occupied Palestinian Territories and (b) businesses owned by Israeli settlers in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [137628]

Alistair Burt: Our position on Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is clear: they are illegal under international law, an obstacle to peace and make a two-state solution, with Jerusalem as a shared capital, harder to achieve. The UK condemns decisions taken to build settlement units, calls for these decisions to be reversed, and for Israel to cease all settlement activity.

International law does not impose obligations on corporations and for a UK company to operate in the Israeli settlements or to provide financial assistance to companies in settlements, is not, per se, contrary to UK law. No UK public funds have gone in direct support of settlements. The issue of settlement financing is under active consideration in London and Brussels. However, there are no current plans for the Government to issue advice to UK-based companies and financial institutions on this matter, or for EU or domestic legislation on this issue.

Palestinians

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Palestinian Authority with a view to encouraging greater trade between the UK and Palestine. [137632]

Alistair Burt: UK Trade and Investment officials in Jerusalem have held a series of road shows in the main cities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) to showcase the services the UK presence offers.

The British Consul-General to Jerusalem also hosted a reception on 12 December 2012 to celebrate the opening of the Jerusalem Business Forum, attended by 200 senior local and international contacts.

In addition, we continue to lobby the Israeli Government to ease restrictions on movement and access, one of the major barriers to trade and economic development in the OPTs.

Sea of Japan

Neil Parish: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent conversations his Department has had with the (a) government of Japan and (b) government of the Republic of Korea on the disputed Dokdo Islands in the Sea of Japan. [136870]

Mr Swire: South Korea and Japan are two of our closest allies in the region. We therefore regularly meet representatives from both of their Governments to discuss a wide range of issues and I returned from Tokyo on 16 January.

Both Governments have raised this issue with us at official level since former President Lee of South Korea visited the islands in August.

The UK does not take a position on either country's claim. We would like to see a peaceful resolution in line with international law. We see cooperation between the two countries as essential to stability in the Asia Pacific Region. Given the recent elections in both countries, we hope that the new Governments in South Korea and Japan will take this opportunity to work closely together. Consequently, we welcome the recent visit of the Japanese Special Envoy Fukushima Nukaga to meet South Korean President-elect Park.

Sri Lanka

Tom Blenkinsop: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with (a) the UN, (b) his EU counterparts and (c) his Commonwealth counterparts on improving human rights in Sri Lanka. [137717]

Alistair Burt: The British Government regularly urges the Sri Lankan Government to improve the human rights situation, and to investigate infringements of human rights and prosecute those responsible. Officials are frequently in contact with their counterparts in the UN, EU and Commonwealth.

At the UN, we raised human rights concerns during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Sri Lanka at the Human Rights Council in November. We look forward with interest to the 'Report of the Working Group' from Sri Lanka's UPR; which we expect to be formally adopted in March 2013.

The UK, in conjunction with the European Union Heads of Mission, also released a statement on 5 December, expressing our concern about recent developments in Sri Lanka surrounding the rule of law and individual freedoms. We welcome the statements from the Commonwealth Secretary-General on the same issue of 12 December and 13 January.

We will continue to use every opportunity to raise concerns with the Sri Lankan Government, including my visit in the coming weeks.

Tom Blenkinsop: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka. [137733]

Alistair Burt: The British Government continues to have concerns about human rights in Sri Lanka. Our latest update can be found on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Human Rights report at:

<http://fcohrdreport.readandcomment.com/human-rights-in-countries-of-concern/sri-lanka/quarterly-updates-sri-lanka/>

We seek to promote progress through direct lobbying, working with international partners, and funding human rights projects. We also regularly urge the Sri Lankan Government to improve the human rights situation,

and to investigate infringements of human rights and prosecute those responsible.

The British Government is deeply concerned by recent developments surrounding rule of law and individual freedoms. On 11 January, the FCO issued a statement on the recent impeachment of the Chief Justice, which can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-deeply-concerned-by-move-to-impeach-sri-lankan-chief-justice>

WALES

Government Procurement Card

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in his Department have use of a Government Procurement Card. [137254]

Stephen Crabb: There are (a) five members of staff and (b) no special advisers at the Wales Office who have use of a Government Procurement Card.

Human Transplantation (Wales) Bill

Jonathan Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many letters he has received (a) supporting and (b) opposing the introduction of the Human Transplantation (Wales) Bill; what response his Department gave to such letters; if he will place that response in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [137353]

Mr David Jones: I have received no letters from members of the public regarding the Human Transplantation (Wales) Bill.

Jonathan Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with (a) black and minority ethnic, (b) Muslim and (c) Jewish communities in Wales on the introduction of presumed consent in to the organ donation system. [137354]

Mr David Jones: I have discussed the introduction of presumed consent to the organ donation system with the UK and Welsh Governments.

The Welsh Government completed an equality impact assessment which is contained in the explanatory memorandum to the Bill.

Press: Subscriptions

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much his Department spent on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12. [137274]

Stephen Crabb: The Wales Office spent £7,214 on newspapers and periodicals in the last financial year.

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales pursuant to the answer of 29 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 1W, on subscriptions, how much his Department has spent on subscriptions since May 2010. [137291]

Stephen Crabb: The Wales Office has spent £150 on subscriptions since May 2010.

Publications

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how often his Department produces a staff magazine. [137324]

Mr David Jones: The Wales Office does not produce a staff magazine.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Government Procurement Card

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in her Department have use of a Government Procurement Card. [137256]

Mrs Villiers: 12 staff in my Department have use of a Government Procurement Card, 11 of which are used solely for the purposes of purchasing stationery from previously agreed suppliers and one is used solely for travel bookings. No special advisers in my Department have use of a Government Procurement Card.

Press: Subscriptions

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much her Department spent on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12. [137277]

Mrs Villiers: During the financial year 2011-12, my Department spent a total of £18,079 on newspapers and periodicals.

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland pursuant to the answer of 31 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 213W, on press subscriptions, how much her Department has spent on subscriptions since May 2010. [137288]

Mrs Villiers: My Department has not incurred any spend on press subscriptions since May 2010.

Publications

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how often her Department produces a staff magazine. [137322]

Mike Penning: My Department produces an electronic staff magazine on a quarterly basis.

Taxis

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much her Department spent on taxis in 2011-12. [137300]

Mrs Villiers: During the financial year 2011-12, my Department spent a total of £26,811 on taxis.

Transplant Surgery

Jonathan Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent discussions (a) she, (b) Ministers in her Department and (c) officials in her Department have had with Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive on (i) the use of organs for transplants in Northern Ireland and (ii) the introduction of presumed consent for organ transplants in Wales; and if she will make a statement. [137352]

Mrs Villiers: These are transferred matters for which my Department has no responsibility. Northern Ireland Executive Ministers have not raised these matters with me nor have there been any discussions on them between my officials and their counterparts in the devolved Northern Ireland Departments.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Aviation

Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many air miles were accumulated by each Minister in his Department in 2012; how such air miles were used; and whether such air miles were donated to charity. [137086]

Gregory Barker: Travel arrangements made by the Department of Energy and Climate Change for Ministers are made in accordance with the Ministerial Code, including those elements of the code specifically relating to air miles. These set out the appropriate uses that include departmental travel and donation to charity. The Department does not keep a record of the past allocation of any air miles accrued to those different purposes.

Energy: Meters

Mr Jamie Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what steps he plans to take to prevent energy companies using smart meter data to increase energy prices at peak times. [137594]

Mr Hayes: We do not regulate prices in the retail market. The UK has a competitive energy market, with the lowest gas prices and fourth lowest electricity prices in the EU15. Once smart meters are available, we expect some consumers to benefit from tariffs that include differential prices at different times, depending on their patterns of consumption, and will have a choice as to whether to move to such a tariff.

Mr Jamie Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what steps he plans to take so that the cost of the mandatory installation of smart meters is not passed on to consumers. [137595]

Mr Hayes: The Government has put in place licence conditions on suppliers so that consumers are not subject to one-off up-front charges for the installation of a standard smart meter and in home display. Under current arrangements consumers pay for their meters, and their maintenance, through their energy bills and this will continue for smart meters.

Meetings

Jim Sheridan: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (1) how many meetings he and officials of his Department had with Google in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012; [138070]

(2) how many meetings he and officials of his Department had with Amazon in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012; [138078]

(3) how many meetings he and officials of his Department had with Oracle in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012; [138086]

(4) how many meetings he and officials of his Department had with Xerox in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012; [138094]

(5) how many meetings he and officials of his Department had with Dell CSC in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012; [138102]

(6) how many meetings he and officials of his Department had with Symantec in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012. [138110]

Gregory Barker: All meetings between external organisations and DECC Ministers are published on a quarterly basis on the DECC website and are available for download at this link:

<http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/accesstoinform/registers/registers.aspx>

Nuclear Power Stations: Decommissioning

Mr Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change who is to meet the waste disposal costs not paid by operators in the Funded Decommissioning Plans to be approved by the Secretary of State under the Energy Act 2008. [137770]

Mr Hayes: The terms on which the Government will take title to and liability for the higher activity radioactive waste from a new nuclear power station for disposal in the planned Geological Disposal Facility will be set out in a Waste Contract, that will be agreed alongside the operator's Funded Decommissioning programme. The price that Government will charge the operator for this service, the Waste Transfer Price, will be determined in accordance with the Government's published Waste Transfer Pricing Methodology:

http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/consultations/waste_trans/waste_trans.aspx

The Waste Transfer Price will be set at a level consistent with the Government's policy that operators of new nuclear power stations should meet their full share of waste management costs. Hence it is not expected that there will be any costs incurred in the disposal of higher activity waste from a new nuclear power station that are not covered by the Waste Transfer Price.

Mr Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what method is to be used to calculate the share of waste disposal costs to be met by operators in the Funded Decommissioning Plans provided for by the Energy Act 2008. [137772]

Mr Hayes: The Government's policy is that it expects higher activity waste from new nuclear power stations to be disposed of in the Geological Disposal Facility (GDF) that is to be built for the disposal of legacy waste. The terms on which the Government will take title to and liability for the waste from a new nuclear power station for disposal in the GDF will be set out in a Waste Contract, that will be agreed alongside the operator's Funded Decommissioning programme. The Department has published a Waste Transfer Pricing methodology which sets out how the price charged to operators of the new nuclear sites is to be determined:

http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/consultations/waste_trans/waste_trans.aspx

Petroleum Act 1998

Mr Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change pursuant to the answer of 10 January 2013, *Official Report*, column 426W, on Petroleum Act 1998, to whom the 17 notices have been served. [137636]

Mr Hayes: The information requested is commercially sensitive and as such it is not appropriate to publish it.

Taxis

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how much his Department spent on taxis in 2011-12. [137306]

Gregory Barker: The Department spent £51,000 on taxis in the period April 2011 to March 2012.

Warm Home Discount Scheme

Andrew Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what the monetary value was of the Warm Homes Discount distributed (a) nationally, (b) in Yorkshire and the Humber and (c) in Harrogate and Knaresborough constituency in 2011-12. [137782]

Gregory Barker: In 2011-12, the Warm Home Discount scheme provided support valued at £237.5 million across the UK to persons in or at risk of fuel poverty in the form of a £120 rebate on their energy bills. Regional or constituency breakdowns for this data are not available.

Further details about the 2011-12 scheme year are in the Ofgem Annual Report for the Warm Home Discount, which is available here:

http://www.ofgem.gov.uk/Sustainability/Environment/WHDS/Documents1/WHD_AR_08_Oct_2012.pdf

SCOTLAND

Carers

Fiona O'Donnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met carers groups in Scotland to discuss the effects of the Government's welfare reform policies. [136983]

David Mundell: Scotland Office Ministers have met with a range of individuals and organisations to discuss the Government's programme of welfare reform and work closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure people from all backgrounds are supported to move into work where they are able to do so or, if appropriate, have access to the support and care necessary for them to lead full, active and independent lives.

Disability

Fiona O'Donnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met groups representing people with disabilities to discuss the effects of the Government's welfare reform programme. [136984]

David Mundell: Scotland Office Ministers have met with a range of individuals and organisations to discuss the Government's programme for reform of the welfare system and work closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure people from all backgrounds are supported to move into work where they are able to do so or, if appropriate, have access to the support necessary for them to lead full, active and independent lives.

Food Banks

Cathy Jamieson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland whether he has visited a food bank since October 2012. [137746]

David Mundell: The Secretary of State for Scotland, the right hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Michael Moore), is visiting a food bank next month.

Government Procurement Card

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in his Department have use of a Government Procurement Card. [137255]

David Mundell: The Scotland Office has seven Government Procurement Cards, six of which have been issued to staff and one to the special adviser.

Press: Subscriptions

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much his Department spent on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12. [137275]

David Mundell: The Scotland Office spent £5,430 on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12.

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland pursuant to his answer of 30 October 2012, *Official Report*, column 142W, on press subscriptions, how much his Department has spent on subscriptions since May 2010. [137290]

David Mundell: The Scotland Office spend on magazine, journal and newspaper subscriptions since May 2010 is as follows:

	£
2010-11 (May 2010-March 2011)	4,235
2011-12	5,430
2012-13 (April 2012-December 2012)	3,841

Publications

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how often his Department produces a staff magazine. [137323]

David Mundell: The Scotland Office does not produce a staff magazine.

Taxis

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much his Department spent on taxis in 2011-12. [137299]

David Mundell: The Scotland Office spent £19,967 on taxis in 2011-12.

TREASURY

Business: Charitable Donations

Mr Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to encourage small and medium-sized businesses to undertake charitable donations and charitable support. [137483]

Sajid Javid: Companies can claim tax relief on donations of money made to charity by simply deducting the amount of the donation from their profit for corporation tax purposes.

Companies can also benefit from corporation tax relief on gifts of land, property or qualifying shares to charity. Companies and unincorporated businesses are also eligible for tax relief on a number of other types of gifts to charities, for example on gifts of trading stock and plant and machinery, and on the secondment of employees to charity.

Guidance on giving to charities by businesses is available on the HM Revenue and Customs website at:

<http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/businesses/giving/index.htm>

Child Benefit

Chris Leslie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of households affected by the changes to higher income child benefit had applied to stop receiving child benefit payments by 1 January 2013, (a) in total, (b) by using the online form, (c) by using the child benefit hotline or (d) by writing to the child benefit office. [135995]

Mr Gauke: The proportion of households affected by the introduction of the high income child benefit charge and who had elected to stop receiving child benefit payments up to and including 1 January 2013 was as follows:

(a) in total—approximately 16%;

(b) by using the online form—approximately 12%;

(c) by making their election over the telephone—approximately 4%; and

(d) in writing to HMRC—approximately 0.03%.

HMRC's initial estimate of the proportion of households who would elect to stop, receiving child benefit was 10%.

The final portion was 27%.

Chris Leslie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the range of potential penalties or fines is for those taxpayers who did not meet his 7 January 2013 deadline to register an opt-out under the higher income child benefit charge and who did not declare the continuing receipt of child benefit in a 2012-13 tax return. [136247]

Mr Gauke: The high income child benefit charge took effect on 7 January 2013. It was not a deadline for claimants to stop payments of child benefit. Claimants can elect to stop such payments at any time and the opt out process does not attract any penalties or fines.

Where a claimant chooses to keep some or all of their child benefit payments, however, affected taxpayers will need to notify HM Revenue and Customs of any tax liability through the Self Assessment process. The deadline for notifying this liability in relation to the tax year 2012-13 is 5 October 2013. The self assessment return will be due by 31 January 2014. Those who do not notify HMRC by 5 October 2013 or submit their Self Assessment return late will be subject to the usual penalty regime. More information is available on the HMRC website:

www.hmrc.gov.uk/compliance/cc-fs11.pdf

www.hmrc.gov.uk/sa/deadlines-penalties.htm#3

Mr Raab: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether a housewife whose husband earns over £360,000 a year will continue to receive national insurance credits towards her state pension if the couple cancel their child benefit, or whether the couple need to continue to claim the child benefit and allow it to be paid back via the husband's tax bill in order for her to continue to receive those credits. [137331]

Mr Gauke: The importance of claiming child benefit is made very clear in all HMRC's child benefit literature (such as for example, the child benefit claim form, and the claim notes), it is also covered extensively on the HMRC website, where the full guidance about the charge can be found at:

www.hmrc.gov.uk/childbenefitcharge/

Parents and carers where either they or their partner have an income of £50,000 or above will have two options to safeguard their state pension:

they can claim child benefit, receive the payments and, if liable, they or their partner can pay the new tax charge; or

they can elect not to receive payments of child benefit. However, they will continue to be treated as claiming child benefit for the purposes of establishing entitlement to the national insurance credits.

By claiming child benefit:

a claimant can qualify for national insurance credits that can protect entitlement to state pension;

can help protect entitlement to other benefits such as guardian's allowance;
ensures the child is automatically issued with a national insurance number before their 16th birthday.

Child Benefit: Scotland

Ian Murray: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of people in Scotland who will be affected by the planned changes to child benefit. [136994]

Mr Gauke: In 2013-14, HMRC estimates that approximately 85,000 families (rounded to the nearest 5,000) in Scotland will be affected by the high income child benefit charge.

This charge is being introduced so that those on lower incomes do not continue to subsidise the better off. 85% of claimants will be unaffected by this charge.

Fuels: Wales

Guto Bebb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will extend the rural fuel discount scheme to remote mainland communities including rural areas within Aberconwy constituency. [137231]

Sajid Javid: Motorists on the Scottish islands and the Isles of Scilly are benefitting from the 5p per litre discount on pump prices since the Government introduced the rural fuel rebate pilot scheme last year.

The Government will consider whether to seek EU approval for an extension of the scheme to other remote parts of the UK that are likely to display similar cost characteristics to the islands.

Government Procurement Card

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in his Department have use of a Government Procurement Card. [137271]

Sajid Javid: At present there are 78 Government Procurement Cards held by staff within the Department. No GP cards are held by special advisers.

Income Tax

Robert Halfon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish (a) any impact assessments and (b) any other internal documents produced by his Department relating to the 2008 decision to abolish the 10 pence rate of income tax. [137360]

Mr Gauke: In line with established practice, it would not be appropriate for Ministers to see or comment on any work undertaken by a previous administration.

Mortgages: Government Assistance

Mr Stewart Jackson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to assist the provision of mortgage products for (a) first time buyers and (b) those buyers participating in shared equity schemes; and if he will make a statement. [137742]

Sajid Javid: Decisions concerning the pricing and availability of mortgages, including shared equity mortgages, remain commercial decisions for individual lenders, and the Government does not seek to intervene in these decisions.

However, the Government has taken a number of steps to support creditworthy borrowers with a limited deposit get on to the housing ladder with its FirstBuy and NewBuy schemes.

Shared equity can play an important role in helping people buy a home by reducing the size of the mortgage required. The Government's FirstBuy shared equity scheme is targeted at first-time buyers with an income below £60,000 per annum. The autumn statement provided an additional £280 million for the FirstBuy scheme, building on the £180 million allocated to the scheme in Budget 2011. Taken together, this investment will support 27,000 deposit-constrained first-time buyers in England by March 2014.

The Government-backed NewBuy scheme provides up to 95% loan to value mortgages for new build properties in England. It is open to UK citizens or those with a right to remain indefinitely in the country, and there is no limit on income for borrowers. This measure looks to ensure that creditworthy borrowers with limited deposits, for example first-time buyers who are looking to buy or move into a new home, have access to mortgages.

In addition, in July last year the Government and the Bank of England also announced the Funding for Lending Scheme. The FLS is designed to provide strong incentives for banks to increase lending by linking both the amount of funds available to banks, and the price of these funds, to the amount of lending that banks make, thus lowering interest rates and increasing access to credit, including for first-time buyers.

Occupied Territories

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to ensure that products produced by Israeli settlers in Occupied Palestinian Territories do not benefit from preferential tariff treatment under the EU-Israel Association Agreement. [137629]

Mr Gauke: HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is aware of the risk of misdeclaration of the origin of goods to secure preferential tariff treatment under the EU-Association Agreement. HMRC control this risk in two ways:

1. Border Force, at the request of HMRC, undertakes targeted pre clearance physical examination of consignments of goods imported under the EU-Israel Association Agreement.
2. HMRC undertakes post clearance audits which provide assurance on business compliance.

This control regime uses intelligence received from a variety of sources including irregularities previously identified through compliance checks.

Press: Subscriptions

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much his Department spent on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12. [137286]

Sajid Javid: The Department has steadily decreased spending on newspapers and periodicals as shown in the following table.

	<i>Spending (£)</i>
2009-10	189,560
2010-11	62,348
2011-12	47,753

Regional Growth Fund

Mr Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will consider increasing the amount of funds allocated to the regional growth fund. [137485]

Danny Alexander: The regional growth fund operates across England and supports projects and programmes that lever private sector investment to create economic growth and sustainable employment.

Autumn statement 2012 announced that the Government would provide a further £350 million towards the regional growth fund, taking the total for the fund as a whole to £2.6 billion. More details on the next bidding round will be available shortly.

Revenue and Customs

Mr Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what evaluation HM Revenue and Customs plans to assess its programme to develop its operational delivery profession. [137032]

Mr Gauke: HMRC has developed an evaluation strategy for its operational delivery profession to measure whether objectives have been met, and whether activities meet business need and provide the best value for money.

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how the £77 million funding for HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) announced in the 2012 autumn statement will be allocated to each area of

HMRC activity; and how many additional staff will be recruited to HMRC as a result of this funding. [137796]

Mr Gauke: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 11 December 2012, *Official Report*, column 293W.

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects the new centre of excellence for tax fraud and evasion announced in the 2012 autumn statement to be operational; and how much funding it will be allocated in each year to 2015. [137797]

Mr Gauke: The autumn statement, 5 December 2012, *Official Report*, columns 871-82, announcement of a further £77 million to expand HMRC's tax avoidance and evasion activity, included £6 million split equally over two years to fund the work of the offshore evasion centre of excellence.

HMRC already has a significant programme of work under way to tackle offshore evasion. The new team will build on the established approach to develop a comprehensive strategy for tackling offshore evasion due to be published in spring 2013. There is already a small core team in place to do this. However, the full team, including secondees and external recruitments to work alongside HMRC experts, will become operational only once the funding is in place in April 2013.

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many staff were employed in each area of HM Revenue and Customs' activity in each of the last five years. [137798]

Mr Gauke: The number of staff employed in each area of HM Revenue and Customs' activity in each of the last five years is shown in the following table. For the current financial year we have shown headcount to the end of December 2012.

<i>HMRC headcount by line of business</i>	<i>31 March 2009</i>	<i>31 March 2010</i>	<i>31 March 2011</i>	<i>31 March 2012</i>	<i>31 December 2012</i>
Benefits and Credits	7,322	7,114	6,621	6,130	5,713
Business Tax	4,119	4,044	4,190	4,026	3,842
Enforcement and Compliance	34,762	29,354	28,066	28,084	28,742
Personal Tax	34,773	30,697	29,127	31,072	29,096
Corporate Services	7,899	6,848	6,376	5,671	5,208
HMRC	88,875	78,057	74,380	74,983	72,601

In 2009-10, approximately 4,500 Enforcement and Compliance staff transferred out of the Department to UKBA.

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much of the £900 million to be spent on HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) announced in September 2010 has been allocated to each area of HMRC activity. [137799]

Mr Gauke: As part of the 2010 spending review, the Government decided to reinvest £917 million into HMRC for additional compliance activities to bring in £7 billion more revenues in 2014-15, on top of the Department's target of £13 billion.

Around 65% of the £917 million investment funding is being focussed on the mass market and tax evasion.

Around 5% is being focused on large businesses and wealthy individuals.

Around 10% of the investment funding is being focused on tackling organised crime.

The remaining funding is being spent on a range of interventions designed to collect more debt.

Revenue and Customs: Aviation

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much HM Revenue and Customs spent on flights within England in 2011-12. [137342]

Mr Gauke: HMRC spent £263,090 on flights within England in 2011-12 via their contracted travel management company. Where HMRC staff purchased their own tickets and claimed back the cost incurred via an expense claim, the information is not available. The data on HMRC systems is not held in a way as to disaggregate flights within England from other UK flights.

Spend on flights via HMRC's travel management company show a significant reduction in the last three years:

	£
2009-10	867,903
2010-11	336,992
2011-12	263,090

HMRC is committed to reducing travel costs and the impact of its business on the environment. Staff are encouraged to consider alternatives to travel such as voice and video conferencing.

Where travel is necessary, staff are asked to consider the full cost of their journey and to use public transport. However, it is recognised that there are occasions where some routes with budget airlines are often cheaper when compared to rail tickets purchased at short notice.

Taxis

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much his Department spent on taxis in 2011-12. [137308]

Sajid Javid: The total spent on taxis in 2011-12 was £76,640.24. This figure is exclusive of VAT. The comparable figures for 2010-11 and 2009-10 were £97,875.40 and £211,207.09 respectively.

Taxi hire is for use by all HM Treasury Group staff for business use only.

The use of a taxi should generally be made where it will save official time or where a disabled member of staff is travelling to attend an official meeting. However, it may be justifiable to use a taxi if an official is carrying classified documents, heavy or bulky luggage or when in an unknown locality as a result of official business. Taxis may also be used when travelling home or to work late at night (after 10.00 pm) or early morning (before 6.30 am) when an alternative method of transport is not available.

Taxis are defined as a car available with a driver for hire, including a minicab.

Welfare Benefits Up-rating Bill

Mr Bain: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will ask the Office for Budget Responsibility to assess the effects on economic growth of implementation of the provisions of the Welfare Benefits Up-rating Bill in each of the next three years. [137230]

Sajid Javid: The effects of Government policies on economic growth are routinely assessed by the Office for Budget Responsibility. Information can be found in the OBR's Economic and fiscal outlook, at:

<http://budgetresponsibility.independent.gov.uk/economic-and-fiscal-outlook-december-2012/>

TRANSPORT

Rail Electrification

13. **Tim Farron:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent progress the Government has made on rail electrification; and if he will make a statement. [137505]

Norman Baker: The Government is committed to an extensive rolling programme of electrification. By the end of the decade, around three quarters of passenger miles travelled in England and Wales will be on electric trains. We plan to electrify around 850 route miles of railway, compared to fewer than 10 route miles in the 13 years of the last Labour Government.

Transport Infrastructure Projects

14. **Kelvin Hopkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what progress he has made on the transport infrastructure projects announced in the 2011 autumn statement; and if he will make a statement. [137506]

Mr McLoughlin: The Government is committed to boosting economic growth through investment in infrastructure. That is why transport infrastructure improvements worth £2.5 billion were announced in the autumn statement 2011, including 35 major projects.

Work is now under way on over 90% of these projects and construction has already begun on 13 of these projects.

Rail Investment

15. **Amber Rudd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has for rail investment; and if he will make a statement. [137507]

16. **James Morris:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has for rail investment; and if he will make a statement. [137508]

Mr Simon Burns: Rail is central to this country's economy and future growth. This is why the Government's High Level Output Specification (HLOS) announced in July 2012 provides for over £9.4 billion to be invested in the Railways over 2014-19. As well as supporting economic growth and generating jobs, our investment plans will deliver a greener, more cost efficient railway that is better for freight and better for passengers.

London-Scotland Sleeper Services

17. **Mr Kennedy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he last discussed the future of London to Scotland sleeper services with the Scottish Government; and if he will make a statement. [137510]

Mr Simon Burns: The Caledonian Sleeper is part of the ScotRail franchise operated by First ScotRail. The responsibility for the specification and management of that franchise rests with the Scottish Government. I have had no discussions with the Scottish Government on this as they have not raised the issue with me.

Rail Services: North Cornwall

18. Dan Rogerson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent assessment he has made of the potential benefits of re-introducing railway services to North Cornwall. [137511]

Mr Simon Burns: It is for Cornwall county council to identify the transport needs of the area and to decide whether re-introducing rail services is the best way to meet those needs.

No recent assessment of the case for re-introduced railway services to North Cornwall has been carried out.

Bus Services

Tom Blenkinsop: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent discussions he has had with bus operators on the cost of bus travel in non-metropolitan areas. [137716]

Norman Baker: I have given considerable attention to the cost of bus travel and to young people on buses. I have had discussions with the industry, and there is a new website giving young people more information about bus fares and the best offers in their area. We are discussing what further steps we might take to help young people, and, indeed, I have met colleagues at the Department for Education to discuss this very issue.

Data Protection

Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport on how many occasions each Minister in his Department carried classified documents on public transport in the last 12 months for which information is available. [137104]

Norman Baker: This information is not recorded. Ministers handle official information in accordance with government guidance.

Driving: Licensing

Nick de Bois: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects the insurance industry's Access to Driver Data project to be completed and fully operational; and if he will make a statement. [137588]

Stephen Hammond: Subject to agreement of the detailed design and costs, it is anticipated that motor insurers will have access to the driver data from April 2014.

Nick de Bois: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the cost to the public purse has been of the insurance industry's Access to Driver Data project; and if he will make a statement. [137589]

Stephen Hammond: At the end of December 2012, the cost to the public purse of developing the project to provide driver data to the insurance industry was £2.16 million. This project will allow insurance companies to calculate motor insurance premiums using accurate driver information.

Government Procurement Card

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in his Department have use of a Government Procurement Card. [137265]

Norman Baker: The number of staff in the Department for Transport and its six Executive Agencies is 17,551 of whom 1,233 have use of a Government Procurement Card. No special advisers have use of a Government Procurement Card.

High Speed 2 Railway Line

Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) over what time period he is assessing the proposed link between HS1 and HS2 will provide sufficient capacity; and if he will make a statement; [137692]

(2) whether Transport for London, Network Rail and HS2 Ltd have assessed whether the proposed link between HS1 and HS2 will provide sufficient capacity for the foreseeable future; and if he will make a statement. [137695]

Mr Simon Burns: The expected demand for international passengers wishing to travel to/from regional UK cities directly to/from the continent was last assessed in September 2010 for which forecasts were produced for the year 2031. While there remains a strategic case for linking HS2 with HS1 and the channel tunnel, the analysis has shown that even in 2031 the expected international market is relatively small compared to the domestic market. My officials are continuing to work with HS2 Ltd to identify the best approach for providing the link.

Transport for London, Network Rail and HS2 Ltd have all provided service predictions for this part of the route for the foreseeable future. These forecasts have informed the design of the link along the North London Line. HS2 Ltd continues to work closely with TfL and Network Rail to consider the operational requirements of the link and a number of proposals have been considered.

Press: Subscriptions

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much his Department spent on newspapers and periodicals in 2011-12. [137285]

Norman Baker: The central Department and six of its seven Agencies spent £71,053 in 2011-12 on newspapers, periodicals and trade profession magazines. This compares to an equivalent spend of £267,642 in the 2009-10 financial year. The Driving Standards Agency could only provide the figure at disproportionate cost.

Railways: Standards

Richard Harrington: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent estimate he has made of the level of rail punctuality; and if he will make a statement. [137503]

Norman Baker: The latest figures available, covering the year to 5 January 2013, provisionally show that 91.3% of trains in England and Wales met the Government's punctuality target of arrival within 5 or 10 minutes for short and long distance services respectively. In the most recent four-week period for which figures are available (9 December 2012 to 5 January 2013), 88.0% of trains met the target.

JUSTICE

Claims Management Services

Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what plans his Department has to publish its response to the consultation on proposals by the Claims Management Regulation Unit to amend the Conduct of Authorised Persons Rules to improve the behaviour of claims management companies. [137451]

Mrs Grant: The response to the consultation will be published as soon as possible once the necessary cross-government and related clearances have been obtained. This includes approval of the implementation stage impact assessment by the Regulatory Policy Committee which is being sought at present.

Employment and Support Allowance: Appeals

Diana Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what proportion of employment support allowance appeals heard at the tribunal venue in Hull were successful in each month since June 2010. [137634]

Mrs Grant: Appeals against decisions made by the Department for Work and Pensions on an individual's entitlement to employment and support allowance (ESA) are heard by the First-tier Tribunal—Social Security and Child Support, administered by Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service.

The following table shows the proportion of ESA appeals cleared at hearing in the Hull venue which were found in favour of the appellant from June 2010 to June 2012 (the latest period for which statistics have been published).

Outcomes of ESA appeals at Hull venue June 2010 to June 2012

<i>Month</i>	<i>Total cases cleared at hearing¹</i>	<i>No. of decisions in favour of appellant</i>	<i>% in favour</i>	<i>No. of DWP decisions upheld</i>	<i>% decision upheld</i>
June 2010	75	31	41	44	59
July 2010	41	11	27	30	73
August 2010	51	16	31	35	69
September 2010	66	20	30	45	68
October 2010	62	14	23	48	77
November 2010	69	12	17	56	81
December 2010	40	17	43	23	58
January 2011	69	25	36	44	64
February 2011	86	29	34	56	65
March 2011	71	20	28	51	72
April 2011	44	13	30	31	70
May 2011	70	22	31	46	66
June 2011	72	26	36	45	63
July 2011	85	40	47	43	51
August 2011	110	36	34	70	66
September 2011	73	27	37	46	63
October 2011	74	30	41	44	59
November 2011	86	29	34	56	65
December 2011	82	28	34	54	66
January 2012	65	25	38	40	62
February 2012	63	29	46	34	54
March 2012	80	34	43	46	58
April 2012	42	15	36	27	64
May 2012	73	22	30	50	68
June 2012	58	19	33	38	66

¹ The total number of cases cleared at hearing includes some withdrawals. Thus, it is not the total of those decisions in favour and those upheld.

Note:

Data are rounded and drawn from the GAPS2 of administrative system. Although care is taken when processing and analysing the data, the details are subject to inaccuracies inherent in any large-scale recording system is the best data that is available. Figures may not add to totals because of rounding. Values at 100 and over are rounded to the nearest 10. Values between five and 99 remain untouched.

Human Trafficking

Mr Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Congleton of 22 November 2012, *Official Report*, columns 857-8W, and to the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire of 8 January 2013, *Official Report*, columns 243-4W, on human trafficking, in which local authority areas and districts the victims identified were found;

and for what reason this information was not provided in response to the original questions. [137419]

Mrs Grant: The safety of identified victims is of the utmost importance and providing this level of information could result in them being rediscovered by their trafficker. It is for this reason that the region in which the victim was encountered was and will continue to be provided rather than the local authority area.

Pre-trial Procedures

Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many people were (a) remanded in custody and (b) remanded on bail in each year from 1997 to 2012. [137819]

Jeremy Wright: The number of defendants who were remanded in custody and the number remanded on bail at all courts in England and Wales, in each year from 1997 to 2011 (latest currently available), is shown the following table.

Data for 2012 are planned for publication in May 2013.

Defendants remanded in custody and defendants remanded on bail at all courts¹ in England and Wales, 1997 to 2011⁴—England and Wales

Remand status	Defendants (thousand)														
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008 ²	2009	2010	2011
Remand in custody ³	86.4	107.0	107.5	99.4	95.4	102.4	100.9	86.6	79.2	74.0	71.6	77.5	71.5	69.4	67.5
Remand on bail	492.9	488.4	474.8	442.3	455.6	432.7	446.7	471.1	445.0	429.3	425.4	441.2	551.4	552.1	509.3

¹ Includes those defendants remanded in custody or remanded on bail during proceedings at magistrates courts and those defendants remanded in custody or remanded on bail at the commencement of trial or sentence at the Crown court in England and Wales. The magistrates courts component of the data presented in this table excludes those defendants who failed to appear and those who were committed for trial or sentence at the Crown court. The remand status used for the Crown court component of the data is that recorded at the point of committal from the magistrates' court to the Crown court for trial or sentence.

² Excludes data relating to proceedings at Cardiff magistrates court for April, July, and August 2008.

³ Including those remanded in custody at any stage of proceedings at magistrates courts or the Crown court who may also have been given bail at some stage of those proceedings.

⁴ The magistrates courts component of the data presented in this table are estimated.

Source:

Justice Statistics Analytical Services, Ministry of Justice

Prison Sentences

Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what the average length of sentence was for (a) the total prison population and (b) foreign national prisoners in (i) 2010, (ii) 2011 and (iii) 2012. [136514]

Jeremy Wright: The average sentence length by nationality for prisoners discharged from determinate sentences on completion of sentence or on licence for the years 2007 to 2011 and January to June 2012 (latest available) is provided in the following table.

Average sentence length (in months) of prisoners discharged from determinate sentences on completion of sentence or on licence, by nationality, England and Wales

Nationality	2007	2008	2009 ¹	2010 ²	2011	2012 ³
Total	15	15	15	18	18	18
UK national	16	15	15	19	19	19
Foreign national	14	14	12	14	14	14

¹ The 2009 figures for average sentence length and average time served have been calculated using data for January to June 2009.

² The 2010 figures for average sentence length have been calculated using data for April to December 2010 due to data quality.

³ January to June. *Data sources and quality:* These figures have been drawn from administrative IT systems which, as with any large scale recording system, are subject to possible errors with data entry and processing.

Young Offenders

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what assessment he has made of the effect that the closure of Ashfield Young Offenders Institution and its replacement with an adult prison will have on young offenders serving sentences in the south of England and the distance they will be located away from their families. [137709]

Jeremy Wright: The Youth Justice Board is working with youth offending teams to minimise the movements of young people across the secure estate. Young people serving sentences in the south of England currently placed at Ashfield YOI, whose sentences extend beyond the date when Ashfield is transferred to an adult prison will be included in a planned relocation, taking into account each young person's individual needs. It is expected that the number of young people who this will affect will be less than 30.

The YJB will ensure that only young people whose are due for release before the transfer will be placed there.

In the longer term it is expected that some young people are likely to be placed further from home. Youth offending teams have become more accustomed to managing young people placed out of area. Additionally, the assisted prison visits scheme helps meet travel and subsistence costs for young people's families who qualify, and the use of video conferencing helps to reduce the journeys to and from court.

CABINET OFFICE

Appendicitis

Andrew Stephenson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many deaths there have been as a result of appendicitis in each of the last five years. [137535]

Mr Hurd: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

Letter from Glen Watson, dated January 2013:

As Director General for the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking how many deaths there have been as a result of appendicitis in each of the last five years. (137535)

The table provides the number of deaths from appendicitis for England and Wales, for the years 2007 to 2011 (the latest year available).

The number of deaths registered in England and Wales each year by sex, age, cause, marital status, and place of death are published annually on the National Statistics website at:

www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-27475

Number of deaths from appendicitis in England and Wales, 2007 to 2011^{1,2,3}

Year	Number (persons) Deaths
2007	146
2008	138
2009	89
2010	130
2011	127

¹ Figures are for deaths registered in each calendar year.

² Figures include deaths of non-residents.

³ Appendicitis was defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes K35-K37.

Source:

Office for National Statistics

Cardiovascular System: Newham

Lyn Brown: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many (a) men and (b) women over the age of 65 died of cardiovascular disease in Newham in (i) 2007, (ii) 2008, (iii) 2009 and (iv) 2010. [138161]

Mr Hurd: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

Letter from Glen Watson:

As Director General for the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking how many (a) men and (b) women over the age of 65 died of cardiovascular disease in Newham in (i) 2007, (ii) 2008, (iii) 2009 and (iv) 2010. (138161)

Cardiovascular disease is a broad term that includes diseases of the heart, arteries, veins and lymphatic vessels. Table 1 below provides the number of deaths where coronary heart disease was the underlying cause for males and females in Newham in 2007 to 2010. Coronary heart disease refers to disease of the arteries supplying the heart and includes conditions such as heart attacks and angina. For background information, Table 2 provides the number of deaths where cardiovascular disease, using the broadest possible definition, was the underlying cause for males and females in Newham in 2007 to 2010.

The number of deaths registered in England and Wales each year by sex, age, cause, marital status and place of death are published annually and are available here:

www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-27475

Table 1: Number of deaths where coronary heart disease was the underlying cause in men and women aged over 65 years in Newham, 2007-10^{1,2,3,4}

Sex	Deaths (persons)			
	2007	2008	2009	2010
Male	78	99	80	81

Table 1: Number of deaths where coronary heart disease was the underlying cause in men and women aged over 65 years in Newham, 2007-10^{1,2,3,4}

Sex	Deaths (persons)			
	2007	2008	2009	2010
Female	94	67	58	71

¹ Coronary heart disease was defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes I20-I25.

² Based on boundaries as of November 2012.

³ Figures are for deaths registered in each calendar year.

⁴ Figures exclude deaths of non-residents.

Source:

Office for National Statistics.

Table 2: Number of deaths where cardiovascular disease was the underlying cause in men and women aged over 65 years in Newham, 2007-10^{1,2,3,4}

Sex	Deaths (persons)			
	2007	2008	2009	2010
Male	156	203	153	158
Female	203	172	157	164

¹ Cardiovascular disease was defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes I00-I99.

² Based on boundaries as of November 2012.

³ Figures are for deaths registered in each calendar year.

⁴ Figures exclude deaths of non-residents.

Source:

Office for National Statistics.

Charities: Fraud

Mr Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what estimate he has made of the level of fraud in the charity sector; and if he will make a statement. [137788]

Mr Hurd: The National Fraud Authority estimated that fraud against the charity sector cost £1.1 billion in 2010-11. The Charity Commission provides guidance on steps that charities can take to protect themselves from fraud, and works with the police and other agencies to tackle fraud in the charity sector and bring criminals to justice.

Civil Servants: Recruitment

Tom Blenkinsop: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many people he plans to recruit onto the Civil Service Fast Stream in 2013. [137545]

Mr Maude: The deadline for applications to join the Fast Stream in 2013 was 30 November 2012. Selection is now under way, and the final number recruited will be announced in the annual Fast Stream report for 2013, due to be published on line early in 2014 at:

www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/civil-service-fast-stream-report

Data Protection

Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office on how many occasions each Minister in the Deputy Prime Minister's Office carried classified documents on public transport in the last 12 months for which information is available. [137107]

Mr Maude: This information is not held.

Dover House

Margaret Curran: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many staff working in the Deputy Prime Minister's Office he expects to move to Dover House in the forthcoming office move. [137471]

Mr Maude [*holding answer 15 January 2013*]: The Cabinet Office are working with Scotland Office to ensure that the needs of the Deputy Prime Minister's Office are met within the space available in Dover House.

Government Departments: Logos

Paul Flynn: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what information he holds on the names of Government Departments which are changing their logos to the Royal Coat of Arms. [137791]

Mr Hurd: All Departments are changing their logos to use a common design, which includes use of the Royal Coat of Arms.

However the following Departments that currently use a different and long-standing coat of arms or other heraldic device will incorporate this within the common design: Home Office, Ministry of Defence, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Scotland Office, Office of the Advocate General for Scotland, Wales Office, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons and Office of the Leader of the House of Lords.

Government Departments: Trade Union Officials

Mr Jim Cunningham: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) for what reasons evidence from the Tax Payers Alliance and the Trade Union Reform Council was used in the formulation of the proposals to reduce the facility time for trades union officials in the Civil Service; [135788]

(2) what representations he has received from trades unions on facility time for trade union representatives in the Civil Service; and what evidence from such bodies has been formally submitted during his consultation into this matter. [135789]

Mr Maude: During the consultation on the reform of trade union facility time in the civil service, at least seven formal meetings were held with the recognised civil service trade unions, these organisations also submitted written representations to inform the consultation. While the formal consultation was with the trade unions a range of other organisations, including individual civil servants also contributed their views.

Government Procurement Card

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in his Department have use of a Government Procurement Card; [137257]

(2) how many (a) staff and (b) special advisers in No. 10 Downing Street have a Government Procurement Card. [136959]

Mr Maude [*holding answer 15 January 2013*]: The Prime Minister's Office is an integral part of the Cabinet Office.

Procurement cards were introduced in 1997 but in the past there was no consistent approach to monitoring them or controlling procurement spend. By clamping down on waste and making procurement smarter, we saved the taxpayer hundreds of millions of pounds

since May 2010. Information on procurement card use is now published for everyone to see and scrutinise.

Since May 2010 we have also tightened the controls on the use of cards and implemented new cross-Whitehall standards, a taskforce to tackle fraud, and a group that monitors the spend and activity on cards.

There are currently 268 staff in the Cabinet Office who hold Government Procurement Cards. None of these cardholders are special advisers.

Expenditure on Government Procurement Card transactions over £500 is published on the Cabinet Office web site on a monthly basis.

Job Creation

Mr Godsiff: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will estimate the number of (a) part-time jobs and (b) jobs on a temporary contract created in (i) Birmingham, Hall Green constituency, (ii) Birmingham and (iii) England since May 2010. [138194]

Mr Hurd: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

Letter from Glen Watson, dated January 2013:

As Director General for the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question.

ONS compiles Labour Market Statistics following International Labour Organisation (ILO) definitions for areas smaller than the UK from the Annual Population Survey. (APS).

Information regarding jobs created is not available. As an alternative we have provided seasonally adjusted estimates of the number of people who were employed part-time or employed in jobs that were not permanent according to survey responses during the 12 month periods ending June 2010, the survey period closest to May 2010, and June 2012, along with the net change between these two periods. This net change provides a reasonable approximation of the number of jobs created since May 2010.

As with any sample survey, estimates from the APS are subject to a margin of uncertainty.

National and local area estimates for many labour market statistics, including employment, unemployment and claimant count are available on the NOMIS website at

<http://www.nomisweb.co.uk>

Table 1: Number of people employed part-time¹

12 months ending	Level		Change between 12 month periods ending June 2010 and June 2012
	June 2010	June 2012	
Birmingham, Hall Green	14	10	-4
Birmingham	106	97	-8
England	6,464	6,605	140

¹ Part-time in main job.

Note:

All estimates are independently rounded.

Source:

Annual Population Survey

Table 2: Number of people employed in temporary¹ jobs

12 months ending	Level		Change between 12 month periods ending June 2010 and June 2012
	June 2010	June 2012	
Birmingham, Hall Green	2	4	2

Table 2: Number of people employed in temporary¹ jobs

12 months ending	Level		Change between 12 month periods ending June 2010 and June 2012
	June 2010	June 2012	
Birmingham	22	23	2
England	1,219	1,301	82

¹ Temporary is defined as “not permanent in some way”—reasons included are:

Working for employment agency;
Casual type of work;
Seasonal work;
Under contract for fixed term or fixed task;
Other reason.

Note:

All estimates are independently rounded.

Source:

Annual Population Survey

Meetings

Jim Sheridan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how many meetings he and officials of his Department had with Xerox in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012; [138091]

(2) how many meetings he and officials of his Department had with Oracle in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012; [138083]

(3) how many meetings he and officials of his Department had with Dell CSC in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012; [138099]

(4) how many meetings he and officials of his Department had with Symantec in (a) 2010, (b) 2011 and (c) 2012. [138107]

Mr Maude: As part of my Department’s transparency programme, details of ministerial meetings with external organisations are published on the Cabinet Office website at:

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/ministers-transparency-publications>

A central record of officials’ meetings is not held.

New Businesses: East of England

Priti Patel: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many new businesses have been established in (a) Witham constituency, (b) Essex and (c) the east of England in each month since May 2010. [137998]

Mr Hurd: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

Letter from Glen Watson, dated January 2013:

As Director General for the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question concerning how many new businesses have been established in (a) Witham constituency, (b) Essex and (c) the East of England in each month since May 2010. [137998]

Data on new businesses are not available on a monthly basis, however, annual statistics on the number of new businesses (we refer to these as enterprise births) are available in the ONS release on Business Demography at:

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/bus-register/business-demography/2011/stb-business-demography-2011.html#tab-Business-births-and-deaths-by-UK-region>

Public Appointments

Luciana Berger: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many appointments made to the boards of public bodies overseen by his Department have been (a) male and (b) female since May 2010. [126175]

Mr Maude: Since May 2010, 30% of appointments to the boards of public bodies overseen by the Cabinet Office have been women. 47 men and 20 women have been appointed. In 2009 26% of members of the Department’s public bodies were female as published in the Cabinet Office Public Bodies 2009 report:

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/cabinet-office-public-bodies-2009>

The Cabinet Office will continue to focus on increasing the number of women appointed to its public body boards as we strive to meet the target of 50% female board appointments by 2015.

Mr Weir: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) which recruitment consultants his Department used to select candidates for public appointments within his departmental remit in each year for which figures are available since 2007; and how much was paid in fees to each such company in each year since 2007; [132785]

(2) how many public appointments (a) regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and (b) not regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments have been made by his Department since 2007; and in how many such cases the services of recruitment consultants were retained; [132786]

(3) when his Department last assessed (a) the utility and (b) the value of psychometric testing in its recruitment and selection of candidates for public appointments on advisory boards; [132787]

(4) what his Department’s policy is on the payment of travel expenses to candidates in respect of their attendance at assessment centres and interviews when pursuing applications for selection to a public appointment. [132788]

Mr Maude: Comprehensive information on the use of recruitment consultants for all public appointments since 2007 are not held, but consultants used by the Cabinet Office to support public appointments campaigns include Saxton Bampfylde at total cost under £100,000 (for appointments made in 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2011-12), Rockpools at £13,800 (in 2011-12), Gattenby Sanderson at £17,786 (in 2011-12) and Russell Reynolds in 2007-08 and 2008-09 (total cost figures for these campaigns are not held).

Since 2007, Cabinet Office-sponsored public bodies have made 60 appointments regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and 55 not regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. The services of recruitment consultants have been used to select candidates for over 10 public appointments made to the Cabinet Office’s public bodies’ boards.

The Cabinet Office keeps the use of psychometric testing, as part of the recruitment and selection of candidates for public appointments on advisory boards, under review. The Cabinet Office will consider payment

of reasonable travel expenses to candidates for attendance at assessment centres and interviews for public appointments.

Taxis

Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how much his Department spent on taxis in 2011-12; [137302]

(2) how much No. 10 Downing Street spent on taxis in 2011-12. [136961]

Mr Maude [*holding answer 15 January 2013*]: The Prime Minister's Office is an integral part of the Cabinet Office.

As was the case under previous Administrations, the use of taxis in the Cabinet Office is only permitted in line with strict departmental guidance.

Records are not held centrally of all taxi use by my Department.

Waste and Resources Action Programme

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the outcome was of his Department's meeting with WRAP on 11 October 2012 to discuss action his Department needs to take to implement the waste hierarchy. [137045]

Mr Maude [*holding answer 15 January 2013*]: At the Cabinet Office's meeting with WRAP on 11 October 2012 it was agreed that the Department was complying with the waste hierarchy. Following the meeting, the Department's relevant contractors formally signed up to the WRAP Hospitality and Food Service Agreement.

Work Experience: Scotland

Margaret Curran: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recent estimate he has made of the number of (a) 16, (b) 17 and (c) 18-year-olds in Scotland who currently have no work experience or experience of part time work. [137596]

Mr Hurd: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

Letter from Glen Watson, dated January 2013:

As Director General for the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question asking what estimate has been made of the number of (a) 16, (b) 17 and (c) 18 year olds in Scotland who currently have no work experience or experience of part-time work. (137596)

Estimates of employment are provided by the Labour Force Survey (LFS). For the period July to September 2012 it is estimated that there were 28,000 16 year olds; 29,000 17 year olds and 10,000 18 year olds who had never had a paid job of any kind or a place on a government supported training or employment programme. It is not possible to measure those who have received work experience as part of their formal education.

The estimates expressed as a percentage of the population in each case are: 55% for 16 year olds; 43% for 17 year olds and 22% for 18 year olds.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Candidates: Disability

Luciana Berger: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many candidates stood for election to Parliament in each of the last four general elections; and how many such candidates identified themselves as having a disability. [137784]

Miss Chloe Smith: The number of candidates that stood for election to Parliament in each of the last four general elections is as follows:

1997: 3,724;

2001: 3,319;

2005: 3,554;

2010: 4,150.

The Government is not aware that data have been collated on how many such candidates identified themselves as having a disability at these elections though the numbers are believed to be low.

The £2.6 million Access to Elected Office Fund, and wider Access to Elected Office Strategy, was launched in July 2012. It delivers the coalition agreement commitment to "provide extra support to tackle the particular obstacles faced by disabled people who want to become MPs, councillors or other elected officials".

Polling Stations: Disability

Luciana Berger: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what steps the Government is taking to ensure that disabled people can access polling stations. [137802]

Miss Chloe Smith: Local authorities are responsible for designating polling places and the law requires them to make sure that, as far as is practicable, these are accessible to the local community including electors who are disabled. Local authorities are also required to carry out regular reviews to ensure that existing polling places are checked for continued accessibility, that any reasonable improvements can be made, and that any new suitable locations can be designated as polling places. Electoral administrators will seek to adapt designated buildings where necessary so that they are accessible, for example by installing a temporary ramp.

The Government is committed to ensuring that the electoral process is accessible to all electors, and we continue to consider how the voting experience might be improved.

Trident

Wayne David: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he intends to publish the Government's Trident Review. [137715]

Danny Alexander: I have been asked to reply as the Minister responsible for the Trident Alternatives Review.

The review will report to the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in the first half of this year. An unclassified version of the report will be published shortly afterwards.

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