



Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Performance of the Department
(#AskPickles), HC 711

Wednesday 22 January 2014

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Simon Danczuk; Mrs Mary Glendon; David Heyes; James Morris; Mark Pawsey; John Pugh; John Stevenson and Chris Williamson.

Questions [270-309]

Witness[es]: **Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP**, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, gave evidence.

Q270 Chair: I welcome you to our session on the work of the Department. I am very pleased to see you here and sorry that you were not with us before Christmas. We appreciate you were ill at the time. We are pleased to see you are back fully recovered.

Mr Pickles: I am in the rudest of rude health. Could I say again, Mr Betts, that it was extremely understanding of you? I very much appreciated your personal wishes. Individual members of the Committee were also kind enough to send me a Christmas card or two on this, and yes, I am much better, thank you.

Q271 Chair: For one awful moment we thought that, if you were not back in full health, we might have your slightly more restrictive American cousin appearing before us this afternoon. I do not know whether the answers would have been better or not, but only time will tell. On to the questions. What we are doing this afternoon is to ask questions that have been tweeted in by a whole range of people: 1,600 altogether. We have been slightly selective and have edited out one or two of them that were probably not fit for our session this afternoon. No doubt, Secretary of State, you will be an expert soon at editing in other

forms, in council newspapers. However, we will not get into that discussion immediately.

Mr Pickles: I did have a look at the hashtag and I have to say, there were some questions where I actually blushed.

Q272 Chair: They must have been bad in that case, Secretary of State. First of all, we had a tweet saying, "Do you agree with Michael Heseltine's call, which said, 'I want powerful councillors and want them to be paid properly'?"

Mr Pickles: I do not want councillors to be paid. I want them to be recompensed. I always think it is really important for us to be able to have some councillors who may want to do it full time, and some who may want to do it part time. The great thing about councillors is that you do not have to take a test, and you do not have to come from a particular background. It is good to have a mixture. I am sure you recall your time as a council leader; I recall mine. I had a mixture of people, some who could devote quite a bit of time and some who could not. The real secret of being a good leader is to bring the best out of those who have a limited time, so they feel fulfilled. It would be sad if we—and when I say "we", I mean the council—become a new political elite, divorced from the folks who sent us there. With oodles of respect, I really do not want to see councillors become professional. I have no objections to councillors doing it full time, but I always want people to have the option to be able to do it part time.

Q273 Chair: Talking about options, we had another tweet in. Like everything else, councils have to move on, but the tweet said, "Will you bring council meetings into the 21st century by ending rules requiring council agendas to be sent to councillors in hard copy?" Apparently that is something your Department does.

Mr Pickles: I had no idea such rules existed. If someone would point it out, I would do my best to abolish it.

Q274 Chair: That is one success for the day, in that case. What about, "Can Government stop some councillors sitting on two local councils, for example, a town council and an upper council as well?"

Mr Pickles: I know there is a problem about sitting on a town council and sitting on a principal council. I have received the odd representation about people who sometimes are described as being "double-hatted", where they are on the district and the county at the same time. If they have the time to do it, I still worry about that. I am

reluctant to take decisions to end twin-hatting. Ultimately, the electorate has to make a decision. Again, the great thing about councils is, you get people coming in from all different backgrounds. I want to keep councils a vital and a vibrant place. I do not want them to become like you and I and the rest of us here; just a little, stale part of the political machine. I want them fresh and exciting.

Q275 John Stevenson: Back in December, Michael Heseltine said in the Guardian that making a county council unitary could save them £10 million a year. Should this policy not be pursued?

Mr Pickles: I did think about this. I have thought about it long and hard. I know there was this jokey thing that I said: that I would have a pearl-handled revolver and shoot the first official that came in and suggested a restructure. When that actually happened, I did not, you will be pleased to know. However, my view was that, given the financial restraints we were under, we could potentially waste an awful lot of money on a reorganisation, and that we would essentially take a couple of years out. I did not think we could afford to do so. Also, I have very strong views about how you get change in an organisation. The traditional view among local government, among the political classes, is that you do a restructure and then everything fits into that. My view is that it should be exactly the opposite, pretty much as it is in business and pretty much as it is in the world of politics, which is that you change the reality and let structure catch up.

I think the big push is for joint working. This is not just to save money; this is to deliver something much more sensible. I do foresee a time, not in the immediate future, where structure will catch up with the new reality of joint chief executives, working together. However, I do not want to lose the immediacy that councillors have. I do not want them to start having to look after a patch that is so big that they lose that. I like the idea of a councillor being able to look after an area.

Q276 John Stevenson: How does localism align with the DCLG diktat to local authorities to lower council tax and enforce weekly waste collection?

Mr Pickles: I have not enforced weekly collections. I have been gabby. I have been a tad annoying. I had a councillor who accosted me in the street in Victoria on my way back from Boots the chemist, who said, "Why are you always going on about weekly collections? We have just got our electorate trained to accept fortnightly collections." I said to him, as part of democracy, I thought we were the people's servants, and I did not think it was part of our process to train people.

I have been gabby, but I have not enforced weekly collections. I have created a condition whereby the public can start to exercise their rights and where politicians might feel a little hot under the collar having to explain why it is going to be fortnightly, or in the case of some authorities in Wales, moving over to a 21-day collection cycle.

Q277 John Stevenson: "Do you enjoy local government bashing? Please stop, it is demoralising."

Mr Pickles: I love local government bashing, because I love local government. Local government is one of the most adaptable, smarter parts of our constitution. It manages crises better than practically anywhere. Just take the floods; I can think of one council that did spectacularly badly, but most of them cancelled Christmas. It was interesting that if you looked on Sky or the BBC, the council was there. More particularly, so were the councillors. It was the councillors that were going out into their ward, helping to fill the sandbags and helping to reassure people. The difference between councils and health authorities and the like is that wonderful immediacy, so when I do a bit of bashing, it is in the confines of a very deep and loving relationship.

Q278 John Pugh: This question is not a surprising one, but is asked by a whole range of different people. You can probably guess which region they come from. The question is, "Why are modern, northern, urban areas suffering much bigger cuts, allegedly more than five times per head, than those in parts of the South?"

Mr Pickles: I think this is question 5 from Unite.

John Pugh: It was asked by a large number of people.

Mr Pickles: Yes, it was.

John Pugh: I am sure Unite are a large number of people.

Mr Pickles: As we started out this process, the 10 most prosperous places in the country received the smallest grant, and that is still the case. The 10 most deprived areas of the country received the largest grant, and that remains the same.

Q279 John Pugh: The question is not about the grant; it is about the cuts.

Mr Pickles: The sizes are proportionate. As you will be aware, Dr Pugh, I did introduce banded floors so that those who were more dependent on the grant had a lower cut. However, if, say, you are

looking at some of the larger northern cities that receive well above the national average in terms of spending power, it is not surprising that that is where the reduction has come from. It is a quarter of public spending.

Q280 John Pugh: You are arguing that they are proportionally the same.

Mr Pickles: Proportionally? No, I am not arguing that.

John Pugh: You are not arguing that.

Mr Pickles: No. I am arguing that, proportionately, the more prosperous areas took a larger cut because of the banded floors that I put in right from the very beginning. This year, no authority will lose more than 6.9%, which is an improvement on previous years. I have to say, given that local government is a quarter of public expenditure, how immensely impressed I am with the way in which they have handled it. I was particularly pleased to see the result of the BBC poll that said that the majority of people have not noticed a difference in the reductions, and in fact thought there had been an improvement in service.

Q281 John Pugh: I would be very interested to see this information that the cut is proportionate across all local authorities, if you have got it. Moving on: "Why does the Government fund rural councils by up to £100 per head less than urban councils, when the services cost the same?" This is from Alex Folkes.

Mr Pickles: Many of us round this table will recall the late Sandy Bruce-Lockhart. You may recall in the early 1980s I did some work with Sandy, in which we looked at the effect of deprivation in urban areas and the effect in rural areas. We compared the Kent villages with Camden and Islington. If you were poor in Camden and Islington, because there was a critical mass, that poverty was recognised. In the rural areas it was not. Last year, we introduced a sum for sparsity, relating to poverty, and we have put that in the base. This year, we have produced a sum in order to do the same things by way of a reward grant, because I do think it is unfinished business, and I personally feel a debt to Sandy that I want to address. We have to be really clear that the level of difficulty in, say, my old stomping ground of Bradford or Manchester is a little different from some of the rural villages in Suffolk. There is a degree there, but we are moving over more to a reward system, so the more that you do, the more of it you can keep.

Q282 John Pugh: Following on from that, the next question comes from Rob Whiteman who is Chief Executive of CIPFA, an organisation known to us all. He is saying: "Would you support an independent commission into local government funding, to ensure the fairer distribution of funds?" Rather than people arguing about it, you would have an independent commission that will tell you just what is going on.

Mr Pickles: I had a look at the Australian system, in which they have a grants commission. There are things that, in a previous life, I found attractive, but I am not sure the Treasury would find it particularly attractive. Ultimately, in terms of where the Australian grant commission comes down to, you would have a decision with regard to the totality. In this system, we have introduced something that is very similar to Australia in terms of the way in which changes in activity are kept and rewarded. Half the business rates are now retained locally, and hopefully as the years progress we will be able to increase that amount.

Q283 David Heyes: You suggested earlier that you have done an analysis of the tweets that have come in.

Mr Pickles: I did, yes.

Q284 David Heyes: You will have spotted that a substantial number of the questions were about the impact of funding reductions on various services: children's centres; Sure Start; youth services; homelessness; care services and those sorts of things. The question I am going to put is just an example, really, from among the many that came in. One, for example, is: "How will you help the 150 women domestic abuse victims who are being turned away from refuges every day due to budget cuts?" I guess the 150 refers to the area that this question comes from, but it has to be a situation that is fairly typical across the country.

Mr Pickles: Local authorities have an obligation to protect the most vulnerable. The local authorities have an obligation to ensure that there is no duplication, that they are working together, that they are not paying too much for their chief executive, that they are not keeping too much in reserves, that they are ensuring that fraud is investigated, and that they collect the council tax. Local authorities want to have a high degree of autonomy, and they have a high degree of autonomy, but sometimes people make bad choices. I have to say as an ex-council leader there is no way I would cut women's hostels. There is no way I would do that. I took a large sum out of my council years and years ago, but I protected teachers, I protected schools, I protected social work and I protected the vulnerable. Sometimes I do think—I

hope you will forgive me for saying so—there are some authorities that take almost a perverse pleasure in saying, “It is nothing to do with me. It is that Pickles fellow. He has taken all this money away.” I actually think local authorities have done very well and have managed to take those reductions. After all, it would be disingenuous to suggest that, were another political party making those decisions, the level of reduction would not have been similar.

Q285 David Heyes: Any amount of reducing chief executives’ pay, attacking council financial reserves and improving collection rates is not going to address the scale of cuts in many—particularly northern—authorities. Thirty or 40% across-the-board cuts could not be dealt with through the sorts of examples that you give.

Mr Pickles: I do not accept that. Joint working and joint procurement—a smarter way of doing things—can achieve an awful lot. It is impossible to hold the view you just gave when council balances are going up, not down.

Q286 David Heyes: It is not just a northern problem; it is fairly obvious where this question comes from. “What will you do for Oxfordshire’s children who face losing 38 of their 44 children’s centres?” Is Oxford a profligate authority?

Mr Pickles: This is an example of democracy. People have consulted and, as you will have seen from your papers, now it looks like Oxfordshire are not going to cut a single children’s centre. They have listened to what the public have said and they are looking for other ways. We should be very happy, and we should congratulate Oxfordshire on listening to their public and being adaptable to their public.

Q287 David Heyes: Here is one more example, which I guess you are going to give the same answer to: “Where do the homeless go when councils slash Supporting People funding?”

Mr Pickles: The level of homelessness is now as low as it has been in 27 of the last 30 years. Indeed, we are specifically offering help to local authorities to deal with homelessness. We are specifically helping local authorities to ensure that people are not kept in bed and breakfasts. We are specifically helping local authorities in capital to deal with poor landlords. We are specifically helping local authorities to help people who have been sleeping rough. At least now we are actually counting rough sleepers, unlike the last Government, which ignored them. We are looking at a position that is helpful. I do not

believe a sensible, caring, compassionate local authority would slash services to the vulnerable.

Q288 Simon Danczuk: I have three quick questions, Secretary of State. The first one is: "Councils like Birmingham have billions of pounds worth of assets yet plead poverty. Should they sell up and invest more in people?"

Mr Pickles: We did quite a bit to help them in terms of the use of capital resources last time, because I do recognise they have a bigish problem with regard to equal pay. You are right—or, rather, the questioner is right; Birmingham is very asset-rich. Providing they can ensure that the services available to the public are there, they have many fine assets, and I cannot see any reason why it would not be sensible to release that. The size of the problem they have with equal pay is just so daunting I do not think they have an alternative to doing so. I think Birmingham will become stronger from the process. We did go out of our way. Virtually half the amount that was available on capital we pushed over to Birmingham last year, with the help of the Treasury, because, clearly, we did not want them to be in such a difficult position; it takes a while to sell things.

Q289 Simon Danczuk: "What will you do to assist local SMEs and co-ops to bid for council contracts against large outsourcing companies?" That is quite interesting.

Mr Pickles: About 40% to 45% of contracts now go to SMEs. There are a number of things we can do. Firstly, we have to be really sensible about pre-qualification questionnaires, which, frankly, have got out of hand. With the help of the LGA, we came to a position. I do not think there is a need for pre-qualification questionnaires before the EU contracting procurement rules come in. If we do that, it makes it a lot easier. Many councils around Europe are able to offer contracts to local firms, and it is a good way of putting things into the system. Things below €200,000 are not exactly going to cause shifts in the market.

Q290 Simon Danczuk: My third and favourite question is: "Is paying minor celebrities to switch on Christmas lights a good use of council funds, rather than spending it on services?"

Mr Pickles: My view is it is a perfect example of the redistribution; it is taking money from the stupid and the gullible and giving it to the undeserving, frankly. I have to say both myself and Mr Betts are available at any time during the Christmas festivities to turn on lights, and we will even throw in a nice little speech.

Simon Danczuk: I am not sure it would be received in Rochdale.

Chair: I am sure I can undercut you on any occasion.

Mr Pickles: I am pretty cheap.

Q291 Mark Pawsey: Secretary of State, I have a number of tweets on the planning system. The first one I think we can pretty much anticipate your response to, but it is: "Do you regret revoking regional spatial strategies?"

Mr Pickles: No. Not for a second do I regret getting rid of them. It took a long time to get rid of them. It is a much better position for local people to decide. There was an almost wilful misunderstanding—people thought people would have a veto—but if you give people power, they have to exercise it responsibly and they have to take a view with regard to the future needs. We are in a pretty good place. There were not that many adopted plans when we came in, and now, by Easter we should have 80% or so published, and over 60% adopted.

Q292 Mark Pawsey: On that point, we have a tweet from a body I think looking to defend the green belt asking whether you will allow councils a period of grace while their plans are examined.

Mr Pickles: The effect on the green belt has been negligible. The amount even on greenfield sites has been pretty small. I saw figures—I think I quoted them on the Floor of the House—that building on the green belt in 2011/2012 was at the lowest level in the last quarter of a century. We are looking in terms of the weighting you have to give, but it is important that it is a realistic possibility. I have seen some submitted plans that put all eggs in a barely constructed basket. There has to be a chance that these houses will crystallise.

Q293 Mark Pawsey: This is the particular concern of some authorities that there are areas where it is taking a long time, because so many local authorities have prepared their local plans that there are a lot waiting to be approved by the Planning Inspectorate. Can you give some weight to those?

Mr Pickles: The more advanced and the more realistic the plan, and the more robust the evidence is with regard to housing numbers and the ability of those housing numbers to appear, the greater emphasis it will have. We have had informal discussions with the Inspectorate, who are going about it in a proper way, but I do not anticipate many rejections in those that are currently submitted.

Q294 Mark Pawsey: Here is another one from a body seeking to protect the countryside, asking: "Why should we not make developers build the homes that they have already got permission for before they are allowed to apply to build elsewhere?"

Mr Pickles: This is a matter of controversy, but the important thing to look at is the percentage of developers' land banks that lies dormant, and the percentage that lies dormant is dropping like a stone. I saw a report from Savills that suggested that land banks were being used faster than at any time since 2007.

Q295 Mark Pawsey: Have you got a view about the "use it or lose it" principle on planning consents?

Mr Pickles: That misunderstands how the system works. As orders start, the nature of land banking is going to increase, because you start to move at a faster pace. That is why I believe that the percentage that lies dormant and is not being used is the critical one, and analysis not by me but by Savills suggests that the amount that is lying dormant is dropping like a stone.

Q296 Chris Williamson: Secretary of State, you will be aware that we have had quite a few questions in relation to house building and housing markets, which is probably not surprising given that you are only spending £1.1 billion on affordable homes and £24 billion on housing benefit. If I could ask two of the tweets together, the first one says: "We aren't building enough. Labour's new towns idea accepts the housing crisis in a grown up way. Have you anything so radical?" The other says: "Housing prices up 0.5%, supply down 0.6%, demand up 10.2%. Is the housing crisis becoming a disaster?"

Mr Pickles: Remember when we arrived in office, as was described on the Floor, "the spirit of Stanley Baldwin" was greeting me, with the historic low levels of building. We inherited a situation where it was as low as the 1920s, and we needed to start that process off. I understand that Labour—and they are perfectly entitled to—want to go back to a spatial strategy that says, "This is where the new towns are going to be. Take it or lump it; here they go." I have to say, if we look in terms of what was delivered, they had a plan for five new eco-towns; that was not delivered, so, in true Khrushchev style, they were extended to 10. Still none were delivered. It will take a very long time to be able to build a garden city. There are a number of authorities who are keen and willing to do so—we saw an example on the Floor of the House on Monday during questions. What I do think we can do is

get some garden settlements going. Because of the nature of the changes in our need for armed services, the Ministry of Defence has a lot of land that has the potential for development. We have a lot of stalled sites. We have managed to get 69,000 units going, and we are perfectly capable of getting 100,000 units out of what we know is available currently. We have a better chance of getting these settlements going before the very long—by the nature of the thing, unless we are going to confiscate land—process of getting garden cities going.

Q297 Chris Williamson: Are you saying, then, that the housing crisis will not become a disaster, or is not becoming a disaster?

Mr Pickles: I think it was a disaster.

Q298 Chris Williamson: So it is already a disaster.

Mr Pickles: It was a disaster. When we arrived, we were greeted with the burned-out wreck of a policy, since which time it has been bumping along the ground and we have been trying to get it going. We will be producing more social housing than the last Labour Government managed in 13 years. With the help of things like Help to Buy and the various other initiatives, we are beginning to see some life come back into building outside social housing.

Q299 Chris Williamson: You will struggle to achieve that when you have cut the social housing grant by 60% and you are only spending £1.1 billion a year. If we can move on to unaffordable housing—

Mr Pickles: Let us not move on. 170,000. We are building more council houses than you managed.

Chris Williamson: Let us move on to the next question, Secretary of State.

Chair: Chris, you have made a comment; the Secretary of State has got a right to make his statement.

Mr Pickles: I am used to him shouting at me. He is a very nice man outside, but he can be very aggressive in these circumstances. We have built more council houses in this administration than in the whole of the 13 years. We will deliver 170,000 social houses. That is pretty impressive.

Q300 Chris Williamson: But you are only spending £1.1 billion on the Affordable Homes Programme, and you have cut the social housing grant by 60%. Let us move on to the next question.

Mr Pickles: All that says is how ineffectual you are. You had all this money; you did not build anything.

Chair: Let us have the next question now; let us move on.

Q301 Chris Williamson: "Housing Ministers come and go. When will the coalition Government take housing seriously and address housing needs of older people?"

Mr Pickles: That is a bit rich, really, because I have barely got round to naming the last Housing Ministers under Labour. The average length of a Housing Minister was nine months and four days. With Grant Shapps, you had somebody who was there for two years.

Q302 Chris Williamson: We can make the arguments about the previous Government, but the question is not from me; it is from a member of the public, who is saying: "Housing Ministers come and go. When will this coalition Government"—which you are responsible for—"take housing seriously and address housing needs of older people?" I do not think it is helpful to talk about the previous Government; they are asking about what you will do.

Mr Pickles: I have just told you. We are going to build 170,000.

Q303 Chris Williamson: For older people?

Mr Pickles: Despite having fewer resources than the previous Government wasted, we will be delivering 170,000. We are ensuring, through the Help to Buy process, that first-time buyers are back on the scene. We are ensuring that mortgages are available. We are seeing a time when, for the first time in a long time, the number of houses is starting to creep up. As the Prime Minister pointed out at Question Time today, an increase in starts of 89% is pretty damn impressive.

Q304 Mrs Glendon: Secretary of State, this question is specifically from a resident who was involved in the dispute over the demolition of houses in the Housing Market Renewal area of Anfield in Liverpool. She asks: "Why do you listen to SAVE and not to the local residents of the Welsh Streets, who voted unanimously for demolition?" I think she is asking if you would come and see them.

Mr Pickles: The Mayor of Liverpool was kind enough to give me a tour round the area. I know he feels passionately about demolition. I have my doubts. I have not made a final decision yet; I am still very carefully considering. There was a legitimate worry and concern about demolishing pretty sturdy and substantial houses. I found it pretty depressing going round with Joe looking at these houses that had these iron protectors over the doors because no one was living in them. The thing that is worrying and that is in our minds is that, under Labour, we lost 420,000 affordable houses through the process of demolition. Given what is happening with Liverpool, given the City Deal, given the prospects—it is clearly going to be a place people are going to want to live; it is a place on the up—is it unreasonable, before we take the decision to demolish these houses, to say, “Well, just hold on. Is this right?” The last Government was criticised for demolition. We said we would end demolition; our coalition partner said we would end demolition; and it is not unreasonable just to have a look at this in the round before we make the final decision.

Q305 Mrs Glindon: But you will bear in mind the plea.

Mr Pickles: Yes, I want to be fair-minded about the whole process. I am not being doctrinal about it. I am just being a bit cautious; that is all.

Q306 Mrs Glindon: “If the Code for Sustainable Homes is withdrawn, how do local authorities consistently ask for sustainable materials outside of building regulations?”

Mr Pickles: We are currently looking at the code and we are currently looking at building regulations. We are looking towards a more simplified system. As you know, Lord Taylor has been doing a lot of work. I do not think this necessarily affects sustainability or energy efficiency. What it tries to do is to get a consistent code. The worries expressed there I doubt will come about.

Q307 Mrs Glindon: The last one I will ask is: “Will you provide longer term empty property rate relief for landlords upgrading energy efficiency?”

Mr Pickles: I will have to take that on advisement. I was not aware that was an enormous problem in terms of getting things back into place. We have been looking at the effect it has had on holiday lets and had some discussions with the commission on that, but if that is a big problem, that is not something I am terribly aware of.

Q308 Chair: You can probably come back to us, Secretary of State, on that one; that would be helpful. Just finally on the “#askPickles” tweets, we had a tweet in that said: “For the record, how much did your Government spend on biscuits in the last financial year?”

Mr Pickles: I cannot believe this.

Chair: Secretary of State, I am going to have to add my little bit on top. Is the bill for salads now larger than the bill for biscuits?

Mr Pickles: My dear chums, obviously, because I am a big fat guy, we take these views. We offer hospitality for people coming from outside Government who have more than a four-hour travel, but the sum that is available is 17% of the sum that the last Labour Government spent on hospitality. I do not think it is unreasonable to offer people a warm beverage or something to eat if the thing is going to last for more than four hours. With regard to whether or not any Minister has consumed any of this, I can tell you, on pain of death, none of them have. We do not do that kind of thing.

Q309 Chair: I will just move on to one or two other points, if we have time before the division. I know you have to go at that point, but just to pick up things that we would have asked you before Christmas, you have made comments about councils who put their council tax up by just less than the amount required to have a referendum being “democracy dodgers”. Does the Leader of Essex County Council now fall into that category?

Mr Pickles: If he is going to do that, then he certainly will, and he will hear from me directly. Could I answer a question you asked at Question Time earlier? I thought it was interesting; you were talking about Section 31 grants. It did occur to me that you were thinking—I mean this with enormous respect—that an increase in council tax would happen only in extremis. I actually think the referendum is going to become part of a normal process, in which councils get into a proper dialogue with their electorate and say, “This is what we are going to do”. They are going to have to choose very carefully which years to do it, because they will not want to do it in a year in which they are up for election. I regard that as being a normal thing. As the bell is ringing, can I say this? Remember councils are different from other organisations, as there is a section 151 officer who has an obligation to ensure that there is a balanced budget. We are in a situation where councils are going to have to come to the reality and say, “We need to take the public into our confidence. This is what we are going to do.” I think they will be pleasantly surprised by that reaction.

Chair: We can follow up on Section 31 and the relationship to council tax referendums at some stage in the future, Secretary of State. Thank you very much for coming and being with us this afternoon and answering the questions that the public have asked on this occasion.

Mr Pickles: Thank you very much. It has been a ball.