Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. After 24 years as a doctor, I do not need to be told how important carers are, and I pay tribute to the many whom I have met in my experience as a doctor—they really are extraordinary people.

I would like to focus on young carers in particular, and to draw hon. Members’ attention to the fact that the average age of a young carer is 12, which is extraordinarily low. The 2001 census showed that there were 175,000 young carers in the UK, 13,000 of whom cared for more than 50 hours a week. Those young carers provide not only help with cooking, cleaning and shopping, but often very intimate and personal care, and emotional support to parents with severe mental illness. Organisations such as Barnardo’s need our thanks for their work, particularly in helping young carers to cope and in identifying them before they find themselves in crisis.

My constituency takes in much of Torbay, where there are 350 identified young carers. Those children suffer low attainment at school, which is partly due to their poor attendance as a result of their caring work. They are also particularly prone to living in poverty. I would like to draw the Minister’s attention to a particular subset of young carers: the 20% of the children and young people in the Torbay area who are carers as a result of alcohol and drug abuse, and associated mental illness. Those who have been identified are the tip of the iceberg. Some fear coming forward for help because they worry that they might be taken into care. Those children have no access to the carer’s allowance. They are particularly prone to living in poverty and to going on to misuse drugs and alcohol themselves, and also at risk of domestic violence.

My interest is in prevention as well as cure. We know that drinking adversely affects up to 1.3 million children in the UK, and that group especially needs our help. Police forces estimate that 40% of all child abuse cases and 62% of incidences of domestic violence are directly related to alcohol. I would like the Minister to look again at the evidence on what works to reduce alcohol-related crime and violence, and therefore the number of children becoming young carers. The evidence shows that that is about pricing and availability, so I hope that there will be support for the Health Committee and NICE, which is clearly on the side of minimum pricing as the way forward.

I pay tribute to the caring organisations in my constituency. A fortnight ago, I was privileged to attend the opening of the Brixham carers centre. Brixham is particularly fortunate as it is also home to Brixham Does Care, which supports 150 carers and has 150 volunteers. Those organisations asked me to raise with the Minister the time that volunteers’ Criminal Records Bureau checks take. Only this morning I was told that some checks submitted in April were still pending. We need to look closely at how we reduce the barriers to volunteering, because volunteers are a lifeline for carers. I welcome the review of the vetting and barring procedure that has been announced by the Home Secretary, but I would like the Minister to look at the time that the checks take.

Respite care is another concern of carers in my constituency. Will the Minister consider the issues facing the John Parkes unit, which provides respite care for some of the most
severely disabled children in my constituency and is used by many of constituents?