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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Friday 28 October 2016**

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# House of Commons

*Friday 28 October 2016*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

*Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.*

# Homelessness Reduction Bill

*Second Reading*

9.34 am

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before I begin my remarks, I place on the record a declaration of interest. I have a small number of properties in the private sector, and am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

The reality is that, in this day and age, homelessness results from many different causes. It could be because of a relationship breakdown, the end of a private sector tenancy, someone being ill or injured in an accident, or many other causes. As Members of Parliament, we know that often someone who reaches that crisis of homelessness in their lives will naturally go to their local authority to seek help. The sad fact is that when someone is threatened with homelessness and goes to their local authority they will as likely as not be told, "Go home, wait until the bailiffs arrive and come back when you are literally on the streets."

When someone is on the streets—when they have reached that terrible crisis point in their life—they arrive at the housing office and the people there do a checklist: is the person addicted to drugs or alcohol; do they have children under the age of 16; are they suffering from some terrible illness or other problem?

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing this Bill. He talks about local authorities and he is right that changes need to be made to legislation, but does he agree that if this Bill is to be successful there needs to be urgent Government funding behind local authorities so that they can tackle mental health, drug abuse and so forth, and that without that extra funding the good aspirations of the Bill will not work?

**Bob Blackman**: Clearly, the Bill is part of a strategy. It is not the sole basis of this approach. Under the new doctrines operating in this Parliament, new duties on local authorities mean new money for local government. I hope to hear that from the Minister later on.

After the checks, if someone is priority homeless the local authority will house them, probably in emergency accommodation, which is expensive to the local authority and not very suitable for the people who have to be housed. The non-priority homeless are told to go out and sleep on the streets, on a park bench, or in a doorway, and then they may—may—be picked up by a charity under the No Second Night Out programme. That is an absolute national disgrace. When employment is at the highest level ever and we have a relatively low level of unemployment, having one single person sleeping rough on our streets is a national disgrace that we must combat.

For 40 years, we in this House have forced local authorities to ration the help that they give. I passionately believe that people enter public service to deliver a service to the public, not to deny them a service.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this important Bill. He points to the fact that local authorities will make an assessment and some people will be placed in

[Kate Green]

temporary accommodation as a result. Does he agree, however, that far too many very vulnerable people still end up sleeping rough, sofa surfing or sleeping on the streets, including, for example, people discharged from hospital or from custody?

**Bob Blackman:** That is precisely why I am introducing this Bill. Anyone who is sleeping rough is extremely vulnerable. They are liable to be mugged and to be attacked. Women are likely to be raped. Horrible things happen to people who are forced to sleep rough. I do not want to see that happen in this society any longer.

**Mr Andrew Smith** (Oxford East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Bob Blackman:** If I may, I will make a bit of progress.

When I was drawn second in the private Members' Bills ballot, I asked myself what I could do that would make a difference. At the time, I never realised how popular I could become, literally overnight.

**Mr Smith:** On his popularity, will the hon. Gentleman give way? [Laughter.]

**Bob Blackman:** I will.

**Mr Smith:** I too congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this Bill, and the number of people here this morning attest to its importance and the support there is for it, which I certainly share in. Does he agree that important lessons should be learned from the action taken by Tony Blair's Government between 1998 and 2009, when rough sleeping was cut by three quarters, not least because of the close focus on the issue that the Prime Minister personally gave it? Does the hon. Gentleman believe that he will enlist the present Prime Minister's equal focus in cutting the level of rough sleeping we clearly face?

**Bob Blackman:** For 40 years, we in this House have forced local authorities to ration the help they provide to the homeless.

I looked at what I could do. I served in local government for 24 years and saw at first hand the damage that homelessness can do to ordinary people who, through no fault of their own, lose their homes. I also sit on the Communities and Local Government Committee, which published its inquiry into homelessness in August. The Committee made particular efforts with ex-homeless people and young care leavers, which led directly to the report's recommendations that form the basis of the Bill.

The aim of the Bill is to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place and to prevent people from ever having to sleep rough. In case anyone misunderstands the extent of homelessness, rough sleeping has doubled since 2010. It was up 30% last year alone, with 3,569 people reported as sleeping rough on any one night in 2014. In London, 8,096 people slept rough at some point in 2015-16, an increase of 7% from 2014-15. Last year, 112,330 people in England made a homelessness application, a 26% rise since 2009-10, with 54,430 accepted as homeless and in need of assistance.

If we combat homelessness at an early stage before it becomes a crisis, we will save money in the long run for local authorities. Research commissioned by Crisis, based on in-depth interviews with 86 people who have experienced homelessness, estimates that £742,141 of public money was spent on 86 cases during a 90-day period of homelessness. Overall public spending would fall by £370 million if 40,000 people were prevented from experiencing one year of homelessness, based on an average reduction in public spending of £9,266 per person a year.

**Emma Reynolds** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing the Bill, which I fully support. On prevention, does he agree that in Wales the Labour Government have introduced measures very similar to those in the Bill? They are starting to work. Unlike in England, homelessness is dropping. He talks about a false economy. The Welsh Government have put money up front to deal with this issue, but I am sure they will save money in the long run.

**Bob Blackman:** I will come on to the situation in Wales in a moment.

The anticipated savings will include direct savings to local authority homelessness teams. Drawing on the lessons from Wales, which the hon. Lady rightly raises, academics commissioned by Crisis estimate that a projected 20% increase in prevention and relief activity could produce an additional cost of £43.9 million, but that that would be offset by a £46.8 million reduction in spending on people who are already homeless. That is partly due to reductions in the use of temporary accommodation and a greater focus on preventing homelessness. Over time, this should reduce the number of people who lose their home in the first place. This would require more intensive support through either a relief duty or an offer of settled accommodation under the main duty of homelessness.

The Bill should also make savings for other public bodies. Research by Crisis into the cost savings of prevention and relief duties in England suggest that in just six months we could save £2.88 million for the criminal justice system and £1.2 million to £3.8 million for the national health service, including over £500,000 of savings for accident and emergency departments alone. What we know is that people who are sleeping rough are far more likely to suffer from respiratory diseases and they have to use the NHS repeatedly.

In Wales, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 came into force on 27 April 2015—a great day, the one after my birthday. The experience gained from that legislation has helped to inform measures in the Bill in certain areas. Wales has seen a 69% reduction in the number of households owed the main homelessness duty, with only 1,563 households owed the main homelessness duty in the first year of the new prevention and relief duties. In the first year, 7,128 households were provided with prevention assistance, of which 4,599, or 65%, had a successful outcome. Temporary accommodation has fallen by 16% in Wales since the introduction of the new duties, saving £697,980. In London, which accounts for 72% of temporary accommodation, even half that reduction would save some £37 million.

**Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): I am here to support my hon. Friend and his excellent Bill. I just observe, however, that when London boroughs seek

temporary accommodation it disrupts the housing market in Wycombe for my constituents. Does he agree that we need many more affordable homes, to both buy and rent, everywhere, but especially in London?

**Bob Blackman:** The Bill does not deal with supply, but that is an important issue. It is clear that we need to increase the supply of affordable homes right across the country, but particularly in London.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman suggests there will be a saving to local authorities in London, so why does my council in the London Borough of Redbridge estimate that the Bill will lead to additional costs of £5 million for our local authority?

**Bob Blackman:** There will be an increase in costs associated with the help and advice, and prevention duties. Clearly, that needs to be funded by the Government. I am sure we will hear good news from the Government when the wind-up speeches take place. There are beacons of excellence across the country, where homelessness is not an issue and local authorities carry out the prevention duty properly. I do not want to comment on particular councils, but I suggest that the hon. Gentleman advises his council to look at the Bill very carefully. We need to make sure that London councils support the Bill, recognise their duties and seek funding for them.

The Bill seeks to revolutionise what happens in housing offices. I received an email from a young lady in Wales. Carol Martin is a line manager for homelessness and housing options for a rural county council in west Wales, with many years of housing experience in both England and Wales. She wrote that since the changes:

“It has taken a total rethink of the way my staff work and has needed additional funding, but we are changing things around to take a preventative approach at the outset. It was certainly not an easy process but with a strong belief it can be achieved, some additional types of training and strong negotiation skills it really does work...the roles within the Team are more positive due to the help they are able to give, and the clients coming through the doors are more likely to join in a mutually agreed Personal Housing Plan where the clients take some responsibility as well as the Officers, all working towards a positive outcome.”

That is precisely what my Bill seeks to achieve.

**Dr Tania Mathias** (Twickenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill addresses the cruelty of the current system? What is brilliant about the Bill is that it will allow local housing staff to express more of their innate compassion and kindness. Like many MPs, I have found staff to be incredibly helpful when people are in desperate need—a gentleman in Richmond borough called Brian Castle does outstanding work—and the Bill will help them to utilise their great abilities.

**Bob Blackman:** That is the aim—to revolutionise the culture in local authorities and housing offices that provide a service.

**Richard Burden** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I commend the hon. Gentleman for introducing the Bill, and I am pleased to hear his acknowledgment that if it is going to work, it will need to have resources behind it. Let me put this point to him about prevention. Prevention must mean what it says. I recall an Adjournment debate

in which it was pointed out that a previous Conservative administration of Birmingham City Council was using the term “prevention” as a means of passing the buck to others to give advice to people threatened by homelessness. It is really important that prevention means prevention and not just passing the buck.

**Bob Blackman:** There are beacons of excellence in local authorities, some of which do a really good job on preventing homelessness. Unfortunately, the norm is that they do not. We must ensure that they do not pass the buck, that they come up to the plate and that they deliver for homeless people.

The aim of the Bill is, first and foremost, to ensure that no one, but no one, is turned away at the door. Everyone should be entitled to some form of support before they get to the stage where they literally have nowhere safe to stay. No one should go to their council for help, only to be told, “Come back when the bailiffs have arrived.” This Bill ensures that everyone, regardless of priority need status, is entitled to receive free information and advice to help them with their situation; and it means that 56 days prior to someone becoming homeless, they will get help. The council will have to produce a personalised housing plan to create a tailored road map for preventing homelessness in that crucial period, so that both the applicant and the council have an agreed set of steps to fulfil the prevention of homelessness.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing the Bill forward today, but will it guard against substandard accommodation? We would not like to see people being placed in substandard accommodation, which is the big issue up and down the country at the moment.

**Bob Blackman:** I am coming on to that particular issue in a few moments.

The Bill will also ensure that local connection requirements are working in a way that prevents people from moving from one city to another or one part of London to another. People demanding housing in London, for example, would obviously put undue pressure on the system.

The Bill also makes sure that everyone takes an aspect of personal responsibility, so that people will be rewarded with good outcomes for co-operation and engagement with the process. It will bring about a culture change in councils—away from a crisis response towards prevention strategies and a more compassionate approach to helping people who are in that desperate crisis.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): My hon. Friend will be delighted to know that I support his Bill, and it is good to see that MPs can turn up on a Friday when a Bill is genuinely popular and important to Members of Parliament. Will he confirm that the Bill will stop some of the perverse incentives that I saw when I volunteered for St George’s Crypt in Leeds, where local authorities were turning away people who did not have a drug or alcohol addiction because people with those addictions were seen as a priority? The people who were turned away felt that they were effectively being told that if

[Philip Davies]

they wanted to be housed, they had to develop a drug or alcohol addiction. Will his Bill stop those perverse incentives?

**Bob Blackman:** I thank my hon. Friend for his support for the Bill. Yes, we have to stop these perverse incentives that are encouraging people to go down such routes. The reality is that the vast majority of people become homeless through no fault of their own; they just want help and advice from the local authority. The Bill will make sure that they get that help and advice at the time when they need it—not just on the basis of priority need.

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): I would like to join the universal hymn of praise to the hon. Gentleman. I suggest that anyone who wants to understand the reality of homelessness in London today should read “This is London” by Ben Judah. Speaking as a former homeless persons officer at the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we did not lack empathy or sympathy; what we lacked was housing, and we need to know how to address that. On the point about priorities, I am very proud that this and the last Government have prioritised people leaving the armed forces. We have a military covenant, so will the Bill still include that prioritisation of people leaving the armed forces?

**Bob Blackman:** I can confirm that the Bill does include priority for the armed forces and for people leaving the armed forces.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his Bill and I wholeheartedly support it. I am glad that he has referenced the absurd situation whereby people have to wait until the bailiffs arrive to evict them before they can get help from the housing department. That is one reason why private landlords are so reluctant to take on housing benefit tenants as well. Will my hon. Friend reference another particularly vulnerable set of people he has not mentioned so far: children leaving care? It can be ridiculous when such people can be evicted even from council-owned housing only for the council then to have to pick up responsibility for them at greater cost and with huge social implications for those vulnerable children.

**Bob Blackman:** I can confirm that the Bill will deal with care leavers. They are included in line with one of the suggestions made during the pre-legislative scrutiny process of the draft Bill.

The Bill will help to stimulate partnerships between local authorities and other public bodies by making sure that key public services are part of the process and have a duty to refer anyone identified as homeless to the responsible local authority. It also creates a power for the Secretary of State to introduce a statutory code of practice, providing further guidance on how local authorities should deliver their homelessness and prevention duties. This will be amendable and helpful when it comes to raising standards or sharing best practice. I do not want us to stifle local authorities that have creative schemes, but I want to make sure that all local authorities are brought up to the standard of the best.

In acknowledgement of the point raised by the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), the Bill will help to make sure that private sector accommodation has been checked by the local authority when the authority secures accommodation for vulnerable households, ensuring that it meets the specific suitability requirements, including the legal checks required of properties, before being offered to people.

I have now described the ambit of the Bill, and it would be fair to say that it has been a long process to get to this stage. Crisis convened an expert panel of council representatives, lawyers and housing experts as well as others from the charity sector to look at ways to update homelessness legislation in England. I want to put on record my particular thanks to Jon Sparkes, Matthew Downie and Maeve McGoldrick from Crisis, particularly for their exceptional support throughout this whole process and for working with me to put this legislation together and help it reach this stage.

We drew on the Select Committee report and the work of the expert panel, publishing a first draft of the Bill in August. It was then put through pre-legislative scrutiny. The Select Committee on Communities and Local Government held an inquiry and produced a report on the draft version. The Bill is complex and it is unique in that it originates from a Select Committee report, has been scrutinised by the Select Committee and has been substantially amended as a result.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): My hon. Friend has set out all the steps that he has taken prior to this morning in preparing the Bill. Does he agree that he has set out the gold standard, if I may put it like that, for what other Members should do before they bring private Members' Bills before the House, and that Members should not just turn up and expect them to get through?

**Bob Blackman:** When I set out on this journey, I did not realise just how much work was going to have to be done. If Members are bringing legislation to this place to change the law, I believe they should go through a long process and ensure that their Bills are thoroughly tested before they present them.

The Select Committee recommended that clause 1, on the extension of duties to 56 days, should be retained—and the Bill has been kept in line with that recommendation. The Select Committee also found that the Bill's original measures on the consequences of non-co-operation did not offer sufficient support to vulnerable households. As a result, this aspect was completely reworked, with the bar for non-co-operation during the prevention or relief stage raised to the level of

“deliberate and unreasonable refusal to co-operate”

to ensure greater protection for vulnerable people. Further safeguards have been introduced to ensure that any household in priority need that is found to have deliberately and unreasonably refused to co-operate will be made an offer of a six-month tenancy. That change is supported by the homelessness charities involved.

The prospect of 56 days of emergency accommodation at the end of the prevention stage, regardless of priority need status, was criticised by the Communities and Local Government Committee. While it agreed with the idea in principle, it added:

“we also recognise the reality that it is not feasible for councils to provide accommodation to all homeless people.”

We heard evidence that suggested that there might be some unfortunate unintended consequences, such as the stimulation of the growth of a market in substandard temporary accommodation—warehouse-style accommodation, for instance—or the diversion of resources from vulnerable people.

Primary legislation is not a panacea. It is not always the best way of tackling an issue properly, especially an issue with a complex range of causes. I am therefore very pleased that the Government have now announced a package of measures—at a cost of £40 million—to tackle rough sleeping, with Manchester, Newcastle and Southwark becoming “trailblazer” councils for preventive work. I believe that that will be a far more effective and flexible way forward, and I commend St Mungo’s in particular for all the work that it does in this regard.

The Committee recommended that clause 2 include the words

“those who have experienced, or are at continued risk of, domestic violence and abuse”.

That has been duly done, and is covered by subsection (2)(d).

In respect of the proposed changes in the definition of a local connection, the Committee recommended that the definition in the original legislation be left unchanged. That too has been done, although a minor correction has been made to the original text to deal with a long-standing issue relating to care leavers, and to ensure that they are protected.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh), and his all-party group on ending homelessness, for all their support. I also commend the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chairman of the Select Committee, for all his help and guidance during this process, and for ensuring that the pre-legislative scrutiny was conducted in a fair, transparent manner. As a result, we have ended up with a Bill which I believe has all-party support.

I am also delighted to have secured Government support. I took into account the views of many interested parties, and on Monday the Government finally announced that they would back the Bill. They will fund the additional costs in line with the long-standing “new burdens” arrangements.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am grateful to my near neighbour in north-west London for giving way, and I, too, congratulate him on his Bill. He has referred to local authority funding and the Select Committee’s report. That report estimates that there could be 1,100 potential “extra duty” cases for the London borough of Ealing, which already has 677 statutory homelessness cases. I am encouraged by the news that extra funding is on the way, and we await the full details, but does the hon. Gentleman share my concern about the revenue support grant? Ealing was a big loser last time round, whereas the grants for certain Tory councils such as Hampshire and Surrey went up. My borough estimates that our grant will fall by 65% by 2019-20, and it would be great if the Government would assist in that regard.

**Bob Blackman:** The hon. Lady tempts me to start talking about the revenue support grant, but I will not be so tempted. I do not wish to digress from the main aim of the Bill, which is, after all, to help to prevent homelessness in this country.

Over time the Bill is likely to save money, because if local authorities act earlier households will receive help earlier, and people will be prevented from becoming homeless and requiring more expensive accommodation. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), and his team of officials for working so hard to ensure that the Bill was in a suitable state to be passed.

I know that the Bill cannot do everything. It will not tackle issues relating to supply, and it will not be a magic bullet to clear the streets of homeless people overnight. What it will do, however, is introduce a long-term cultural change which will, over time, bring about a different way of working among local authorities that will stop people from getting into the terrible position of being homeless in the first place.

Let me relate just one story from my constituency. I will not name the individual concerned, but he had lived in west London and fallen on hard times. When he approached the local authority for advice, he found himself passed between various staff members before falling into an agreement with a housing association. He was evicted from that property, and moved further west. He approached the local authority there, and the local Member of Parliament. Again, he was passed between council staffers. He ended up sleeping rough sporadically, or in his car. After a while he was given a room by a support group, but he left the property shortly after beginning the tenancy as a result of a mutual agreement with the management. He then approached a third local authority.

It was at this point that the man contacted my office for help. That third local authority had told him that he could not be housed. No help was offered, despite his obvious need. My staff approached the office of an MP with whom he had had contact in the past, as well as a support officer who had helped him at one stage. There is a strong suspicion of an undiagnosed mental illness. Without a permanent address, it is difficult for the man to retain a single GP and obtain a diagnosis, and without a diagnosis, he is not considered vulnerable. The cycle just repeats itself. It is important to ensure that everyone is given help, advice and support from the start to prevent such situations from developing.

It is vital for Members, here and in the other place, to refrain from adding amendments to the Bill if it is to succeed. Private Members’ Bills are inherently vulnerable because they have a limited amount of time to get through Parliament, so amendments are likely to cause this Bill to fall in its entirety. I shall welcome short contributions from Members today, as well as volunteers to serve on the Bill Committee. Certain organisations have expressed concerns about the drafting of some clauses; if the Bill succeeds today, I shall undertake to investigate them fully in Committee.

The Bill has received the maximum possible pre-legislative scrutiny, so Members can be confident that it will be workable and has been properly costed. Homelessness is a complex issue, and no one piece of legislation can be the sole solution. The Bill is one part of a larger strategy, but it is a key part, and will produce a revolution in local authority housing offices.

I thank all those who have helped to guide and produce the Bill, but in particular I thank my long-suffering parliamentary assistant, who, over the past six months, has done virtually nothing except work on the Bill.

[*Bob Blackman*]

The Government have proved their commitment to social justice in backing it, and, in doing so, have also demonstrated that the Conservative party, led by our current Prime Minister, is the truly reforming, progressive party that is delivering after 40 years of legislation that has prevented local authorities from offering a service to homeless people.

10.8 am

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Let me begin by expressing my thanks and gratitude to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), not merely for his Bill but for the enormous amount of work that he has done over the last few weeks in building a coalition of support across the House and among outside organisations. We should not underestimate his commitment, or his success in building that support for his Bill.

Members have referred to the work of the Communities and Local Government Committee. We in the House are used to following precedents—we seem to do it all the time—but I think that, on this occasion, we have actually created a precedent. A report from a Select Committee has provided the basis for a private Member's Bill, the Bill has then been subjected to pre-legislative scrutiny by the Select Committee, and the Committee's subsequent report has helped to produce the Bill in its final form. That, I think, is unique. No one can find an example of its being done before. It is an important example of the two ways in which Back Benchers can best shape and influence legislation in this House—private Members' Bills and Select Committees—coming together in a powerful way to produce legislation that has support right across the House and will, I hope, reach the statute book. I thank all my colleagues on the Select Committee for the work they have put into it.

Homelessness is a growing problem, as can be seen from the 50% increase in local authority acceptances since 2010 and the growing number of rough sleepers. We also know that the figures do not reflect the true situation. The UK Statistics Authority has said that the figures are not fit for purpose and the Government have agreed to review them, but this is a difficult job. It is difficult enough trying to count rough sleepers. The St Mungo's estimates for London are eight times higher than the Government figures. We also know that many people go to a local authority and are not recorded properly. Then there are the thousands or tens of thousands who are living in overcrowded accommodation or sofa surfing, and who do not present to a local authority at all. They are not counted in the figures, but we know they are there. The problem is therefore far bigger than the figures indicate.

The Bill, admirable though it is and despite its support across the House, will not deal with the fundamental problem of the housing crisis in this country. There is a shortage of housing caused by decades of not building enough homes by Governments of all political persuasions. Interestingly, when the Select Committee asked three young witnesses what was the most important thing this House could do to deal with homelessness, they all said, "Build more social housing." That was reflected in recommendation 3 of our first report on homelessness, which stated:

"There is therefore a case for the development of homes for affordable rent which we encourage the Government to act on by working with local authorities to deliver the homes that are needed at a local level."

It is helpful that the new Minister for Housing and Planning is beginning to reflect that point in his comments. We look forward to the White Paper and the autumn statement, which hopefully will recognise that although homes to buy are important, there are many people who cannot afford to buy and who need a home for rent. That is something for the Government to consider.

**Emma Reynolds:** I welcome my hon. Friend's focus on the housing crisis and the failure of the Government to deal with it. Obviously, successive Governments have failed to build enough homes. May I bring him back to his point about supply? Is it not the case that some of the Government's policies, such as forcing councils to sell council homes and watering down section 106 agreements to focus purely on starter homes, rather than council homes, are making the problem much, much worse?

**Mr Betts:** Personally, I agree with my hon. Friend. The Select Committee looked at this matter for our report on housing associations and the right to buy, and that was reflected in our report on homelessness. We accepted that there should be a housing programme to provide more homes in local areas to reflect local needs, and that it should include homes to buy and homes to rent. That was agreed across the parties. There is a need to recognise that housing markets are different across the country and that what is appropriate in London is not necessarily appropriate in the north-east. It is appropriate to look at local need and provide the homes that are needed in particular areas. There was all-party support for that.

The Select Committee looked at the problem of the growing gap between private market rents and the local housing allowance. Some 40% of homelessness cases are caused by the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy, often because the tenants cannot afford to pay the rent. In Westminster, the gap between the average rent and the local housing allowance is £500 a month. But it is not just Westminster: in Cambridgeshire, the gap is £250 a month. Those are large figures. If the local housing allowance is frozen from now until 2020, the gap will get worse. Recommendation 2 of the Select Committee's first report on homelessness states:

"Local Housing Allowances levels should also be reviewed so that they more closely reflect market rents."

There was cross-party agreement on that. It is a problem that in many areas, when people are made homeless, there is no social housing for them to go into and no private rented housing they can afford either. That needs to be addressed.

There are also problems with supported housing, although the Government have rowed back from their initial intention to relate the cost of supported housing to the local housing allowance. This still needs to be thought through. There are particular problems for people in supported housing who get back into work and then find that they cannot meet the cost of supported housing because housing benefit is withdrawn completely. That problem was raised with the Select Committee by a lot of young people during our inquiry and it needs to

be addressed. People must be able to get back into work without finding, suddenly, that they have lost their supported housing at the time they most need it.

**Mr Andrew Smith:** I congratulate my hon. Friend and his Select Committee on the work they have done. Is there not also an acute problem that arises from the cuts to housing-related support? For example, Oxfordshire County Council, because of cuts in Government support, is drastically cutting the support it gives to local homelessness hostels and threatening to end it altogether in three years. Even with all the measures in this Bill, if that went ahead, it would be a disaster because hostels would close and people would be forced on to the streets.

**Mr Betts:** Certainly, when the initial proposal was made that the costs of supported housing would be related to the local housing allowance, virtually every provider of supported housing said that they would not be viable. The Government have rowed back from that and are now talking about splitting the housing benefit element and the care and support element. That might be a sensible way to help people who get jobs and ensure that they do not lose all their support, but the Government might still want to think again about the proposal to force supported housing providers to reduce their rents each year. That will cause problems for many of them and they are still raising it as a concern.

The Select Committee found that there was a need to offer better support and advice to people who present as homeless. As the hon. Member for Harrow East said, the Bill will not end homelessness, but it will address a very real problem. We saw some good examples of local authorities dealing with homeless people. In Birmingham, we saw a truly joined-up service, with the housing authority, the children's service, charities and the health service all working together. Unfortunately, that is not the case everywhere. Crisis sent its mystery shopper into 87 local authorities and 50 of them were found to have got it wrong. The variation in support for homeless people is simply unacceptable. Crisis was very clear about that when it came to the Select Committee, and our report said:

"We have received too much evidence of councils and their staff treating homeless people in ways that are dismissive and at times discriminatory. This is unacceptable."

Hopefully, the Bill and the better code of practice that the Government are going to bring forward will address those issues.

The hon. Member for Harrow East outlined the important measures in the Bill, which I and the Select Committee support entirely. The extension in the time when homelessness should be addressed by local authorities from 28 days to 56 days will provide more time for preventive work. The measures to improve support and advice are very welcome, as is the proposal for a personal plan for individuals who present as homeless. It is important to talk to people about what is and is not possible in addressing their homelessness needs right from the very beginning.

I hope it can be written in at some point that, in addressing those needs, regard should be given to the care and support that homeless people get from family members and others, and to the schools their children go to. Perhaps that can be contained in the code of

practice that Ministers will bring forward, because those things are important. We heard evidence of people being offered homes that were a two-hour journey from their children's school. If at all possible, that should be avoided.

**Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con):** I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing this important Bill to the Floor of the House.

On the point the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) has just made, I want to say that families have changed; there are many more broken families and single men and women out there. We need to treat them all equally, especially a man who becomes single but still wants access to his family and the school his children go to. We need parity across the system, with single men treated equally if they become vulnerable and homeless.

**Mr Betts:** There is a very real problem in that for local authorities, which can end up providing two homes for a family when it splits up. That is a real challenge and I have a lot of sympathy with local authorities, but equally with the people who want to keep contact with their children and maintain good parental relationships.

I welcome the personal plan and the preventive measures, and particularly the measures in clause 1 and a stop to the nonsense that homeless people, who are already stressed out and traumatised, should have to go through a court process and sometimes end up being evicted before the local authority will help them. That is crucial to the success of the Bill and to giving homeless people a better deal.

I have something to say about the wording of the Bill. Local authorities can decide they will force people to go through the court process if they can show they

"have taken reasonable steps to try to persuade the landlord to—

(i) withdraw the notice, or

(ii) delay applying for an order".

That may be reasonable if authorities use the measure reasonably, but I am worried it provides a loophole that authorities that are not being reasonable could use to force more people through the court route than intended. We will need to closely monitor the legislation to make sure that unintended consequence does not arise.

**Stephen Pound:** My hon. Friend speaks from a position of great knowledge. I entirely endorse his point about schooling: anyone who goes to Slough station at 7 o'clock in the morning will see 20 or 30 children wearing Ealing school uniforms, making a two-hour journey. That is heart-breaking.

One of the fastest-growing areas of homelessness is parental exclusion. It seems to be perverse to ask a mother or father to evict, through the courts, their daughter or son. Does my hon. Friend agree that parental exclusion should be examined in detail in Committee?

**Mr Betts:** The hon. Member for Harrow East will know far more about the intended mechanics of the legislation, but I think the point is that when someone is threatened with homelessness they go to the authority, and now they will be entitled to proper advice and support, including the working out of a personal plan,

[Mr Betts]

from the very beginning. That is a key part of the legislation. It will not solve every problem for every person who is homeless or threatened with homelessness, but it should provide a much better service for people in the situation that my hon. Friend mentions.

The duty of public authorities to refer to a housing authority someone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness is very relevant. I ask the hon. Member for Harrow East, however, whether there is a possibility at some point of extending beyond a duty to refer, to a duty to co-operate. If someone is homeless, they often have mental health problems or are faced with domestic abuse or other issues related to their homelessness such as unemployment or benefits problems. The Committee's report on homelessness recommended having a joined-up approach, and it would be an improvement to get all public authorities working together.

Finally, it is crucial that we get the code of practice in place. I would like to hear from the Minister whether the code will be available for Members to look at before the end of our consideration of the Bill. The Government have codes of guidance at present but unfortunately they do not always work. A classic example is that currently in the code—a Minister has recently written to councils reminding them of this—if a local authority does an out-of-area placement of a homeless family, they are supposed to tell the receiving authority that that family is coming to them because they may have other needs that need addressing. In many cases that does not happen, however, despite the guidance saying it should. A code of practice ought to strengthen the code of guidance, and authorities ought to have to follow it. We want to hear that Ministers will put in place proper monitoring arrangements to make sure all the good measures are delivered in practice for people who are homeless or are threatened with homelessness.

This Bill will not remove homelessness, as the hon. Gentleman has accepted. However, there has been such a cross-party effort to try to get this right, from the hon. Gentleman, from the Select Committee and from a wide group of organisations including Crisis, that we hope it will improve the situation for the homeless and those threatened with homelessness in a very meaningful way.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. No fewer than 29 Back-Bench Members are seeking to contribute to the debate, meaning there is a premium upon economy.

10.25 am

**Mr Mark Prisk** (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the Chairman of my Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) not just on deciding to tackle what is a very thorny issue, but on the way he has developed the legislation. His open, collaborative approach means the Bill contains proposals that are workable, have been tested in the Committee and have cross-party support. That is why I am delighted to co-sponsor this Bill as a Committee member, and as a former housing Minister.

In the year I was housing Minister, I took the opportunity over Christmas 2012 to learn a little more about this subject by working as a volunteer for Crisis in one of its shelters, and it was a real eye-opener. We all deal with this as constituency Members, but when we are there as an individual listening and engaging and doing what Ministers rarely have time to do, which is work with individuals, that really changes our views and aims. I want to put on record my support for Jon Sparkes and his team at Crisis and its many volunteers for all they do. I also pay tribute to Crisis for handling this Bill so openly and collaboratively, which means it is taking a just cause and turning it into good law. Many other pressure groups could learn from that.

As so many other Members wish to speak, let me canter through the issues. First, we have rightly heard that homelessness is hugely complex. It manifests itself in different guises: people might be sleeping on the streets, in shelters, or in a house but sofa surfing. It is also immensely complicated in terms of the way it can be measured. The current snapshot statistics are not sufficient; they do not provide a clear picture. One outcome of the Select Committee inquiry was to encourage the Government to look at extending the CHAIN—combined homelessness and information network—database statistics, which are year-round, by rolling them out beyond London. I hope the Minister will respond to that point, because if we get a better view throughout the year of the nature of the problem, we will deal with the causes more effectively.

On the causes, while it is clear that the increase in the turnover of tenancies is a factor, it is not the only factor. For many people, the reason they find themselves on the streets is less to do with housing and more about underlying problems. Indeed, for some people their homelessness is a symptom of other problems. That is why mental health issues, addictions, family breakdowns and the challenges around debt frequently feature among the homeless. People can often cope with one of those problems, but the moment when those problems coalesce can be when their lives collapse and they turn up at the local authority. So if we are to tackle homelessness, we need to understand the complexity of the causes.

That is why I am so pleased to see that 20 years on from the Housing Act 1996, this Bill shifts the policy and the law to prevention. As Members have said, the danger is that action occurs only once people are facing crisis. Clauses 1, 2 and 4 are important because they enable local authorities to intervene in a way that helps to prevent homelessness. Change the law and the policy and practice will follow. Until now we have tended to deal with the issue once people become homeless, which has proved to be more expensive and difficult. More important perhaps, if we only deal with the problem once people have been turfed out of their home, it is far more traumatic for them, especially when there are children involved.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East touched on the question of how to raise the standard of advice and support across local government. Many local authorities do a fantastic job and I want to express my admiration for the housing officers in my own district of East Herts and the many others I have met. They do a rewarding but difficult job, dealing with family crises on a daily basis. The Select Committee inquiry revealed the huge variation in the advice and support provided by different councils. This is not, as we might suspect, simply a

difference between councils in different parts of the country with different problems. In fact, there are variations between neighbouring authorities with almost identical social issues. To use a catchphrase, there is a postcode lottery for those in need.

As a Minister, I tried to promote best standards of practice and to use those standards to lever up the rest. That had some good effects and we saw some really important improvements, but I have to say now that, three years on, I recognise that they were not enough. I have been a reluctant supporter of the provisions in the Bill on statutory codes of practice. I back them now, but I did not do so initially. If they are clearly drafted and focus on outcomes, such as mandatory codes—I note that they are plural in the Bill, not singular—they could be targeted to raise the standards of service in the weakest authorities. I fully accept that the Local Government Association and others have said that we need to be very careful about this. Of course we need to be careful about how we draft the codes and ensure compliance. The codes should also be matched by a continuing effort from the Government to reward best practice.

Clause 2 will broaden the duty to provide advice and information. All of us, as constituency Members, will recognise the different categories that come before us locally, including people who do not quite meet the standards and are not regarded as priority cases. The Committee had an important meeting with young care leavers, and I am particularly pleased that that group is included in the Bill. Those young people were very candid about the system, which currently ignores them once they reach adulthood. They were initially cautious about talking to us—they do not normally engage with strange politicians in suits—but the conversation flagged up the fact that many of them were sleeping rough. Yes, some of them were sofa surfing, but sadly some of them were turning to drugs and even to prostitution. It is therefore really important that that group is specifically included in the Bill. The fact that councils will now be required to recognise them as a vulnerable group is really important too.

The Bill offers a great opportunity to reduce, but not remove, homelessness. I think we all understand that this is an opportunity to focus on prevention and to raise the standards of advice and support across the country. It is also an opportunity to ensure that more people get help sooner. In that sense, the Bill offers real hope, but I would like to add one rider. Given the mood music coming from the Government, I think we might get a good answer to this point. I say to the Minister that we can hope to make progress only if the Government play their part. It is fantastic that Ministers have stepped up to the plate and that they are backing the Bill, but many councils will require additional funding in order to fulfil these new commitments. I trust, given the Minister's positive body language, that we are going to get a useful response from him on that point, as we would expect. Today offers a chance for the House and the Government to send a message of real hope to those without shelter. Let us seize this chance and let us back the Bill.

10.33 am

**John Healey** (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk). He has spoken this morning with

a combination of policy expertise and personal experience. He made a telling point towards the end of his speech about the priority that the Bill gives to young people leaving care, which I really welcome. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on his Bill and also on the way in which he has gone about securing it. His sponsors are all members of the Communities and Local Government Committee, including my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), and for Leicester West (Liz Kendall). Together, they have produced the first ever prelegislative scrutiny report of a private Member's Bill. That has been helpful, in that the Bill before us has been significantly amended as a result of the Select Committee's report.

The Bill is well supported, and there have been good briefings on it by campaign charities including Shelter, St Mungo's and, above all, Crisis, for which it has become something of a crusade in recent months. I am glad that we got confirmation in the House on Monday from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government that the Government intended to back the Bill. That is a tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones). I know very well how much work is required behind the scenes to get all parts of the Government, not least the Treasury, lined up to support a private Member's Bill. Those of us who have seen him at meetings, receptions and debates in recent months know how hard he has been working to secure the Government's support.

We on the Labour Front Bench welcome the Bill. I back the Bill and I welcome the cross-party support for its aims, which are to provide more help earlier for people who are threatened with homelessness, and reduce the number of people hit by the misery of homelessness. I also welcome the Bill because it builds directly on similar legislation that was introduced in Wales by the Labour-led Government in 2014. Importantly, however, that was not an isolated piece of legislation, but part of a 10-year strategy.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): Did my right hon. Friend see the comment by Simon Rose, the housing management officer at Newport Council, that for every pound Newport Council spends on its homelessness policy, it saves £4 as a result of the legislation introduced by the Welsh Government?

**John Healey**: I have not seen Simon Rose's comments, and I would be grateful if my hon. Friend could send them to me. He makes the point that the extra cost required to support this Bill will be a good investment in the long term, and I hope that Ministers will recognise that. Preventing homelessness will prevent higher, longer-term costs. It is early days, but the experience in Wales in the first year following that legislation has been encouraging. In 65% of cases, homelessness has been successfully prevented when at-risk households have been helped by councils. That means that there are nearly 5,000 people and families in Wales today who last year could have been homeless, but who have instead benefited from the help offered by the councils.

This is a good, useful Bill, but it is only a first step. The hon. Member for Harrow East was right to say that legislation is not a panacea that can reverse the rapidly rising level of homelessness. The Bill is not a silver

[John Healey]

bullet. We cannot legislate and claim to be tackling homelessness. We cannot legislate and lay the blame on councils. If the hon. Gentleman really wants to reverse 40 years of rationing the help that councils can offer, he cannot do it by simply redesigning the system, when councils are struggling every day with an ever-increasing workload, and face an ever-decreasing range of housing options. If the Government are serious about this Bill, and if Ministers mean what they say about homelessness, they must do two things: fund the cost of the extra duties in the Bill in full, and tackle the causes of the growing homelessness crisis in this country. Those are the two tests with which we Opposition Members will hold the Government to account, hard.

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome the practical measures in the Bill, but I also heed my right hon. Friend's comments about the need to accompany the changes with a real effort to build more homes, as the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), said. That is a test not only for Government, but for us all. So many times in Communities and Local Government questions, MPs rise to oppose new developments in their constituencies, even though that has nothing to do with the House of Commons. We must have the courage to tell our constituents that this country does not build enough houses; we cannot simply reflect their prejudices back on them. We have to tell them that this country must build more homes.

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend is right. I hope that the cross-party spirit in which we tackle this Bill may, in due course, lead to more of a cross-party spirit in tackling the bigger housing challenges that he mentioned.

I return to our two tests. First, the Government must fund the costs. The Minister told the Select Committee that he hoped to complete a costs estimate of the Bill before Second Reading. He has not, but in answer to a parliamentary question this week he confirmed to me:

"The Government will fund any additional costs in line with the longstanding 'new burdens' arrangements."

The work to assess and agree the extra costs of the new duties or, if we like, burdens on councils that are in the Bill must be done urgently and openly. It cannot be done in some backroom deal between the Treasury and the Department for Communities and Local Government. Local government must have confidence in and involvement in the process. That is the first commitment that we want the Minister to give the House today. Beyond that, councils rightly want to know that any additional funding of the costs really will be additional, not taken off some other part of the funding due to go to local government. We look for that commitment from the Minister today as well. First, fund the costs in full; secondly, tackle the causes.

Homelessness is not inevitable. It is not necessary in a country as well off and as decent as ours for people to have no home. Cutting all types of homeless was one of the proudest achievements of the previous Labour Government. At the time, it led the independent homelessness monitor produced by Crisis and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to declare

"an unprecedented decline in statutory homelessness".

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith) said, homelessness, rough sleeping and people on the streets all fell by three quarters while we were in government.

I regret the fact that, since 2010, we have seen that trend go into reverse. Rough sleeping has doubled, statutory homelessness is up by almost half, and the latest official figures show that, each night, nearly 115,000 children are sleeping in temporary accommodation. Those are young lives blighted by transience. They are often in temporary bed and breakfasts and hostels. Their belongings are in their bags. They are often sharing bedrooms with siblings and bathrooms with other families. These are the children who cannot go home. These are the children with no home in our country today. That is a scandal that shames us all.

I say as gently as I can to the Minister that many of the housing policy decisions and failures we have seen over the past six years have led directly to the current homelessness crisis. There have been 13 separate cuts to housing benefit, including the bedroom tax, and, of course, the breaking of the link between housing benefit or local housing allowance and the rise in private rents. In the previous Parliament there was a 45% cut to Labour's Supporting People programme, which provides vital funding and support to homelessness services. We have seen soaring private rents. Rent in the private sector is now on average more than £2,000 a year more than in 2010.

Councils cannot help the homeless if the Government will not build or, indeed, let councils build the homes that are needed. The number of new social rented homes started in Labour's last year in government was 40,000; the number started last year was just 1,000.

**Caroline Lucas:** The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point. We often talk about people losing their homes; does he agree that people do not lose their homes like they lose their keys but are often being forced out of them by Government policy? We need a joined-up strategy of exactly the kind he is describing.

**John Healey:** We do indeed. Increasingly, the trend is that people face the threat of homelessness and, indeed, are made homeless by breakdowns in private rented contracts, and they are often evicted by a private landlord. To tackle homelessness, we have to tackle the causes of homelessness. We must build more affordable housing, act on the rising costs and short-term lets for private tenants, and reverse the crude cuts in housing benefit that hit some of the most vulnerable people.

In today's cross-party spirit, I direct the Minister's attention to two planned changes that he simply must stop. If he does, he will find almost as much support for doing so among Conservative councils and colleagues as he will among the Opposition. Both of the changes are part of the toxic legacy for housing left by the previous Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), so perhaps there is plenty of scope for common ground. First, how can councils house the homeless if the Government are going to force them to sell off the better council houses every time they become vacant? The Minister should drop that plan from the Housing and Planning Act 2016.

Secondly, how can councils house the homeless if homeless hostels face closure because the new housing benefit or local housing allowance falls so far short of the housing costs? The Minister should fully exempt supported housing from the changes to housing benefit.

Finally, I turn to the hon. Member for Harrow East and his cross-party sponsors. The Opposition wish them well during their further detailed discussions and debates with the Government. We wish the hon. Gentleman well in moving forward with the Bill, and in securing the action required to fund the costs and tackle the causes of the homelessness crisis in our country. To the extent that he does that, he will have the Opposition's full support.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. Just to be helpful, lots of Members want speak and I want to get everybody in, so if brevity can be the order of the day, we will ensure that the Bill is tested and that, hopefully, everybody can unite at that stage. I am worried that we might end up talking it out if we are not careful.

10.47 am

**Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Like many colleagues present, I am pleased that the Government have put their support behind this much needed Bill. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has worked tremendously hard to get to this point, and that he has received great support from Crisis and St Mungo's. It is a credit to the Bill that so much expertise has formed its building blocks, and it fully deserves the attention it has received today.

It is a tragedy when a person becomes homeless. It is also deeply saddening that homelessness doubled between 2010 and 2015. The misery is plain to see across many of our high streets and neighbourhoods. Kent is no different: the number sleeping rough there has doubled. Yet, most disturbingly, the number of homeless people aged 25 and under has tripled since only 2014, and that is indeed the case in my own local community. My local authority, Medway Council, has conducted a survey to detail rough sleepers in the area. However, as I imagine is the case throughout much of the country, it is conceded that the true figure in Medway could be much higher than recorded.

The unfortunate people sleeping rough go through experiences that many of us cannot imagine in our worst nightmares, sometimes even under the radar. In Medway, we recently had the tragic death of 28-year-old Samson Paine, who was homeless in Chatham town centre. Samson's partner, with whom he shared a life on the streets, has spoken emotionally about their struggles and how, eventually, they acquired a tent in which they could get some decent sleep. Although housing had been offered previously by a charity, under current legislation there was sadly little that Medway Council could do. We have in place a strong local network of organisations to help the homeless, and the council does offer good advice, but we should always do more when vulnerable individuals are forced to live on our streets.

In Rochester and Strood, we are blessed to have some of the hardest-working charity groups helping the homeless to get back on their feet. Emmaus Medway provides, as it does across the country, a supportive community for the homeless, allowing them to regain their dignity and

independence. As a companion of Emmaus, those who are homeless can stay as long as they like within the caring principles and spirit of the community. This summer it celebrated its 25th anniversary in Rochester with a day of "bargains galore", with the generous proceeds raised from my community going straight to the movement.

Our area also has Caring Hands, which offers a Christian response to the problems facing the marginalised in our society, including the homeless. Big focuses for Caring Hands are children and young people who have come out of care, people with addictions, those with mental health issues and ex-offenders who are looking for help in Medway. Each week, it provides meals and snacks, showers, laundry and a clothing exchange to its regular visitors. It offers that support and it, in turn, has a lot of support within our local community, including from many local businesses.

That work in my constituency is inspiring and it has extremely wide support throughout the local area. However, prevention is of course better than cure. A greater focus on preventing homelessness should, over time, reduce the number of people who lose their home and require more intensive support or accommodation. I know that it is important for councils to see an end to homelessness and, as in Medway, they would much rather have it prevented in the first place, so it is sad that we hear of many examples where a local authority can give its assistance only once a person has already slept rough. The system needs to be strengthened to ensure that these difficult choices are reduced. In the end, we need to move towards services having the ability to offer meaningful, personalised support, whereby struggling households and individuals are assisted to identify solutions to prevent homelessness quickly.

I am pleased that this Bill is setting out to address the prevention issue. Regardless of a person's priority needs status or local connection, no one should be forced on to the streets when measures are still available. A single woman living on the street should not be there, just as much as a young family should not be. With the appropriate backing, it is right that our local government receives the means and is given the duty to prevent families or individuals from being forced to live on our streets.

I am hopeful that our local authorities will be given the necessary funds to ensure that this legislation works and that we achieve the results that everyone wishes for, but it should also be a case of, "You need to help me for me to help you." It is crucial for the success of this legislation that households take their own steps and initiative to resolve their homelessness. It will be in most people's interests to get themselves off the streets and back into a home that offers warmth, shelter and a place where a family can flourish. The incentives are there and the cultural barriers within households stopping them from seeking help must come down, too.

We are all aware of the introduction of similar legislation in Scotland and Wales. It is impressive to see the scheme in Wales already providing positive results in just its first year, with 65% of households applying for prevention assistance having a successful outcome. I am hopeful that that statistic will rise at the end of its second year and beyond. Through this Bill, we can get to the stage where we share best practice, both locally and nationally, across all regions of the United Kingdom.

[Kelly Tolhurst]

To conclude, I believe that in a civilised society it is unacceptable that people should be faced with the fear of homelessness. It is therefore vital to help the most vulnerable in society to get their lives back on track before it is too late or the damage is done. This important Bill reflects the compassionate society we all hold dear, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for bringing it forward today. I fully support him in his endeavour.

10.54 am

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), particularly given her comments about Emmaus, which is by far the most impressive group working and producing practical results in this area. I had the experience of visiting Emmaus, and, uniquely, the people there insisted that the visiting MPs washed their dishes after the modest meal that we had. This was a symbol of the democratic nature there; MPs, no matter who we thought we were, were on the same level as the homeless people and companions in the house. Emmaus is a splendid institution.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) deserves our full congratulations on introducing this Bill. May I urge everyone else to follow his advice to keep a Bill simple and not to adorn it with amendments? I once had the experience of the late Alan Clark and the late Eric Forth making speeches in support of a Third Reading of a Bill I had. I then realised to my horror that neither of those two colourful figures actually understood the Bill, and the only way of getting it through was to make a 13-second speech in case they understood the details and then sabotaged it. Simplicity is the way of getting things through in this House.

The Welsh Government, to their credit, already have this measure. It is the best of legislation, because it is not overambitious; it does not attempt to change the world. We know the problems of homelessness. A lot of it is to do with mental ill health, or with addiction to drugs or alcohol. Homelessness is a very complex issue and there is no simple solution to it, but they have introduced this measure modestly and it has been very successful. May I commend another measure that the Welsh Government took, which is on consent for organ donations? About three years ago, I had a constituent visit me who was waiting for a heart transplant. This 19-year-old boy found that there was a shortage of donors and six months later I attended his funeral. Again, we should look at what is happening in Wales with the presumed consent measure and follow that example.

I have a half-hour speech written out, but I will not burden hon. Members with it. On the Bill, I wish just to say something to my Labour colleagues. A simplistic way to solve these problems is to say that the Labour party should end the sale of council houses. That is a very controversial issue, and may I commend the work of the late David Taylor, who was a councillor in Leicestershire and a marvellous MP? Members should read a great book about him called "Clockwinder Who Wouldn't Say No". He was a model MP, and anyone who wants to should read that book and find out—

**Stephen Pound:** Who wrote it?

**Paul Flynn:** Don't bother buying it, as it is much too expensive—come to see me. [Interruption.] No money is made from it. Those who remember David will know of the sad circumstances of his death. I believe he was killed by press criticism, which destroyed him, because he was a great Christian gentleman who was undermined by an attack on him; he dropped dead a fortnight later. I mention him today because when he was on the council, long before he became an MP, he and Newport's council did the same thing. Long before Thatcher sold council houses, we decided, for good socialist reasons, to sell council houses, because it is not property that is theft in today's housing world, but rent. We could not continue, in good conscience, to deny the people who support us so well—the council house tenants—the chance of acquiring an appreciating asset: a house. I say that we must not take that road, as that would be the wrong way to go, and there are other ways of tackling the problem.

This Bill is a fine Bill, and it is wonderful to see a progressive, highly intelligent and practical politician following the example of socialists in Wales.

10.58 am

**Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn). Like everybody else, I pay great tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the promoter of the Bill, and I am proud to be one of its cross-party sponsors.

Several weeks ago, the Prime Minister took to the stage at our party conference to deliver her vision for Britain: a country where every single person, regardless of their background or that of their parents, has the chance to be all they want to be, where government stands up for the weak and stands up to the strong.

Hon. Members might forgive Henry for his scepticism. At the age of 22, Henry found himself on the streets after being physically abused and thrown out of his home by his father who refused to accept that he was gay. Vulnerable and in desperate need of help, Henry turned to his local London borough, repeatedly waiting for hours in packed receptions, only to be told that there was nothing that could be done, and that he was not a priority and certainly not a statutory priority. Effectively in his mind, he did not matter. It is for people like Henry for whom we are standing up today and this week. We want to ensure that, at the very least, we have in statute a duty to prevent people like Henry from going through the cycle of despair without a home.

There have been many good speeches today; no doubt there are still more to come, but they will be getting briefer as we get to the time that will see this Bill safely on its passage. They will not necessarily bridge that gap in credibility that people like Henry see as they gaze across at this fine building. I am talking about those people across the Thames who are facing another night on the streets. It is, as others have said, a scandal that we too readily tolerate, and have tolerated, the increasing number of homeless people. It is also a preventable scandal, which today we can do something about by supporting this Bill.

The point of this Bill is to ensure that the causes of homelessness are tackled, so that people do not reach that crisis of being without a home. Inevitably, that means empowering councils and other agencies to focus more on the drivers of homelessness. Sadly, in the front

seat is family relationship breakdown, which for six out of 10 young people is the main cause of homelessness, according to a Centrepoint report this week. This Bill will provide that duty of prevention. Yes, the burden will fall heavily on local authorities, but the responsibility is a shared one, particularly when one considers the costs of youth homelessness, which mainly hits central Government budgets. That is why I welcome the Government's support today, and we look forward to hearing the Minister's response. Inevitably, the Government are already picking up the costs, so they need to be involved in investing in prevention.

Centrepoint's recent report highlights that the main cost of youth homelessness alone—on top of costs of offending, poor mental health, lack of education, employment or training, and domestic violence and so on—falls predominantly on the welfare budget. For those under 18, that amounts to £9,000 per young person per year, rising for 18 to 24-year-olds to £12,000. That amounts to some £560 million a year just in terms of homelessness. The Government's £40 million announcement is welcome, but those figures put the problem in context and show us what is needed to be able to shift the focus on to prevention. Such a shift obviously makes so much sense both in terms of value for money and of social benefits.

Homelessness is a complex issue, because it involves individuals with multiple and complex needs. As we know from the great work of St Mungo's and its supported accommodation—it also has accommodation in my constituency—of the 1,036 people who have slept rough and are currently in its accommodation, three quarters have mental health problems, 65% have drug or alcohol problems and half have a physical condition that has a substantial effect on their health. We therefore need to deal with things in the round and ensure that all agencies of government, centrally as well as locally, are focused on seeking to prevent homelessness.

The stark reality is that the average life expectancy of someone who is street homeless is 47—so someone of my age. At the age of 47, that would be it. That is appalling and hard to comprehend. We must be able to shift that in this day and age.

As the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, there are examples of good practice. In my borough, there are individuals who are working incredibly hard—in John Wilkes House and others—to do a great job. Sadly, there are far too many examples of bad practice across local authorities. In my constituency, I have had some examples of really appalling, shoddy practices that dehumanise individuals as they try to seek help. This Bill will ensure that there is a level playing field for those who do not currently see that—the homeless. The reality is that we need to ensure that the good practice highlighted by Centrepoint of mediation, whole-family approaches, multi-agency working, and of the single frontier for services needs to spread throughout our land to help the most vulnerable.

All too often in my years as a Member of Parliament and as a councillor, I have seen that outer London boroughs such as mine can be in denial about the real numbers of homeless people—the hidden homeless and the real street homeless. They can acquiesce—not least because they are allowed to by legislation—to seeing those at risk of homelessness gravitate to central London hostels, to the Greater London Authority's excellent

scheme of No Second Night Out and the rest. They can effectively sit on their statutory hands while others pick up the bill. This is what this Bill seeks to address by ensuring that there is co-operation, relief and a duty of prevention, and I welcome that.

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con) *rose*—

**Mr Burrows:** I will press on so that others can speak.

We need to do what we can to tackle this issue. I am therefore disappointed, but not surprised, that my borough of Enfield and other north London councils in the North London Housing Partnership have sent round a submission that is very critical of this Bill. It says that it is unworkable in London and that it will increase homelessness. That is a huge shame. In their words:

“This is likely to detract from the very effective homelessness prevention that already takes place.”

They are in denial. I wholly disagree with them. We need to respect that the funds and support are needed. We need to look at those without recourse to public funds, and to support those who do not have family or local connections. I say to my council and others that what is unworkable is what Crisis reported, which is that what was offered to the 50 out of the 87 mystery shoppers—the people acting as single homeless people—was wholly insufficient. They reported a lack of private interview rooms and the insensitivity of staff, which was akin to public humiliation. Sympathy and empathy, which are there in individuals, were sadly in short supply. The poverty-related shame and the stigma were reinforced by what they received from their local authorities. That must end. That is what is unworkable. It is unworkable that many were just dismissed with a selection of leaflets that they were unable to understand or to decipher. Some were simply told to browse on Gumtree. That is unacceptable in this day and age, just as it is unacceptable to see the rising level of homelessness.

We must ensure for the good conscience of our nation that we do not just let people fall back on the priority need and “sitting on our hands” aspect of practice at the moment, and that we deliver much more comprehensive preventative duty. We need to recognise that the safety net provided by the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 is aged, failing and unworkable for the homeless. We must get on and back this Bill.

11.7 am

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Last night, I attended an event organised by TELCO, the citizens' organisation for east London. It is working to establish a community land trust. The event was hosted by the Salvation Army, which, in a few weeks' time, will open a night shelter in my constituency. It does that every winter. Two thirds of the people who stay in that night shelter will not in any way be affected by this Bill because they have no recourse to public funds. There are many thousands of people on the streets of London who are sleeping rough and who, because they do not have EU treaty rights or for other reasons, have no recourse to public funds. That homelessness problem will continue regardless of what this Bill does.

**Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): Is it not true that if we are to deal with street homelessness, which many people think we are talking about when we are discussing homelessness, it will require a lot more money to deal with the very complex needs that those people have?

**Mike Gapes:** Yes, I am coming on to that matter.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) made an unfair attack on his local authority. He said that the staff were not doing their job properly. He implied that people not getting services was somehow the fault of the council and its staff. I was concerned when I read in the report of the Association of Housing Advice Services, which brings together people from local authorities all over London, that it has calculated that the extension of homelessness prevention duties to single, non-vulnerable people will lead to an additional estimated cost for all 32 London boroughs of £101,641,728. Frankly, £40 million from the Government is peanuts compared with the additional costs for London alone. In an intervention on the promoter of the Bill, I pointed out that my council, Redbridge, has said that the Bill will cost it £5 million. Redbridge is suffering a major homelessness problem. In my borough of 278,000 people, 64% of householders own their own home, only 11% live in social housing, and 25% rent privately. Systematically over the past three years, large numbers of private tenants have been evicted from their homes in Redbridge because of benefits changes and landlords pushing people out so that they can get higher rents. Every day, I am contacted by people in hotels in Bath Road, Hounslow who have been placed there by my local authority because it cannot find any accommodation in Redbridge. A few months ago, my council outbid Kent County Council for ex-Army accommodation in Canterbury. That got national publicity. It happened because people cannot be moved out of the hostels in Redbridge—they are blocked because there is nowhere else to go. We face an ongoing crisis.

This Bill, unfortunately, is a classic piece of wishful thinking. It is gesture politics of the worst kind in that it wills the ends but does not provide the means. It is about feeling good about voting for something that sounds good, having been pressed to do so by pressure groups and campaigns. The Bill should not be called the Homelessness Reduction Bill but the “Homelessness Recognition Bill”. It will not provide any additional social housing or good-quality private rented accommodation in my constituency. It will not provide any extra money for my local authority to offset the additional £5 million that it estimates will be necessary owing to the bureaucratic and staff requirements that will result from it.

I could go on at length, and I am tempted to do so after the attitude of the promoter of the Bill, who seemed to say, “Take it or leave it, and don’t amend it.” The Bill needs to be looked at very closely because it has implications in a whole range of areas leading to costs and processing issues. I will concentrate on just one or two of them. The proposal to change the definition of “homelessness” does not give us any extra temporary accommodation. We cannot deal with these problems simply by shuffling things around so that women with children are unable to get accommodation in the borough because somebody who is single and homeless has had it instead. That means, potentially, more people going out of borough. There are issues and implications to do with legal judgments about the definition of what local authorities can do when they send people out of borough. We have a major crisis in housing in London generally, and certainly in east London, and this Bill does not deal with that.

The Bill contains an entirely new duty to provide people with accommodation for a maximum period of 56 days if they have nowhere safe to stay. That is

supposedly going to solve the problem, but it does not—it simply shuffles the criteria around. We have in the Bill various—

**Bob Blackman:** I am very tempted to allow the hon. Gentleman to continue, but I think he is looking at the original draft Bill rather than the Bill presented today. The 56 days’ emergency accommodation provision was removed at the request of the CLG Committee because of the resource requirements and because London authorities, in particular, said that it would be unworkable and cost far too much money. I trust that he will understand that it has been removed, and that probably removes his principal objection to the Bill.

**Mike Gapes:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I look forward to seeing the final version of the Bill after it has come out of Committee. I accept that he has made some late changes to the Bill, mainly because the CLG Committee came up with the proposals referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). My principal objection to the Bill concerns the obligations and requirements on cost, which will be considerable on my borough and many other boroughs in London.

The Bill has considerable resource implications. Redbridge Council has calculated that there will be between £3.2 million and £4.3 million in additional accommodation costs, and extra staffing costs of £673,000. That is just for one borough. My local authority has faced £70 million in central Government cuts over three years. At a time when we are cutting services, restructuring and reorganising, and down to the bare bones, this could be a significant additional burden. Moreover, councils all over the country face an autumn statement that is potentially going to be not very friendly towards them.

There is, of course, an argument that we should just pass the Bill today and hope for the best. I look forward to, and will listen with great interest to, what the Minister says when he winds up. He needs to reassure me—not just me, but Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors and rate payers all over the country—that these measures are going to be fully funded, and not just for one year, or two years, or some transitional period. He needs specifically to take account of the needs of London, where there is a massive homelessness crisis. The alcohol services, mental health services and provisions for dealing with rough sleepers who have no recourse to public funds must also be looked at, because the failure to deal with those issues properly is a blight on our society. This Bill does not address that, and that is why I am raising my concerns today.

11.17 am

**David Mackintosh** (Northampton South) (Con): I am very pleased to be standing here today in support of, and as a sponsor of, the Homelessness Reduction Bill, as it deals with an issue that I have pushed since I was first elected here. As a new Member, I was elected to the Communities and Local Government Committee, and one of our first tasks was to outline inquiries to be looked at. My work with homelessness charities in my constituency, and my experience as a former leader of a local authority, had made it clear to me that not enough was being done to tackle homelessness, so I pushed for the Select Committee to undertake an inquiry into the issue. This was widely supported by Committee members, and the inquiry ran from December last year until July.

In March this year, with another member of the Committee, I set up the all-party group on ending homelessness. That member was of course Jo Cox, the former Member for Batley and Spen. I would like to take this opportunity to pay my own tribute to Jo. She readily agreed to help champion the issue of homelessness and to serve as vice-chairman of the APPG. Her energetic approach to problem solving and reaching out across the House has been well documented. I know that if she were still here, Jo would be in the Chamber today supporting this Bill. Jo would be pleased that the issue of homelessness has been pushed up the political agenda during the course of this Parliament. It speaks volumes that so many colleagues from across the House have given up a valuable day in their constituencies to be here in Parliament for this important Bill.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on promoting the Bill. I know how much work he has put into it and to secure cross-party support and, most significantly, the support of the Government.

Indeed, I am pleased that the Government have announced their support for the Bill, and I welcome the measures and additional funding that they are putting in place to tackle homelessness. That shows that the Government are taking the issue of homelessness seriously and that they are committed to supporting the most vulnerable in our society. I am especially grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), for his help and patience on the issue, because I have talked to him about it at length for many months.

May I also take this opportunity to thank charities and organisations from across the homelessness sector for their support throughout the process? They have provided invaluable knowledge and expertise, which has been essential to the work of the CLG Committee, the APPG on ending homelessness and, of course, the Bill. I also thank the staff at Crisis for their support and, indeed, my own office staff.

It is disturbing that in the United Kingdom in the 21st century, support for homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless can be so inconsistent from area to area, and that so many people continue to fall through the net. That situation has existed for far too long, and it is my hope that the Bill's provisions will not only result in positive changes to the support structures in local councils and other public bodies, but lead to a cultural change in the way in which all public bodies view homelessness and their role in its prevention.

The measures will not, of course, be an issue for local authorities that already provide support that is suitable or that goes above and beyond the call of duty, but it will be a positive step to improve standards in other authorities that have fallen behind. We have heard too many examples of local authorities that hide behind the current law and force people into hardship and circumstances that none of us would want to see.

I am sure that we have all heard shocking stories of people being forced to sleep rough before they could access help from their local council, and of instances where people have been required to make their own situation intolerably worse before they were eligible for help that, if it had been provided earlier, would have prevented them from having to sleep rough at all.

Of course, local authorities already do a huge amount to help relieve homelessness for families and vulnerable people, but that help must be extended to single homeless people. Our failure to have adequate provisions in place to help those people, who are disproportionately affected by mental health problems, is a serious anomaly, and I hope we will address it.

The factors that lead families and individuals to become homeless are, of course, numerous and complex. They include relationship breakdown, substance abuse, mental illness, lack of suitable housing and the leaving of care or the armed forces. Often the reasons are not limited to any one single factor, and the exact circumstances are unique to each case. That means of course, that those at risk are often already in touch with at least one public body, possibly more, such as social services, the NHS, their local council or a branch of the armed forces. It also means that there is significant potential for preventive intervention at an early stage.

When speaking to healthcare professionals, mental health workers, and even officers concerned with the welfare of service personnel leaving our armed forces, I repeatedly hear that, when they identify an individual as being at risk and attempt to intervene, they are often frustrated by the lack of help they receive from local housing authorities. That is generally not because there is a reluctance to help people, but because the structures they work within do not always properly support cross-agency working or allow them to support specific individuals.

Importantly, the Bill does not place an additional duty of responsibility on public bodies, but empowers them by giving them a louder voice when dealing with housing authorities. That, together with the enhanced requirements placed on local councils to help those at risk of homelessness within 56 days, means that the Bill represents a significant step forwards in the provision of more support.

Understandably, one of the main concerns about this Bill in local government circles is the additional financial burden that it will place on authorities. We heard positive news from the Government earlier this month and I look forward to hearing what the Minister will say later in this debate.

In conclusion, this Bill can make a significant difference to the lives of many vulnerable people who at present are at far greater risk of homelessness than is acceptable. It is clear that the current system is not providing adequate help to those most at risk, but the Bill's measures can create a framework and culture in the public sector where earlier intervention, better cross-agency co-operation, consistency of support and equal help for all qualifying homeless people becomes standard. Today we have an opportunity to take a stand and to make that happen.

11.24 am

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): I welcome the Bill and think that it will make a real difference with regard to early intervention and prevention and to broadening the scope of assistance to those who are currently defined as non-priority—a category that often masks the real range of experience of many of the people who are seeking help for homelessness. In common with many of my Labour colleagues, I have major

[*Ms Karen Buck*]

reservations about the capacity to deliver the proposals. I will touch on that, but I still think that it is worth supporting the Bill. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on promoting it, Crisis on its work in support of it, and the expert panel that helped to draw it up.

A number of Members have mentioned what has happened with homelessness over the years. As a Member of Parliament in central London, and before that as a councillor, I was there when homelessness exploded in the 1990s and through the early part of the last decade. I then saw the progress made over the second half of the last decade in bringing down the rates of homelessness and rough sleeping, but the problem is worsening again. We have heard about a doubling of rough sleeping, but rough sleeping is only the tiniest tip of a huge iceberg. It is an intractable and difficult issue, but one that masks a much wider problem of homelessness.

We know that acceptances of households that are in priority need have gone up by a third in the past few years, and that 58,000 were accepted as homeless last year, but that also masks something much bigger. I am surprised that we have not heard anything this morning about the existing local authority framework for homelessness prevention and relief, which is a series of measures intended to prevent homelessness in priority groups. Last year, 220,000 households received help through prevention and relief, and more than 1 million households have received prevention and relief assistance since 2010. That gives us an idea of the sheer scale of the problem that we have to confront. It is clear that not enough is being done in the present circumstances.

I welcome the Bill because I think it will help to bring about a cultural shift and reach people who are currently not receiving assistance. Like many colleagues, I know those people as individuals, not as statistics. Anna had terminal cancer and heart failure. She was single and lived in a private rented property that the landlord was seeking to recover because of a rent shortfall. She sought help from Westminster in order to have settled and less stressful accommodation for her palliative care. She wrote that the council

“are saying that they are unable to register me”

for a council property,

“because homes are in short supply and only people with severe medical conditions or welfare problems can apply for it.”

Anna was dying. We fought for a year to get her housed and won only just in time.

Ahmed, who was 21, was thrown out of his home and then a hostel, for behavioural problems, and was stabbed through the hand while sleeping rough. He was diagnosed with psychosis, but was repeatedly turned away from the council as non-priority. I took him to a central London hostel myself, but it turned him away because his problems were too severe for it to accommodate him. That case took two years of court battles to resolve.

I first met Heidi when she was lying in bed, sick from chemotherapy for breast cancer, in a private rented flat with no facilities and two tiny children, waiting for the bailiffs to come before the council would provide her with accommodation.

There are many young people like Jamal, who was severely depressed and slept in his car because of violence in the home, which was worsened by severe overcrowding: there were six of them in a one-bedroom flat. I could not demonstrate that he was homeless, because it could not be verified that he was sleeping in his car and I could not get anybody to that part of London.

Trey was 19 years old and slept in terror in the doorway of his mother’s repossessed flat. He was too afraid to go anywhere else to sleep, but it was impossible to get anyone to verify that he was sleeping rough.

Finally—these have been just some of many examples—Michael was sleeping rough in the west end after being refused priority, and the medication that he was required to take for his condition had to be kept refrigerated. During the review of his homelessness decision, he was told, wrongly and unethically, that there was no need to accommodate him, because it was possible for a local GP surgery to store his medication.

Those are the kinds of cases that I hope the Bill will do something to resolve. Those people have complex problems but cannot get over the threshold of priority need. They need additional advice, assistance and support, not simply a list of telephone numbers to ring. I am sure that, as I have done, colleagues have sat and rung those numbers for hours on end but have been unable to get assistance. In some cases, councils do not even record applications from vulnerable families; they are turned away without an application even being taken.

Measures similar to this Bill in Wales have made a real difference. I hope that the Bill will make a comparable difference in England. In common with many of my Labour colleagues, I feel that welcome though these provisions are, they have been introduced in the context of a rapidly deteriorating situation. Only one in five private landlords in London now accepts households on housing benefit. There are fresh housing benefit cuts to come, and the Housing and Planning Act 2016 will worsen the provision of social housing in central London.

I will give the House just one tiny statistic: there were 300 people sleeping rough in Westminster every night last year on average, and housing associations in Westminster alone have sold 300 one-bedroom flats to meet the Government’s targets. Life is not quite as neat as that, but it goes to show that the problem is worsening on the one hand and the ability to respond to it is worsening on the other. The Government’s welfare and housing agenda reforms will make the situation worse.

The Bill will be equivalent to running up a down escalator, but I still think it is worth doing and I want it to be supported. As we have heard from the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, there are some drafting problems, particularly in clause 1, and some things need to be tightened up as the Bill progresses, but it is a welcome Bill. Unless the Government address the underlying causes, which, in many cases, they have created or are deliberately making worse, I fear that the Bill will not bring about the transformation that we want.

11.31 am

**Mary Robison** (Cheadle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who highlighted with great passion her constituents’ complex needs, which the Bill is designed to address.

It is also a pleasure to rise in support of the Bill. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on introducing this truly historic Bill. I commend him not only on his stewardship of this landmark Bill, but on the incredible campaign that he has led to bring it to this stage.

As a member of the Communities and Local Government Committee, I was pleased to take part in the prelegislative scrutiny of the Bill. Today I am pleased to join other Members in the House who not only support the Bill but who, like me, are co-sponsors. The Committee's inquiry on homelessness shone a light on many of the issues that my hon. Friend has taken up and addressed in the Bill. I join colleagues in paying tribute to the homelessness charities across the UK—particularly Crisis UK, St Mungo's and Shelter—which gave us their time and specialist knowledge, met me privately and advised the Select Committee on this groundbreaking legislation.

During our inquiry, we saw some incredibly brave people, who came before our Committee to speak about their experiences and share their stories of being homeless or sleeping rough. They gave powerful, personal evidence of how vital the first steps in getting help were; how the first contact with their local authority, at the front desk, can inform their future; how important that point in their story is; and how often it can determine whether they have a home or a future on the streets. I commend the work of staff in housing offices across the country, but we have heard that there is a real disparity in the quality of service received by people who need help. That disparity was explained by Mateasa, a young woman who used to be homeless and who now acts as a mystery shopper for Crisis. She told us that she was constantly surprised by the different experiences that she had when approaching local councils for assistance. She said:

“As I approached them under cover, I was an eighteen year old girl who had been kicked out of her house by her parents. Generally the stereotype around that would most probably be that it was my fault: that is the reason why I was homeless. A lot of the time I was advised to work out what my problems were with my home life. I was never asked if I was being abused by my parents or what the problem was.”

Changes proposed in clause 2 of the Bill to section 179 of the Housing Act 1995 place a duty on local housing authorities to provide advisory services that give information and advice, and that are designed to meet the needs of, among others, victims of domestic abuse, persons suffering from mental illness or impairment, and care leavers.

I welcome provisions in the Bill that make it easier for care leavers to show that they have a local connection with both the area of the local authority responsible for their welfare and the area in which they lived while they were in care, if those were different locations. That matters, because it will oblige local housing authorities to provide advisory services, or to secure the provision of information free of charge, to prevent homelessness and make people aware of their rights. We must ensure that those protections are robust enough to secure adequate safeguards for these at-risk groups.

More important for care leavers are the local connection criteria established in clause 8, under which all care leavers who are owed duties as children are deemed to have a local connection. Importantly, where the young person was looked after by a county council, they will

have a local connection to any district in that county. Such stability will help to ensure that they can maintain their contacts and friendships, which can be so important to their wellbeing.

I would like to draw attention to the plight of vulnerable women and girls. St Mungo's reports that 44% of its female clients have experienced domestic violence, 19% experienced abuse as a child and 32% said that domestic violence contributed to their homelessness. The changes to section 179 of the 1995 Act will mean that housing authorities have to provide or secure a service that gives women and girls who are in such dreadful situations protection from homelessness when it is most needed.

The same applies to individuals suffering from a mental illness or impairment. Research published in February this year found that four in 10 people who sleep rough have a mental health problem, and that they are more likely to be stuck sleeping rough for longer than a year. That is a major problem that the Bill seeks to address. Clearly, early intervention and prevention have the potential to make a positive impact on the lives of such vulnerable people.

That is why I welcome the core principles of the Bill. It introduces requirements for local housing authorities to carry out prevention work, with the formulation of a personalised plan. Ultimately, the legislation will need broad co-operation to bring about a cultural change whereby we focus efforts on prevention instead of intervention at crisis point. As I have said, the fact that there are disparities in service quality came across strongly from the evidence given to the Committee. I am pleased that the Bill will help to ensure that people know what their rights are and how they ought to be treated, and that girls such as Mateasa who turn to their local authorities for help are treated with kindness and respect, and given the advice that they need to prevent them becoming homeless.

It is a privilege to serve on a Select Committee that has taken such an active role in not only inquiring and reporting on such an important issue, but scrutinising and supporting the Bill. I am pleased to stand in the Chamber with so many Members of this House who share the common goal of reducing homelessness. I believe that the Bill will go some way to achieving that aim.

11.38 am

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): As a sponsor of this vital Bill, I am proud to support it. It is the first major reform of homelessness legislation for 40 years, and it is an opportunity to make a fundamental difference to the lives of thousands of people in England. I thank Members on both sides of the House who have taken time away from their constituencies to support the Bill. We are engaged in a very special process, which I hope will lead to genuine reform.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for choosing to progress this private Member's Bill, and for his commitment to it. He heard the same evidence as the other members of the Communities and Local Government Committee, and it is entirely to his credit that, as a member of the governing party, he chose not to turn a blind eye and defend the status quo, but to champion vigorously the need for change. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield

[Helen Hayes]

South East (Mr Betts), who, as Chair of the Committee, led the inquiry. I also pay tribute to the Committee Clerks and specialists, whose work contributed to an inquiry that was innovative and rigorous, and that was directly and extensively informed by the experience of those who are, or have been, homeless, and those who seek to support them.

Finally, I pay tribute to Crisis, Shelter, St Mungo's and Homeless Link for the work they do every day to support growing numbers of homeless people, and for the research and evidence that they have provided to underpin this Bill. I mention Crisis in particular, whose mystery shopper research and No One Turned Away campaign helped to expose the inadequacies of the current homelessness legislation.

As a relatively new Opposition Back Bencher, I have found Select Committee work rewarding because it is evidence-based scrutiny. The evidence on homelessness is incontrovertible. Homelessness is increasing, and the current system is not fit for purpose and cannot cope.

This Bill takes that scrutiny a stage further and provides the opportunity to change the law based on the evidence we have received. The prelegislative scrutiny by the Select Committee has strengthened the Bill and allowed the views and concerns of a wide range of stakeholders in this legislation, including councils—my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) raised many of those concerns—to be listened to and understood, and it has enabled the Bill to address some of these concerns. It is a better Bill as a consequence.

It is fitting that we are debating this Bill almost 50 years to the day since the first broadcast of “Cathy Come Home”, which exposed the harsh cruelties of the post-war housing crisis; that coincided with the launch of Shelter and eventually led to the passage of the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977. That Act created the statutory duty to house people in priority need and to advise those who do not meet the criteria.

The need for this Bill can be summed up by the experience of my constituent, Ros. She is a 69-year-old widow who lived in a privately rented flat for many years. Served with a section 21 notice out of the blue, she was unable to find anywhere else affordable to rent in the local area, and approached her local council for help. Ros came to see me, and I wrote to the council in support of her claim that she was being made homeless through no fault of her own. To my horror and to Ros's great distress, the current law determined that her age alone did not make her vulnerable, and that the council did not have any duty to house her. She waited for the bailiffs to arrive and then approached the council again. The council gave her a list of organisations that she could call who might be able to provide accommodation. All of them required a referral from the council if Ros was to access the accommodation.

The council acted entirely within the current legislative framework, and in the face of crippling demand on its resources, it had no other choice. Ros spent several months sofa surfing, in great anxiety and uncertainty, before moving into sheltered housing, where I am pleased to say she is now settled. Ros's situation left me deeply uncomfortable. Her homelessness was absolutely no fault of her own. She could have been my mother or my aunt. In the same circumstances, I would have expected

help to be available for one of my relatives, yet there was no obligation to help, which seems too harsh. If the council had a prevention duty, Ros could have been helped before the bailiffs arrived. The sheltered housing, for which she was eligible in any event, might have been found earlier, and her transition could have been managed without the level of anxiety she suffered.

**Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Helen Hayes:** I am afraid that I am not taking interventions because so many other Members want to contribute.

The housing crisis in the UK is unprecedented since the post-war period. Over the past five years, there has been a significant increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness. The number of people sleeping rough has doubled since 2010, the number of people accepted by councils as being owed the main homelessness duty increased by 26% between 2009-10 and 2014-15, and the number of people receiving prevention and relief support was up by 33% in the same period. The ending of a private tenancy is now the single biggest cause of new homelessness applications.

The majority of single homeless applicants are not covered by the current homelessness legislation; for them, councils need to provide only basic advice and information. However, there is little detail in the current legislation on how that should be provided, and there is no minimum quality for the information provided. In 2014, Crisis's mystery shopper exercise found that in 50 of 87 cases, people received inadequate or insufficient help.

Many councils provide a very good service, and I pay tribute to the councils I represent, including Southwark Council, which has recently been recognised as a trailblazer for its prevention work. However, the variability between, and sometimes within, councils is not acceptable. Our Select Committee inquiry heard evidence from several witnesses who had been homeless, including Daisy-May Hudson, who has made a powerful film called “Half Way” about her family's experience of homelessness. The evidence showed that far too many people feel that when they approach their council for help, they end up feeling like an inconvenience, judged for their circumstances and stripped of their dignity.

There is a strong rationale for a system based on priority need, but in the context of a housing crisis, having priority need as the only criterion means that too many people go unsupported, with harsh consequences. The Homelessness Reduction Bill seeks to ensure that help and support for homeless people is established on a fairer footing, and that the focus of councils' work on homelessness shifts to prevention. Prevention is important because the costs of homelessness are so high. Recent Crisis research has shown that failing to tackle homelessness early costs the taxpayer between £3,000 and £18,000 for every person in the first year alone. The Government have estimated that the annual gross cost of homelessness to the state is up to £1 billion. Much of that cost is borne by councils through the scandalous costs of nightly-rate temporary accommodation. Ensuring that everything that can be done to maintain someone in their own home is done, or helping people to manage a transition to another stable home, should reduce local authority costs.

The Bill introduces a new prevention duty and a new duty to provide an applicant with 56 days' help to find alternative suitable accommodation. It broadens the range of people who will be helped, and it makes the help more meaningful. Of course, additional obligations cannot simply be passed on to councils without the resources to fulfil them. I am pleased that the Government support the Bill, but the Bill introduces new burdens on local authorities. The Government must therefore make good on their support by granting local authorities the resources to deliver these new obligations. It is important that we see an announcement in the autumn statement that gives local authorities comfort on this point. We need to be absolutely clear that councils will be funded to meet the new duties.

Finally, we cannot debate the law as it affects homeless people without mentioning the wider housing crisis. We will not solve the scandal of homelessness by creating a new legal framework if the Government's wider housing policy continues to contribute directly to making the crisis worse. Although I welcome the cross-party commitment to this principled reform of homelessness legislation, I call on the Government: to change their approach to housing more widely; to fund the building of the council homes we urgently need; to stop the forced sale of precious council homes; to reform the private rented sector to give more security of tenure; and to reform the benefits system so that people do not become homeless because the local housing allowance cap on housing benefit does not come close to covering their rent.

In the face of the evidence I have seen in my constituency and in the Select Committee inquiry, we cannot wait for all these measures to be in place before we reform homelessness legislation; the Government must back up their commitment to this legislation with resources. I urge colleagues to support this principled reform, which has the capacity to make support for homeless people fairer and more meaningful, and to enable far more people to be helped when they most need it.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Brevity will help as well.

11.47 am

**Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con):** I will try to live up to that, Mr Deputy Speaker. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) made an outstanding speech. She and her fellow members of the Select Committee should feel proud of what they have done to support my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) in getting the Bill this far. Homeless cases are some of the most troubling we see in our surgeries because they bring with them many overlapping aspects of human misery. We are assisted in our work as Members of Parliament by fantastic organisations in our constituencies, of which I will list two: Loose Ends—to call it a soup kitchen would not go near the level of support it gives to homeless people—and Two Saints, a hostel. I commend the words of the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith), and I say to the Minister that it would be a shame if the Government's great work to support this Bill were undermined in any way by local authorities being unable to continue funding contracts for hostels

across the country. I also pay tribute to Citizens Advice for preventing many people from becoming homeless in the first place.

I commend my hon. Friend for how he has guided this Bill. He said that primary legislation is not always the best way to address such problems, but his introduction of the Bill in a cross-party way, with pre-legislative scrutiny, is exemplary. Most concerns raised by local government have been addressed, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about that.

The concept of new duties meaning new money is excellent, but I draw hon. Members' attention to what happened in the Health and Social Care Act 2012. As this Bill progresses through both Houses, I encourage my hon. Friends, despite the excellent Minister here today, to put on the record what "new money" means. I have a recurring problem in my constituency with the funding of a new burden under the 2012 Act, which I hope the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) is about to resolve.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House have been absolutely right to raise the perverse incentives that currently mean that local authorities, however compassionate councillors and staff are, have to play a game of brinkmanship with someone facing a potential crisis in their life. If the Bill goes a long way to addressing that, the fullness of time will show that the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) about a glass-half-empty approach will not be realised.

At the moment, a perverse pressure is put on the private rented sector not to make housing available to people on housing benefit and other vulnerable tenants. I speak with some experience on this, in regard both to the situation in London and to providing affordable housing in rural areas. There are small tweaks the Government can make that would go a long way to addressing some of the problems people face in the housing crisis that has been referred to.

I hope the Bill will blur the divide between providers, whether local government, national Government through policy creation, charitable sector agencies, such as mental health agencies, and the police. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for putting a specific list in clause 2, which details a proposed substitute section 179 of the Housing Act 1996. Proposed new section 179(2) states:

"The service must be designed to meet the needs of persons in the authority's district, including, in particular...care leavers...former members of the regular armed forces...victims of domestic abuse".

I will not list the rest because there is not time, but it also mentions "persons released from prison". In my local homeless forum—this is going back a few years, so I hope things have got better—I heard of people leaving prison and going back to the community where they had offended. Their benefits did not come through on time, so they sofa surfed, possibly with someone with whom they had offended in the past, and we can write the script after that. I hope that the work done on the Bill by my hon. Friend and the Committee will help to resolve that.

I conclude by echoing the praise for Crisis, which is a wonderful organisation, and mentioning a couple more. The Depaul Nightstop UK service provides free,

[Richard Benyon]

safe, secure emergency accommodation for single young people, predominantly aged between 16 and 25. The homes are vetted and have trained volunteer hosts. That is an extraordinary service which we could roll out across our constituencies. A web-based solution could deal with many of the problems that have been raised. I mention finally the Centre for Social Justice, which I am honoured to be involved with, along with one of our former colleagues in this place, Brooks Newmark. It is doing very interesting work, building on success in places such as the United States and Finland, talking about early intervention and whether the current legislation is fit for purpose—I hope to an extent that that is being addressed today—and, beyond legislation, building on best practice.

Let us be able to say that, on our watch, collectively across the House, we have tackled what is one of the most shaming—to use my hon. Friend's word—features of modern society. Let the huddled figure in the doorway and the hidden figure in the myriad other forms of homelessness described so eloquently be addressed; with the Bill and with the actions of a Government who really want to take forward social reform, we will be able to do so.

11.53 am

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): I arrived early in the Palace of Westminster this morning. In the tunnel between the tube station and the entrance I passed four people asleep on the floor. I do not think that I have ever been past quite as many as that before; there are often people sleeping there but the fact that there were four was a very visible reminder of the growing scale of the problem that we are rightly discussing.

Next Tuesday, the NEWway homelessness night shelter in my constituency will open its doors for the fourth year. Some 14 churches, led by Bonny Downs Baptist church, which started the initiative, will each provide shelter and a meal for up to 15 single adults for one night each per week; seven churches will do so for three months, and then another seven for the following three months, so from November to March there will be places and meals available for 15 adults every night of the week. Last year, NEWway night shelter obtained the quality mark from Housing Justice, which supports church-based homelessness initiatives around the country. Housing Justice estimates that 500 churches, church halls, synagogues and mosques opened up to provide overnight shelter last winter. I imagine a larger number will be doing so this winter.

NEWway has provided accommodation for 225 people in total in the past three years. It has been able to help about a third of those people to secure long-term housing. The co-ordinator, Jonathan Adams—he used to design racing cars for a living—has done a fantastic job. Caritas Anchor House in Canning Town, of which my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and I are patrons, supports more than 200 single homeless adults at any one time, and provides employment support and rehabilitation for them as well. Both those organisations have been among those lobbying us to support the Bill that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has introduced this morning. Anchor House developed a very impressive online application, the Global Noticeboard, to support homeless people, housing providers

and others. It hopes, believes and is confident that, in widespread use, that would significantly shorten the accommodation delays currently experienced and endured by homeless people.

These are wonderful initiatives, and, as is so often the case, faith groups are on the frontline of meeting need, but they argue, rightly, that they should not be having to deal with the scale of the homelessness crisis that we are facing today. I warmly commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward the Bill, and also commend the organisations that he has been working with. I welcome the work of the Welsh Assembly Government, also, who came up with the ideas that have given us the blueprint for this.

**Susan Elan Jones:** As a Member of Parliament from Wales, I must say that I think the legislation in Wales has been absolutely transformative on this. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the need to share best practice between both Governments is pivotal?

**Stephen Timms:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. This House should extend its thanks to the Welsh Assembly Government for those ideas, which have brought about change there and will, I hope, do so in England as well.

I want to press the Minister to set out some information—it has been hinted that he will do so—about what resources there will be to enable the new burdens in the Bill to be discharged. We have heard some quite large estimates of the additional costs. The East London Housing Partnership currently estimates that implementing the Bill in east London will cost local councils £18 million in the first year. Now, that is a good deal less than it was estimating a month or so ago, as a result of the changes that the hon. Member for Harrow East talked about, which were made in response to the Communities and Local Government Committee, but it is nevertheless a substantial cost, and we need reassurance that such costs will be met, or at least some figures that indicate what the Government believe the costs will be.

I very much welcome the fact that local councils will be taking on these new responsibilities. There is the potential to transform the service, as we have heard, and I very much welcome the fact that the Government are supporting the Bill, but they also need to shoulder their responsibility and confirm—I hope very soon—what additional funding they will provide to enable local councils to play their part.

We heard that some London councils were saying that the Bill was unworkable. I think almost certainly that that view would have been expressed before the changes were agreed. I do not think that that is the view of councils in north London or elsewhere, but we need assurances on the resources provided by the Government to enable local councils to take forward these welcome additional responsibilities.

11.58 am

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on the way he has piloted the Bill through its initial stages and prepared it for Second

Reading. He worked with outside agencies and ensured pre-legislative scrutiny by the relevant Select Committee, of which he is a member. That scrutiny has resulted in a better Bill. With 18 pages and 13 clauses, this ain't no ordinary private Member's Bill. He has secured the support of outside agencies, with a public campaign and the lobbying of Parliament. I pay tribute to those from The Housing Link in my area who came down for that. That work has paid off this morning.

No one can be in any doubt that homelessness is a real problem. The Department for Communities and Local Government's rough sleeping statistics for England estimate that the number of people sleeping rough has increased from 1,768 in 2010 to 3,569 in 2015. In my own local authority area of Bury, the figures have varied from a peak of 10 in 2013 to a rather doubtful zero in 2014, and to nine last year.

Of course, no legislation of itself will solve the problem of homelessness. Many people volunteer, and many people work in charities, the third sector and local authority housing departments, striving day and night to help those who find themselves either homeless or under threat of being made homeless. For example, my own church of St Anne's in Tottington regularly collects for, and provides help to, the Booth Centre in Manchester. I place on record my thanks to them all for their work.

I support the proposal to ensure that single people who are homeless or facing homelessness are not discriminated against simply because they are single and do not fall into one of the priority groups. It must make sense to extend the time period during which help can be offered. The old adage that prevention is better than cure is no truer than when it comes to homelessness.

One of the underlying causes of homelessness is, of course, the supply of homes. It is therefore incumbent on all social housing providers to keep their voids to a minimum. The other side of the equation, however, is something we have not really heard about this morning: demand and the effect that immigration is having on the supply of housing. A net figure of 300,000 people coming into the country every year, all of whom need a home somewhere, must be having an effect on the number of homes required. It must be having an effect on homelessness. It must also be having an effect on rents. Nevertheless, I support the Bill.

12.2 pm

**Emma Reynolds** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on bringing forward the Bill and the manner in which he has done so. He has fostered cross-party working and pre-legislative scrutiny from the Communities and Local Government Committee, on which he sits. Given the time restrictions and the interest in speaking in the debate, I will try to be brief. I want to make three points.

First, homelessness is an issue that is close to my heart. Some 34 years ago, my mother and I found ourselves in that situation. As a single parent, my mum applied to the local council for a council home. Fortunately for us, we were able to stay with friends of hers while we waited for a flat to become available. We were then lucky enough to secure a council property.

I do not remember that experience, but my mum does and I know that she experienced the warmth, sanctity and relief that moving into a council property brought to our small family. We were lucky. In the 1980s, local councils could quite easily give people in our situation that sort of help and support. Frankly, it was a lot cheaper than what would happen now, three decades later. We would have been put into emergency accommodation or the private rented sector, where we might not have been able to afford the rent. I welcome the shift the Bill is trying to engender, from cure to prevention.

I welcome the fact that the Government are supporting this legislation, but they are pursuing wider policies that go against the grain of the progress that the Bill is trying to make. For example, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) has already asked the Government to rethink, and I agree, the idea of forcing councils to sell off council homes to fund the introduction of right to buy for housing association homes, which will result in fewer and fewer council homes being made available. Since the 1980s, we have lost 1.6 million council properties, the majority of which have not been replaced.

A second example is watering down section 106 agreements and replacing affordability requirements for starter homes. I think we should help people to get on the housing ladder, but, as many of my hon. Friends have said, some people will simply not be able to afford to buy and will have to rent. Thirdly, the Government need to reflect more widely on the cuts to local councils, both broadly and particularly in the area of public health. We know that within the complex web of reasons for homelessness, addiction is one driver and councils are increasingly finding it difficult to provide the support.

My second main point is that since the Government came to power in 2010, after the progress made during our 13 years in power before that, the number of rough sleepers has unfortunately doubled—the hon. Member for Harrow East was honest about that—and homelessness is increasing, yet that is not happening in either Scotland or Wales. A few moments ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) was urging the Government—I echo his remarks—to learn from the experience in Wales.

In his opening speech, the hon. Member for Harrow East said that new duties must bring new money. He is absolutely right—and that is what has happened in Wales. It has introduced very similar provisions, ensuring that single homeless people get the support they need as well, while also introducing a specific pot of money. In this financial year, for example, local authorities in Wales were given £4.9 million. As a result of backing up legislative reform with money, we can see how to make a real impact on people's lives by reducing the number of people who find themselves homeless.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): In the London Borough of Redbridge, the cost of temporary accommodation has risen by £5 million in the last two years, and my council estimates that some of the welcome measures in the Bill might place an additional burden of an extra £5 million. I thus strongly support my hon. Friend's point—that the new duties are welcome, but they must be properly funded.

**Emma Reynolds:** Following on from my hon. Friend's point, we all know from our own local council areas that homelessness is a problem, but I have to say that in London the scale of the problem is of a totally different magnitude. When we think about this Bill, we have to make sure that London councils get the resources they need. If they do not, Wolverhampton Council, Birmingham Council, Sheffield Council and other councils around the country will also be affected. When people are made homeless, they are often forced out of borough to places where housing is cheaper. I am not a London-centric MP—I am from the west midlands—but we need to pay specific attention to London. I am not being purely selfish about this, but when there is a problem for London, it then becomes a problem for other parts of the country. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that when he deals with the money resolution for the Bill.

That was to be my third and final point, but let me add that councils need extra resources. Many of them are already trying to do preventive work, although, as we heard from the hon. Member for Harrow East, that is not the case in every part of the country, and we need to engender the cultural shift to which he referred. Budgetary pressures on the good councils are preventing them from doing more. Each year, through a range of interventions, Wolverhampton Council prevents about 1,500 households from becoming homeless, and it tells me that homelessness is rising, but it is receiving no extra money to help it to tackle that rise.

Any extra money that we give to councils must include resources that will enable them to do something about the private rented sector. As we heard earlier from the Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), 40% of homeless people find themselves homeless owing to eviction from privately rented accommodation. When I was shadow Housing Minister, we had an ambitious programme to improve the regulation of the private rented sector. I know that Wolverhampton Council would like more power to regulate the private sector and support good landlords, while ensuring that those whose properties are in poor condition are forced out of the market.

I support the Bill, but if the paper on which these measures are written is to mean anything, it must be backed up by resources.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. If Members continue to speak at such length, I shall not be able to fit everyone in, and the Bill is too serious for that. I want to ensure that every Member has a fair chance.

12.11 pm

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): We take our homes for granted as a basic given, but imagine not having a home, or having a home that is threatened. I cannot imagine that, and I cannot imagine the inner strength that people need in order to keep going when doors shut and systems work against them, as though they were designed to prevent people from having a roof over their heads rather than to provide one. That is why I support the Bill.

I entered politics to create opportunities and offer chances, and in that context no Bill is more fitting than this one. It epitomises what we, as politicians, should be doing: helping and supporting the most vulnerable in our society. Homelessness can happen to anyone, as I know from my constituency. None of us has a special immunity to it. Being homeless is not a choice, but a collision of several issues at one time that affect people in all walks of life. Today, however, we do have a choice: a choice to support those who need our help.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who has worked tirelessly to produce a Bill that will transform lives in my constituency, his constituency and the country. It contains many common-sense measures that are intended to prevent homelessness from the off, and to address the fact that some of our current processes exacerbate the situation. In Wiltshire, we have a double-whammy disadvantage. Homelessness in the county is often hidden: the official figure is very low, but the real one is considerably higher, which means that local charities struggle to bid for grants and initiatives. Prevention is key, and we can rest assured that many measures in the Bill will prevent homelessness, including the extension of the period for which an applicant is threatened with it from 28 days to 56.

I am especially pleased to note the duty to give vulnerable homeless people the support that they need. Under the relief duty, there will be better support for those with wider needs through partnership working with bodies such as the NHS. That might have helped some of my constituents. One constituent who came to see me told me that his house had burned down, and he had subsequently suffered post-traumatic stress. He was trying to look after his family, but was told that he could not move into a different property because he would make himself intentionally homeless if he did so. Another constituent, who suffers from severe mental health issues, needed to live where there were open spaces. He was offered an urban property, refused it, and was then told that he had no other options. Looking at things in the round and working with bodies such as the NHS might have helped those constituents. These are real people with real lives. They need our support, and they need their circumstances always to be reviewed in context. That is achievable through partnership working.

One of the most significant aspects of the Bill is that, despite retaining the protections under priority need, it will open up more support for other vulnerable homeless people and help them to secure accommodation. The relief duty means that all who need help will receive it. It sounds simple, but the system is currently arbitrary, and people often do not get the help that they need because councils' hands are tied. Currently, it is hit and miss whether people get the help they need and whether they are deemed "priority need" or not. That is simply not good enough.

Doorway is an exceptional and inspirational charity in my constituency. Its chief executive has said that the Bill has the potential to significantly improve the system and local lives. It will free up more time for the charity to offer support to people, because it will not be fighting for those who are viewed as just vulnerable and not priority need.

Expanding the support that people receive beyond priority need will ensure that rough sleepers have a better chance of getting accommodation before they develop drug and alcohol conditions, since most newly homeless people do not have complex needs of that nature. That will stop the system exacerbating such problems. Currently, we wait for people to become worse, which reduces their chances, increases the costs in the long run and makes it difficult to place them.

Critics of the Bill have suggested that it will not fix the problem of homelessness because the root cause is a lack of affordable homes. Although more housing does need to be built—and we are addressing that—this criticism fails to recognise the flaws in our current homelessness legislation. This Bill will help to prevent homelessness.

The Bill will help young people in particular by ensuring that young people who leave care have a “local connection” to the local authority that was providing their care, and will therefore be housed locally. I recently visited the w home in Chippenham, where I discussed with young people the impact of being housed locally, and that impact is astonishing.

This is an historic opportunity to improve the system to address homelessness. The Bill will increase the support for vulnerable homeless people in Wiltshire and make the hit-and-miss approach that depends on whether someone is deemed “priority need” or not a thing of the past. It will create a universal approach and introduce a universal standard. Ironic as the term may be, it will remove the postcode lottery service that homeless people receive in the UK.

12.17 pm

**Liz Kendall** (Leicester West) (Lab): I, like many other Members, welcome and support the Bill, which will enshrine in legislation the principle that prevention is better than cure. That principle should drive reform across our public services, whether in the NHS, early years or reducing crime and reoffending, because prevention gets better results for people and better value for taxpayers’ money.

I will talk briefly about what is happening in my city and the excellent work that Leicester City Council is doing to prevent people becoming homeless. It is a huge, uphill task. We currently have 11,200 households on our housing register. That has gone up 18% over the last year. Like many other areas, we have also seen a big rise in the number of rough sleepers. The number of families in Leicester who are seeking help because they are at risk of homelessness has gone up 25% in the last 12 months to just over 1,200 a year, and the number of single people and couples without children seeking help because they are at risk of being homeless is up by a staggering 39%.

As many hon. Members have said, there are many and complex reasons why people are at risk of being homeless. Many people are fleeing domestic violence or there may be a family or relationship breakdown, but the council tells me that the main reason for the recent increase in my city is people being evicted from the private rented sector. I have seen many such cases in my constituency. That happens either because they cannot afford to pay the huge increases in rent or because the landlord decides to sell. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East

(Mr Betts), who said that one reason why many landlords are selling up is that housing allowance has been frozen since 2014 and is not keeping up with market rents.

Despite the huge increases in demand and the challenges my city council faces, the number of people who end up being placed in temporary accommodation has remained roughly stable over the last two years at about 1,000 a year. That is because of all the hard work the council is doing on prevention. It helps people to solve their housing benefit problems and deal with rent arrears; it offers debt advice and legal advocacy for people in the private rented sector; and it offers a mediation and conciliation service if there has been a breakdown in the relationship with friends or family. We are also working very hard with other agencies to tackle the problem of people facing repeat homelessness, working in particular with the NHS.

But there is a cost to providing this help and advice, and I am concerned that the huge cuts to local council budgets could put this work at risk, which would make no sense because preventing homelessness is so much better for the families involved—for the children, who can stay in a safe and secure home and do their homework, and for the parents, who can go to work. It also saves money for the council and for the NHS, because we know that homelessness increases mental and physical health problems. So the Government must fund the provisions in this Bill, and I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) recognises this must be part of a much wider strategy to deal with the appalling lack of housing in this country, and especially the need for more affordable and social housing.

I have one point in particular for the Minister: please drop the proposal to include supported housing in the local housing cap. This would have a devastating impact on precisely the sort of services, like hostels, that my constituents need if they do eventually end up homeless. But overall this is an important step forward. Prevention is better than cure, so I welcome and support the Bill.

12.21 pm

**James Berry** (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): May I begin by extending my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on using his place on the ballot to introduce a Bill on such an important subject? I am delighted it has achieved Government support. I also want to place on record my thanks to Crisis and St Mungo’s, which have worked so hard to put this Bill together. I know a little about Crisis because my mother volunteered with Crisis at one of its London centres over Christmas last year, an experience she would thoroughly recommend to hon. Members.

I have had a huge number of letters and emails from constituents asking me to attend this debate. The one letter which particularly stood out to me came from my constituent Nathan May, aged 12, who explained to me how he had been helping with a number of local homelessness outreach projects through his church. He told me that he had seen homeless people sleeping rough in all weathers and was upset that they had nowhere to go in the cold and the wet. He could not understand how this could be possible in Britain in 2016 and urged me to do something. Well, Nathan, I hope that, with all my colleagues here today, we are doing something with the passage of this Bill—not

[James Berry]

ending the problem, but taking an important first step on the road to ending the misery of homelessness that either causes or contributes to so many other social problems from family breakdown, to mental illness, to alcohol and substance use, to children being unable to fulfil their potential because they do not have a stable home environment.

I want to speak a little about homelessness in Kingston. When people think of Kingston, they probably think of a leafy borough next to Richmond; I believe that is what Lord Prescott said when he stood at the Dispatch Box in 1998 and changed the funding for places like Kingston in a very negative way. But such opinions come from looking at the average prosperity in my borough, which masks some areas of real social deprivation with all the problems any urban constituency has, including homelessness.

The type of homelessness that I am most often contacted about is street homelessness: people who are either sleeping rough, or begging on the streets, or street-drinking during the day. This is something that we should not be seeing anywhere in 21st century Britain, but it is only a very small proportion of the overall homelessness problem in Kingston. It is a problem I am determined to tackle in my time as an MP, and I am aware that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) announced a sizeable homelessness fund in his last Budget. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister today to update the House on how that fund might be accessed for projects like wet shelters for people with drink and drug problems in places like Kingston, so they can be built and put into operation, because many of my constituents are clear that one person sleeping rough is one person too many.

But in terms of scale, the far bigger problem is what we might call technical homelessness, which this Bill addresses. I have completed over 5,000 pieces of constituency casework since I was elected, and over 40% of them relate to housing or homelessness. Typically, a family are living in a flat in the private rental sector. The landlord seeks to increase the rent beyond what they can afford or, more commonly, serves them with an eviction notice because he wants to renovate or sell the property. The family want to stay in the area, perhaps because they work there or their children go to school there, but they cannot afford anything else in the private rental market so they become unintentionally homeless and are owed a duty by the local authority.

The next step is temporary accommodation, but unfortunately for many families in Kingston, that accommodation could be in Ealing, Hounslow or Croydon. That means that their children have to be transported to and from school, often involving a two-hour round trip each day. Others have an equally long trip to reach their job, and this is very disruptive. I find these cases particularly sad to deal with because even if I tell the family that I will write to the head of housing for them, I know what the answer will be. I will be told that they will just have to wait because there are 173 other households that have been in exactly the same situation even longer. The council will tell me that it wants to help, but it has no more temporary accommodation in Kingston.

The housing waiting list in Kingston stands at over 9,000, and some people have been on it for more than a decade. The straightforward answer might be to build

more homes, but even before we take into account the high land values in Kingston, we have to ask ourselves where we are going to find the space for 9,000 units. The Conservative council in Kingston is currently working on a plan, with funding from the last Mayor of London, to rebuild and increase the density of the Cambridge Road estate, but even if that and other projects take place, it will not solve the problem. That is because house prices, and therefore rents, in Kingston are rising sharply, and more and more people are going to find that they cannot afford to pay their rent. I am therefore pleased that the Minister for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), who no doubt has similar problems in his own area, is realigning the focus of his Department from buying to renting. I am also pleased that the Bill includes a number of robust measures that will help to solve the problem. I want to touch briefly on the matter of funding. It would be remiss of me not to say that my borough's head of housing, Darren Welsh—a man not prone to exaggeration—welcomes the duties set out in the Bill but estimates that without additional funding there will be a shortfall in Kingston of around £500,000 per year.

In conclusion, I want to thank all the excellent charities in Kingston that do so much to combat homelessness. Without them, we would be nowhere. They include the YMCA, the South West London Law Centres, Kingston Churches Action Against Homelessness, the Joel Project at St Peter's church, and Kingston Churches Together, which provides winter night shelters. I am genuinely grateful, as are all Kingston residents, to those organisations and to the volunteers who support them day in, day out. I thank them for all the work they do. That work will be supported by the Government, through this Bill. I thank the Government for supporting the Bill, and I thank all the hon. Members who have come to the House to support it today.

12.27 pm

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I should like to thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing this important private Member's Bill to the House and for the work that he has done with Crisis, St Mungo's and others. I am also grateful for his generosity in allowing me to put my name to the Bill as a member of the Communities and Local Government Committee. Judging by last Friday's shenanigans, this might be the only opportunity for a Scottish National party Member to get their name on a Bill during this Parliament, so I am grateful for that.

We have heard a lot about the evidence from Wales and elsewhere, and I want to mention some of the work that has been done in Scotland over the past 10 years or so. We decided to abolish priority need and worked with local councils to make that happen. It has had a positive effect on the levels of homelessness in Scotland, in contrast to the rising figures in England. From 2014-15 to 2015-16, homelessness applications in Scotland decreased by 4% and homelessness assessments decreased by 5%. Overall, from 2008 to 2016, there has been a 40% reduction in homelessness applications and a 41% reduction in homelessness assessments. Those are significant figures, particularly when we consider the rises in England. There is a real contrast between what is happening here and what we are doing in Scotland.

The evidence that the Select Committee heard in its recent inquiry was shocking and compelling. The impact of homelessness and the lack of a safe roof over your head can be absolutely devastating. As a former local government councillor in Glasgow, I know how many organisations and their staff are working hard every single day to try to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place and ensure that they are helped at that point of need.

There are still too many people sleeping homeless on the streets of Glasgow. Despite initiatives such as the Night Shelter, more needs to be done. We currently have homelessness rights hubs, which are a partnership between the council, Govan Law Centre, Glasgow City Mission and The Marie Trust. Importantly, of the people who have engaged with the hubs, 90% have been accommodated and more than 250 have seen an increased income. For homeless Scots who find themselves in London, as some do—I spoke to one such young man a few weeks ago—there are organisations such as ScotCare and Borderline, which work hard to ensure that people in London who have come from Scotland are looked after.

The Bill contains significant improvements to English homelessness legislation. I am particularly glad to see the stress put on prevention and relief duties, as well the strengthening of duties on advice and information. I hope that the Government's stated support for the Bill will extend to fully funding such initiatives. Will the Minister confirm whether there would be Barnett consequential to such funding? We could use the money well in Scotland.

I wish to touch briefly on some of the issues that must still be addressed before homelessness can truly be seen to be reduced. The Bill makes a valuable and worthy contribution to the debate, and builds on the evidence from Wales, but we still need action on one of the fundamental causes of homelessness: the lack of affordable housing. The hon. Member for Harrow East acknowledged that we need to increase supply, which is important.

In Scotland, we have been able to deal with the change to the duty on priority need because we are building affordable homes. Between 2011 and 2016, we have built 33,490 affordable homes, including many for social rent, and in the years up to 2021 we hope to build 50,000 more houses, both for sale and for social rent. We have abolished the right to buy, which means that those new houses are kept within local authorities' pools, where they are available to people. Private lets are just too expensive for so many people, and that is driving homelessness.

In its submission on the Bill, Shelter said that

“the mismatch between the theory and practice of homelessness law will only deepen if this legislative change is not accompanied by significant changes to councils' availability of suitable accommodation—if this is not addressed, we will be setting this Bill up to fail”.

I am sure that no one present wants to see that.

The Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), mentioned the evidence given by young people who had experienced homelessness. All three of the young people who bravely and forthrightly gave evidence to the Select Committee—Mateasa Grant, Daisy-May Hudson and Ross Symonds—said that the priority should be to build more council housing and make private lets more affordable.

The Government have not done nearly enough to regulate private lets, which are so expensive and are the real burden on the benefits budget.

We need to look at the structural drivers of homelessness, which relate to the end of a tenancy and the affordability of social and private rents. As Scotland has done very successfully, we must look again at the right to buy. Shelter is stressing its effect in high-value areas, which are a real pinch point for housing need. I call for the end to the cap on housing benefit at local housing allowance rates—another thing that Shelter has asked the Government to look at. This morning, Mary Taylor, the head of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, said that the LHA cap has the potential to be even more significant for housing than the bedroom tax.

Will the Government learn from what the Scottish Government are doing? Many Members have mentioned the impact of homelessness on young people, which is exacerbated by the policy to remove housing benefit completely for 18 to 21-year-olds. The Scottish Government are reversing that policy, because we have the option to do so. I call on the Government in Westminster to do that as well, because it is clear that young people are being unfairly left out and disproportionately affected.

Like other Members, I call on the Government to ensure that supported accommodation continues to be available and does not lose out from the proposals on the LHA cap.

The hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) mentioned Emmaus, which I also visited last week. A lot of these organisations, including ARCH in my constituency and Blue Triangle, which works with young people, are making an intervention that can prevent people from becoming homeless. Again, they can get people back on their feet and will ensure that they work for them as long as is necessary, and that will end that cycle of homelessness.

We need to look at services for women, particularly those who are coming out of prison and those facing domestic violence. Our Committee heard evidence that women are putting themselves at risk to avoid being on the streets—sharing accommodation with people or getting into relationships where it is unsafe for them to do so. We need to consider that very carefully. The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) mentioned Home Office policy and forced destitution, and we also need to consider that, because many of the people sleeping rough on the streets have nowhere else to go, because they have no access to public funds. That is a real danger for them and they are reliant on volunteers from organisations such as Positive Action in Housing in Glasgow. I shall finish there, merely adding that the Bill is a great start but a lot more needs to be done and considered by the Government.

12.35 pm

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who has provided us with a Scottish perspective. I rise to support the Bill and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I also pay tribute, as others have done, to the Communities and Local Government Committee for its support and prelegislative scrutiny work, and to the Government for supporting the Bill.

[Will Quince]

I am passionate about tackling homelessness and serve as an officer of the all-party group on ending homelessness. I could not let this debate go past without paying tribute to the amazing charities in the UK, particularly those in my constituency: Beacon House; the Colchester emergency night shelter; the churches that run soup kitchens every evening of the year and pop-up shelters in winter; YMCA; and Emmaus.

I am conscious that many Members wish to speak, so in the interests of brevity I wish to focus on just one area of the Bill. I have long had concerns about how our local authorities define “homelessness” and those making themselves “intentionally homeless”. I have concerns that local authorities are not tackling homelessness at the earliest possible point. Without question, I wish to see a greater emphasis on prevention, and this Bill certainly shifts the emphasis. I suspect that all hon. Members here have seen the briefing sent out by the Local Government Association, which says:

“Councils want to end homelessness and are already doing everything they can within existing resources to prevent and tackle it.”

With the greatest respect, I would very much question that.

As was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), who is no longer in his place, some local authorities take their responsibilities incredibly seriously but, sadly, others simply do not. I have raised concerns that Colchester Borough Council is routinely telling those seeking help to stay in their properties until the bailiffs evict them. The council has failed to address the need for temporary accommodation. Despite it having been run by the same people for eight years, and it having run a surplus of £200,000 last year and running a surplus again this year, it is still sending people to temporary accommodation 20 miles away, in Ipswich. That is not acceptable.

I wish to give hon. Members an example of a family who had done all the right things but struggled to pay their rent in the private rented sector. They had gone to the council for help because they were falling into arrears. Their landlord served on them a section 21 notice, and the council then advised them to stay in that property until the point at which they were evicted; otherwise, they would make themselves “voluntarily homeless”, and would lose all rights to support. I thought, “That cannot possibly be right. How could we possibly advise people to put themselves in an adverse position?” I therefore wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), and I hope you will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, for reading out his reply. He said:

“We have been extremely clear that authorities should take every opportunity to prevent homelessness wherever they can, that they should not insist that tenants wait until bailiffs arrive before they help. This is poor practice and as you so rightly point out leads to other problems further down the line.

The Housing Minister wrote to all local authorities in February on this issue. He made clear that to operate in this way contravenes statutory guidance and that local authorities should not be placing households in this position. The letter also made clear that it is no longer reasonable for a household to remain in a property once a valid section 21 eviction notice expires and that leaving under these circumstances does not make them intentionally homeless.”

Why is this terrible advice still being given, when vulnerable people are relying on it? Why are people still coming to my constituency surgeries week after week saying that councils are giving them this terrible advice?

As a former property solicitor, I can say that had I given such adverse advice to my clients, I would have considered myself to be negligent, yet our councils are giving out that advice on a weekly basis. It is bad and potentially unlawful and it must stop. It pushes families into crisis, and it comes with huge social cost. Families are being told that they have to wait until a bailiff evicts them. They are seeing their children forced out of their homes when they did the right thing in approaching the council at the earliest available opportunity to seek help. It leads to considerable debt and potential county court judgments, which means that, even in the future, when the council says, “Sorry, we don’t have any social housing available, but we’d like you to go to the private rented sector,” the families will not find a landlord to take them. Who will take them when they have a CCJ against their name, and no references other than one saying, “They sat in our property and didn’t pay their rent”—and that was on the advice of the council?

These families have no savings and no deposit for future rental properties. Moreover, what does it say to private sector landlords in our constituencies when the council tells their tenants to stay in properties and wait until they are evicted? Landlords face the costs of tenants not paying rent. Let us not forget that landlords often have mortgages, too. They are losing out on money, and, more importantly, they have bailiff fees, court fees, and all sorts of other costs to pay. There is reputational damage.

**Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): In my first 100 days as an MP, I have heard from one family every four days that they are facing homelessness and eviction, but are deemed to be not vulnerable enough. In the past week, I have been emailed by 300 Tooting constituents who are alarmed by this problem. They are asking me how a family is not vulnerable enough when they are having to resort to sleeping on the streets. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising these points. We have all heard in this Chamber today that the issue needs to be addressed, and I am thankful that that is happening.

**Will Quince:** The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. Every Member in this Chamber will have had such an experience, which is exactly why it is so important that this Bill enters the statute book. Ironically, all those negative social costs and the adverse advice being given to our constituents come with a financial cost. It costs the council more to wait three to six months, because it has to put the family into temporary accommodation. It cannot get them into private sector rented accommodation because of the CCJs against them; no landlord will take those families. By acting at the point at which the family rightly comes to ask for help, the council would save money. Councils up and down the country that act like Colchester Borough Council are acting negligently. They are giving terrible advice that is against Government guidance and, I think, unlawful.

In the interests of time, I will conclude. I fully support this Bill, particularly because the definition of homelessness applies to households served with a notice seeking possession. Really importantly, the Bill contains

strengthened advice and information, and a personalised plan, which means that every single family that comes forward has to be assessed and looked after on an individual basis. I urge all colleagues to support this Bill.

12.43 pm

**Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab):** I am delighted to speak today, but I will not stand here and pretend that this Bill will solve the homelessness crisis, because it will not. It will not build a single new home; it will not place more properties in the social sector; and it will not reduce the crippling rents that my constituents face.

My constituency of West Ham is in the London borough of Newham, and we, like other London boroughs, are bearing the brunt of this housing crisis. An average family in Newham looking for a home cannot think about buying one, because the average house price is £352, 272, which is simply out of reach of all but a few. The majority seeking a home want to enter social housing, with its affordable rents and more secure tenancies—let us face it, families in private accommodation often have to move yearly—but there is a waiting list of 16,755 households. As a result, many families have no choice but to look at homes in the private rental sector. If they were affordable, that would not be so bad, but they simply are not.

According to the Valuation Office Agency, the current median rent for a three-bedroom property in the private sector in Newham is £1,600 per month. Detailed research from the council shows that the median household income in the borough, after tax and benefits, is £18,604, or £1,550 a month. That is right: the average private sector rent in our borough is higher than the average after-tax income. It is truly a disastrous situation.

With such an acute housing crisis, it is no wonder that Newham Council has to deal with a huge amount of cases in which residents are threatened with homelessness. In 2015-16, the council received 2,488 homelessness applications, whereas Ribbles Valley Borough Council in Lancashire received just seven. Newham's rate of homelessness acceptance—that is, the proportion of households that it accepts as homeless—is almost five times higher than the English average. That is striking. The council faces an unenviable task, with a huge workload and shrinking resources.

In Newham, we have great charities such as Caritas Anchor House, which provides temporary accommodation and support for our homeless community, who are trying to get off the street and stay off the street. This year, it supported 37 residents into full-time employment and 84 residents into independent living. It is not just a shelter; it is a source of community support with high-quality professionals. It provides hope for those who desperately need it.

**Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op):** My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. My borough of Hounslow is also suffering in similar ways, with thousands on the waiting list and people becoming homeless. I have been struck by the fact that when I go to schools and ask about under-achievement, the issue of housing repeatedly comes up. Children's uncertainty about where they are living and will live has an impact on their levels of attainment, as well as their wellbeing. Does she agree that this is a completely false economy, with a long-term impact on our prosperity?

**Lyn Brown:** I certainly do agree. I often say that I was privileged to live in a council flat in east London, and that provided me with the security to learn and do as well as I could. My little sister, who is no longer little—well, she is little, but no longer young—is doing well as a solicitor, and I am standing in this House. We could not have done that without the security of a council property behind us.

This week, I met some of the people living in Anchor House, and I was really impressed by their resilience and aspiration. One woman entered Anchor House soon after being evicted following a mental breakdown and hospitalisation. She was on the streets for some time, but found her way to the charity. She is now training to be a youth worker and wants to take a degree to help her career. I met a man who decided that living on the streets was better than living at home, because that was the only way that he could free himself from the company of family who were encouraging him to take drugs. He is now clean and training to be a tunneller. These people were excited by this Bill, because they thought that it would prevent people from finding themselves in the same situation as them. It is because of their hope that I support it.

If the Government are not to destroy the faith of those people, two things need to be done. First, the duties on councils must come with up-front, realistic costs. There was a 26.5% increase in households assessed for homelessness in the first year after new homelessness duties were introduced by the Welsh Government. The Welsh Government anticipated that, and thankfully funding was provided to deal with it. We can expect even greater increases in our workload in London, where the housing crisis is that much more acute. In fact, boroughs such as Newham will have to process an additional 7,581 applications a year as a result of clause 3, and that must come with proper resources.

The Government must provide sufficient funds for the Bill's money resolution, but they must be based on the needs of those local authorities that will have to deal with the extra workload. It is no good giving extra money to areas that, frankly, do not have such needs or concerns about the workload, and less money to those of us who do. The Government should not pass the buck without the bucks.

The Government also have to acknowledge that changing council duties is only one small component in the fight to reduce homelessness. More homes need to be made available in every sector, and more services and support, such as those provided by Caritas Anchor House, are needed to deal with the complex needs of those who have been driven to street homelessness. The Bill could be a step in the right direction, but only if it has appropriate Government support.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. Before I call anyone else to speak, it surely must be obvious that this Bill has support from all around the House. There is very little disagreement and argument going on among Members. Therefore, I must urge Members to speak for fewer than five minutes. If everyone who has indicated to me that they wish to speak, and who has just stood wishing to speak, speaks for as long as the average speech so far, the Bill will not receive its Second Reading, because it will be talked out. The point

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

is to raise your issues in the House, not to keep repeating what everyone else has said, thereby putting the Bill in danger. I implore Members to think not of their own press releases or the pieces of paper that they have in their hands, but of the point of getting the Bill through. I implore Members to think about other people as well as themselves.

12.51 pm

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): I shall do my best to comply with your urgent call, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I had not intended to be here on what is usually a constituency day. I had not intended to speak and I was not convinced that the Bill would deliver what my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) intended, but I have changed my mind and I will explain why.

Every MP can relate to the points made by my hon. Friend earlier, especially the one about people who are about to be made homeless being told, "Come back when the bailiffs arrive." I remember the first time a constituent raised that experience with me. I challenged my local council about it, and a housing officer explained that the law did not allow her to do what she might want to do, and that, even if it did, the council could not afford it.

I do not recognise the description a Labour Member gave earlier—I think that the phrase came from Crisis—of council housing teams being dismissive and discriminatory. My experience is different from that and from the experience of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince). One of the things that has come out of this debate is individual Members' different experiences of their local councils.

The members of the housing team at Gloucester City Council are among the hardest working and most patient civil servants I know. They deal with angry, tearful and frustrated individuals who sometimes—I stress sometimes—have impossible expectations, and they juggle a waiting list that will take years to resolve. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has said, it is other changes by the Department that will alter the supply of housing, not this Bill. He is absolutely right to say, however, that waiting for the bailiffs to arrive is not remotely the way to prevent homelessness. His aim to change that through the Bill is a good cause, and I join others in congratulating him on doing something about it.

I was worried that the Bill would load considerable additional responsibilities on our councils. Individual pathways for every potential homeless individual or family will need significant additional resources, and I had real concerns—some of which the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) raised with great indignation—that, without Government backing, the Bill would add responsibilities without providing the resources to deliver them. As the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said, that would pass the buck without the bucks.

Government support for the Bill changes that. We do not know yet what that support will amount to—my hon. Friend the Minister will enlighten us—but the provision of additional resources to actually make this Bill happen is key. This will make a real difference to all

the faith groups and agencies in Gloucester that work so hard to help the homeless. I am talking about the Gloucester City Mission, in particular, and all those beside them in the George Whitefield Centre making a real difference.

I want to raise two or three issues that I hope might be taken forward in the Bill Committee. The emergency accommodation available in small cities such as Gloucester is often needed by people from outlying rural areas who are in trouble, and that has an impact on our ability to look after everyone who needs help. The local connection provision in the Bill, not least for those who are leaving care, needs to be looked at carefully. Local connection is currently undefined, and I encourage my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East to establish a minimum term of one year.

Likewise, the duty to refer from other Government bodies needs more than a note saying: "Please give the bloke in the sleeping bag outside McDonalds a home." I have seen similar notes. The situations behind them are often complex, and the individuals involved do not always come from Gloucester or from anywhere very close to us. I hope that that issue will be tackled.

When the Bill is passed, expectations will be raised immediately, and it will take time for the changes to happen. May I urge my hon. Friend to consider transitional funding, time and training for a starting period? May I also encourage him to look at the housing provider's duty and ensure that co-operation from them is more effective? Perhaps the LGA can help with that. Those are details, but that is where the devil often lurks.

Let me end by saying that the Bill is an important one, and that the complex underlying issues will need to be resolved. I welcome what my hon. Friend is doing, and I look forward to hearing the Government's support for the Bill.

12.56 pm

**Simon Danczuk** (Rochdale) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing forward this important Bill and raising awareness of homelessness across the country over the last few months. For a number of years I sat with him on the Communities and Local Government Committee. I know that he has taken this issue seriously, and he has gained considerable knowledge of it. His experience as a councillor and council leader gives him a good understanding of homelessness and the challenges that it poses for communities. He has brought that knowledge to this debate, and we should all reflect on it.

Like the hon. Gentleman, before entering Parliament I spent a lot of time focusing on homelessness as a social researcher and working at the Big Issue in the North for two years. During that time, I worked with charities and local authorities, and I saw what worked and what did not work. Some local authorities went the extra mile to support homeless people, while others failed to do so. I hope that the Bill will encourage and enable all local authorities to raise standards across the board.

In my constituency, I have seen at first hand the good work that local people are doing to combat homelessness. I am pleased that Rochdale Council has made preventing homelessness a priority, and I commend the great work done by charities, which Petrus does on a daily basis in Rochdale.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that additional funding must be made available to help councils to support the good intentions in the Bill?

**Simon Danczuk:** Absolutely. The point has been made that the measures have to be resourced, and I am sure that the Minister will address that when he speaks.

In the borough of Rochdale, Petrus provides a drop-in support service for vulnerable people who are experiencing homelessness, and people who are at risk of homelessness and marginalisation. The advice and support that the charity gives its users is vital. However, with rough sleeping on the rise, politicians at a national level must also act immediately to help to prevent homelessness. This Bill will ensure that fewer individuals slip through the safety net. It will ensure that they receive the support that they need before it is too late.

There is no doubt that more must be done to tackle the causes of homelessness, but the Bill is a step in the right direction and it is imperative that we all support it.

12.59 pm

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I shall endeavour to follow the brevity of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk). At the risk of repeating others, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on introducing this essential Bill. This is the most significant legislation on homelessness since the Housing Act 1996, and I am pleased that the Government are joining me in supporting it.

I am abandoning all my notes, probably much to the disappointment of the researchers in my office, but I will make a couple of points. Before becoming an MP I visited a couple of organisations for the homeless. One was called the Cyrenians but is now known as Changing Lives—Members from the north-east will know that organisation—and the other is St George's Crypt, which my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) mentioned earlier. Those remarkable organisations are doing terrific work, and visiting them was a wonderful opportunity to learn a little more about the issues around homelessness and the need for the extra support and advice that those organisations provide. This Bill will go a long way towards addressing some of the issues that those two organisations, and others like them across the country, seek to address.

My husband spent 12 years serving in the Royal Navy, and we often hear statistics about the high proportion of ex-forces people who find themselves homeless. A lot of work has gone into reducing that number, and charities such as the Royal British Legion, the Salvation Army and others are doing tremendous work on that issue. I am pleased to hear references to the armed forces covenant, which is another area where we must continue to seek further improvements.

I will wrap up having spoken for just over two minutes—I hope that others will follow my example—by saying that I welcome this Bill. I look forward to following its progress through Committee and the other place as it hopefully becomes law.

1.1 pm

**Colleen Fletcher** (Coventry North East) (Lab): I support this Bill, and I will set out the reasons why over the next couple of minutes. It is shameful that the national trend

in homelessness is upwards, and has been so for the past six years. That is true in my area of Coventry, where the number of households accepted as statutorily homeless has increased year on year, with the city's rate of statutory homelessness above both the regional and national averages.

We know that people can become homeless for a variety of complex and overlapping reasons. In Coventry, the most common reason for homelessness is the ending of a tenancy in the private rented sector, which has increased significantly over the past five years and now accounts for 34% of statutorily homeless households in the city. The next most common reason is family or friends no longer being willing or able to accommodate a person, and after that it is the breakdown of a relationship.

Although existing homelessness legislation offers much needed support to the extremely vulnerable, its limited scope and restrictive nature means there are still too many people who receive little, if any, meaningful help from local authorities. This is particularly true for the single homeless or those who are found to have made themselves intentionally homeless. For those groups current legislation neither prevents them from losing their homes nor acts as a safety net to protect them.

The Bill seeks to address those limitations and to modernise current legislation. Together, the provisions in the Bill will ensure the introduction of stronger and more robust statutory prevention and relief duties, as well as extending the reach of those duties to include people who would currently be refused help because they are not considered a priority. That is an extremely welcome step in the right direction and will make a positive difference in the fight to address the scourge of homelessness.

With any such extension of legal duties on local government comes new costs and requirements, which must, in turn, be accompanied by the extension of adequate funding and appropriate powers from central Government. It is imperative that the necessary means be provided to enable local authorities to implement the new duties successfully.

I have never been homeless. I have always had a safe and secure home, which is fundamental for everybody's wellbeing, but I know only too well some of the factors that may cause a person to end up on the downward spiral towards homelessness. We have heard many such examples today.

This Bill forms only part of the wider solution needed to end homelessness. If the country is to have an effective and sustainable housing policy, we must adopt an overarching strategy that combines these legislative changes with structural housing, welfare and employment reforms that not only ensure an increase in the supply of affordable homes but address the ever-increasing gap between household incomes and rents.

1.4 pm

**Mrs Flick Drummond** (Portsmouth South) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in support of the Bill, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on bringing it forward. I thank Crisis for giving us so many updates.

Although I welcome the Bill, it is important to recognise the work our local authorities already do to help the homeless. Portsmouth City Council deserves praise for

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

the way it works with the homeless across the whole spectrum. The number of families in temporary accommodation has fallen. The council's housing options team already assigns a caseworker for each family at risk, but as other Members have mentioned—in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince)—our concern is that people have to go all the way to the point of eviction before an authority can help them.

Last week I saw three examples of people in that situation at my constituency surgery. One was a serving member of the armed forces. I therefore welcome clause 1, which redefines homelessness and gives protection to those at risk at an earlier stage than is currently the case under the 1996 Act. Replacing the current 28-day period with a 56-day period will give more reassurance to those in difficulty, and more time for preparing a plan of action. I hope that that will be of help to the people I have been seeing in my surgery, and in particular people affected who are in the armed forces; it is a disgrace that someone in the armed forces had to come to my surgery because he does not have somewhere to go when he leaves the forces next month.

I am also pleased that clause 2 reinforces the duty to provide advisory services, but it is not only the local authority that can provide advice; there are plenty of charities in the sector, such as the Roberts Centre in Portsmouth, which provides a tenancy support service. Last year the centre helped 86 families, and I am pleased that it is funded by the Government's supporting people service.

Finally, as others have mentioned, clause 8 gives greater protection to care leavers, but I would like it to go further. I believe the state should be taking a parental role by looking after care leavers until the age of 25. Many parents, myself included, have children in their 20s who are still living at home. The state ought to do the same for care leavers. Care leavers should also be supported to move outside their local area if seeking work or educational opportunities. Those vulnerable young people need support wherever they go and live. I hope that will be taken into account in Committee. We know that they face many risks, and we can do something to reduce one of those risks with the Bill.

The charity Crisis estimates that reducing homelessness could free up £370 million a year of public spending. We also know from the Welsh experience that early action can prevent homelessness. I am therefore really pleased that the Bill enjoys support from all parties, and hope we can send a unanimous message from this House that we are all backing it today.

1.7 pm

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing this important Bill forward to the House; I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for all her work in generating and fostering cross-party support for the Bill.

The hon. Member for Harrow East has already mentioned the staggering figures for people sleeping rough in London. The 8,096 people whom we have failed and who are sleeping out on the streets of London should make us hang our heads in shame. The figures

for my constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn are not much better. The DCLG statistics show that the number of people sleeping rough on the streets in the Camden side of my constituency has increased by one third in the past five years; in Brent, in just one year and one borough, we have dealt with 55 homeless people looking desperately for somewhere to live. My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) has already outlined the very complex needs of some of our constituents trying to find houses.

The number of deaths of homeless people that have happened in my constituency recently is really tragic. I will give one particular example. After a bitter night, Steven Percival, a man who used to sell *The Big Issue* on the streets of Camden, was found dead on the steps of a NatWest branch. He was always smiling, and was trying to make ends meet, but in the end he died. It is not just that theirs are lives of hardship; the truth is that, for a lot of homeless people, there is no dignity in dying.

Putting aside the people who are homeless for one second, I also welcome the Bill's inclusion of a duty to protect those at the risk of homelessness. There is an attempt to bring in personalised plans for those threatened with homelessness. In the Brent side of my borough, there are currently 700 people waiting to be housed in temporary accommodation because they cannot afford the soaring rents in the private rented sector. Brent already has the highest number of families in temporary accommodation, which makes us realise that they could be added to the overall homelessness figures. Again, these are statistics that should make us hang our heads in shame.

I am pleased that the Government support the Bill, but it is not enough to just pay lip service. There are a few conditions that need to be met before we can accept that the Government are fully behind these measures. First, they must allocate sufficient funds for the measures to be implemented—a point that has been made over and over again. Secondly, they must stop selling off council homes. Thirdly, they must regulate the private rented sector, eliminating revenge evictions and rogue landlords. Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, they must build more houses.

I will end on this note. I used to be a local councillor and I worked with excellent council officers. The worst thing we can do when someone comes to us and says, "I don't have a bed to sleep in, I don't have a roof over my head," is to turn them away on a cold, bitter night. It is not a lack of will on the part of local authorities; it is a lack of resources.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Before I call the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), I must congratulate the last few speakers who have been very brief and to the point. We can relax a little now. Five to six minutes is fine, but no more than that. The trouble is that if I say five minutes, those five minutes will become seven, so I am still saying five. Those who have taken two or three minutes should take the brownie points.

1.11 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): You gave us the four-minute warning earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I will stick to that. There are many points I would

like to make, but I will focus on just one as it is important that we proceed to the key moment of letting the Bill, which I support in principle, go forward to the next stage. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I want to focus on how the measures in the Bill will be paid for. Like many hon. Members, I have the concern that while the Bill is very fine in principle, there is a danger of passing it into law and finding that our local authorities do not have the resources to implement the duties it puts on them. I am sure the Minister will tell us that he has put his hand down the back of the sofa in Marsham Street and come up with the money we need to support this—I hope he does—but I would like to suggest one way we might consider paying for the measures in the Bill.

This is about intervention in the housing market. We should remember that the Government already intervene in the UK housing market to the tune of many billions of pounds. We should consider ring-fencing some of the profits from the Help to Buy scheme. At the moment, the Government's stake in residential property from all equity loans, going right back to those under new Labour such as HomeBuy Direct and First Buy, is £4 billion. That cash is not sitting there available for us to spend. However, it is being redeemed at an increasingly fast rate.

Last year, redemptions on equity loans—money to the Exchequer—amounted to £183 million. From a social point of view, when somebody redeems an equity loan from a scheme such as Help to Buy, they will do so because they have benefited from Government money to get on the property ladder. At that point, they will have either sold the property or re-mortgaged it and become a fully fledged 100% property owner—a part of the property-owning democracy to which we all aspire. It would be a very powerful signal if, at that point, we were to share some of their success with the people at the sharp end. That would be a more holistic housing policy.

We could still repay the Government debt and Government interest. In the time that the £4 billion has accrued, house price inflation has, since 2013 alone, been 23.3%. Even if 10% of that was profit, that is still £400 million, or £150 million a year for the rest of the Parliament. That is my main point. I hope the Minister will at least give consideration to having a joined-up housing policy, so that schemes such as Help to Buy in effect become a social impact bond. The whole of society will benefit from this way of robustly funding the commitments in the Bill, and councils will not be left out of pocket.

1.14 pm

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on all the hard work he has done on the Bill, and on approaching the issue in an inclusive cross-party way. However strongly I feel that his party in government has a lot to answer for when it comes to homelessness, I know that none of that attaches to him personally. I am glad to see that such a worthy cause has such an effective champion.

I also congratulate the members of the Communities and Local Government Committee on dedicating their time to the Bill—by questioning the Minister on the

draft Bill and going through it with a fine-toothed comb, they have put some real weight behind it. I sincerely hope that the Bill will provide an example of how Back Benchers can make a real change when they go about their business in the right way.

Homelessness is one of the insidious problems that any civilised country has to deal with. As politicians of whatever party, we all talk about changing the country for the better and improving people's life chances. We may disagree about how to build our prosperity, but we should surely all agree that when someone has no stable roof over their head or, worse, is sleeping on the street, all our rhetoric will count for nothing. Every family facing eviction with no place to go and every rough sleeper represents our collective failure to do better as a society.

I do not accept for a moment that homelessness is “just one of those things”—a problem that will always be with us, so we should just accept it. Government can do something about it, if there is a will. We should just look at what happened when Labour was last in office. We set up the rough sleepers unit within the Cabinet Office; and we increased the funding for homelessness services through the supporting people programme and the hostels capital improvement programme. The Homelessness Act 2002 extended councils' legal duty to provide stable accommodation to 16 and 17-year-olds, care leavers, ex-servicemen and women, those leaving prison and the victims of domestic violence. By requiring local authorities to put together homelessness strategies and by encouraging early intervention, the focus began to shift towards prevention.

With the stock of affordable housing dwindling, private rentals have been the key means by which those not classed as a homelessness priority seek to put a roof over their own heads, but rising demand has seen private rents soar over the last six years by an average of £2,000 extra a year by comparison with 2010. Local housing rates rarely reflect the reality of rising rents, leaving those on low incomes in a precarious position. Six years ago, only 14% of homelessness cases accepted by councils were due to the end of the shorthold tenancy; now that figure is 30%—far and away the most common reason why households find themselves facing homelessness. Put simply, people on low incomes are being priced out of the market—a situation made worse by landlords' reluctance to rent to people on housing benefit. Last year, a survey of local authorities that were at the sharp end of this problem found that two thirds of them linked rising homelessness to welfare cuts, and three quarters expect the roll-out of universal credit to push even more into homelessness.

I am glad that the Government have delayed this travesty over the tenancies of supported housing, now to include homeless shelters and women's refuges, and that they have agreed support for short-term accommodation. Surely, however, the Minister can see that this cut will only increase homelessness. I urge him to look at this issue again and make sure that permanent funding is in place—and not just until 2019.

Concerns have been raised about the strain that the extra duties of the Bill will place on councils, and I share those concerns. Having been a councillor in Sheffield for more than 17 years, I am well aware of the strain put on local authorities by Tory austerity cuts. If the changes brought about by the Bill are to have any impact, they must be fully funded. If anyone is still in doubt, I simply

[Gill Furniss]

point to the example set for us by the Labour Government in Wales, who have had very similar legislation in effect since April last year. After a year, 45% of homeless households were found secure accommodation for at least six months, and two thirds of households assessed as threatened with homelessness had that prevented for at least six months. There has also been a significant drop in the number of households in temporary accommodation.

However, the Welsh Government have not stopped there. They are funding affordable housing, both to rent and to buy; they are protecting the Supporting People programme; and, unlike the Government here at Westminster, they are not forcing local authorities to sell vacant homes to the highest bidder. In other words, they are serious about tackling both homelessness and its underlying causes.

I welcome the Minister's support for the Bill, but I urge him, too, not to stop there. I urge him to see the Bill not merely as a sticking plaster, but as a starting point for a better housing strategy. Let us provide support for those who find themselves homeless, let us assist those who have the threat of homelessness hanging over them, but let us also work to remove that threat from so many of our constituents who have been let down by six years of failed housing policy.

1.20 pm

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss). I share her support for the Bill, but I could not help noticing one or two specific points that she made. There was, for example, her talk of local government funding. My memory goes back reasonably well over the last two years, and I am reminded of what the current "Strictly Come Dancing" star and former shadow Chancellor Ed Balls said about the extra funding that Labour would make available to local government. It was a round figure, to say the least, and it was not the figure 10.

It has been interesting to hear some of the comments that have been made today, but I want to return to the welcome and genuine cross-party spirit that produced the Bill. As a constituent pointed out to me on Twitter a few moments ago, we need to be clear about the fact that homelessness is not always visible. It is not just about people sleeping rough on the streets. Indeed, most homelessness is not about someone sleeping in a shop doorway, although that may be the most visible manifestation of it, and obviously the most concerning. Much of it involves people who are not in appropriate accommodation, such as families who are living in houses that are too small for them and their needs, or people who are sofa surfing. Some people do not have a home of their own, and would be out on the street but for a kindly family member or friend who says, "Here is the sofa"—or the floor—"and you can at least be somewhere warm and dry." That, however, is not much of a step up from being out on the street.

**Wendy Morton:** Could not those sofa surfers, and others who are not actually visible to us when we walk around our constituencies or around London, be described as "the hidden homeless"? Does that phrase not encapsulate their situation?

**Kevin Foster:** Absolutely. They are indeed the hidden homeless. Similarly, although people in temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation—which is also mentioned in the Bill—are not actually out on the street sleeping rough, no one could call a B and B a home. It is not an appropriate place in which to live. I remember one of the occasions on which I opposed my own party locally, a few years ago. There was a debate in Torbay about the future funding of the local hostel for the homeless, and I made it very clear that I could not support an alternative that involved the use of some of Torbay's B and Bs. While they are fine for a week's holiday, they are certainly not places in which people should be housed other than in the most extreme circumstances.

I must pay tribute to some of the organisations in my constituency that are doing so much work to help those who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. Anode, which is based in an old monastery in Paignton, provides goods such as cheap furniture to help people to get back into housing. Those who have been homeless, especially those who have been sleeping rough, do not have furniture, and are unlikely to have the means to pop down to a local shop and buy some. The Leonard Stocks Centre in Factory Row is the hostel that I mentioned a moment ago. Along with the charity Shekinah, which assists with its management, it works to ensure not just that people have homes to go to, but that rough sleepers can be given a basic breakfast and have their clothes sorted out. It has a rough sleeper outreach worker who is a former rough sleeper himself, and on many occasions he has been able to give people the confidence that they need.

I often make the point that no one chooses to sleep on the streets. Some people may feel, owing to mental health conditions or other issues that have arisen in their lives, that that is the only choice that they can make, but it is never an active choice.

Of course, it is always worth mentioning the Salvation Army and its citadel in the centre of Torquay, which does so much to support people and families who have been homeless or who are at risk of homelessness.

For those who are wondering, I have no intention of attempting to talk the Bill out, but I will make a few more points on why it is such important legislation. As a number of people have said, the current criteria date from 1977 and were amended in 1996. It is clear that they need to be updated. Only last week in my surgery, I found myself advising a family who had been issued with a notice of eviction by their landlord that they would be rehoused, but that they would probably have to wait until a week or two before the bailiffs are due to throw them out.

On that front, I am pleased that the National Landlords Association supports the Bill because landlords are put in an invidious position. They know that someone probably will be rehoused, but they have to get to the point of almost sending the bailiffs round for that to happen, rather than prevention work being done. That is why it is important that the emphasis in the law changes from dealing with people who will be on the streets imminently or who are on the streets, which is a particular issue in London, to working before that point to prevent people becoming homeless.

**Mike Wood:** Was my hon. Friend as startled as I was to discover that in the last quarter, nearly 5,000 people were judged to be homeless but not a priority case?

Does he welcome the changes in the Bill to address those extremely vulnerable people who are not covered by the existing legislative framework?

**Kevin Foster:** I could not have put it better myself. The excellent briefing note prepared by the House of Commons Library talks of the fear that a bit of “gatekeeping” is going on when people approach local authorities. It is hard to see how 5,000 people can be defined as homeless but not a priority. The changes proposed in the Bill are therefore very welcome.

It is also welcome that, as was mentioned earlier, the armed forces will remain a priority. Those who have put their lives on the line for this country should know that there will be a home fit for a hero awaiting them when they leave the forces. There are sometimes issues with locality, and I accept that there are unique issues if someone is looking to return to certain parts of London after their service. However, it is part of the duty we owe to servicemen and women who have put their life on the line that they know there will be a home fit for them and their family.

I welcome the debate we have had on the Bill today, and I welcome all the clauses in it. We will now move on to the detailed Committee process to finalise it and ensure that it tackles the issues we all wish to see tackled in order to reduce homelessness. That is why I think it is appropriate that the Bill receives its Second Reading, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments.

1.28 pm

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): In the interests of the 94 people sleeping on the streets of Bristol, I want the Bill to proceed, so I have taken everything that has already been said out of my speech and cut it down to a few sentences.

If the Government really want to tackle the housing and homelessness crisis, they should go beyond supporting this Bill and consider the following things. They could tackle land banking by allowing councils to charge council tax on unused land that has planning permission. They could remove the arbitrary borrowing limits on councils when building homes. There is no set limit on borrowing to build a swimming pool, so why is there one for homes? They could release more public land for building. They could follow the suggestions made by Opposition Members and some Government Members today to reform the private rented sector, which so badly and urgently needs reform. They could tackle low-income, insecure employment, which is causing many families who are in work to struggle to meet their rent and put food on the table.

I support the Bill, but as I go home having supported it, I will still be thinking about the people who are left behind. I ask the Government to think of them as well as I mention the young couple I know who cannot afford a deposit on a home, young people leaving care with no family to turn to when things go wrong, older people who are struggling when they are ill or put out of work for other reasons, and every family and individual at risk of homelessness in Bristol West and elsewhere tonight, because while this Bill does so much that is commendable and we support, there is much more the Government can and must do to end this housing crisis.

1.30 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones):**

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for introducing this carefully considered Bill. As he is aware, this Government are committed to preventing homelessness. The number of people found to be homeless is down by 58% from the 2003-04 peak, but the Government remain absolutely clear that one person without a home is one too many.

We are supporting the largest house-building programme by any Government since the 1970s, but homelessness is not just a housing issue. Tackling it requires a collective response at national and local level, and an unrelenting focus on prevention. There are many examples of good early intervention around the country, and we want all areas to learn from the experiences of the best, driving good practice to help more areas to learn from effective ways to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place.

We are taking action, and we have already made significant progress. In 2010, we overhauled the methodology for counting rough sleepers, so every council now has to report the scale of the problem in its area. Since 2010, we have invested more than £500 million to help local authorities prevent almost 1 million households from becoming homeless.

Over the course of this Parliament, we are going further. The Government have protected the homelessness prevention funding that goes to local authorities, which will reach £315 million by 2020, and we have increased funding to tackle homelessness to £139 million over the course of this Parliament.

Just this month we have announced that we are going even further. We have launched our £40 million homelessness prevention package, which takes an end-to-end approach to preventing more people from becoming homeless and helping them to recover quickly when they do. It will mean quicker intervention with rough sleepers or people at risk of sleeping rough, and it will turn around the lives of some of the most entrenched rough sleepers in England. The £10 million rough sleeping grant fund, which forms part of this package, will enable local areas to intervene early with rough sleepers before their problems become entrenched, and to build better local multi-agency partnerships to address people’s underlying problems.

**Stephen Timms:** The Minister has explained some of the things the Government have done. What in his view are the reasons why, as has been acknowledged across the Chamber in this debate, rough sleeping more than doubled since 2010?

**Mr Jones:** As I have said, homelessness is not just about housing supply. It is about a number of issues and I am going to outline a number of steps the Government are going to take to tackle rough sleeping; those steps will wrap around the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East to support the most disadvantaged in society.

This Government did bring forward the first social impact bond in the world to help the most entrenched rough sleepers on London’s streets. We are now going to build on that success and introduce a social impact

[Mr Marcus Jones]

bond with a £10 million rough sleeping fund for it, which will allow local partnerships to work with some of the most entrenched rough sleepers, focusing on getting them into accommodation and using personalised support to address their complex needs. This will be open to all areas but we will particularly be interested in hearing from areas with the highest levels of rough sleeping.

Our programme will mean innovation and collaboration to prevent homelessness. Our £20 million grant fund for prevention trailblazer areas will help up to 20 local areas to go further and faster with reform, laying the groundwork for many of the changes we want to see through my hon. Friend's legislation. They will adopt and develop best practice and data-driven approaches to identify people at risk of homelessness, and will provide them with early support to prevent a crisis. Southwark, Newcastle and Greater Manchester are our early adopters and will be taking forward a range of initiatives. Projects will include collaboration with a wide range of services to identify people who are at risk of homelessness, and to work with them well before they are threatened with eviction. Early adopters will also test innovative approaches to preventing homelessness to help us build our evidence base on what works. Taken together, these three funds make up a strong package of local support that will make an immediate difference to the lives of homeless people in our country.

It is not just local change that is needed. I am also driving action across Government through the ministerial working group on homelessness. The group is focusing on many key initiatives, the first of which is the development of cross-departmental indicators, so that we can track the progress that all Departments are making in tackling homelessness. Homelessness is not just a housing issue, and that is why, through the ministerial working group, we will work closely with health services, such as hospital discharge teams and mental health services, to understand what more they could do to help to prevent homelessness. Finally, the group is looking at how we can ensure that people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness receive the help that they need to get into work.

This Government are committed to going even further. That is why last year we said that we were looking at options, including legislation, to prevent more people from becoming homeless, and I am pleased that the Government are now providing full support to the Homelessness Reduction Bill. This important piece of legislation will reform the support offered to everyone who is at risk of homelessness, better protecting vulnerable households. Services will focus on intervening earlier, and working with people before they reach crisis point. People who do face a homelessness crisis will get quicker help to resolve it.

The Bill requires local authorities to provide new homelessness services to all those affected, not just those who are protected under existing legislation. My hon. Friend provided an excellent description of the effect that the Bill will have. I particularly draw Members' attention to the extension of the duty on local authorities to provide advisory services. This means that services must be designed with certain vulnerable groups in mind, such as care leavers and victims of domestic

abuse. This will mean that people at risk of homelessness will receive more meaningful information earlier, to help them to prevent their own homelessness.

**Emma Reynolds:** Can the Minister reassure the House that the Bill's money resolution will provide sufficient resources to allow local authorities to comply with their new duties, in order to make the Bill a reality?

**Mr Jones:** I thank the hon. Lady for bringing up a point that Members across the House have rightly raised today. I shall say more about this later, but I hope that I will be able to reassure her and other Members that the Government are absolutely committed to providing new funding to local authorities to allow them to discharge the new duties in the Bill.

As I was saying, preventing homelessness as early as possible is critical. Importantly, the Bill places a duty on local authorities to start helping applicants 56 days before they are threatened with homelessness. This doubles the current period for help and brings it more into line with the notice period for ending an assured shorthold tenancy, which is currently the lead trigger for statutory homelessness acceptances.

The Bill will place a duty on local authorities to take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness for eligible households threatened with homelessness. It will also ensure that other local services refer those who are either homeless or at risk of being homeless to local authority housing teams, and that care leavers are more easily able to establish a local connection and so are not deterred from seeking support, should they need it.

The Bill will make a real difference; it offers support to a much wider group of people who need it than the existing legislation, which is why I am today pleased to offer the House the Government's full and unfettered support for the Bill. I can confirm that the Government will fund the additional costs of the Bill, in line with the long-standing new burdens arrangements.

As I said to the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), there will be new funding for local authorities. We will work closely with local authorities and homelessness charities to ensure the successful implementation of the Bill. That includes a commitment to working together on any guidance and codes of practice that will be required to sit alongside the new legislation.

**Mr Betts:** I welcome the Minister's assurance about the codes of practice. His efforts to get Government support for the Bill are greatly appreciated. On the money, aside from the initial work with the LGA to get the new burdens figures agreed, does he accept that it is difficult to predict the precise costs of the legislation? Will he reflect on whether, once the legislation has been in operation for a year, he should sit down with the LGA again to see whether the initial figures are correct or in need of revision?

**Mr Jones:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about my work on this important matter. In view of the changes recently made to the Bill, we are looking very carefully at the costs. We acknowledge that the Government will have to deal with the new burdens that will come with the legislation. We are speaking to the LGA and will continue to do so. We are also speaking

to local authorities about the costs that will be incurred. He makes a good point; in the past few months, I have created a local authority working group. Local authorities come to the Department to discuss various issues and good practice that they are promoting. We are certainly listening to what that group is saying and feeding that into the work being done by the cross-Government ministerial working group.

**John Healey:** Members on both sides of the House will be pleased to hear what the Minister said on the new funding that will go to local government for the new duties. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) may have jumped the gun a little. Speaking to the LGA and listening to the local government working group is one thing, but will the Minister undertake to involve the LGA in assessing and agreeing the additional duties and the likely additional costs that will necessitate the new funding?

**Mr Jones:** As I said a few moments ago, we are engaging with the LGA, and engaged with it and the Select Committee on the Bill. Like the Select Committee, we are aware that some concerns from the LGA arose from the process of prelegislative scrutiny of the Bill. We are speaking carefully to the LGA about the costs and new burdens on local government, and will continue to undertake to do that, because we want to make sure that the Bill works. As I said, we are determined to put in funding that does not currently go to local authorities to support the Bill.

We know from the experience in Wales that a change in culture, alongside the introduction of new legislation, is critical. I will drive forward work alongside the Bill to ensure that the change becomes a reality. Our funding package, and the work that will take place alongside it, will be important steps in that direction. That work will support the reform of local practice and partnerships through the provision of expert support from a network of specialist providers; improve the quality of services by giving front-line organisations and local authorities easier access to evidence-based best practice through an online hub; and improve data collection and analysis, making it easier for local areas to spot those at risk of homelessness. There are extremely good examples of that type of work going on. In Newcastle upon Tyne, extremely good work is being done on spotting the people who may be at risk of homelessness, but who are not yet at that point.

I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for his admirable work in bringing this legislation to this point. Since publishing his draft Bill in August 2016, he has worked tirelessly with the LGA, Crisis, Shelter and St Mungo's to address many of the concerns raised in their evidence to the Select Committee. The Government are proud to support this important Bill, and are very grateful to all concerned for their expert work.

Although the measures that set out to provide 56 days' emergency accommodation for anyone who needs it were not included in the final version of the Bill, the Government are clear that no one should have to sleep rough to get the support that they need. That measure was removed because of concerns that that duty was unworkable and would not achieve the outcomes it

sought to secure. I hope that the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) will acknowledge that a lot of work has been done, following the representations made by local authorities and the sector, through the Select Committee, and that changes have been made to overcome the biggest impediment that local authorities saw to delivering the Bill.

The Government are committed to building up evidence and good practice to address this issue in the longer term, which is why our £40 million support package includes a new £10 million rough sleeping prevention fund to help people who are at risk of rough sleeping. That will prevent people from reaching the streets and help new rough sleepers quickly off the streets. Ensuring that people on the edge of homelessness have a safe place to stay while longer-term solutions are found will be a key part of this programme.

I know that concerns have been raised by the National Landlords Association about clause 1. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, I am committed to working through these concerns with the NLA over the coming weeks. I put on the record my thanks to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for leading such thorough scrutiny of the draft legislation through the Communities and Local Government Committee. I also thank all other hon. Members who are on that Committee, many of whom are here today, as their scrutiny has resulted in important changes to the Bill, such as: the removal of the clause that changed how local connection was defined; people who have experienced, or are at risk of, domestic violence being specified in the duty to provide advisory services; the increase in safeguards for households considered not to be co-operating with the local authority; and the added flexibility for councils to be able to help to secure a six-month tenancy when working with people to relieve their homelessness.

I also pay tribute to Crisis for all its work. It has been a pleasure to work with it, and when I first met the people on its expert panel, who were promoting the original Bill, which was based on the Welsh legislation, it was extremely revealing to hear what they had to say. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has been able to take the Bill forward, and that the Government have been able to support it with him. I also pay tribute to Shelter and St. Mungo's, which have also worked together to contribute to this Bill so far. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) and the all-party group on ending homelessness for their input into this important work.

A great deal of work has gone into the Bill to get it to this point. As we know all too well, when Members play politics with private Members' Bills, they often find that their Bills get timed out. As has been said by a number of right hon. and hon. Members today, I urge Members not to take that risk with this Bill, which has enormous potential to improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our country. I also thank the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) for his kind words about my work, and for the spirit of co-operation shown today. I hope that that spirit is continued throughout the progress of this Bill.

The Government are confident that the Bill will significantly reform England's homelessness legislation and work well alongside the package of non-legislative

[Mr Marcus Jones]

reform that the Government are also driving forward. This Government will continue to ensure that more people get the help that they need to prevent them from becoming homeless, and the support that they need, should they fall through the safety net. I am honoured and very proud to say that the Government will give their full support to this Bill. I hope that it will receive its Second Reading today, and that it will proceed through the remaining stages in this House.

1.51 pm

**Bob Blackman:** We have had a passionate and well informed debate. With the leave of the House, I will briefly sum up the debate. First, may I thank the 32 Members who have taken part and the numerous others who have made interventions?

When we set out on this journey, the informal title of the Bill was the Homelessness Prevention Bill, but, as it was politely pointed out to me, that would mean that it would make it illegal for anyone to be homeless. We rapidly retitled it to the Homelessness Reduction Bill in the hope that we will eliminate homelessness in the long run.

I wish to place on record my thanks to Crisis for all the work that it has done on getting us to this stage, to St Mungo's, which every day tries to take people who are sleeping rough off the streets, to the Minister and the Communities and Local Government team for all the help and advice they have given to get us to this stage, and to the Residential Landlords Association and the National Landlords Association, which have given their critical input. I wish to put on record my thanks to FirmFoundation in my constituency, which does so much work to get single homeless men off the streets and into appropriate accommodation. Equally, I thank Members on both Front Benches for their support and assistance in getting us to this stage.

Getting a Bill to Second Reading is a long struggle when one is doing something so important. We have taken a lot of time and trouble to get this right. Provided that the Bill receives its Second Reading, I look forward to it going through Committee, Report, Third Reading and the House of Lords. Out there today, people will be looking at this House and saying how proud they are that MPs from all parts of the House are taking the right sort of approach to ending completely the social disease of homelessness.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).*

## Protection of Family Homes (Enforcement and Permitted Development) Bill

*Second Reading*

1.54 pm

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for—[*Interruption.*]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. It is unfair on the hon. Gentleman that people are making a noise while leaving the Chamber. His Bill is also important and deserves a hearing.

**Steve McCabe:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I am very pleased that his Homelessness Reduction Bill has made progress.

Let me be blunt: I have been here a long time, and I know how Fridays work. In fact, in a previous life I was the Government Whip on Fridays, so I have a fair idea of what to expect. I intend to be very brief because I would really like to give this straightforward proposal a chance to make it on to the statute book. If it is not the Government's intention to give my Bill a chance, I ask the Minister to consider the injustice and wrongs that it seeks to address, and at least to think about how the Government might tackle the issue. I am quite willing to meet him and his colleagues to consider other options. My ego is not such that I need to have a Bill with my name on it; what I want is something to address the problem. The Neighbourhood Planning Bill is currently before the House, and we could amend that. I think there is also a White Paper imminent.

The purpose of the Bill is to offer occupants of family homes some relief and protection against rogue developers and landlords who are exploiting permitted development rules where the shortage of local authority resources and the complexity of existing enforcement arrangements means that there is little prospect of redress. Selly Oak Village and Bournbrook were once particularly attractive parts of my constituency. They consisted of a series of interlocking tree-lined streets full of small terraced and other family homes. Today they consist of "To Let" boards, with streets, pavements and front gardens littered with skips, builders' rubble, sand and cement. All day and at the weekends, there is the noise of building works as developers knock up extensions of various shapes and sizes in an effort to convert family homes into five, six, eight, 10 and 12-bedroom houses in multiple occupation.

Birmingham City Council seems powerless to address this activity, even where it is clearly in breach of planning guidance, permitted development rules, and building regulations. It says that enforcement action is far too costly for local authorities, that Government guidance is not clear enough, and that it cannot risk a court case against well-heeled developers who are often much better resourced. The problem is not confined to Selly Oak or to Birmingham; it affects towns and cities across the country. The Minister may even have come across it in

Nuneaton. Anywhere with a student population, a transient workforce or a high demand for temporary accommodation is being affected in the same way.

One example is the case of my constituents Mr and Mrs White, a retired couple who have lived for many years, and brought up their children, in the family home. A developer bought the house next door and promptly commenced an extension that has, in effect, changed their detached home into a semi-detached property, as the roof was expanded to sit on top of the roof and guttering of their home. The council failed to take enforcement action, despite the work commencing without any approval, because the developer had claimed the work was within permitted development rights. In reality, he went well beyond any rights he had. A surveyor's report indicated severe damage to the Whites' external wall. It has cost them thousands of pounds in court fees, and despite winning their case and being awarded costs, they have not yet received a penny, and the illegal extension is still in place.

Another constituent, Mrs O'Sullivan, complained that work on an extension included digging up the foundations in a shared alleyway. The council concluded that the requirement to take into account whether any breach unacceptably affects public amenity or involves the use of land and buildings that should be protected in the public interest meant that a court case was too costly and too risky.

On Gristhorpe Road, the Britannia Group continues to build extensions designed to convert existing homes into eight-bedroom properties, without planning permission and under the guise of permitted development. Given that it gets away with that, it is not surprising that other developers are doing the same thing in the same street and on adjacent roads. In one development, cowboy builders demolished the chimneys and gas flues of the home of the elderly couple next door, exposing them to the risk of serious carbon monoxide poisoning.

I could go on, but many Members will be familiar with the accounts that I have given. All those cases involve ordinary people who have worked and saved for their family homes, only to find rogue developers and landlords turning their properties and streets into a series of mini-hostels.

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): In the hon. Gentleman's experience, are breaches reported by neighbours to the local authority, which then fails to act, or do the neighbours fail to report them to the local authority?

**Steve McCabe**: The point is that they are reported, but local authorities will not act because of the cost and complexity of the enforcement apparatus. That is what the Bill seeks to address. As the value of the properties affected plummets, the developers move in to snap them up and the cycle begins again.

I am not arguing against permitted development where someone wants to add a conservatory, extra bedroom, kitchen extension or another modification to their property. Nor am I arguing that conversion to flats of previous commercial properties, such as office blocks, is wrong. I am arguing that the systematic abuse of permitted development by rogue developers converting family homes into five, six, eight and 12-bedroom HMOs is destroying the character of whole neighbourhoods, reducing the number of family homes and damaging

existing properties. I also wonder about the safety of those extensions, given the cowboy builders who are so often employed.

We need cheaper, effective enforcement powers, so that cash-strapped local authority planning departments can counter the unintended consequences of permitted development. Birmingham City Council claims that the current guidance is not clear and that many agents and individual owners are not sure about what they can and cannot build. Not surprisingly, however, those who advise them always err on the side of ever-greater expansion.

The Bill calls for four things. First, it calls for monitoring and inspection arrangements to be put in place by local authorities to ensure that developers are complying with the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015, and for an opportunity for those affected by such developments to request an inspection.

Secondly, the Bill calls for a simple complaints procedure to adjudicate on breaches of permitted development rights and an enforcement plan for tackling such abuse. Thirdly, it would allow local authorities to impose a financial penalty on a developer whose alterations are found to have exceeded entitlements under permitted development rights and/or created a structure or conditions with an adverse impact on the property or enjoyment of the property belonging to another person. Those penalties are modelled on those that the Government have already introduced in their recent Housing and Planning Act 2016 to deal with rogue landlords.

Finally, the Bill calls on the Secretary of State to lay a report before each House on compliance of developers with the 2015 order and to comment on the monitoring investigations and complaints process. It also offers the prospect of the Secretary of State issuing clarifying guidance. Given that the current guidance on permitted development runs to about 200 pages, I think that that measure must be coming down the tracks. For the sake of Mr and Mrs White, and the thousands of other innocent homeowners like them, I urge the Minister and Members of the House to support the Bill.

2.5 pm

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate, and not least to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe). I believe that he secured this Bill by joining us for the sleep-out a few months ago. We had a slightly uncomfortable but very successful evening, in which we spent about eight hours on the floor upstairs outside the Public Bill Office.

I welcome the fact that we are debating what we should do about family homes. In Torbay, Victorian villas that were once fairly substantial properties are now being converted, with mixed success, either into homes explicitly in multiple occupation or, as the hon. Gentleman alluded to, into homes in which a suspiciously large number of people live, which were designed to avoid the HMO regulations. That is especially common in places where the local authority is trying to restrict the number of HMOs.

In Morgan Avenue in my constituency, residents are concerned about one property—it would be unfair to name it on the Floor of the House—which may be

[Kevin Foster]

being used as an HMO even though permission to convert it into one has been turned down. Even if that property is not being used as such, a large number of properties in the area have undergone conversions, which have not necessarily been sympathetic. That has put pressure on local services and removed desperately needed three and four-bedroom family accommodation, particularly in areas where the local services nearby are very useful for those who do not have a car.

I am glad that we are having this debate. When I think back to my time as deputy leader of Coventry City Council, when the Minister and I knew each other rather well, we faced a dilemma over how to enforce the rules and how to justify tying up a planning officer for a significant period. That would be fine if we were dealing with a very large enforcement case, but we had to decide which ones came first and how to reach the required evidential standards. I hope that the Bill will give the Government an opportunity to look at the rules. I suspect that the Bill will not make a huge amount of progress beyond today, but it provides a useful chance to look again at how we deal with developers who seek to turn family homes into HMOs.

I was interested to read in the Bill the suggestions around sanctions and creating codes of practice in the next six months. Even though the Bill may not reach the statute book, perhaps the Minister could reflect on those things in his response—[*Interruption.*] I hear heckling from the shadow Front-Bench team. I am happy to keep going, because I presume that they would like to hear more of my comments. I will not be cruel, however; I will make sure that the Front Benchers have time to respond to the Bill. I can see the clock.

I am keen that future development in Torbay should be appropriate and provide family homes, and that those homes should be protected. In our debate on the previous Bill, we talked about getting people off the streets, and the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) pointed out that we have to ensure that there is good accommodation for those people to go into. If their housing offer is a room at the back end of a Victorian villa with perhaps a bathroom or a very small bedroom off it, they will end up doing their washing, cooking and sleeping all in the same room, and it will be only one step up from a hostel. I find it particularly difficult when families approach me, as so many do, because they are struggling to find accommodation that meets their needs, especially if they have a child or a family member with disabilities. They need a particular type of house—probably a family home with a garden—but if such houses can easily be converted to different uses, the situation is made much harder.

**Mr Stewart Jackson** (Peterborough) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill has evident merits but should be seen within the context of other action by local authorities to regenerate city centres using permitted development rights and the appropriate use of selective licensing schemes, particularly in urban areas?

**Kevin Foster:** My hon. Friend makes a useful and interesting observation. I agree with him on selective licensing schemes in areas where there have been issues with rogue landlords. The active residents group in

Melville Hill, Torbay has been campaigning for a selective licensing scheme for some time, and my view has always been that people renting higher-value properties on the edge of town are able to advocate for themselves, but licensing schemes are welcome in areas where there have been problems. The merit of the Bill has to be seen against the whole range of powers available to local authorities, but I accept that its main thrust is to try to make some of those powers more usable on a practical, day-to-day basis. I welcome what is being done.

Finally, permitted development rights make particular sense where a building has been out of action for some time. I ask the Minister to ponder how we ensure that office blocks in significant locations, such as Roebuck House on Abbey Road in Torquay, that are converted from commercial to residential use do not end up being converted into one-bedroom studio flats with few facilities around them, essentially becoming a large house in multiple occupation, rather than being converted into two or three-bedroom properties that might be more needed in the local housing market?

I am conscious of the time, so I will now conclude my speech. I welcome that this issue has been brought to the Floor of the House. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

2.11 pm

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): I too begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on the progress of his Bill.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for introducing this excellent Protection of Family Homes (Enforcement and Permitted Development) Bill. His constituents have clearly been having problems with permitted development so I applaud him for shining a light on the issue, which he rightly says is not only confined to Birmingham but affects all our constituencies across the UK.

The Opposition fully support my hon. Friend's Bill. Nothing better characterises the difference between the Government's approach and Labour's approach to planning than permitted development. I am sure the Housing Minister and his predecessors can testify to our ongoing objections to the Government's extension and relaxation of permitted development rights and the system that underpins them. The system takes away the ability of local people and their elected representatives to have a say on development in their area.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones):** I hear what the hon. Lady is saying. Does she not accept that if a local area has such concerns about permitted development rights and their use, the local authority in question can invoke an article 4 direction and take away those permitted development rights?

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** I do indeed know that a local authority can apply for an article 4 direction, but I also know that the Government have made it extremely difficult for local authorities to get one. Applying for an article 4 direction is a cumbersome process.

To be clear, we are not against change of use, per se. Labour is arguing for a proper system of planning

approval that considers all the issues that are likely to arise from a development so that any necessary mitigation may be put in place if it is approved. We fully recognise the need for many more homes, but we want additional housing of all tenures to be built as part of good-quality and properly planned developments in a sustainable and appropriate way and in consultation with local people.

We believe the measures in the Bill will provide protection for residents against those who seek to exploit permitted development rules, as well as introducing a clear complaints procedure and enforcement rules. The Bill makes provisions for local authorities to check that changes made through permitted development are in compliance with the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015, and empowers local people to request that neighbouring properties can be inspected for their compliance. It also puts in place mechanisms for dealing with complaints relating to non-compliance. The measures in the Bill are perfectly reasonable and will help to ensure that the 2015 order is complied with.

We know that some developments being brought forward through permitted development rights result in poor housing and poorly planned neighbourhoods. We have heard from architects, one of whom said of the Housing and Planning Act 2016:

“This new bill only addresses speed of delivery: short-sighted political gain at the cost of long-term quality.”

That loss of long-term quality comes with some of the changes under permitted development. So extensive are permitted development rights now that the 2015 order is 162 pages long, with a further 12 pages of extension this year. That undermines the Government’s claim that they are interested in placemaking. In placemaking, one needs some emphasis on infrastructure, access to services, availability of local jobs and everything else that goes into making a local community. That emphasis is exactly what cannot happen with the wide use of permitted development.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak does his constituents, and all of ours, a real favour by bringing forward a Bill that seeks to address some of the abuses of the permitted development system. I hope that the Government take the Bill seriously and support it.

2.16 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones):**

I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for introducing the Bill. Housing is a key priority for my Department and for the Government. As the Prime Minister has made absolutely clear, ensuring that the housing market works for everyone is necessary if we are going to make Britain work for everyone.

We are making good progress, delivering more than 700,000 additional homes since 2010. We have doubled the housing budget to more than £20 billion over the next five years, but there is still significant work to be done. The Neighbourhood Planning Bill currently before Parliament supports house building while providing more say for communities over developments in their area. We need a range of homes for individuals and households at different stages of their lives, with different needs and incomes.

The private rented sector, including houses in multiple occupation, plays an important role in the housing market. Around 4.3 million households in England live in private rented homes. Single people, students and those embarking on their first job in a new town often want to rent a room. They may only be staying in the area for a fixed period, such as a university term; they may want to get familiar with an area before they find a more permanent home of their own; or it may simply be that they are not in a position where they can afford to live alone. Houses in multiple occupation, including smaller shared houses, can provide flexibility. Where they offer good quality, safe accommodation, managed by responsible landlords, they can provide a much needed service.

Many households live in decent, well-maintained homes in the private rented sector. However, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak is all too aware, that is not always the case.

**Mr Jackson:** The Minister is making a very good case. Does he believe, as I do, that, given that about a third of local planning authorities do not have robust local plans in place, it is incumbent on those authorities to do their bit in defending the integrity of residential areas as much as it is on the passing of specific legislation such as this Bill?

**Mr Jones:** My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. It is incumbent on all local authorities to put local plans in place. My hon. Friend and I spent many happy hours on the Housing and Planning Bill Committee. The Bill, which became an Act earlier this year, includes provision to compel local authorities to put local plans in place. He is absolutely right that any local authority that does not do so has an obligation to its residents to protect its area. If it cannot do so because it does not have a substantive local plan, then unless there are any practical reasons why it has not been able to do so, it is failing its local population.

Returning to landlords prepared to exploit their tenants, who are sometimes the most vulnerable members of our society with very little choice of housing, unfortunately a number of rogue landlords do not manage their properties properly. They have no regard for planning legislation or building regulations. They are prepared to rent out substandard accommodation: homes that are dangerous and overcrowded.

The Bill draws attention to the need for measures to tackle the problem of illegal or substandard housing. However, I do not accept that the hon. Gentleman’s proposals are necessary in this context. There is already a range of regulations to tackle the various breaches to which he draws attention. In particular, the private rented sector provisions in the Housing and Planning Act 2016—at least three of us in the Chamber sat on the Bill Committee—show a real determination from the Government to tackle rogue landlords by disrupting their business models and putting them out of business.

**Steve McCabe:** The central point is the cost and effectiveness of the enforcement measures. If the Minister thinks there are alternative ways of dealing with this, will he accept my earlier offer to meet for talks about how the Government might be able to do that? I am

[*Steve McCabe*]

concerned to address the injustice. I am not that desperate to have an extra bit of legislation. I want legislation that will tackle the problem.

**Mr Jones:** I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. I will come on to talk about some of the things the Government have done to make the enforcement process easier for local authorities. I hear what he says about the spirit in which he introduced the Bill. He will know that the Housing and Planning Minister will consider carefully what is said in this debate and that the Government will publish a housing White Paper in due course. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be able to bring these issues to the fore.

**Kevin Foster:** On next steps, will the Minister look at how we communicate with local authorities about the powers they already have; for example, talking to Torbay Council about whether a selective licence scheme would help to deal with some of the specific issues around Melville Hill, even if, rightly, it did not want introduce one across its whole borough area?

**Mr Jones:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for the Torbay area and I hear what he says about Melville Hill. He has an encyclopaedic knowledge of his constituency. If he is saying that that is the type of area where his constituents need to be protected by the selective licensing regime, I am sure his local authority should heed his advice. Before introducing new legislation, we should always consider current legislation and ensure it is being enforced effectively.

Certainly in respect of rogue landlords, which I am talking about and my hon. Friend has mentioned, the 2016 Act is relevant. I take on board the comments made by the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods). The Government have put in place significant powers to protect local authorities. There is now a regime under which local authorities can levy civil penalties against the worst examples of rogue landlords, and they range up to £30,000. As with many other penalties and fines, the local authority gets to keep the money and is able to use it to do more work around enforcement.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** I would like to take the Minister back to the comments he made a few minutes ago. Was he confirming that the housing White Paper, which we expect in a few weeks' time, will contain measures to deal with abuses of permitted development?

**Mr Jones:** The hon. Lady tempts me to move away from the Bill, but it would be unfair for me to tell her exactly what is in the White Paper. I know that she always likes a surprise, so I implore her to be patient, and to wait and see what is in the White Paper when it is published.

The identification of rogue landlords and letting agents has been notoriously difficult to achieve. The new database will help enforcement agencies to identify rogue operators. By their very nature, rogue landlords and letting agents do not wish to reveal their activities, which would put their flawed business model at risk.

This situation has been made worse by rogue landlords and agents seeking to evade attention by moving their operations into a new area.

Rossendale Borough Council's "Operation CARL"—co-ordination against rogue landlords—noted that when a rogue operator's business is at risk, they are likely to move across local authority borders and slip into relative obscurity, until they commit a breach of legislation. The database will enable local authorities quickly to identify landlords convicted of housing offences who are operating within their locality.

Landlords and letting agents will be entered on to the database if they have been convicted or sentenced in a Crown court for an offence that involves fraud, violence, drugs or sexual assault, particularly if the offence was committed at a residential premises that the offender had let out; for an offence that was committed against or in conjunction with any person residing at the let by the offender; or if someone is found guilty on two or more occasions of a relevant housing offence, whether it be in the magistrates court or a Crown court. A company may also be included on the database if its director, secretary or officer commits such an offence. In very serious cases, a banning order for rogue landlords, letting agents or property managers would prevent them from letting out or receiving rental income from a property. During the time that the ban is in effect, it will be an offence for them or any one associated with them to be involved in the letting or managing of a property.

As I have said, the 2016 Act also provides a better enforcement regime based on the "polluter pays" principle. The cost of this enforcement will fall primarily on rogue landlords.

Let me move on to the issue of permitted development rights, about which I know the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak is extremely concerned. As he knows, some home extensions may be carried out under permitted development rights. A householder who wants to improve his home can build a modest extension such as a loft extension without planning permission, but must meet the limits and conditions set out in the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015. That allows limited development to take place more easily, and frees up local authority resources, but it does not mean that a householder or a developer—

2.30 pm

*The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).*

*Ordered,* That the debate be resumed on Friday 25 November.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier today, members of some organisations that have been working on the ground in Calais came to Parliament to express their deep concern about the chaos that is unfolding in the camp at this moment and the complete lack of safeguarding, which is leaving children in a dangerous situation. At least 40 children spent last night under a bridge, and their only security was provided by some volunteers from those grassroots organisations, who were prepared to spend the night alongside them. We were also told that the process of bringing children in under the Dubs amendment had apparently been "paused".

I wonder whether you, Madam Deputy Speaker, could use your best offices to call on the Home Secretary to come to the Chamber and make a statement now. She could then reassure us that she is doing all that she can to hold the French authorities to the commitments that they made earlier today to remove children safely, and to ensure that British officials who are able to work alongside the volunteers and French authorities in the camps are actually in those camps and making sure that the children are safe.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I understand why the hon. Lady has brought that information to the House immediately. The situation in Calais is, of course, tragic, and we are all concerned for the welfare of the children who are there, especially those who are on their own.

The hon. Lady asked me whether I could use my good offices—the offices of the Chair—to bring the Home Secretary to the House now. She would have had to submit a request for an urgent question earlier this morning to allow Mr Speaker to require the Home Secretary to come to the Chamber today. Clearly, now that the House is on the point of adjourning, I have no offices that I can use to require the Home Secretary to come to the House.

However, I will say two things of importance to the hon. Lady. First, I am sure that the Home Secretary and her Ministers will be aware of the situation that she has described. I expect that they will take action in the way in which they have taken action over several weeks, and I expect that the Home Secretary will take action on these issues regardless of whether the House is sitting. Secondly, when the House next sits, at 2.30 pm on Monday—three days from now—the Home Secretary will be here to answer questions. I am sure that the hon. Lady and other Members will be able to raise this matter with her then, and that she will be fully able to respond.

## Chronic Urinary Tract Infections

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)*

2.33 pm

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate on the inadequacies of the current testing regime for people suffering from chronic urinary tract infections. I am happy to have been joined by other Members, and in particular by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), my neighbouring Member of Parliament, who has a long track record in defending services for patients with those conditions, and has worked closely with the Whittington hospital in that regard.

This subject has been neglected for too long, although it affects far too many people. Some 33% of women are expected to suffer from a urinary tract infection before the age of 24, and one in 10 girls and one in 30 boys have a UTI by the age of 16. The issue first came to my attention through the work of Professor Malone-Lee in his lower urinary tract symptoms clinic, which is run from the Hornsey central health centre in my constituency. Many of his patients are my constituents, but many others travel from all over the country and even from abroad to seek his expert help with complex, chronic bladder conditions that have made their lives a misery for many years. Some of them are in the Public Gallery today, including some who have travelled across the country to be here, so this is an important debate for all of us.

The devastation of those patients when Professor Malone-Lee's clinic was closed temporarily last year and the ongoing concern that I and many others have over the clinic's future have brought his unique methods into the spotlight. One patient told me that before she saw Professor Malone-Lee, she suffered every single day in pain, leaving her unable to function. Another told me that her life had not been worth living after 32 years of terrible pain and invasive treatments that failed to solve her bladder problems.

I am aware that the long-term future of Professor Malone-Lee's clinic is the subject of a review by the Royal College of Physicians, so I do not intend to focus specifically on his work today. Instead, I will talk about the wider issue, which my contact with the professor and, more importantly, with so many of his current and past patients has highlighted: the inadequacies of the current testing regime to diagnose urinary tract infections.

The gold standard for diagnosing urinary tract infections over the past 60 years has been to culture a mid-stream urine specimen and identify a pure growth of a known urinary pathogen within a range. However, such dipstick tests have been known to be deficient for many years, with data as far back as 1983 casting considerable doubt on the veracity of their findings due to the lack of sensitivity. Such tests cannot exclude acute or chronic urinary tract infections and do not take into account differences in bacterial strain virulence, host genetic variability, intracellular bacterial reservoirs or even the dilution of the urine specimen due to high liquid intake before the test. The standard laboratory culture will miss 50% of infections. That matters, because these are real people with real symptoms.

[Catherine West]

Too many people have told me that they have spent years reporting horrendous symptoms and suffering terrible pain, but that they have been dismissed and told that they do not have an infection because the culture was negative. That is to confuse the absence of evidence of disease with evidence of the absence of disease, when those are two wholly different things. What happens to the poor people whose symptoms are dismissed based on a test that experts know to be inadequate? Some will recover and others will find that a short course of antibiotics cures their symptoms, but far too many others will enter a cycle of repeated acute infections, exacerbated by sex, exercise, alcohol, certain foods, stress and many other of life's normal occurrences, causing devastation to their lives.

As many as 20% to 30% of patients fail to respond to the current recommended antibiotic treatment, whether it is prescribed for three or 14 days. That is not an insignificant number of people when one considers that the Cystitis and Overactive Bladder Foundation estimates that the condition affects about 400,000 people in the UK. Despite that, doctors are not being given the basic tools to inform them how to treat these symptoms differently, and they will not be until the health service revises the inadequate guidelines for testing and treatment. Professor Malone-Lee's clinic has clearly shown that there are different and more effective ways of testing. Many patients who have not responded to conventional treatment have seen their lives transformed by antibiotic treatment over a prolonged period.

I am well aware of the understandable anxiety among many clinicians and inspectors about antibiotic resistance and the evolution of superbugs. That is clearly something that cannot and should not be ignored, but it is not a reason to fail to question the current guidelines for the treatment of chronic urinary tract infection or to ignore their clear inadequacies. Neither is it a reason to fail to manage the care of those who do not respond to so-called conventional treatment options and to leave them in distress for months and, all too often, years. What evidence is there about the consequences of partially treated urinary infection in the long term? Safe strategies should be developed for helping people who present with particular problems that do not respond to the so-called guidelines. Data show that the NHS spent £434 million on treating 184,000 patients in 2013-14 in unplanned admissions associated with urinary tract infections. Failing to adequately treat these patients is expensive for our NHS and devastating for the patients themselves. The testing and treatment methods employed through the lower urinary tract symptoms pathway under Professor Malone-Lee are estimated to cost approximately £409,000 for 1,000 patients compared with a cost of approximately £5.3 million for 1,000 patients using conventional methods.

I urge the Minister to give this neglected subject the attention it deserves, and I would be grateful for answers to the following questions. Why are people with symptoms and signs being told that they have no infection on the basis of discredited tests? Why are the existing guidelines and policies so didactic when the published evidence implies that there is considerable uncertainty about our knowledge of the condition? Why do these guidelines base their conclusions on the results of quantitative

urinary culture which has been so discredited? What is the NHS provision for adults and children with long-term chronic urinary infections? Finally, why is there no tertiary care facility for recalcitrant cystitis in the NHS?

I ask the Minister to meet me and other MPs with constituents who have been affected by the inadequacies of the existing guidelines so that we can discuss this issue in more detail. This is a cause of immense suffering for many people across the country who struggle to be heard and to be taken seriously. I know that I also speak on behalf of MP colleagues who cannot be here today—many have sent apologies—when I say that many of those affected would be very keen to meet the Minister in person to share their experiences. Will she today agree to have a meeting with representatives from patient groups?

2.42 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood):** I thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for securing this important debate and for all the hard work she, alongside the Cystitis and Overactive Bladder Foundation, or COB, does in campaigning on behalf of people with urinary tract infections. I know that this issue concerns colleagues from across the House and I am pleased to see a number of them here, and welcome the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) to the debate. It demonstrates the importance of this subject for so many of our constituents.

Interstitial cystitis, often referred to as painful bladder syndrome, or PBS, is a debilitating and lifelong condition which affects over 400,000 people in this country. Its effects not only cause great and often frequent physical pain, but, as those affected often have to urinate up to eight times an hour, it can also threaten their ability to sleep, work, attend school and maintain a social life. This in turn can, of course, have an adverse effect on the quality of life and even the mental wellbeing of those with the condition. It is therefore clearly crucial that those presenting with symptoms consistent with PBS are diagnosed as quickly and accurately as possible in order to receive the most effective treatment to minimise the devastating effects of the condition. We are alive to that.

I understand that PBS can be a challenging condition to diagnose and that both the hon. Lady and COB have concerns over the effectiveness of the NHS tests for diagnosing urinary tract infection using dipsticks in the urine and mid-stream urine specimens. I am also aware of the work of Professor Malone-Lee and the research that he and his team of researchers at University College London have carried out in this area. I know that she recently invited Professor Malone-Lee to speak to MPs on this matter and I am grateful to her for raising awareness of his findings, as this is one of the most effective ways of sharing best practice and changing behaviours.

I am the first Minister for public health and innovation, and I am always interested to hear of any new developments that could lead to more effective diagnosis and better outcomes for NHS patients. Enhancing the quality of life for people with long-term conditions is hugely important to this Government and an overarching indicator in the NHS outcomes framework. The earlier a condition

such as PBS can be identified and receive the appropriate treatment, the more the patient will be able to manage their condition and maximise their quality of life.

Our National Institute for Health Research invests around £1 billion each year, and finding innovative solutions to help patients better manage chronic conditions is a vital part of this investment. The NIHR recently awarded about £1 million to the University of Newcastle to run a trial looking at alternatives to prophylactic antibiotic treatment for recurrent UTIs. Another study is looking at the effectiveness and acceptability of urine collection devices to reduce contaminated urine samples in women presenting with symptoms of UTI. That is designed to improve accuracy of diagnosis.

We know that UTIs can be a serious burden for individuals and for the healthcare system, and we believe that clinician-led NHS commissioning should be responsible for making decisions about individual treatments on the basis of the available evidence, taking into account the relevant guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence as appropriate. NICE publishes quality standards to define clinical best practice for the diagnosis and treatment of conditions. These standards are designed to help those commissioning and providing services to understand what a good-quality service looks like and to identify where improvements can be made. NICE published a quality standard on urinary tract infections in adults in June 2015. The quality standard comprises quality statements concerning the diagnosis, treatment and management of urinary tract infections. Quality statements 1 and 2 offer specific guidance on ensuring more accurate diagnoses of UTIs in adults. However, I understand that NICE has not yet addressed the specific issues relating to detecting UTIs raised by Professor Malone-Lee and his team of researchers.

As hon. Members will no doubt be aware, NICE guidance is kept up to date through periodic assessments of new evidence. The evidence surveillance team at NICE has been asked to take into account any publications emerging from Professor Malone-Lee's work when it next considers the relevant guidance for review. I would

encourage Professor Malone-Lee, the Cystitis and Overactive Bladder Foundation and the hon. Lady to take this opportunity to ensure that NICE is kept updated with the latest research, whether it is existing work or research that is produced in future, as I have no doubt that it will be helpful in improving guidance in this area. Furthermore, NICE is an independent body—fiercely independent—and if there are any concerns about an existing NICE quality standard or other guidance, I would encourage those concerns to be taken up with NICE directly.

In more general terms on continence care, NHS England published new guidance in November 2015 to help to improve the care and experience of people with continence issues. This includes the most up-to-date evidence to support commissioners and providers. Once again, I am grateful that this important matter has been brought to my attention, and I hope that any further research will be considered by NICE in any future guidance so that we can continue to make improvements in the diagnosis and treatment of people with such a painful and debilitating condition. I will of course be happy to meet the hon. Lady and patient representatives to ensure that we can make the necessary progress in this area.

I know from personal experience the impact that a chronic, difficult-to-diagnose and hard-to-manage condition can have on a patient's quality of life. An early and clear diagnosis and a clear treatment pathway can truly be the light at the end of a very dark tunnel for many who are suffering with PBS. I hope that, as a result of the dogged championing of this cause by the hon. Lady and many others, and of the more robust evidence of innovative treatment options that NICE can evaluate, we will be able to offer the genuine hope and certainty that is clearly so urgently needed.

*Question put and agreed to.*

2.49 pm

*House adjourned.*





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