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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Friday 13 January 2017**

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# House of Commons

*Friday 13 January 2017*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## BILL PRESENTED

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Mr Secretary Javid, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Greg Clark, Secretary Jeremy Hunt, Secretary Andrea Leadsom and Ben Gummer, presented a Bill to make provision about non-domestic rating in England; to amend Chapter 4ZA of Part 1 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992; to confer power on the Greater London Authority and certain local authorities in England to impose levies on nondomestic ratepayers to raise money for expenditure on projects expected to promote economic development; to confer power on certain local authorities in England to impose a levy on persons with certain property interests in a business improvement district to finance projects to be carried out in the district; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow; and to be printed (Bill 122) with explanatory notes (Bill 122-EN).*

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

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

## Broadcasting (Radio Multiplex Services) Bill

9.34 am

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a pleasure to bring this Bill to the Floor of the House today for what I hope will be a constructive, interesting, informative and perhaps even entertaining debate. I should like to thank the Clerks in the Public Bill Office, my own staff and the radio team at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for their assistance in putting this draft Bill together. It is interesting that we are here to discuss this on Friday the 13th. Some people say that it is lucky for some, and I hope that it will be a lucky day for the Bill, given the issues that some Bills face when trying to make progress on a Friday.

In the course of my remarks, I intend to explain the details of the Bill and tell the House how I hope to create an effective piece of legislation that will bring real benefits not only to listeners of DAB radio but to the creative and media industries, as well as giving many community stations a real chance to go digital. I hope that the legislation will also create a diversity in our media that does not currently exist. It is also worth making it clear that the Bill relates to the whole United Kingdom, given that broadcasting is a reserved, not a devolved, matter. It is therefore slightly disappointing to note that certain Members who are normally keen to make points on Bills that do not relate to Scotland on a Friday are sadly not here today to debate this one, which directly affects Scotland. Some aspects of it would give opportunities to parts of rural Scotland to develop services that do not currently exist and to create a real community feel. The Bill could benefit all corners of the United Kingdom.

The first point to consider when looking at any proposed legislation is whether it is needed. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), who is in his place, regularly and rightly asks this about any Bill. What is it about? What will it achieve? What benefits will it bring? Passing legislation is not just a matter of academic debate.

I want to explain what a multiplex is. I suspect that many people who saw the Bill title on the Order Paper will have wondered what that word meant. It is possible to get extremely technical when describing this system, but the House of Commons Library briefing note handily explains it in non-technical jargon:

“A DAB multiplex can be broadcast from many transmitters, all using the same transmission frequency”.

This is the key difference between digital and analogue transmissions. Analogue transmissions are broadcast on individual frequencies, and neighbouring transmitters cannot use the same frequencies as each other. Many local radio stations advertise themselves with their frequency number—94.8 FM, for example—because with analogue, it is critical for people to know the frequency. Digital radio, however, broadcasts using the names of the stations because it is effectively using the same frequency for many different stations. It is a different type of broadcasting.

**Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Forgive me, but I am not a particularly clever man and I therefore have difficulty understanding the

[*Oliver Colvile*]

technical side of all this. Could my hon. Friend remind me: is FM part of that analogue or is it a digital thing? What is it?

**Kevin Foster:** FM is an analogue transmission, and most community stations currently broadcast on FM. With DAB, people tune in using the name of the station. On a digital radio, we search not for a frequency but for a station name. You never know, with more opportunities for digital radio there could even be a station called Hedgehog DAB Community Sound—a local station dedicated to promoting the benefits of having the hedgehog as our national animal. I know that my hon. Friend takes that matter very seriously and that he has brought it to the House on several occasions.

Many of us probably already listen to digital radio and will wonder how this Bill fits in, what its purpose is and what small-scale multiplexes are. Three national digital radio multiplexes currently broadcast between 10 and 19 stations each. Those are the most popular stations—I will not give them any promotion as they really do not need it—that can be heard in virtually every part of the United Kingdom. Different transmitters across the country broadcast a selection of services that does not vary from location to location, and about 97% of the UK's population can receive one of the three national multiplexes. There are also 58 local commercial DAB multiplexes, covering approximately county-sized areas. Each broadcasts up to 14 commercial radio stations as well as the relevant local BBC station for the area. According to figures from the Library, over 90% of the UK's population should be covered by one of those multiplexes. In my area, for example, I can receive BBC Radio Devon and some of the commercial services that currently operate on DAB.

However, one instantly realises that there is a real gap between all that and what most people recognise as the third layer of radio: community radio. We have national radio, regional radio and then the small-scale community radio stations that many people know and love.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that community radio is an oft-forgotten layer? We hear about the big names in radio, but community radio reaches right into the heart of many local communities.

**Kevin Foster:** I thank my hon. Friend for that interesting observation. In some cases, community radio can become quite famous across the country—I will touch on hospital radio later—because it reflects the community in which it is being broadcast. As I will go on to say, some communities have different language services that would not necessarily have an appeal across the UK, but they speak to a particular need and provide people with what they want to hear. There is an explosion of opportunities on the internet, so it is strange that what one can get on to the radio is restricted. We even have the bizarre situation in which many areas can receive more TV channels, broadcast free-to-air to homes, than radio stations. That contrasts with the situation that most of us will remember from about 20 or 25 years ago when we still only had the main analogue TV stations, but

radio had started to expand. The Bill seeks to expand that sort of choice so that people can get more local news and things from their local community that mean something to them, but not necessarily to an entire region.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his clear explanation of the difference between digital and analogue. Does he agree that rural areas such as mine are where community radio stations can really come into their own? Such areas often cannot link into the main transmitters and have sparse populations, and small community radio stations can serve a really important purpose.

**Kevin Foster:** I absolutely agree. One issue at the moment is that if a community radio station is looking to serve a small community, that might be viable via FM but the jump to DAB is impossible owing to the current licensing structure and the revenues that it would have to produce. Even in a rural setting, the station might have to cover a nearby city to make the move to DAB worthwhile, which can take away from the special element of community radio. The Bill aims to provide more communities and areas with a practical, rather than theoretical, way of getting a digital radio station. Many rural areas would be unable to generate the type of revenue necessary to support such a move and, to be blunt, many people in the theoretical listening area might not want to listen.

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the rurality of an area is a problem in itself? It is about not just the necessary income, but the strength of signal that community radio stations are allowed. If an area's topography is hilly, that can restrict the distance over which a station is able to transmit via analogue.

**Kevin Foster:** My hon. Friend is right to point out that geography and topography have a large impact on what radio and TV signals people can receive. The Bill is targeted at radio infrastructure and could provide options, which I will touch on later, to provide a service where digital radio currently does not exist or where choice is limited owing to an area's topography. The current licensing system has not kept pace with the development of technology, so a different option is needed for smaller-scale radio stations. The situation with analogue was similar. Only a small number of analogue stations were broadcasting when the technology was extremely expensive. As the costs fell, increasing numbers of stations were created, including community stations. Now that digital technology is becoming cheaper, we need to look at creating a legislative process and a licensing system to allow community stations a chance to move to digital.

As I have touched on already, one issue with community stations and the current multiplex system is that many of the areas they cover are just too large, meaning that stations might be providing content that is irrelevant to many. For example, if a community station wanted to cover Torbay, which is perfectly reasonable under an FM licence, it would have to broadcast over a much wider area, leading to problems with sponsorship and rendering local discussions and contributions from local groups meaningless to much of the theoretical audience.

That is why the Bill seeks to create smaller multiplexes that can cover defined areas in the same way as a community FM licence.

The fact that there are such wide areas to be covered means that there is a large jump in the cost of access that is not necessary if someone is looking to use analogue and get a community licence. For a station that might be broadcasting from someone's bedroom or over the internet from a small studio, the jump to digital radio can involve a fee of £100,000, meaning that it would have to generate revenue of some £1 million a year to provide a DAB service through the local multiplex. Would that be tolerated in any other industry? There is in effect a shelf that stifles the natural growth of a business from a bedroom or of the amateur operation moving to internet broadcasting, then through to a small-scale broadcasting operation and then to who knows where. Large companies have literally been developed in people's bedrooms. Microsoft, for example, started out as a group of students drinking Coca-Cola to keep them awake all night while they created code and is now one of the biggest companies in the world.

**Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con):** It is all very well my hon. Friend referencing commercial operations, but will he confirm whether the Bill would allow commercial radio stations to operate, or is it limited to non-commercial operations?

**Kevin Foster:** My hon. Friend will have read the Bill, and he will have seen that subsection (4)(c) of proposed new section 258A of the Communications Act 2003 states that Ofcom may

“require small-scale radio multiplex services to be provided on a non-commercial basis”.

The main thrust of my argument is that we would have a shelf—meaning that a service that is trying to grow has to jump immediately from a very cheap internet, almost market stall-style, operation to a £1 million a year turnover operation—which exists in very few other industries.

My intention is that such multiplexes will mainly focus on community radio and will be the main focus of Ofcom licensing, although I emphasise that if the Bill were to become law there would need to be detailed consultation with the industry on its operation. It is possible to provide very small-scale services through such multiplexes but, fundamentally, we are looking at non-commercial services. My hon. Friend will see that non-commercial does not necessarily mean a totally non-profit or charitable operation—we should be clear about that. The Bill provides for infrastructure that allows digital radio to be broadcast into a certain area, and that infrastructure may carry some for-profit stations. If the Bill gets its Second Reading today, it will be interesting to explore in Committee how to refine it to ensure that its target is clear and absolute.

I make it clear that the Bill would not put any new requirements on existing multiplex operators, nor is it intended to provide a way of bypassing licensing regimes. An operator would not be able to have multiple small-scale licenses to avoid going through the current Ofcom licensing procedure for clearly large-scale commercial operations. I use the analogy of a retailer—either charitable

or any other form of retailer—that grows from a market stall. Imagine if the only options that a retailer had were either a market stall or a large department store.

**Rebecca Pow:** My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way again. He sparks many memories from my long career in radio. I used to get incredibly frustrated when I tried to bid into tortuously complicated systems, particularly the BBC system, to try to get my ideas through. The Bill would offer an opportunity for people to set up their own outlet and broadcast their own ideas. It would give many opportunities to people on many different levels. I know that we can now do these things on the internet, but will he comment on that? I particularly wanted to pursue environmental, gardening and countryside ideas, and, back in the day, I was told that no one was interested in those things. Of course, that has been proved quite wrong.

**Kevin Foster:** My hon. Friend makes the fantastic point that sometimes a community radio operation can take a broadcasting risk that a large-scale commercial operation, or even the BBC, with its requirement to satisfy licence-fee payers that their payments offer value for money, cannot take, and can develop a service and show that it works. Earlier this week we were talking about the Green Investment Bank, which was started to address a perceived market failure, but now private investors want to take it on and develop some of its actions into a profit-making venture because they believe the market has changed. As my hon. Friend points out, broadcasting is the same.

A service that may not be seen as inherently profitable, or as something that a broadcaster would want to launch fully commercially, could be allowed to build its name in a community setting. Indeed, an individual can build their abilities and talents with a community service, allowing them to move on in broadcasting more generally. Community services would effectively act as an incubator for what might become successful and popular services. However, if people cannot make that jump, we are in essence restricting the options to those who are tech-savvy and can go online to access such content. People will then find that there are no community services out there when they tune in on their DAB radio, or they will have to rely on FM technology, which clearly puts them at a disadvantage because of the quality of the output they will be able to produce.

The Bill would fix the issue with the scale of digital broadcasting by allowing the creation and licensing of smaller-scale multiplexes that can operate in a local area, giving a new opportunity to create the infrastructure to deliver digital radio. I make it clear that the technology has moved on hugely since the House last considered these issues.

**David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con):** I declare an interest, because I wrote songs in the 1980s. I do not know whether that has anything to do with this debate, but I am just covering myself.

On a serious note, if I remember rightly the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), when he was Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, announced that he wanted the old analogue system to go digital sooner rather than later. At that time, the public expected that that would occur quickly. Will my hon. Friend clarify the situation?

**Kevin Foster:** Just to be clear, the Bill makes no move towards turning the whole sector from analogue to digital. The Bill does not seek to end the process of seeking community FM licences, which will remain. The Bill is about creating an option to enable people to put community radio on digital broadcasting systems. There is a debate to be had in Parliament at some point in the future on options for a fully digital radio broadcasting system. However, that is not what we are discussing today—that is a debate for future years.

In fact, with technology moving on, we do not know whether we will have separate broadcasting systems in the future. I suspect that many of us use, for example, the BBC's iPlayer Radio app, through which people can turn a dial to select a station and listen to live broadcasts. That does not come through a DAB system, FM, medium wave or anything else; it comes via a device's internet connection. There will be a debate on it in future, but I make it clear that the Bill is not about forcing anyone to broadcast on DAB or about bringing the analogue broadcast system to an end, or even about envisaging that; it is about giving a practical option to broadcast community services on digital radio. That is what the Bill is about, although my hon. Friend is right to say that there have been suggestions that, at some point, the UK might look to move to digital.

Norway says that it will be the first country to switch off its analogue radio transmissions, and there is some debate in the industry about whether Norway is genuinely about to start doing that, apart from in some areas of the larger cities. Fundamentally, that is partly a debate for another day. If the House ever were to consider ending the analogue broadcast system, we would clearly need to provide a practical and affordable solution for community and smaller-scale operators to broadcast on digital radio so that we do not annihilate the whole sector. The current licensing system for digital radio would do just that. If we went to a totally digital solution, it would leave the larger operators but take out literally hundreds of community radio stations.

The Bill is about giving community stations an option for digital; it is not about forcing them on to digital. Crucially, the Bill is not about forcing any of the existing multiplexes or existing infrastructure to carry community stations. Existing multiplexes are not affected by the Bill, and it does not seek to force them to do anything. The Bill creates a timely option. It might contribute to future changeover, but that is not the intention.

Technology is moving on and the days of large-scale equipment being needed to broadcast a reliable radio transmission are long gone. The idea of engineers running around in white coats to fix various bits of equipment is not what small-scale radio is about any more. In some of the small-scale radio trials, the main broadcast was being run off a laptop. It is even theoretically possible to run a broadcast off a smartphone. Self-broadcasting has become huge on the internet. YouTube and Facebook Live are both showing a range of changes and a range of diverse programming opportunities that people would never see on a broadcast channel, which says to me that more people out there want to hear such content. The follower rates for content that is self-broadcast over the internet point to how community broadcasting and people expressing personal experiences that connect

with others now really mean something—in some cases, to more people than watch certain broadcast television shows. Therefore, providing that opportunity in digital radio makes eminent sense.

In response to an intervention, I touched on how we can see the impact of digital TV in opening up a range of choice and opportunities to deliver new community services, and digital radio could be the same if we give an option to have smaller-scale multiplexes. As has been said, we do not know where technology will go next, and it is almost pointless to spend a morning speculating on whether we will still have broadcasts, whether we will do this via the internet and what further integration will take place involving wearable technologies that may or may not benefit from this type of Bill. However, what we fundamentally know is that the technology exists to enable effective, community-run, small-scale, digital radio broadcasting, and that is what this Bill seeks to create a licensing structure to allow.

With any technology, we may say, “Yes, it exists but is it practical?” Between 2014 and 2016 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport funded a programme of work by Ofcom to look at the potential of a new software-based approach to enable small-scale DAB broadcasting. The work included 10 technical field trials in towns and cities across the UK. The three main aims of the trials were: to test how well the small-scale DAB technology worked; to test how well the technology lends itself to several parties co-ordinating their services through the transmitter; and to give the market a chance to learn about small-scale DAB and the potential opportunities it presents.

I am sure that some Members will have studied the Ofcom report published in 2016 before coming to today's debate. The report confirmed that the trials had achieved all three aims. First, the technology worked and was reliable in terms of transmission. Secondly, the 10 trial operators gained significant experience, with some innovating further in how this technology could work. Thirdly, and most importantly, across the 10 areas, 70 unique radio services are now being carried, the majority of which are totally new to DAB. This was not about seeing existing choices disappear or providing competition with them; it was about giving a new choice.

**Oliver Colville:** I am curious as to how much it would cost a community organisation to apply for a licence, because that needs to be taken into account, too.

**Kevin Foster:** In terms of the process to apply, we must remember that this is mostly focused on the infrastructure, so it would be possible for a couple of community groups to club together or for an organisation to seek to provide a small-scale multiplex to help facilitate the growth of creativity in their area. A university would be the classic example of an organisation that might provide a small-scale multiplex to broadcast a student radio station and potentially provide an opportunity for other community-based stations. Let me be clear that the Bill also makes sure that protections are in place for those who operate existing multiplexes. As has been said, this is not about creating a new competitor for them; it is about creating an opportunity for existing community services to go to digital. I will say a bit more about that later in my speech.

**Mr Nuttall:** Can my hon. Friend explain the status of the 70 unique radio stations that, apparently, have sprung up, most of them being new? What would be their status if the Bill did not proceed? What is their status now, without this Bill? How can they be operating?

**Kevin Foster:** At the moment, they are, in effect, operating under a trial basis that Ofcom has created. If the Bill did not proceed, I suspect that they would be able to continue on a trial basis, although I have seen indications that they might not be able to do so, because it is a trial. To be blunt, if the current system is reinforced by the failure of the Bill, with Parliament deciding that it would rather stick with having the national operators and the current 58 local areas and that it did not wish to see things on a smaller scale, at some point those radio broadcasts would need to be brought to an end. My guess is that some might move purely to internet broadcasting, restricting their audience, and others might seek to switch to a community FM licence. This could be one of the few examples of this Parliament saying, “We can see a new technology breeding, coming on and creating new opportunities, and creating more diversity of media, but we would rather you all went back to just FM only, with the national operators the only ones able to take advantage of this.” In other debates we sometimes get a misleading picture presented that people in this country get their news from only one source, which is palpable nonsense when we think about the number of options that exist. If we do not want to create the type of opportunities this provides, having seen what they are, that would be a negative step. I see the Minister indicating agreement with that element of my comments. I am sure he will wish to comment on the future for those stations if we do not seek to create a permanent structure of small-scale multiplex licensing. It is safe to say that the future would be rather grim.

We know that the technology works, and we know the operators who did this succeeded and created new services. So the technology is there and the gap in the licensing is there, so the next thing to address is whether the demand exists.

**Wendy Morton:** Will my hon. Friend say a few words about preparedness and whether the infrastructure is in place? Is it going to be financially viable for some of these community radio stations to move on to the multiplexes?

**Kevin Foster:** The infrastructure currently is not in place, and we are dealing here with creating the licensing for small-scale multiplexes to allow its creation. On the costs, we know that the existing multiplexes work reasonably well for larger-scale operators; as I have mentioned, those with a turnover of more than £1 million might find this an option for them, although some would debate whether there is, in effect, a monopoly in some areas. I am not looking to affect that situation; I seek to create an opportunity for small-scale operations. The feedback from the industry is strongly that the opportunity is there and the technology is there in an affordable way, particularly with the potential use of tall buildings, rather than having to build separate broadcast masts, but the opportunity of licensing is not in place legally.

As I have said, this is not about forcing anyone to do anything: the Bill does not compel the Minister to provide a service by subsidy; and it does not compel the

BBC to spend licence fee money in setting something up—it gives people an opportunity to set something up. My strong belief is that there is genuine demand to take this step, for reasons that I will set out in a moment, but if we do not do it, we are merely blocking it out in legislative terms. We have seen the impact of the trial, with new services coming along. We have seen those develop and flourish, but if we do not want to create that opportunity, we have to ask why not.

**David Morris** *rose*—

**Kevin Foster:** I will briefly give way, but I should start to make some more progress.

**David Morris:** I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way, and I just want to clarify something. If the demand is there—as he said, people could be utilising this technology on laptops—would that not eventually drive the cost down?

**Kevin Foster:** Indeed, and I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. As we have seen in the past, as things have become easier and industries have grown and developed, the costs have fallen. I am convinced that we would see the costs fall significantly in this area if there was more ability to do it. The fact that small-scale multiplexes would exist would reduce the straight broadcasting costs—that would be a key benefit of this Bill; people would no longer have to pay for coverage over a very large area that they did not really need. All the evidence about technology and broadcasting has shown that as time goes on, things get cheaper. As people are able to innovate and use their creative speciality, things get cheaper. We can look back to 50 years ago to see that when we were overly tough in our regulatory system of broadcasting onshore, we ended up with people in radio stations operating from ships just outside our territorial waters to flagrantly get around a licensing system that had become out of date and irrelevant, with its basis in another era. If we are not creating opportunities for this sort of industry to flourish, all we do is push people on to the internet, thereby restricting choice and people’s ability to listen to new and interesting services that may well be able to be provided at much lower cost than has been possible in the past.

**Andrew Bingham** (High Peak) (Con): I declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party group on commercial radio. My hon. Friend is talking about setting up small-scale multiplexes on a non-commercial basis, but would such multiplexes be open to small commercial stations? For example, would High Peak Radio in my constituency be able to access one of the multiplexes, even though it is a commercial station?

**Kevin Foster:** My understanding is that yes, it would, although I have to be clear that the Bill will only set a framework; the exact details of a small-scale licence would be a matter for consultation with the industry and for Ofcom in considering individual licence applications. My understanding is that, yes it would be possible for very small-scale commercial operations to take advantage, but there would be processes in place to ensure that the rights of existing multiplexes were not affected unduly.

[Kevin Foster]

One consideration would be whether someone had an interest in another multiplex. For example, the Bill includes provisions to enable Ofcom to create rules to disbar someone from applying to set up a small-scale multiplex if they already have an interest in a local or national multiplex. Yes, the Bill could create opportunities, but it is very much about setting a legislative framework, with the detail to follow. Individual licence applications would be considered by Ofcom in the normal way.

There should be an element of flexibility in the framework because, as has been touched on, there will be unique individual circumstances. Some areas are covered by the national digital radio multiplexes but not by a local one. In such circumstances we may wish to look at having some flexibility to allow the provision of digital radio. The Bill is about creating a framework and giving an opportunity. It puts some limits on the framework so that it does not undermine the existing regulatory system, but it is very much a deregulatory Bill that will provide an opportunity to small-scale radio stations that serve particular communities and cannot realistically take on the cost of a local-area multiplex that covers a very wide area.

We know that the technology works, but there is a legislative gap that needs to be fixed to allow that technology to flourish throughout the UK. However, as I just touched on in response to that intervention, is there actually a demand for this type of system? There is little point passing a law for theoretical benefit, or to make the argument that this structure should exist; it must have a practical effect to justify the parliamentary time.

Around 400 community radio stations are already in existence. There is a huge range of diversity in their output, and they are positioned throughout these isles. There are university radio stations, including UCA Radio in Ayr. Interestingly, quite a large number of British forces broadcasting stations operate as community-licensed radio stations, such as the ones at Brize Norton and Shorncliffe. There is also Aldershot Army Radio, and I think there is another one on Salisbury plain. They operate using community FM licences, so would potentially benefit from the framework in the Bill. There are community stations that reflect the community they are in, such as Hillz FM in Coventry—on which I was once interviewed—and Riviera FM in Torbay. A lot of these stations end up broadcasting via the internet as their sole digital output, but if they can broadcast over the internet, they could quickly convert to using a small-scale digital multiplex, which is why I am keen for the structure in the Bill to be created.

As I touched on earlier, hospital radio stations give people more than just something to listen to while they are staying on a ward; they can be a real part of the local community. Several already operate as community FM stations, and I would like to see them have the opportunity, if they wish, to become community DAB stations via a small-scale multiplex. They would cover approximately county-sized areas; they are clearly not going to look to compete with a national digital radio multiplex—that is flagrantly not what they are going to want to do. They should at least have the practical opportunity to go on to digital radio if that is what they see as the natural progression for their services.

**Dr Sarah Wollaston** (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward this excellent Bill to broaden choice for community providers. Will he join me in paying tribute to the volunteers who work in community radio stations throughout the country? I very much welcome the opportunity to expand the role that they play in our communities.

**Kevin Foster:** I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for that intervention. Hospital radio absolutely provides an opportunity for volunteers to be part of delivering something to patients, and it also develops skills and talents that may well sustain them in a future paid career. There will be stories of people who have started off presenting a hospital or community radio show as a volunteer, but displayed talent that they could take much further. My hon. Friend will know Torbay Hospital Radio, which regularly provides the outside broadcast system for community events and fairs. The image of hospital radio is just someone sat in a broom cupboard at the bottom of the hospital, playing requests, but they actually get out in the community and do interviews, and they look to be more than just a station that people listen to in their hospital beds; they really want to make a contribution.

**Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): In my office, I have a young lady who volunteers at her local hospital radio station. She said that it gives volunteers the chance to go round and befriend patients. They are a conduit between the radio station and the patients. It makes patients feel befriended, and the shows are tailored to their needs. It makes them feel like someone is taking their views seriously, and they can listen to the things that they want to listen to. Does my hon. Friend agree that although we hear so much negativity about hospitals, hospital radio provides so much and can help with the loneliness that we often discuss?

**Kevin Foster:** I thank my hon. Friend for such a passionate intervention on behalf of hospital radio stations. I totally agree that it is about providing not only a song to listen to but a sense of community in the hospital. Why would we want to maintain a licensing system that effectively bars such stations from any possibility of transmitting digitally? Why would we want to say to them, “You can go digital, but you’ll have to do so on the same basis as fairly large regional radio stations, or radio stations owned by fairly large media conglomerates”? Why would we want to send that message by not giving the Bill its Second Reading and thereby not allowing the development of a small-scale DAB transmission system? We want to do that not only for the technical reason that it would be nice to have a slightly better sound system, but because we think it is right to give stations the opportunity, if that is the direction they want to go in.

The whole point of the Bill is to provide options. It provides the option if stations want to go to DAB. It does not make any requirements on anyone, and nor does it require any of the existing multiplex operators to do anything to allow smaller stations to go to DAB. It simply gives those stations the opportunity to do it themselves, in a practical and affordable way. Without a licensing system of this nature and without the framework in the Bill, they would not be able to do it. Those are all reasons why giving this opportunity to the community radio sector is the right thing to do.

There are lots of examples of how the Bill could help to drive a local service, creating news and information from South Uist to the Isles of Scilly. As I keep saying, the point is to give people a chance and take the legislative opportunity to form infrastructure for that growth. I am not asking the taxpayer suddenly to fund a whole load of small-scale multiplexes and broadcasting equipment throughout the country, and I am not asking existing multiplex owners to provide space for these services on their broadcast systems. The Bill is about providing an opportunity.

Although it is not the main thrust of the Bill, I have given a little thought to whether services of the type I have described might in future provide an opportunity to help to sustain local newsrooms. Throughout the country, many local newspapers are struggling to maintain the capacity for investigative journalism at a local level. In the past, Parliament rightly ensured that there were strong restrictions in place to prevent a potentially dominant local newspaper owner from also owning one of the handful of local FM licences. The coming of the internet and the growth of other news sources means that in future a wider platform may be needed to sustain some level of professional journalism in a local area, or, bluntly, to avoid it being reduced to only the BBC having a pool of paid local journalists available. That is not something I wish to dwell on in discussing the Bill, but it is perhaps worth considering the role of smaller-scale digital radio operations when it comes to future policy development.

**Rebecca Pow:** If my hon. Friend is saying that the taxpayer will not have to fund these mini-multiplexes, where will the money come from? Will it have to be factored into what each community radio station pays to use the service?

**Kevin Foster:** I thank my hon. Friend for her helpful intervention. In essence, it would be similar to how FM transmissions are funded, with stations getting the equipment and going on to the licence. There might be grant funding in other environments. For example, a local authority might decide to help by providing the infrastructure—I must emphasise here that I am talking about the infrastructure, not the service. It is not the role of a local council to provide a radio station, in the same way that it is not its role to use taxpayers' money to provide a local newspaper. For me, it is about providing an opportunity, but who would it be funded by? I think that we have seen from the trials that, yes, there would be some demand from community stations for the infrastructure to be provided, and, as has been mentioned, the costs have fallen significantly. The cost to install such a service can be relatively low, particularly if there is a friendly owner of a tall building nearby, which means that a station does not need to go to the expense of building a mast.

We see the community radio sector flourishing on analogue without heavy taxpayer support or subsidy. I do not see any reason why the community digital radio infrastructure could not develop in a similar way. Allowing schemes to go ahead would give us an opportunity to see what happens in reality. It is possible—particularly if we move to all digital—that the Minister will decide to provide some sort of support to help community radio stations convert to DAB, but that is not the focus for today. Today is about creating an opportunity for

radio stations. Once those stations have taken up the opportunity, we can look at their experience and see where new services have started up. I cannot see why things will be any different in Torbay than they are in Bristol or Taunton. If the opportunity is there, people seem to want to take it up and move forward with it.

There may be some opportunities for groups such as councils and universities to consider providing the infrastructure to allow creativity to spawn in their area. Again, as I keep saying, this is about infrastructure and about providing an opportunity. It is for others then to use their sparks of entrepreneurship to take specific ideas forward. It is not for Parliament to legislate on whether there should be a community digital radio station in a particular area or whether a particular operator should be required to put up an aerial or a broadcasting system.

As I have said several times, the Bill does not require any station to move to DAB; nor does it require anyone who has a multiplex to provide space on it. There has been a debate about our entire radio system going digital, but that is not something I want to discuss today. Today is about merely providing an opportunity to go digital; it is not about forcing anyone.

This Bill does not seek to interfere with current national or local multiplexes. It is quite specific in clause 1. Paragraph 4 (b) clearly says that provision may include

“disqualifying persons who have an interest in a national or local radio multiplex”.

Any licence may also include provision to require services provided via the multiplex to be done on a non-commercial basis. Yet there is a small bit of flexibility to allow for unique circumstances where there might be a pressing case. I urge Members who have specific concerns to join the Bill Committee to look at the whole matter in depth. I know that there will be a debate about how exactly we get the law just right on this point.

Under paragraph 4(e), it is possible to reserve some space on a small-scale multiplex for particular services, which might be of benefit in more isolated communities or where there are limited opportunities to install new infrastructure. One point that may come up is that, in some locations—it certainly would not apply in central London—a small number of tall buildings may be the only realistic option for installing the infrastructure. It therefore might make sense in an individual location to have the requirement in the licence that access must be provided for another service. This is about not compelling people to do so on existing infrastructure; it is about ensuring that, for example, where there are four tall buildings in a particular area, one operator cannot make an agreement with the owner that they should be the only one who has the right to install broadcast equipment and then seek a licence, effectively excluding others.

The Bill aims to put a draft framework in place that makes it clear that Parliament intends to legislate without making the provisions so rigid that unique circumstances cannot be accommodated. As stated in the explanatory notes, the final details of the regulatory framework will be subject to a full consultation with the industry.

I recognise that this Bill has a targeted power to modify primary legislation by statutory instrument. However, in justification, there are already precedents in using such a power to create lighter-touch regulatory

[Kevin Foster]

regimes for smaller audio visual services. A similar approach was taken by Parliament to create such regimes by using secondary legislation for community radio—via the Community Radio Order 2004—and local television, with secondary legislation in 2012. This Bill builds on those precedents in strikingly similar circumstances. The power in this Bill will be used in such a deregulatory way and, as mentioned earlier, the Bill will not create additional burdens for existing multiplex operators. Finally, I can confirm that the power is exercisable only by affirmative order, ensuring scrutiny in both Houses before such modifications could come into force.

I am sure that the Minister will wish to set out in his speech similar points and to confirm that that is the intention of the Government, although I hope that Members will be reassured both by my comments and the affirmative order provisions. As I have said, the power builds on precedents in very similar areas of policy development. Therefore, it is appropriate to have it in this Bill.

In summary, this Bill creates opportunities for new creative talent to flourish, gives hundreds of community stations a practical and an affordable opportunity to go digital, and provides—I know that we will hear this from many Members who are about to speak—the chance for more communities to have a unique choice of radio stations that reflects the area in which they live. Not to give this Bill its Second Reading would not help any radio operator, would not protect any interest and would not see things develop in a better way. It would merely block the growth and development of community radio stations and restrict development in the industry in a way that we would find absolutely ridiculous in any other sphere. This is about supporting small community stations, giving that local opportunity and allowing broadcast radio to reflect the explosion of creativity that is taking place on the internet. The days of strictly regulating and controlling very small numbers of operations are gone, which is why I hope all Members will support giving this Bill its Second Reading today.

10.28 am

**Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on making such an informed speech and on giving so much of his time to multiple interventions from many hon. Members on the Government Benches. I am sorry and very surprised that there are no Back-Bench Members present on the Labour Benches.

**Oliver Colvile:** It is because they have resigned.

**Pauline Latham:** Resigned, yes.

Every constituency could be affected by this sensible Bill. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay for all his hard work and efforts to bring forward this debate on such an important subject.

**Jo Churchill:** Is my hon. Friend not surprised that there is not broader interest in this important matter across the House, given that in 2015 98% of all stations and 100% of all local stations contacted and had talks with their local MP?

**Pauline Latham:** It is disappointing, but of course there are never that many Members here on a Friday; traditionally, it is the day we spend in our constituencies—

**Mr Nuttall:** Parliament is sitting.

**Pauline Latham:** Would my hon. Friend like to intervene?

**Mr Nuttall:** I would just like my hon. Friend to reflect on the fact that Parliament is sitting. There is no such thing as a “constituency Friday.” As far as I am concerned, Members of Parliament, if at all possible, should be in Parliament when it is sitting.

**Pauline Latham:** I know that my hon. Friend is usually here on a Friday, and I have to say that I am guilty, as are many other Members, of normally spending Fridays in my constituency. However, I am delighted to be here today to support my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay.

I said at the beginning of my speech that my hon. Friend has brought forward a Bill on an important subject. Those words of praise are often said out of polite custom in this place, but on this occasion they could not be more deserved, as he actually slept in Parliament overnight in order to secure the opportunity to introduce the Bill, such was his passion. As he pointed out afterwards, the reality of sleeping in a royal palace is far less glamorous than it sounds. I hope for his sake that he has had a better night’s sleep before Second Reading than he did on that occasion. I do not know how he passed the hours while waiting to submit his Bill, but it would have been extremely apt if he had listened to a digital radio to keep him company.

As in so many sectors across the UK, digital has become hugely important for radio. In the third quarter of 2016, just under half of all radio listening—45.5%—was on a digital platform, and that figure will increase. The radio industry predicts that if current trends continue, the number will be 50% by the end of 2017—I think that is a fairly conservative view. Small-scale DAB—the kind of digital radio that the Bill deals with—is especially important. Industry data show that 60% of UK homes today have at least one DAB radio, and the DAB terrestrial platform accounts for about three quarters of all digital radio listening. These figures underline the growing importance of the area and make it more important than ever that small-scale digital radio becomes a viable option for as many stations as possible.

I recently listened to Radio Derby on the digital platform, and it does have a better signal than I used to get, so I am pleased that it has been able to move to that platform and continue on FM. Unfortunately, small radio stations currently face a major disadvantage when it comes to digital radio. At present, the costs and the licensing scheme are not conducive to allowing small-scale radio services access to the DAB radio network. As with anything, costs vary, but digital specialists estimate that the cost of carriage for a mono service on a non-London multiplex is between £3,500 and £5,000 per month. That could mean £60,000 a year. Needless to say, that is a pretty hefty sum for a small station, with the consequence that it is priced out of the market. Contrast that with Ofcom’s estimate that using small-scale DAB could allow stations to access the digital market from just £9,000. That is a huge difference, and it would make the market much more accessible for smaller stations.

Alongside cost, the current climate creates a number of other key problems for smaller stations. County-sized local DAB multiplexes exist and are used effectively by several stations, such as Radio Derby, which covers not only the county of Derbyshire but part of east Staffordshire. However, their large coverage area means that they are not suitable for smaller stations that want to transition to DAB but cannot do so. Even if local DAB multiplexes could be used in theory, stations encounter problems in practice as there is not always sufficient capacity for them to operate.

Providers are very aware of the fact that they face dwindling audience numbers and the fall in advertising revenue that comes with that as digital listening by default becomes the norm. Quite understandably, they want to change that. Ofcom trials have proved that there is major demand for change and that appropriate legislation would be followed up with action. In a research report from September 2016, Ofcom states that

“there is a significant level of demand from smaller radio stations for small scale DAB, and that a wider roll-out of additional small scale services into more geographic areas would be both technically possible and commercially sustainable”.

That statement was made after a trial in which 100 small commercial and community radio stations successfully broadcast on terrestrial DAB for the first time. Those stations came from a wide range of different backgrounds, from new entrants to established companies, which provides an even more compelling case that all small stations could make a success of using digital radio.

**Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): Community radio stations sometimes have dwindling audience numbers. Does my hon. Friend think that this might also be an opportunity for print media to broadcast from their news rooms? We know what pressure they are under as well.

**Pauline Latham:** I entirely agree. For instance, the *Derby Telegraph* is sadly losing its readership, despite being a good local paper. I do not think that the web is conducive to local newspapers, because they have to include so much local advertising, which intrudes on the reports. If they could also broadcast, that would produce more competition and help other local media to get in on the act.

**Oliver Colville:** Many local newspapers are now trying to move firmly towards much more activity online. Does my hon. Friend think that not only could a community licence be given, but that such content could appear on the internet too?

**Pauline Latham:** Yes, I am sure that that would be the case. I thank my hon. Friend for intervening at that point.

The compelling case is that all small stations could make a success of using digital radio. In fact, the initial trial was so successful that it was extended for two years. Alongside tests of viability and effectiveness done within the UK, the international use of small-scale DAB offers another indication of the benefits of the expansion of this new technology. It has been used successfully abroad, with stations using it on air in Switzerland and France.

Given the established track record, we can see that the Bill would be helpful. It would make a tangible difference for an estimated 450 stations that could take advantage of small-scale DAB. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay, and from interventions, that even hospital radio stations could get in on this and widen their listenership, which I think is incredibly important.

**Seema Kennedy:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again; she is being very generous. We have talked about hospital radio, but I want to mention radio in universities and colleges. Runshaw College, which you know very well, Mr Deputy Speaker, has a fantastic radio station that broadcasts in the college, but it has so many links with local businesses and community enterprises that it could take advantage of this new technology and the proposals in the Bill. Does my hon. Friend agree?

**Pauline Latham:** Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It could also be used as part of a degree to give students real live practice on radio, which they would not normally have. I am sure that the University of Derby would embrace that, as it already uses the local theatres to give students real live practice of producing and acting in plays so that they have a practical example when they go into the world of work. People working in local university radio would have real experience to draw on in interviews, which we all know, as employers, is incredibly important.

The Bill provides an opportunity to alter the current legislative framework for digital radio multiplex licensing, as set out in the Broadcasting Act 1996, to introduce a more appropriate, lighter-touch regulatory framework. Greater numbers of small radio stations could expand into a digital market to which they currently do not have access. I particularly commend how the proposed approach has adopted features of effective previous secondary legislation, such as the Community Radio Order 2004, that has successfully modified primary legislation by allowing for provisions of the 1996 Act to be modified rather than replaced. That slight but important distinction will not only make things simpler, but allow for the creation of a new licensing regime that will take account of the varying needs of smaller stations.

Although the use of small-scale DAB is a relatively novel form of technology, implementing this Bill fits into the Government's long-term radio strategy, published in 2014 in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's "Digital Radio Action Plan." The plan recognised that "radio is changing", and that the Government must respond by helping to facilitate a digital-friendly environment where 50% of all listening is digital. The paper also states that the transition to digital and the changes the Government make should always be "driven by the listener." To some extent, the change must also be driven by the concerns of radio station providers themselves, and it is clear from Ofcom trials that smaller stations really do want to access a digital market. We must not ignore their views.

As well as setting out the digital criteria, the paper stresses the major contribution that radio makes to the UK, outlining that 90% of the adult population consume in excess of 1 billion listening hours each week, which is a huge number. That allows them exposure to an endless variety of cultural topics and the chance to listen to

[Pauline Latham]

myriad fantastic music genres from acid jazz to zydeco—I have probably not pronounced that right. I must admit that I had to probe the internet rather thoroughly to find a musical genre beginning with z and it was rather difficult, but I was rewarded with the discovery of the wonderful Louisiana Creole blues that is zydeco.

The economic impact of the sector is highlighted by the digital plan, and the fact that this Bill can lead to economic growth and job creation cannot be dismissed. Having so many more digital stations will mean that young people—I presume that it will mainly be young people—can take up a valuable real-life experience and go on to bigger and better things in the larger broadcasting corporations, whether in the BBC or in commercial operations. That cannot be dismissed. The Bill would create many jobs. At the moment, the entire radio sector is worth an estimated £1.2 billion and employs 17,000 people. Ensuring that legislation that affects the sector is helpful and up to date is an important responsibility and one that should encourage us to vote in favour of the Bill. I am sure that the Minister will cover many of those points in his response.

I once again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay on introducing the Bill and urge the House to support its Second Reading. Let us make sure that his sleepless night was worth it.

10.44 am

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): It is a great pleasure, as always, to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on the very assured way in which he introduced the debate on quite a technical subject, which has the capacity to be quite dry but which he brought to life in an entertaining way while dealing with all the technical aspects in a confident manner.

I venture to suggest that this Bill is ideally suited for the private Members' Bill procedure. It does not seek to impose any cost on the taxpayer and deals with a relatively narrow area of the law, dealing with a problem that has arisen that could not really have been foreseen when the original legislation was drafted because of the developments in technology, the advances in software and the reduction in the price of the equipment, which I will come to. All those developments have left a gap in the legislation that the Bill seeks to fill.

**Wendy Morton:** Does my hon. Friend think that another opportunity for the provisions in this Bill would have been the Digital Economy Bill?

**Mr Nuttall:** It would seem that the nature of what is in this Bill could have been included in the Digital Economy Bill—maybe the Minister will explain why it was not when he addresses us—given that the matter undoubtedly needs to be addressed.

I rise to support the Bill and I have no wish to try to scupper it. I do have some concerns about the precise detail, which I will come to but, in broad principle I agree that the Bill is needed.

**Kevin Foster:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the bonus of this aspect of the law being dealt with via the private Members' Bill route, rather than having been

part of the Government's Digital Economy Bill, is that it makes clear that this Bill purely focuses on resolving the issue for community radio stations, rather than being linked to any wider changes in broadcasting or media regulation?

**Mr Nuttall:** My view is that the matter could have been dealt with, without any undue side effects, in the Digital Economy Bill. But we are where we are, and we now have this separate Bill.

The Bill is what we might politely call an enabling Bill. It will be of no benefit to anyone unless, once it becomes an Act and reaches the statute book, it is driven forward by the Minister, who I am sure will want to take advantage of the powers by making an order and doing something about it. The Bill will not help anybody, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay would agree.

**Kevin Foster:** It is an enabling Bill.

**Mr Nuttall:** It is. For it to be of any use at all to man or beast, the Minister and his team at the Department need to bring forward the appropriate order—as soon as possible, I hope, if this Bill reaches the statute book—to cover all the various aspects set out in clause 1. The Department will need to give those powers to Ofcom so that it can set about licensing new broadcasters, in order that they can enjoy what some of those who have taken part in the trials have already benefited from.

Basically, the Bill is about making it easier to broadcast digital radio. At the time the original Act was passed, digital radio was very new, and it was thought that it could be dealt with only on a large scale—a national or county-wide scale. However, since the Act was passed, it has become possible through advances in technology for smaller-scale multiplexes to operate and to provide opportunities for community radio stations and small-scale commercial stations to operate.

Incidentally, I should declare an interest at the outset, in that I am an avid user of my digital radio. In fact, I carry it with me everywhere—at this very moment, it is in my coat pocket—and I rarely go anywhere without it. [Interruption.] We are not allowed to use props, as the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) knows. My digital radio is a wonderful thing. In fact, it is my second one—the first one broke, having had an unfortunate incident.

**Rebecca Pow:** My hon. Friend has sparked my interest. Will he share with us what sort of radio stations he listens to and whether there are any local and community stations among his favourites?

**Mr Nuttall:** Well, I will be honest: it is usually Radio 4, Radio 5 or Radio 5 live sports extra, particularly when it is carrying the cricket commentary.

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):** Does my hon. Friend not think that many people also carry digital radios with them wherever they go not least so that, on a Friday, they can listen to his wonderful speeches in Parliament?

**Mr Nuttall:** I am sure that is not the case.

In her most recent intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) asked whether I use digital radio to listen to community radio stations. Of course, there are very few of those operating, but if the Bill reaches the statute book and is followed up by an order and some activity from commercial radio stations, it will enable me to have even more stations on my little digital radio than there are already—and there are already plenty on there from around the country.

Incidentally, I made sure that my last car, which I bought a few years ago, had a digital radio. I understand that virtually all cars now have digital radio as standard. At that time, it was an option, and people had to pay a little extra if they wanted it—I wanted it mainly because “Test Match Special” was no longer broadcast on long wave, and to reach it I had to get Radio 5 live sports extra.

**Kevin Foster:** Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the biggest changes that has happened since Parliament last substantively looked at broadcasting regulations is the spread of DAB radio into the car? Like him, I was one of the early adopters—I got a digital radio back in 2003, which I have at home. However, digital radio is now in most new cars coming on the market, which means there is a need to create an opportunity for community radio stations to be there, as well as the larger operations.

**Mr Nuttall:** My hon. Friend, the promoter of the Bill, is absolutely right: there has been an enormous increase in the use of digital radio over the past few years. While I fully understand the concerns of those who operate on the FM frequencies, radio seems to be moving inexorably—just as television did—towards a situation where it will operate in the digital space in years to come. As Members will be aware—it has been on the news this week, and it was touched on earlier—Norway is apparently planning over the next few months to become the first nation to move its radio stations on to an entirely digital platform.

These things will take many years, and I hope we proceed very cautiously, because I am conscious of the fact that lots of elderly people, in particular, do not have access to modern equipment. However, we managed it with television, and it would not be beyond the wit of man for us to manage it in due course with radio. However, we will need to proceed carefully and to make sure that all the technical research is properly done. To be fair, Ofcom is dealing with this, and if I have time I will touch briefly on the fact that the report it issued last year specifically refers to the feasibility of accommodating on DAB commercial and community stations that currently transmit on analogue.

One concern I do have about the Bill relates to clause 1(4)(c), which states that an order would

“require small-scale radio multiplex services to be provided on a non-commercial basis”.

I see no reason why we should try to restrict this to non-commercial services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay said in his opening speech, the cost of moving straight to the larger multiplexes could be prohibitive for a start-up operation. I want to see more competition and to see the costs of entry reduced, so that the barriers to entry are as low as possible. Restricting

things through a reference to non-commercial services only is not necessary, and if the Bill proceeds I will look at that further.

**Kevin Foster:** What I would emphasise—I am sure my hon. Friend looked at this in reading the Bill—is that the clause starts with the words:

“An order under this section may in particular”.

Although it alludes to the fact that there “may” be a requirement for services to be provided on a non-commercial basis, that is not a “must”.

**Mr Nuttall:** I accept that. In making that intervention, my hon. Friend draws attention to another point I was going to make about the Bill, which is that, in many ways, it raises more questions than it answers. Because of its use of words such as “may”, it does not make it clear what will actually happen. When we hear from my right hon. Friend the Minister, I hope he will give us more clarity about exactly how this will play out. There are competing interests, and I can understand that the commercial interests of the larger operators mean they will not want it to be made easier for new competitors to join the market, but that is no reason not to allow new entrants to the market, and more competition would be a good thing for the larger operators.

I particularly support the Bill because I want my area to be able to benefit from the possibility of having its own commercial or non-commercial radio station—a community station. There is, or has been in the past, something called Project 29 radio operating in Bury, and I appeared on it from time to time. It was a very small-scale operation, operating from the centre of Bury with a very small staff, who worked on a volunteer basis, and running community programmes. That sort of small-scale community radio station will be able to benefit if the Bill goes ahead and it is made easier for small operators to be given a digital licence, to operate with modern equipment, which, by definition, would be the latest available, and to broadcast over a relatively small area—smaller, for example, than the whole of Greater Manchester or the whole of Lancashire.

I am conscious of the fact that many Members want to give their time to this debate, so I do not want to extend my remarks unduly, but I do want to refer to the trials that were allowed last year by Ofcom. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay touched on this. Three different types of trial were allowed, covering different sorts of equipment at different levels of cost. I will not go into all the detail, but the cost of the equipment involved ranged from £9,000, to £17,000, to £19,000. Different licensees were given the different types of equipment to try it out and to see how efficiently it operated. The results are all set out in Ofcom’s report. It is a lengthy document that it would take some time to read all the way through, but it is worth while for those who are interested to study it, because it sets out the detail of the nature of the equipment and how successful it was.

More importantly, perhaps, the end of the report covers the technical scope for the wider roll-out of DAB. In essence, although we can solve the problem of the legislative framework and create a licensing regime, there is an underlying problem about the frequency blocks that DAB operates on. The bands are fixed, and there is not much we can do about that. At the moment,

[Mr Nuttall]

DAB transmitters in the UK use the VHS band 3 frequency blocks, which range from approximately 211 MHz to 229 MHz, known as blocks 10 to 13. Those frequencies provide the spectrum to support the existing three national DAB multiplexes and the 58 local commercial DAB multiplexes.

When Ofcom looked at the prospects for small-scale DAB trials, it was clear right from the outset that further spectrum would be required. Because DAB radio receivers can also tune into lower frequencies than those currently used in the UK, Ofcom examined the availability of frequencies below 211 MHz for use during the trials. It also carried out an initial study looking at whether it would be technically feasible to develop a future frequency plan for small-scale DAB that might provide an opportunity for small commercial and community stations, which currently transmit only on analogue radio, to be carried on DAB. This goes back to the argument about whether we can ever transfer everything on to DAB, because we need the frequencies available to be able to do so, not just the legislative framework. The study says that

“in most areas of the UK, it should be technically possible to develop a frequency plan for small scale DAB which might accommodate those stations”,

so the position is not completely clear-cut, even for Ofcom. It concludes:

“However much more detailed planning and optimisation work would be required to develop a frequency plan which could be implemented in practice.”

**David Morris:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the whole point of this Bill is to enable smaller multiplexes to be set up, creating the network across the country that Ofcom would like to see?

**Mr Nuttall:** Yes, I do agree—that is exactly what the Bill seeks to do. However, as I said, the Bill, of itself, will not achieve that—it will need to be followed up with action from the Department. I hope the Minister can assure the House that if this Bill reaches the statute book, his Department will act speedily in bringing forward the appropriate order to make use of it. I wish the Bill well as it proceeds and hope it receives a Second Reading.

11.6 am

**Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on bringing forward this Bill. He has worked particularly hard on it, not only in spending the night here with other hon. Members—[*Laughter.*] You know what I mean. He has done a lot of research, because this is quite a complicated Bill—at least, it touches on something technical. Often in this House, when those of who do not have an engineering or science background are discussing these matters, it feels as though we are analogue children in a digital age and we are always running to catch up. I am absolutely delighted to support this Bill, because through it we are, if not in the vanguard of technology, anticipating the future.

I have an admission to make: I am an absolute radio nut. There have been periods in my life, sometimes several years, when I have not had a television, but I

have always had a radio. I lived in Tehran for a few months in the early 2000s, and my only company—besides my family—was the BBC World Service. The only English voices I heard were through the means of short-wave radio. That was fantastic, but now I am a total convert to DAB. In true radio style, I want to give a shout-out to my favourite radio presenter, Graham Liver of BBC Radio Lancashire.

The transfer from FM and all the other frequencies to DAB has been somewhat controversial. We heard at the beginning of the week that Norway is going completely on to DAB, and that has caused some consternation in that country. We have to recognise that, as my hon. Friend said, this has nothing to do with switching off other frequencies. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) mentioned that there might be technical difficulties in doing that.

**Wendy Morton:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the switchover in Norway is an opportunity for us, as a country, to watch and learn from what it is doing as we take our radio forward into the future?

**Seema Kennedy:** That is an excellent point. Of course, we have huge geographical and demographic differences with Norway, but we should be watching and learning, and seeing what happens there—I completely agree.

**Oliver Colvile:** Is perhaps the reason Norway is moving away from any analogue form of radio that it does not broadcast “Test Match Special” on a regular basis?

**Seema Kennedy:** Probably, although I would not dare to make any comment on cricket to my hon. Friend.

**Jo Churchill:** The game of cricket provides the perfect example for our approach to this situation. We are quite happy to listen on the radio to a match that can take five days to take its course. Similarly, it is good that we are approaching the change from analogue to digital in a slow and measured way, and that we trial it first.

**Seema Kennedy:** There are so many cricketing metaphors that I could use, but I had better not. I agree with my hon. Friend, but there must be a balance. We have to do things in an evolutionary way and look at what other people are doing. However, in this House, we need to be alive to the possibilities that technology offers us and our constituents, particularly in this area, where a great barrier to entry exists.

In discussing the Bill, we have heard that the costs for small community radio are prohibitive. Different figures have been mentioned, but for a non-London multiplex service, the cost is about £3,500 per month. That is too high a figure for community radio stations to raise. There is also inadequate capacity. That barrier to entry prevents the opportunities that could be offered to businesses and communities. In a day and age when groups and entrepreneurs can set up from their laptops or mobile phones, this area seems at odds with what is happening in other spheres of life.

I want to focus on community radio. Some hon. Members have spoken about community radio stations in their constituencies, but others have said to me, “We don’t have one.” I am very lucky that South Ribble has a

radio station called Leyland Festival Radio. I pay tribute to two constituents, Keith Bradshaw and Rev. Phil Gough. As Mr Deputy Speaker knows, because his seat used to contain Leyland, the Leyland festival is the highlight of Leyland life. As hon. Members might be aware, Leyland has had a long history of vehicle making, including trucks, tanks, buses and the Popemobile. All those things are now stored in the vehicle museum in Leyland. In a weekend in June, there is a huge festival at which there is a parade of classic vehicles and floats. It is a joyous occasion where we can make the most of what is fantastic about Leyland and its heritage. I remember going to watch the Leyland festival as a little girl; now I have the great honour and pleasure of judging the floats.

Back in 2015, a group of local people came together who wanted to celebrate the occasion. They wanted to create a moment and a focus for the civic pride involved. This happened between April and June 2015, when I was the candidate and then had the great honour of becoming the Member of Parliament. It culminated in three days of hyper-local community radio broadcasting on FM in June 2015.

The aims of Leyland Festival Radio were to enhance community identity not only in Leyland, but in Farington and Moss Side. Other hon. Members might never have heard of Farington and Moss Side, but they identify very strongly with Leyland. This is the point of the Bill. We have county-wide multiplexes—as I have mentioned, I am a huge fan of Radio Lancashire—but there are sometimes stories up in Lancaster or in other parts with which I cannot identify. The hyper-local networks therefore mean a lot to people.

Leyland Festival Radio wanted to have community involvement. Its inception brought together local people across generations and backgrounds. That is the key point that I want to make in this speech. The radio station has developed transferable skills. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) said, community radio is a training ground for people. Leyland Festival Radio has developed transferable skills such as production, presenting and marketing. Structured training was offered, with everybody getting a one-day introduction to radio course, but they also learned from each other because there were young people, old people and people from all different backgrounds. There was a lot of peer-to-peer learning.

The radio station was a partnership. There was money from South Ribble Borough Council and it involved Runshaw College, which has its own excellent radio station, as I have mentioned, and local community groups. It presented an opportunity for businesses to talk and for artists and performers to get proper on-air broadcasting experience. My first ever radio experience was as a candidate in the 2010 election, when I stood in Ashton-under-Lyne. I was interviewed by Tameside Radio. I am sure the only people listening were my agent and my grandma, but it was still a great experience for me. Such interview opportunities are valuable. A fantastic sense of community cohesion grew up around Leyland Festival Radio.

**Wendy Morton:** I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way this morning. She is touching on the value of community radio. I know that she is a great advocate for tackling isolation. Does she agree that

community radio is an excellent means of reaching into the homes of some of the most vulnerable and isolated members of our communities?

**Seema Kennedy:** My hon. Friend anticipates the next part of my speech. It is almost as though she had seen it in the Tea Room, which she did not. I am glad that the points I am making in this place about isolation and loneliness are getting through. That is exactly the point I will move on to next.

To conclude my remarks on the excellent work of Leyland Festival Radio, although it continues to broadcast breakfast programmes presented by Keith Bradshaw, it is very limited. The aim of the group is to be a community radio station for Leyland, Farington and Moss Side.

To move on to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), I believe that hyper-local radio has a role in combating loneliness and isolation. Members will know, because I have raised it before, that the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and I are carrying on the work started by our late colleague, Jo Cox, and that the Jo Cox loneliness commission will be launched in Speaker's House on Tuesday 31 January. I know that other hon. Members will join us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North said that he always has his radio with him. We recognise that radio is a very intimate medium; it really can speak to us. I know that from friends and family members who have suffered from loneliness. Indeed, when I have been very lonely in my life, I have put the radio on. It makes us feel safer and as though we have somebody there.

**Rebecca Pow:** My hon. Friend is making some valid points about radio acting as a friend. I know that many elderly people turn to their radio when they wake up in the night, particularly the World Service. Many local radio stations have regular callers to their phone-ins, many of whom are lonely people who are gaining relationship building from the radio. Radio stations serve an excellent purpose in that regard.

**Seema Kennedy:** My hon. Friend, with her history in broadcasting, knows about this only too well. Local radio plays such an important role in the community. Hyper-local radio already performs that role, but the Bill will allow a flourishing of hyper-local radio.

Mediums of technology are useful in tackling loneliness and isolation only if they lead to face-to-face contact. As human beings, we need the contact of others just as much as we need food and water. That is the key point. We all talk about Facebook and Twitter, but radio, too, has to be able to connect people. When a radio station broadcasts to a few thousand people, those who are at risk of being lonely and isolated—the old, the infirm, people suffering from mental health problems and people who are disabled who cannot travel very far—will hear about community events and businesses close to them and go to them, which is the great advantage.

There is much to applaud in the Bill, but I have some questions to which I hope the Minister will respond. How do radio multiplex services work in practice? My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay mentioned attachment to high buildings, but many of us do not have them in our constituencies or anywhere around. Forgive me if I

[Seema Kennedy]

have missed something, but whenever anything new is put up, there are worries about what it looks like, so an example would be helpful.

The Bill has great potential to expand community radio, which plays such an important role in helping communities to build and foster good relationships. As I have mentioned, radio stations such as Leyland Festival Radio do sterling work in our communities. I hope the Bill gives it the opportunity to fulfil its dream of being a full-time radio station in South Ribble.

11.21 am

**David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on securing this spot in the Chamber. I have to declare an interest: I used to write songs in the 1980s, which always cheers up my hon. Friends.

**Oliver Colvile:** Does my hon. Friend still get royalties?

**David Morris:** That would be telling.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. If Mr Colvile is to ask a question like that, he has to name the tune he is referring to.

**David Morris:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Digital radio affects areas of the UK that should have been honed in on a very long time ago. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay earlier, when the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) was Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, his ambition was to have digital radio take over from analogue. My hon. Friend stated that his proposal would involve an optional request from the broadcasting industry, but it must be taken seriously.

We have a few good radio stations in the Morecambe and Lunesdale area, including The Bay radio. Its website states that there is no DAB solution for it currently, but it covers low-lying areas in my constituency and leading all the way up into the Lake district, touching on the Scottish borders. It says on its website that people who want to find the coverage area can click on the application. The option that my hon. Friend has put forward for the broadcasting industry and for the House to consider would help my local radio station immeasurably, and help the people in those communities to keep in touch with what is going on around them.

About 12 months ago, we were hit with the most horrendous floods we have ever seen. There was a power cut, and the only lifeline in the whole area to find out what was going on was The Bay, our local radio station.

**Jo Churchill:** Today of all days, I should like to reiterate how important that last point is. On the east coast, particularly in Suffolk, we have the challenge of the possibility of flooding. As my hon. Friend says, and as my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) has often said, when flooding comes there is not much warning. Enabling community radio stations to give more information is a good thing.

**David Morris:** I agree with my hon. Friend and thank her for that helpful intervention, which leads me to what happened with The Bay radio. It was flooded and ran the whole operation off a laptop from the first floor of a building. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay said in his speech that laptops come in very handy for that kind of broadcasting, but one problem is that costs can be prohibitive, which was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall). It is costly to get licences, but with demand, costs are driven down.

I hope the Minister looks on the proposal favourably. We must go forward and progress—if we do not, it will cost us. The radio industry has had certain problems over the years, not least having such a measure to help out in the first place. If The Bay had had DAB, people in the areas to which it broadcasts would have been better informed about what was going on within their localities. Not just my constituency was affected; Lancaster and constituencies further up towards Carlisle were also affected. During the floods, I met the then Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). Not many people knew that he was running around the vicinity trying to sort out the problems and that he was working very hard, purely and simply because communications broke down in the area. The power cut in my vicinity lasted nearly two days.

Radio is a lifeline for communities. We should enhance the industry and not curtail it. The measure proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay is very welcome indeed. Larger broadcasters such as the BBC would welcome it because it would drive their costs down. I am not being more favourable to one radio station than to others. I have not mentioned them all, but I must plug Beyond Radio—I am sure it will use it in its jingles.

We must look at this in a sensible and grown-up manner. DAB is the way forward and the future. It was for the right and collegiate reasons that the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leigh, wanted to push the project forward, but we have yet to see that.

**Kevin Foster:** My hon. Friend refers to what the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) suggested when he was the Cabinet Minister responsible. The Bill is not about that specifically, but does my hon. Friend agree that, if ever there is a move to digital, we need to ensure that all three layers of radio are represented—national, commercial and community—on the digital spectrum?

**David Morris:** I totally agree. I pay homage to my hon. Friend for his research on the Bill and for speaking for one hour, largely without notes. I was in the music industry once, and it shames me to say that I did not know half of what my hon. Friend told us. His Bill would be a big help to the industry as a whole and I am sure that it will welcome it.

11.28 am

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris). It is amazing what we

discover about our colleagues during such debates. I am intrigued to find out some of the songs he wrote. Perhaps he could share that with us later.

Having spent very much of my life as a broadcaster and journalist, with many years' involvement in radio stations of every kind, from community to local, commercial and BBC national radio, I am delighted to support my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) in introducing the Bill. I congratulate him on all his work in introducing the Bill, in particular on the very clear case he has made today. He has made it very clear even for those of us who do not understand very much about the technicalities.

I reiterate the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham). It is disappointing that the Opposition Benches are so empty, particularly the Scottish National party Benches, because the Bill will help the very remote areas where it is difficult to receive a signal. *[Interruption.]* There are two Welsh MPs on the Labour Front Bench. The Welsh are well-represented, but the House gets my point.

I am a very keen supporter of local media, including our local newspapers. I am particularly keen to support local radio stations, which are targeted by the Bill. Anything that can be done to facilitate them must be applauded. Like my hon. Friends the Members for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) and for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), I am a fanatical radio nut. I literally go everywhere with my radio. In our house in Taunton Deane, we have a radio in almost every room and we go from one room to the other switching them on. Members might think that that is a bit sad, but we cannot live without them.

**Oliver Colvile:** I confess that I drive to and from my constituency for two reasons: I want to listen to the cricket over the course of the summer; and, more importantly, I want to listen to "The Archers".

**Rebecca Pow:** I welcome that intervention, because I am a complete Radio 4 addict. I listen to the World Service when I wake up in the middle of the night and I could not be without my radio because of "The Archers". Sometimes I listen to the same episode three times: at lunchtime, the repeat in the evening and the long episode on Sunday. That is quite sad, but I am never quite sure what episodes I have missed! I am also a very big local radio fan. I do exactly as my hon. Friend does: as soon as I get back to my constituency in my car, I switch on the local radio so I can catch up instantly with the local news.

The way we listen to radio is changing. Television, which I spent many years working in, has already undergone a big transformation. Radio is now going through a similar change. Almost half of all radio listeners use a digital platform and approximately 60% of UK homes have at least one DAB radio. For Christmas a few years ago, my husband gave me a DAB radio for the bedroom. This year's Christmas present from my husband was a DAB system for the kitchen to replace the old system—I am not sure whether the new system was for him or for me. It has taken me quite a long time to work it properly, not because it is not a good radio, but because I now have to put my glasses on to be able to see the touch-button thing—it is terribly sophisticated, and black and beautiful.

As we have heard today, DAB systems are becoming increasingly important as features in cars, which is where I listen to my local radio. For the uninitiated, I must clarify that when I talk about DABs I am not talking about fish. As a mum with three children, we eat a lot of dabs. They are terrific fish to feed children with and they are very, very cheap, but we are not talking about dabs today; we are definitely talking about radio. I will come on to explain why, as has been mentioned by many colleagues, small radio stations are so vital and why the Bill will really help them to have a better future, particularly the under-resourced and underfunded stations.

Local stations offer highly localised news that we do not receive from national stations, or from regional stations now that they are covering bigger and bigger areas. The Government have made the welcome announcement that Taunton will be granted garden town status. Local radio has provided a terrific place for the public to discuss what they think about that. What better place to carry out a poll on which day we should choose for Somerset Day? There was a lot of audience interaction across all the stations on that issue. They are also well placed to promote the local initiative Art Taunton, of which I am a patron, which encourages culture and art in Taunton. There are many great things about Taunton, but we need to up our offer of art and culture. Perhaps the Minister could pay a visit to talk about Art Taunton and maybe even do an interview on local radio.

Local radio is important for all those things, but it is very important, as my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale said, in times of crisis. The local and community radio stations were absolutely invaluable in 2013-14, when huge areas of Somerset were flooded. Local radio was the linchpin in transmitting the news, with people phoning in and volunteering to help. Local radio played a key role in co-ordinating where people should go and what they should do. Local radio is also very important in transferring information when it snows. All the local schools use local radio to tell people whether they will be open or closed, and everybody turns on their radio to find out. It is an invaluable service.

If we think of local radio, we cannot help but think of travel reports. Local radio is where all hon. Members get their travel information. It is where I find out what is happening on East Reach in Taunton during rush hour and whether to use the busiest road in Somerset, the A358, which goes right through my constituency. If one hears that that road is log-jammed, one avoids it, so it is a marvellous service. I hope we will soon never have to hear such messages on our local radios again, because this week the Secretary of State for Transport reiterated his commitment to upgrading the A358.

I would like to mention a couple of the excellent community radio stations in my constituency. Tone FM, based in Taunton, is very good for traffic news. It has an audience of 22,000 people, which is incredible for a town community station. It has great live broadcasts, despite operating on a shoestring. I used to do a regular gardening slot. We had a lot of fun, but I hope we also managed to impart a lot of knowledge. I would take something in and invite the audience to guess what we were talking about. One time I took in a giant elephant garlic, a terrific thing to see and to use in cooking. Similarly, much guesswork went on over my Jerusalem

[Rebecca Pow]

artichokes. I now regularly go in to provide updates on what is going on in Parliament. We have an awful lot of interaction and many people listen to the podcasts. It is a great way to disseminate information. I applaud all the people who work for Tone FM, in particular Darren Cullum who gives up hours of his time. The station could not run without them.

Another excellent community station is 10Radio, based in Wiveliscombe on the far western outreaches of my constituency.

**Seema Kennedy:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill could enable these hyper-local radio stations to be a substitute for the Facebook community pages that have grown up in many of our villages and rural areas but are not very accessible for older people? They might be the perfect substitute for them or for declining local newspapers?

**Rebecca Pow:** That is a valid point. The Wiveliscombe station transmits to only 10 parishes, but it provides an invaluable service with local news and gossip. I much enjoyed going there just before Christmas to give an update on my year in Parliament: the station did a long interview with me, and then put it on as a podcast.

10Radio is run entirely by volunteers. I congratulate Derek Skeavington, the chair, Anton Matthews, who is the “techie brains”—the technical side of these services must be run by someone—and Barry Summers, who is the “glue” and has a great touch with all the people who come to be interviewed. However, I particularly want to mention Josef Tucker. Josef is a wheelchair user who speaks through a computer-controlled gadget controlled by his eye movements, and he presents a programme on 10Radio: “Joes-Show”. It is all about musicals, and it is absolutely brilliant. It is a fantastic platform on which Joe can engage with people and people can engage with Joe. That is one of the great things about community radio stations.

It was, in fact, on a very small local commercial radio station called Radio West that I started. Many people from pirate radio had gone to work there, such as Johnnie Walker, who is now on Radio 2. I had left university, and went to the station to gain work experience. I then went back and worked there for a whole year, pretty much unpaid: I had three other jobs on the go to fund myself. I devised a programme called “Country Connections”, which I broadcast live on Sunday mornings at 7 am. It ruined all my Saturday nights, because obviously I could not over-imbibe.

I had to drive home, and I had to drive all the way to Bristol early in the morning to broadcast the show to the whole city, although I was sure that no one was actually listening to it, because it was so early and because people in Bristol are a very urban audience. Nevertheless, that was a fantastic grounding. I learnt all my craft there—editing, producing and directing. I am certain that, without that experience, I would never have gone on eventually to produce “Farming Today” on Radio 4. Small local community stations are still offering young people that opportunity, and I urge them to take it because it is a fantastic grounding. The more we can do to help those services to operate, to remain in existence and, indeed, to expand, the better, and I think the Bill will ensure that that happens.

Tone FM and 10Radio are not on DAB platforms, both because the cost would be too high and because there is often not enough capacity available to such stations on DAB multiplexes. BBC Somerset, which is a bigger station, is on one of the larger multiplexes, and I must say that it does excellent work in helping many of the community stations. That is to be applauded. The smaller local stations are well aware that audiences are moving over to digital and have told me that they would welcome the opportunity to broadcast on a digital basis as long as that was practicable and affordable. 10Radio would benefit particularly, because the area is very hilly and it has difficulty with its FM signal.

I welcome the work being done by Ofcom, especially the 10 technical field trials that have been run over the last two years and which have examined the viability of small-scale DAB multiplexes. I believe that they have gone very well, having demonstrated that a software-based approach can be workable. The nearest trial to Taunton Deane was based in Bristol and carried out by The Breeze, which broadcasts from my constituency. Across the 10 trial areas, nearly 70 unique radio stations are now being carried, most of which are new DABs. I believe that a great deal of interesting, innovative work went on during the trials, and that lessons can be passed on and learned. Exciting opportunities have opened up. It has been proved that they could work, and I hope that the Bill will facilitate some of them.

I am delighted to support a Bill that will allow Ofcom flexibility in the servicing of small-scale radio stations with multiplex licences in a much simpler and more straightforward manner. That can only benefit small local radio stations and help them to do their great community work, and the community will also benefit hugely. Let me emphasise to the Minister that if the Bill is passed, the opportunities could be endless. Perhaps I could even start up Pow Radio from my garden shed. Who knows?

I welcome the Bill, and wish it the best of luck.

11.33 am

**Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I have not yet listened to the omnibus edition of “The Archers”, although I have tried quite hard. I look forward to hearing it on Sunday. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on an excellent Bill, which I shall be delighted to support later should it be pressed to a vote.

I must declare an interest. When my father left the Navy, he immediately became head of outside broadcasting at Rediffusion Television, the forerunner of ITV. Moreover, as many Members may know, my brother is the cricket correspondent at Sky Television, and before that—some while ago—he was a newsreader on Radio 4. Reputedly, he went on air at 1 pm one Saturday and said, “BBC radio news at one o’ clock. A Russian submarine has been found south-east of Swindon.” It should have been Sweden, but it turned out to be Swindon instead. It was one of those things.

I must make a confession. In the 1980s, I was the Conservative party agent in the London borough of Merton. I worked for a woman called Angela Rumbold, a Minister at the Department of Education who was my great mentor. She later went to the Home Office. Before she became a Minister, however, she was very much

involved in a campaign connected with an organisation called Radio Jackie. Radio Jackie was a pirate radio station which initially broadcast on Sundays, and then began to broadcast on other days. At the time, there was a real sense that the Department of Trade and Industry did not want more radio stations than were being proposed. Provision was very limited: there was the BBC, and I think that by that time Capital Radio had come on board as well.

The issue was really important then, and today feels a bit like Groundhog Day to me. There were times when the DTI was so stringent that it decided to try to raid some of the pirate radio stations, and it actually succeeded in raiding Radio Jackie, which was owned by Tony Collis. My governor asked me to make sure that he was aware that the equipment could be taken away. We have moved on an awfully long way since then. The advent of digital radio enables us to provide a better service, and, more important, a greater service that provides more choice, and I believe that the Bill will make that possible.

I pay tribute, obviously, to my local BBC radio station, Radio Devon, and the wonderful Gordon Sparks, who unfortunately has not been commentating much on Plymouth Argyle, who, as Members may know, ended up drawing against Liverpool. We look forward very much to seeing what happens on Tuesday, when the replay will take place at Home Park. I understand that the tickets have been selling incredibly well, and that the sales could add £1 million to Plymouth Argyle's exchequer.

I also pay tribute to Simon Bates, who has just left Radio Devon. Every time he interviewed me, he wanted to talk about my great campaign for hedgehogs to become a protected species, and I am delighted that he did. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] One would not want to miss an opportunity to mention that during an informal debate of this nature. Sadly, Simon Bates has decided to stand down, but I pay great tribute to him; it was a delight to be interviewed by him, and I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

I must pay tribute to Radio Plymouth, which is probably the best example of a local community radio station in the city as a whole, and covers a series of issues. One of the great things about community radio is that it can cover specific community events. In 2020, Plymouth will be celebrating Mayflower 400. The Mayflower left Plymouth after a journey into Torbay and other places, and those on board went on to found the American colonies. We need to provide good community coverage of the commemoration of that event, so that people can become engaged with it.

We all know that at the time of Ascot or Wimbledon, for example, specific radio stations are set up to cover those events. These are really useful opportunities for local communities to promote their activities and ensure that the people in those communities become engaged with them. Indeed, if these ventures are successful, they could become another version of the Liberal Democrats' "Focus" leaflets or, for that matter, our "In Touch" leaflets.

I am delighted to see the Minister for Digital and Culture, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), in his place today. He is a great cricket fan—he has played cricket with me, which was great fun. That was in India, where I took the opening bat's wicket, much to everybody's surprise. We ended up having a great time. I know that Newmarket is

in his constituency, which holds big racing events. There are specific ways in which we could do this, including covering specific campaign issues. I am also aware that there are a number of community websites, such as SW19, which I know about from the days when I was taking a historical interest in what happens in Merton. People write into those websites regularly and put comments on them about the local community activities. That, too, is important.

I have one question to ask of the Minister. I am acutely aware that the Bill is about infrastructure rather than about some of the other details, but when the provisions are being developed, could he ensure that the licences will be affordable to local communities? There would be nothing worse than if these new arrangements were prohibitively expensive and the local communities could not afford to set up their own stations.

**Kevin Foster:** I hope that my hon. Friend will be reassured to hear that, when Ofcom carried out its trials, many small operations did get going. The purpose of my Bill is to enable such arrangements to be set up on a more permanent basis across the country. The cost of the current multiplexes clearly excludes any community operations.

**Oliver Colvile:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

It is important that we develop an infrastructure that is not too expensive for local communities. Before I was elected to this place, I did some work on behalf of one of the mobile phone operators, and I am aware that we still need additional infrastructure for those services too. I know from travelling from Paddington down to Plymouth on the train that we still need much better mobile phone coverage. I cannot get on to the internet or even take telephone calls half the time, because the mobile phone coverage is not particularly good. But why should not local communities be able to put their stuff on to the mobile phone mast network? That is also an important consideration.

Will the Minister also give us an assurance that community radio stations will not be abused by other political parties and that they will comply with the Representation of the People Act in providing balance, especially during election campaigns? I would be very nervous about the possibility of biased reporting at such times. I personally do not think that the BBC is particularly biased, and it is important that we do not give an opportunity to other people, who do not necessarily agree with everything we say, to use community radio against us in a party political manner.

Thank you very much indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker. This has been a pleasure and a delight. It has been fantastically informal debate with some entertainment, some of which I suspect I have provided myself.

11.54 am

**Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con):** It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile). I should also like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on securing this debate on his Bill today. This is obviously an issue of great importance to those of us here in the Chamber and, I hope, to many other

[Maggie Throup]

Members as well. I should also like to add my name to the list of people who are fans of “The Archers”. I, too, have been known to listen to each episode three times, although I must put on record the fact that I no longer have time to do that.

**Oliver Colvile:** Is my hon. Friend aware of a wonderful organisation called Archers Anarchists, whose members believe that “The Archers” is not so much a soap opera as a fly-on-the-wall documentary? Among its activities is the annual Sammy the Cat lecture.

**Maggie Throup:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was not aware of that, but I am not surprised.

The issue that we are discussing today is of great importance to my constituents, especially those who live in the southern part of my constituency. I represent the constituency of Erewash, which has a community radio station called—not surprisingly—Erewash Sound. What is surprising, however, is that not every resident of my constituency can tune in to the station.

The Erewash Sound Community Interest Company was granted a five-year community radio licence in April 2008 and began its full service on 96.8 FM on Saturday 6 March 2010 from studios in what was an old school in Ilkeston. It is important to understand that it is a community interest company, which is a not-for-profit organisation. It is run by volunteers for the benefit of the people of the borough of Erewash. The running costs are covered by the sale of advertising, by sponsorship and, when the company can secure it, by grants, donations and fundraising.

Community radio across the country faces certain issues that continually affect their sustainability, and we are talking today about one way in which we could improve the sustainability of community radio operators. I am led to believe that the Community Radio Order 2004 places restrictions on community radio. Those include limiting broadcast power levels to quite low levels and stipulating that community radio stations can accredit only up to 50% of their total revenues to advertising and sponsorship. Indeed, some local radio stations cannot even sell any advertising or receive any sponsorship; they have to get their money from elsewhere.

Erewash Sound is currently restricted by the so-called 50% rule, but it has even greater problems. It was allocated a power allocation of just 25 W on 96.8 FM. That is just one point away from transmitters in Ashbourne to the west and Grantham to the east that broadcast commercial radio stations on 96.7 FM, making it difficult to separate the stations.

The 96.8 frequency is also used by BBC Radio Wales’s Welsh language service, which has a reported 125 kW of power, going up to 250 kW in some parts, and the transmitter is located in south Wales. Since its launch, Erewash Sound has suffered spurious and intermittent interference from the BBC transmitter, the effects of which can be severe, interrupting or even obliterating Erewash Sound’s transmissions in some parts of the borough. I am sure that people do not mind listening to the Welsh language programme, but I am afraid that not many people in Erewash will be able to understand what is being said. The problem is about differentiation

and people being unable to listen to the local radio station. I understand from the operators that the effects are worse in fine weather—I reassure hon. Members that we have lots of fine weather in Erewash.

When Erewash Sound challenged Ofcom over the frequency allocated, it was told that 96.8 FM was the best frequency it could offer, which is really quite poor. Erewash Sound was also informed that 25 W was the usual power level allocated to community radio, yet there is evidence that other community radio stations have been allocated 50 W—double the power—or even 100 W. The problems are starting to build up. Low power and interference from the BBC transmitter result in over half my constituents being prevented from tuning in to Erewash Sound. Residents in Long Eaton struggle to tune in, and the problem is worst in the southern part of the area. Residents in Stanton by Dale, a village on a hill between Ilkeston and Long Eaton, can tune in, but people living beyond the hill are unable to. The low power and the bandwidth are restricting the transmission of this fantastic local community radio station. However, that does not prevent Erewash Sound from promoting the station and supporting residents in the south of the borough, even though they cannot hear it. The station lives in hope that things will change one day—hopefully as a result of this Bill—and that everyone in Erewash will be able to hear what Erewash Sound has to play. The outcome of today’s debate will determine whether all my constituents are able to enjoy the sounds of Erewash Sound.

I want to describe how Erewash Sound contributes to the community right across Erewash. In the summer months, Erewash Sound can be found at the fairs and carnivals in the two major towns of Ilkeston and Long Eaton. Erewash Sound provides outside broadcast facilities at the League of Friends of Ilkeston Community Hospital summer fair and the Ilkeston and Long Eaton carnivals. In fact, last summer I was invited to judge the floats at Long Eaton carnival alongside one of the presenters from Erewash Sound. I was so relieved to have a fellow judge, because I did not want to upset anybody when judging such fantastic floats that people had put a lot of effort into. He blamed me for the ones that did not win and I blamed him for the ones that did not win—it was a dual-purpose approach. Erewash Sound also actively supports the local Treetops hospice, including allowing the hospice’s business club to meet on its premises so that people can see what the radio station involves. It is really trying to reach out. Other hon. Members have already alluded to the importance of community radio as a training ground for budding presenters, and Erewash Sound has an academy that is open to local people regardless of age or experience.

It is completely wrong that while Erewash Sound supports my entire constituency, a great number of constituents cannot enjoy the pleasures of our local community radio station. The broadcasting gets off to a lively start every day with the breakfast show, hosted by Paul Stacey—my fellow judge at Long Eaton carnival. Next up is “Morning Plus” with David Allen, who will still be broadcasting now as he goes from 9.30 am to 1 pm. On a recent visit to the station, I had the pleasure of sitting in with and being interviewed by David live on air. We had a really good chat and a phone-in—the radio station is really interactive. David’s show finishes at 1 pm and is followed by “The Afternoon Show”,

“Homeward Bound”, “The Alternative Show” and then “The Late Show”. For the insomniacs among us, the “Night Owls” show provides non-stop music throughout the night, but I always try not to listen to it because I like my night’s sleep.

Many members of the public in Long Eaton, and in the part of the constituency that cannot receive the community radio station, have told Erewash Sound directly that they really want to listen to the radio station. They want the proposed changes to be made so that they can tune in.

In my maiden speech back in July 2015, I spoke about how people in Ilkeston think that the residents of Long Eaton get everything and how the people in Long Eaton think that the people in Ilkeston get everything. Well, I usually say that they are wrong, because both towns get everything, but in this case Long Eaton residents are right—they do not get Erewash Sound. It does nothing to bust the myth when a community radio station called Erewash Sound cannot be heard in Long Eaton. In fact, a major part of the original bid for the community radio station back in the early 2000s was based on the premise that it would help to bring the two towns together, yet technology has so far stopped it doing that. The low wattage and the constituency’s topography have got in the way.

The Bill would allow an affordable DAB licence that is accessible to community radio stations such as Erewash Sound. My discussions with Ofcom have resulted in my reaching the conclusion that an affordable DAB licence is the only option available for Erewash Sound to be able to fulfil its goal of bringing together and broadcasting to my whole constituency. I support the Bill and hope it completes its next stages without delay so that Long Eaton can enjoy the delights of Erewash Sound.

I finish by thanking everyone at Erewash Sound for providing such great entertainment and for supporting the whole community through its community action, even though it does not broadcast throughout the whole constituency. Erewash Sound does a fantastic job, and it is all voluntary. I am sure that people in Long Eaton want the Bill to be passed as quickly as possible so that they can enjoy the same benefits as Ilkeston.

12.7 pm

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who talked with so much passion about her local radio station. She is a good advocate for all things in her constituency.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on presenting the Bill. I will shed a little light on his hard work and determination in pursuing a slot for this important Bill. Reference has been made to the sleepover at the House of Commons to secure Bill slots, a well-known practice to those of us who are determined to try our best to get legislation on the statute book. All I will say is that a number of us were there that night, and there was no DAB radio to entertain us, but we certainly had the “Bong! Bong!” of Big Ben chiming throughout the night. I leave it at that.

The Bill is techy in parts, but it is very important and much needed. It will create a lighter-touch licensing regime for the new small-scale radio multiplex services

that have come out of the Ofcom small-scale DAB trial. It was pleasing to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) refer to the word “dab”, and during my research I sought confirmation that we are talking about DAB—digital audio broadcasting—and not the viral dance in which a person leans into their elbow as if they are sneezing. Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to know that I will not be doing any dabbing in the Chamber today.

Let me get back to the more serious aspects of the Bill. About 250 community radio stations and 200 smaller commercial stations are currently transmitting on FM and do not have the opportunity to broadcast on digital radio. Near my constituency, we have Ambur Radio in Walsall and a number of local radio stations in the Birmingham and west midlands area. I hope that if the Bill proceeds through this place and gets on to the statute book, more community stations and more local stations will be encouraged to start up.

There are two reasons why such stations do not have the opportunity to broadcast, the first of which is the insufficient capacity available on local DAB multiplexes. As we have heard, a multiplex is a way of broadcasting digital radio, whereby a number of DAB radio stations are bundled together to be transmitted as digital data on a single frequency in a geographical area. That is a much more efficient way of transmitting stations than FM, AM and other analogue methods. The second reason is the prohibitive costs of broadcasting on these existing DAB networks. DAB broadcasting is currently transmitted via three national multiplexes, Digital One, Sound Digital and the BBC’s national DAB service, with an additional 58 local commercial DAB multiplexes covering county-sized areas, but the cost of broadcasting on such a multiplex is quite large. These multiplexes have a limited capacity and can carry only a certain number of stations, meaning that the biggest county or countrywide stations can afford to broadcast, whereas smaller community stations, which serve a much smaller area, are simply priced out of broadcasting on the multiplex.

We have heard a lot today about Ofcom’s work and the trials it has been doing. This Bill seeks to address the issue of capacity by enabling Ofcom to modify the various procedures, provisions and conditions that are attached to the award of radio multiplex licences so that more local and community stations can be broadcast on small-scale DAB multiplexes. Surely that must be a good thing for all Members and all of our constituents.

For several years now, the Government have been discussing the digital radio switchover, and I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay refer to that in his speech. Much like the digital television switchover in 2012, the digital radio switchover will see broadcasts moving from the current analogue platform to a digital one. For that to happen, however, criteria would need to be met before starting any process of digital switchover. I was therefore pleased to hear him assure us that the Bill is all about choice and opportunity.

**Kevin Foster:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the focus here is on giving an option for community stations to go on DAB—nobody is going to be forced to go off FM? I am happy again to give the reassurance that the Bill is about giving an option for the third tier of radio, community radio, to go on to DAB if it wishes to do so.

[Kevin Foster]

Nothing in the Bill would force those wishing to stay on the current analogue transmissions to move away from them.

**Wendy Morton:** I am grateful again to my hon. Friend for giving us all that welcome reassurance.

There are many reasons why DAB and the digital switchover is important—the first, and most essential to this Bill, is choice. My hon. Friend has just reassured us again on that. The variety and quantity of stations available is the main motivation for listeners to use DAB. A huge number of stations are available, and we have heard many examples given this morning. These range from stations that play jazz music non-stop all day, children's stations and religious stations through to those that play only heavy metal—I have not listened to any of those. The FM spectrum has only limited space and is currently very crowded. DAB provides a greater space, meaning more stations and therefore more choice for consumers and more space for local communities.

Broadcasters are currently paying double transition fees on FM and DAB, as they broadcast the same station on multiple platforms. Cutting their costs allows broadcasters to invest further in the technology of DAB. Surely that must be a good thing. Digital radio offers the possibility to develop content and innovation much better than analogue does, be that scrolling text or slideshows, and the ability to pause, rewind and record live radio. Many people have come to expect that as the norm now. As with most things, there are naturally some negatives to DAB. We heard earlier that reception is currently far from perfect, often being described as a cliff-edge—as you may know, Mr Deputy Speaker, there is either a perfect signal and reception, or absolutely nothing at all. I am hoping you are on the same wavelength as me today.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** In Chorley FM country we get the perfect wavelength.

**Wendy Morton:** That cliff-edge contrasts with FM, which becomes slightly fuzzy as the signal begins to be lost. There are possible options to deal with reception problems but, much like with FM, there is a limit to how many stations can be broadcast from a single multiplex, although the limit for DAB is much higher than for FM. As a multiplex fills up and competition for space increases, the cost of broadcasting from it naturally rises, pricing out local stations. That is another reason why the Bill is so important.

The industry has already made some developments in increasing capacity on the DAB matrixes, one of which is broadcasting stations in mono, which reduces the transmission costs and enables more stations to be accommodated in a multiplex. Another more efficient way of increasing DAB capacity is to switch to DAB+, which is two to three times more efficient than regular DAB. Some of the trialists in the OFCOM trial were allowed to start broadcasting on DAB; it will be interesting to see how they progress, and perhaps the Minister will have something to say on that.

I shall explain the importance of community radio and why it matters. As we have heard, community radio is alive and kicking throughout the UK, with more than

500 stations broadcasting on analogue and online. For those stations to really grow, there needs to be the opportunity and space for them to broadcast on small-scale, local multiplexes covering the local areas that they represent. I am reminded of my own background: I come from a rural area where Dales Radio has been designed to help the area, reporting on things such as bad weather and local road conditions. We have heard the bad weather forecast for today—not only rain and floods, but heavy snowfall throughout the country—and I am sure that local radio stations are playing a vital role for our constituents and local communities. The British Forces Broadcasting Service is another fantastic example of a true community radio station.

I am going to wind up my speech, as I know that time is marching on and others would like to speak. At the heart of the Bill is an opportunity not only to help local radio stations to access local multiplexes, but to make a real difference to our local communities, which we all fight so hard to represent in this place. Some have local radio stations; some do not. I would like to think that for some communities this Bill will bring about the opportunity for more local radio—more chance to broadcast and communicate. That is particularly important at a time when so much is being said about the need for greater social cohesion and for communities to come together, particularly post Brexit. We have a perfect opportunity to all come together and make a difference.

12.18 pm

**Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** It is my great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton).

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on bringing this Bill to the House. He is proving himself to be a tenacious campaigner who always stands up for his constituents. He is an incredibly impressive Commons performer, as we saw at the start of the debate, when he spoke for nearly an hour and took all the interventions that were thrown at him with great elegance. I am not at all surprised that he spent a night in his office queuing to get this Bill on to the Order Paper and before the House. I congratulate him on his efforts on behalf of his constituents.

Members tend to know that they are in a pretty good place with their private Member's Bill if my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is not present. We have not had a contribution from him, so there must be very broad support for the Bill, as we are seeing demonstrated in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley regularly uses the words "worthy sentiment" when he speaks on a Friday. There is a lot of worthy sentiment in the Bill, because it is all about communities, local services and communication with local people in local areas. The objectives that underpin this Bill most certainly constitute worthy sentiment.

I wish to start by recognising that, in Corby and east Northamptonshire, we are very well serviced by our local media outlets. When it comes to radio, we have BBC Radio Northampton, Corby Radio, and Connect FM, all of which provide a brilliant local service, with their own niches and listeners. We also have good television coverage with BBC Look East and ITV Anglia, which provide a very good local news service. We also

have the *Northamptonshire Telegraph* and the *Nene Valley News*. All of those outlets come together in their different ways to contribute to local north Northamptonshire life.

As Members from across the House will appreciate, those different outlets have different resources available to them. Some are much better resourced than others. We should not forget that community radio is very dependent on volunteers who put an awful lot of time and effort into providing those services on behalf of the communities in which they are based. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that, currently, around 200 small commercial radio stations and 244 community radio stations do not have the opportunity to broadcast on digital radio. The realities are very striking. The rationale behind this Bill is exceptionally logical, as there is not enough capacity on the current DAB multiplexes, particularly in urban areas. The cost of carriage on networks is too high for some small local stations, which is a particular challenge locally in north Northamptonshire. The area of multiplex coverage provided by county-level DAB multiplexes is too large compared with the smaller FM transmission areas, and the set length of licences of 12 years is not appropriate for all broadcasters.

We must recognise that we need to move with the times. Many small commercial radio providers broadcast online, but they need a viable option to move to terrestrial DAB. By the end of 2016-17 and early 2018, 50% of radio listening will be on a digital platform, which is hardly surprising in a digital age, and 60% of UK homes have at least one DAB radio. I am sure that that figure has increased over the Christmas period, with many people being given a DAB radio as a gift. My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) alluded to her household situation and the digital radios that she has received at various Christmases.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay and I can sometimes be accused of chuntering from a sedentary position. I can tell the House that that happens when we believe that Members are complaining about problems but are not bringing forward any solutions to address those problems, and that frustrates us on a regular basis. That is where this Bill has a particular strength. The funded trials, which were run by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport between 2014 and 2016, have proved that the technology works, that this is a viable opportunity, and that the scheme could be rolled out. The success of those pilots is clear both in the outcome of those pilots and in the Library briefing notes. Not only have we identified a challenge and a problem, but we have something to help rectify some of those challenges which is ready-made and readily available and can be rolled out if we move forward on that basis.

One criticism that can be made of this House is that, sometimes, the debates are a little abstract. In the back end of my remarks, I will set out the local context and exactly where we sit in my part of the country—in Corby and east Northamptonshire—in relation to this issue. As I have said, we are very well serviced by two local community radio stations, namely Connect FM and Corby Radio. As part of my research for this debate, I have made contact with both of the radio stations to ask what their take is on this Bill, whether

there are any areas that can be improved, and what challenges they face. Let me reflect on the comments that I have had back. Connect FM states:

“Connect FM is on DAB Radio currently. We believe that DAB is the way forward and so took the decision to invest in DAB. We currently broadcast on DAB across Northamptonshire, incorporating Corby. DAB gives smaller broadcasters like Connect FM, who previously only covered part of a county, the ability to compete on a county or even region wide basis. This is vital to ensure the long term financial stability that commercial radio broadcasters like us require. It provides the level playing field on Transmission”—

a level playing field is important here—

“previously only enjoyed by a limited number of commercial broadcasters and the BBC.

The costs involved in broadcasting on DAB currently are eye-wateringly high when compared to the financial return currently gained. Connect FM have had to negotiate heavily with Arqiva, the sole DAB supplier, to be able to broadcast on the platform and even then can only afford a low-bitrate mono signal. Stereo is beyond our reach currently.

We have been keeping a close eye on Small Scale DAB and it would be of interest to us even if it were to simply offer a level of competition on the transmission market. Current DAB costs are excessive so anything that can be done to drive those costs down, whilst at the same time offering more listener choice, has to be a good thing.

We support the bill if its aim is to achieve that and to also bring forward a switchover date.”

I hope that the Minister will remark on some of those issues later, and perhaps they will inform the nitty-gritty discussions when the Bill goes into Committee—I would be delighted to serve on the Bill Committee—to ensure that we get this right for all our different providers.

Corby Radio, which first started broadcasting on 5 December 2009, is a full-time, community-focused radio station. It is incredibly strong on local issues and it has a news output, combined with popular music for all tastes. It does regular studio programming, as well as special live broadcasts, for example from key community events such as the Corby carnival, the highland gathering, which is very popular in the town, the opening of the Corby Cube and the arrival of the Olympic torch. Those pivotal moments in Corby’s history have all been captured in our local media output, but I do not think that they would have been without Corby Radio, and I do not think that it would necessarily happen as successfully in future.

We need to remember the enormous contribution that Corby Radio makes. It is uniquely local coverage, by Corby people and for Corby people, with input from Corby people all the way through. Over the summer I took part in the listener takeover. I went in for an hour and basically had a “Desert Island Discs” show in which I ran through my favourite songs. I thoroughly enjoyed it, as I hope did the listeners at home. I hope that it raised a few pounds to contribute to the radio station. I was just one of many people who took part in those initiatives throughout the summer.

**Kevin Foster:** Were any of those favourite songs written by our hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris)?

**Tom Pursglove:** Shamefully, I am not aware of any of the songs written by our hon. Friend, and I was very disappointed that he did not name them so that

[Tom Pursglove]

we could all go and listen to them over the weekend. Perhaps we could have another show on Corby Radio: “Dave Morris’s greatest hits.”

Corby Radio currently does not transmit on DAB; it transmits only on FM to the borough of Corby and the surrounding villages. When I head back to the constituency at the end of each week, I know that I am nearly home when the station comes into range on my car radio. Corby Radio is a community station. It has been issued a five-year community radio licence by Ofcom, which must be renewed every five years. It would be very interested in transmitting on DAB, because it feels that current trends are going that way. For example, all cars are now manufactured with DAB radios. It cited the evidence I alluded to earlier, which is that more and more people in the UK are turning to DAB radio. It is estimated that 50% of radio listening will be on a digital platform by the end of 2017-18. It asked me to set out the situation in this debate, because that is an important fact.

Corby Radio also mentioned that Norway has started to phase out FM and that by the end of 2017 the whole country will be digital only. That is a global trend. The Government have said many times that they want us to keep up and be at the front in the global race, and I think that on this issue we should do exactly that. Corby Radio would be very interested to see the Bill progress. It is fully supportive and, as their local MP, I think that it is important that I put that on the record and ensure that we get the Bill through Second Reading. That is why I am pleased to be here for this debate today.

As I come to the end of my remarks, I want to say that the Bill really matters. Corby Radio and Connect FM both provide such an important local service, promoting excellent local community groups, causes and fundraising efforts that other radio providers are simply not in a position to advertise in the same way, and providing topical local news. We currently have inclement weather around the country and, as other hon. Members have mentioned, local stations provide crucial local weather updates. The news output from small local radio stations is, in my experience, completely impartial. It is simply often a case of presenting the facts and letting people know what is going on.

A point that has not yet been mentioned in this debate is that community radio provides a platform for local sports clubs to get across future fixture information and reports about past fixtures, and that is welcome. People are interested in their local clubs and teams, so it is good that there is a platform to let them know how local people are getting on and to encourage more people to go along to the grounds on a Saturday, for example, to support their team.

**Jo Churchill:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about the value of community radio in his constituency. I am sure that, as with Radio Suffolk, his constituents hear, as weekends and summers approach, about fêtes and local charity group events. That shows the importance and vitality of our commercial and local stations. The Bill will help with that, as I am sure my hon. Friend agrees.

**Tom Pursglove:** I completely share my hon. Friend’s sentiments. In Bury St Edmunds, rather like in Corby and east Northamptonshire, an awful lot of fantastic community work goes on that would not necessarily get the hearing that it does were it not for local radio.

I was interested in what my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) said about loneliness. It is clear that local radio has a big role to play, particularly in isolated and rural communities where people are not necessarily able to get to urban centres, or in cases where people are not able to get out for various reasons. The radio service keeps people connected to the local community, allowing them to ring in as part feedback programmes, giving them the confidence that things are going on around them and sometimes providing an avenue of support. Those things are welcome. I commend my hon. Friend for her work on the issue of loneliness—[*Interruption.*] It is a bit lonely over on the Opposition Benches, but I commend the two Opposition Members on the Front Bench for taking their seats in this debate.

I do not underestimate the value of community radio in my constituency. I spend a lot of time knocking on doors. The part of this job that I enjoy the most is getting out there, knocking on doors, finding out what issues matter to local people as part of my listening campaign and then campaigning on those issues. One thing that strikes me on a regular basis, aside from the fact that people speak warmly about community radio, is the amount of stickers in people’s windows for Connect FM and Corby Radio, which shows that people are switched on to their community radio services and hugely support them. The fact that they go to the length of putting a sticker in their window is evidence of the value that people place on those services.

The Bill presents a real way forward to help to secure the future of community radio services. There is no compulsion about it, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay has made clear; it provides just another opportunity for community radio stations to secure their future in the way that works best for them. I commend that and I very much hope that the Bill will progress today.

12.34 pm

**Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con):** We have heard a lot today about local community radio, and I want to endorse a lot of that and to talk a little about the future and about DAB radio. I should declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party group on commercial radio. I have made a note of all the Members present today, and I fully expect them to join the all-party group within the next week.

The future is digital radio. In my area of High Peak, we have a lot of signal issues with FM. We have talked about the multiplexes we have, and we do get some of the national multiplexes in High Peak, but even that coverage is not great. However, digital is the future of radio, and there will come a day when we switch from analogue to digital. The sooner that day comes, the better, but we need to remember areas such as High Peak, because those of us there are usually the last to get anything in terms of these technologies.

If digital is going to be the future, we need to use it to secure the future of our local radio stations. Others have spoken eloquently about small local radio stations.

This has been a great opportunity for us all to wax lyrical about our local radio stations, and I intend to be no different. I will talk about the aptly named High Peak Radio, which covers the whole of my constituency. It is a big constituency, at over 200 square miles, and the name—"High" and "Peak"—tells you all you need to know: we have lots of hills, and signals are a problem. However, because of where we are, we do not really identify with the Radio Manchesters, the Radio Sheffields or the Radio Derbys of this world. So High Peak Radio provides us with a tailor-made station for our area.

The future of radio is digital, and I am sure that that is the way High Peak Radio will want to go one day. However, the way things are at the moment, it is beyond the finances of small, independent, community, commercial local radio stations to go into digital—it is too expensive and too difficult.

The Bill is an excellent piece of legislation, and the sooner we get it through, the better. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) laid out, it would put in place a framework whereby the likes of High Peak Radio can get on to digital—they can move into the digital zone.

Somebody here once talked about being an analogue person in a digital age.

**Seema Kennedy:** I think that was me.

**Andrew Bingham:** Actually, I was referring to the former Member for Sedgfield and the former Member for Witney, but it still works. The former Member for Witney did actually come to High Peak Radio, but more of that later.

We need to allow the likes of High Peak Radio to move into the digital age, and the Bill puts down the framework that will allow it to do that without the huge expense it would currently face. The benefits for local radio are huge, and many of them have been highlighted today.

I look at what High Peak Radio has done for High Peak in the years it has been broadcasting, and I see that it brings so many benefits. We talk about community and community charities. We have things such as Blythe House hospice in Chapel-en-le-Frith; High Peak Radio is a great supporter of that great charity, as well as many others.

I have done events in High Peak: I have walked round High Peak and golfed round High Peak—I have done everything round High Peak for charity—and High Peak Radio has been a fantastic supporter. It is not that it has enabled me to do those things—I have to do the walking or whatever it might be—but it gets the word out.

On one of the first charity walks I did, I walked round the boundary of the constituency. I was walking out of Buxton when a car pulled up. The driver opened his window and said, "There's a tenner, Andrew." I said, "What's that for?" He said, "I've just heard on High Peak Radio that you're walking the boundary of the constituency for charity. There's your 10 quid." That 10 quid went to the charity.

That is just an isolated instance of how High Peak Radio helps support so many people doing so much good work for so many charities. People cannot afford to have an advert on the big commercial radio stations,

let alone the television, but High Peak Radio provides them with a vehicle and a conduit to get the word out and to encourage support. That, in turn, promotes community cohesion. We talk a lot about community cohesion in this place, and that is a great way of promoting it.

Somebody talked earlier about isolation, which affects a lot of people. We all think that, nowadays, with satellite television and all these channels, people do not listen to the radio any more. Well, in High Peak, they do. I know lots of people who have High Peak Radio on because, yes, there is music, but they also get the local news and it makes them feel part of their local communities. They are sometimes elderly people who cannot get out as often as they would like, and it makes them part of the town or village they live in. Whether it be Chapel-en-le-Frith, Charlesworth, Dove Holes or New Mills, they know what is going on in their town and area. They know, for instance, that on Christmas day an organisation did a Christmas lunch for people. It is a great way of promoting community cohesion and dealing with the social isolation that we in this place try to find many ways of dealing with.

As we sit in here, I do not know what the weather is doing, but it is probably pretty snowy in High Peak. Buxton is one of the highest towns in England, and we have the highest football ground and the highest pub in England, all of which will be covered in snow. With High Peak Radio, people can put their local radio station on. If they put a national radio station on, they would probably hear of Buxton only two or three times a year when we are snowed in. They hear about the Cat and Fiddle and the Woodhead pass, because those roads are often blocked with traffic.

At this time of year, snow is always a problem on those and on many other roads. If someone is looking to get from Glossop to Buxton this morning, they will not get that information on BBC radio news but they will get it on High Peak Radio. One of my constituents, Jamie Douglas, cannot get to work today because of the snow. For anybody in High Peak who is watching this, I am very sorry but my constituency office is closed because my staff are snowed in in Glossop. How do people work that out? How do we know where we can go and where we cannot go in High Peak on a day like this when we get more snow than anybody else? People turn to High Peak Radio because the road and traffic news goes on all the time.

My hon. Friend—an old friend—the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) talked about sport. I was glad he mentioned that. In fact, I was not that glad because I wanted to mention it first, but hey ho—he beat me to it. We have lots of football, cricket and rugby teams in High Peak.

**Oliver Colvile** *rose*—

**Andrew Bingham:** Ah—my friend with the hedgehog is back.

**Oliver Colvile:** My hon. Friend may recall that he organised a game of cricket up in Burton which I was delighted to play in. It was a great game.

**Andrew Bingham:** That is right, although I must correct my hon. Friend: it was actually in Buxton, which, by the way, saw the only case of a day's cricket being lost due to snow in this country, in June 1975.

[Andrew Bingham]

Yes, we organised a charity cricket game where the parliamentary cricket team played the “Emmerdale Farm” 11. My hon. Friend drove some 300 miles to play and acquitted himself exemplarily, as he always does—as he did in India, as he remarked earlier. High Peak Radio broadcast from the ground and interviewed the players. On that day we raised, I think, just over £10,000 for the air ambulance. We could not have done that with such success without the backing of our local radio station, because it introduced the coverage.

Among our local football teams, we have Buxton, where High Peak Radio often broadcasts the game live if it is a big match. Glossop North End has been in the FA Vase final twice in recent years. That is a huge event for High Peak, and it is encouraged by High Peak Radio, which sends someone down to Wembley to commentate live on the game. High Peak Radio has actually broadcast from within this building: when I was elected to this place in 2010, we managed to arrange for it to broadcast from Central Lobby. This is great because it makes people in High Peak feel connected with each other. Those who could not get to Wembley to watch Glossop North End in the final could tune into High Peak Radio and feel part of the day. You will find no greater supporter of local radio in this place than me, and that is why I take an active role in the all-party group.

Local radio stations also support local businesses. I ran a small business for many years, as have many colleagues here. We cannot afford to advertise on the television or, perhaps, Radio Manchester, but High Peak Radio provides an opportunity. Whether it be a small shop, a garage or a small trader such as a plumber, it gives them an opportunity to advertise in the local area—an area that they can serve efficiently, quickly, and, more often than not, at a lower cost than some of the national companies.

**Pauline Latham:** My hon. Friend is talking about the fact that people can advertise on these radio stations. Has he ever considered advertising his election on local radio?

**Andrew Bingham:** I have considered advertising in elections on many things. I have had my name on buses, for instance, although people just said, “You look like the back of a bus—now your picture’s on the back of a bus.” As my hon. Friend the Member for Corby said, local radio stations such as High Peak Radio are politically neutral. There is no politics with local radio. High Peak Radio will broadcast what I have to say, whether from my perspective as the Member of Parliament or when I was a Conservative candidate. Whether it is the Labour candidate, the Lib Dem candidate, or whoever, it is completely politically neutral. That is one of the advantages of local radio. As has been said, it is broadcast by local people for local people. It does not have a political edge. That is why I have not considered advertising politically on the station. I do not want to compromise it or to spoil the essence of local radio.

**Kevin Foster:** I am very much enjoying my hon. Friend’s remarks. He will be aware that the rules for political parties on broadcast advertising still apply to small-scale licensing, just as they do to large-scale licensing. That is certainly the intention.

**Andrew Bingham:** Yes, and it must remain so.

If we can give local stations a low-cost option to move on to digital radio, that has to be welcomed and encouraged. The sooner we get it on the statute book, the better. We can encourage our local stations to continue. We all have our own stations and they all have their own programmes. My hon. Friend the Member for Corby has been on “Desert Island Discs”. My radio does not do that, but it does have “High Peak Insiders” and “High Peak Happenings”, on which events can be advertised.

I am a great supporter of High Peak Radio and local radio in general. We need to give it every chance and every encouragement to survive and flourish. Getting the Bill on the statute book will help them to move into the digital age without costing them a fortune. I am delighted to see the Bill before the House today. The sooner we can get it through Report stage and all the other processes, the better.

Before I sit down, on the wider subject of radio, I want to give a gentle nudge to my right hon. Friend the Minister—who is now looking somewhat startled—and ask him to please get on with the radio deregulation consultation, because it has been talked about for some time. [Interruption.] He is looking towards his officials, as am I, and everybody is nodding, so hopefully we have achieved something there.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay on bringing the Bill forward. I enthusiastically hope it will get on to the statute book as quickly as possible, and that that news can be broadcast on High Peak Radio very soon.

12.47 pm

**Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on the Bill. It intends to allow Ofcom the flexibility to create a lighter touch listening regime in relation to small-scale digital audio broadcasting. It follows the two-year trial run by Ofcom and funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport between 2014 and 2016.

As Members may know, there are two categories of radio multiplex for which licences are awarded by Ofcom under part II of the Broadcasting Act 1996. Those are for national or local coverage, with local coverage being roughly county-sized. The Bill would allow for small-scale radio multiplexes, which the DCMS has said would likely be no more than 40% of the size of current local services. The intention is to spread the opportunity of DAB to smaller stations, which have so far not been able to use those frequencies. We welcome that.

There are 58 local commercial DAB multiplex services across the UK, which is not enough to offer coverage in all areas. Often, the county-sized DAB services are too expensive and have too large a range for smaller community stations. As a result of this and other factors, there are up to 400 local and community stations that are not carried on DAB but on analogue AM or FM services. Small-scale DAB would provide a cost-effective way forward.

The Bill aims to benefit areas experiencing over or under-subscription. The extra DAB coverage provided by small-scale radio multiplexes would benefit those areas, especially urban areas, where the current county-sized local services do not have the capacity to meet demand.

Likewise, as is outlined in the explanatory notes for all to read, in areas such as Shropshire and the Scottish borders where there is no local multiplex, small-scale multiplexes could cater to people at a community level.

Having more radio content and more people accessing that content are clearly desirable outcomes. Indeed, the access radio scheme, which saw the licensing of 15 community radio stations, was piloted by the Radio Authority in 2002 under a Labour Government. Community radio continued to grow and strengthen. In the five years following the Community Radio Order 2004, licences were given to more than 200 community radio services, which created more than 400 jobs, involved 10,000 volunteers and provided services to an audience of more than 10 million people. At the heart of the scheme was the use of radio for social gain. The developments were hailed by Ofcom as one of the great UK broadcasting success stories of the past few years.

Radio content made by and for communities was funded, supported and championed under Labour. The hard-working groups and individuals who continue to run those services continue to receive our full support and gratitude. Given that the Bill extends and modernises Labour's legacy, we welcome it. Our questions relate mostly to the practicalities rather than the principles.

The Government drafted the Bill, so we will be interested to hear what the Minister says in response. As has been mentioned, the Bill draws specific attention to rural areas where there are currently no local multiplexes. We have heard many examples of how they would be welcome throughout the country, but the Ofcom trial on which the Bill is based used 10 locations, all of which were cities, from Glasgow to Manchester and Cambridge. I understand that the trial used pre-existing radio services and so could not take place in areas without local radio multiplexes, but the disparity between the stated aim of the Bill and the scope of the trial on which it is based requires further exploration.

Radiocentre, the industry body for commercial radio, has expressed concern that the measure prohibiting anyone with an interest in a national or local multiplex from gaining a small-scale DAB licence could negatively impact rural areas, particularly where it is possible that no other operators would be interested. Will the Minister tell us whether the DCMS consultation will specifically address the feasibility of the programme in rural areas? What is his view of the concerns expressed by Radiocentre?

The explanatory notes refer to the 200 smaller commercial radio stations and the 244 community stations that currently do not have access to DAB, and so continue to broadcast on AM and FM analogue frequencies. The Bill has been presented as an opportunity for such stations, but in "Small-scale DAB trials: final report", from September 2016, Ofcom notes that although

"it should be technically possible to develop a frequency plan for small scale DAB which might accommodate those stations...much more detailed planning and optimisation work would be required to develop a frequency plan which could be implemented in practice."

The House will not want to pass the Bill until it knows that it can be implemented in practice. Will the Minister tell us what plans have been made to address those uncertainties? When will that detailed planning and optimisation work take place? Furthermore, there are

issues to address such as the skills and knowledge needed to capitalise on the opportunities that the Bill could offer.

Ofcom's final report notes that the trials focused on functionality, so that the software and materials provided to the operators involved were often complicated and user-unfriendly. The majority of operators had suitably skilled engineers or technical staff to deal with that, and those who did not received additional support. In reality, a wider roll-out would require tools that are more user-friendly, as Ofcom recognises in the report.

**Kevin Foster:** I welcome the broad thrust of the shadow Minister's remarks, which appear to be supportive. She referred to the operators and the recent trials. Has she met anyone involved with the operators in the trials, as I have, when I found out from them just how simple it is?

**Dr Allin-Khan:** I have not personally met the providers as I am the shadow Minister for Sport, but my shadow DCMS team have met providers, and I have been briefed. The Opposition team are fully aware of all the details, as I am outlining.

**Kevin Foster:** It is not that complex.

**Dr Allin-Khan:** I beg to differ and will make progress.

As I have said, the majority of operators had suitably skilled engineers or technical staff to deal with those issues, and those who did not received additional support. In reality, a wider roll-out would require more user-friendly tools, as Ofcom recognises in the report. That would be needed by operators that do not have engineers and skilled technical staff, and by those establishing a station for the first time.

The software-developing community and market are beginning to deliver those more user-friendly technologies. However, given that the report was published only four months ago, it is safe to assume that no breakthrough accessible technology has yet become available. Do the Government have a plan for making such technology available? Will Government stakeholders and the industry co-operate to build up skills and knowledge? What assessment has been made of the risks of adjacent channel interference, a matter discussed in the Ofcom report and one with which I am sure the hon. Member for Torbay is fully familiar?

As is so often the case, this comes down to funding, and the Government are cutting funding wherever possible. DCMS seems hopeful that the Bill will encourage the establishment of new small-scale radio services. Will the Minister clarify if and how those stations will be eligible for any grants or funding? Since 2010, the money provided for the community radio fund, established under Labour, and community radio projects have suffered a 17% cut. I understand that no community radio fund will be available for small-scale DAB stations. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case?

Other details require clarification. The draft legislation specifies that a small-scale multiplex would only be operated on a non-commercial basis. Uncertainty about this has caused some concern among stakeholders. Radiocentre appreciates that the aim is to keep the costs of carriage as low as possible, but will this prevent a commercial operator from holding such a licence?

[Dr Allin-Khan]

Will commercial radio stations be able to broadcast on the multiplex? The Community Media Association has also expressed concern about the Bill's ambiguity in this area, although it, like Radiocentre, is supportive of the Bill in general. In the light of that, what measures will be taken to ensure that the licensing of small-scale multiplexes promotes healthy competition without crowding out existing local services?

Finally, why was the provision in the Bill not included in the Digital Economy Bill, the most obvious legislative vehicle for such a measure? The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) asked the very same question today in this Chamber. The Government crammed everything else into that Bill, to the extent that this is a rather more obvious measure to include than many of the other measures in that Bill. Does that not show that we were right all along and that the Digital Economy Bill was not ready when it was introduced, hence so many Government amendments?

As I said, Labour is supportive of the Bill. The Labour party encouraged the proliferation of small-scale radio when in government, and we welcome the opportunity for community channels and small commercial channels to expand on to DAB frequencies, and we support the establishment of more new local media.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that community radio is great for local news and may benefit enormously from the Bill? I was once a volunteer reporter on a community radio station in Sydney in Australia, for which I covered rugby and international relations. It was good to play a small part in updating the local community. I am sure we support the Bill for that reason.

**Dr Allin-Khan:** Absolutely. We wholeheartedly support the Bill for that reason. I thank my hon. Friend for his articulate and eloquent comments. I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate our support for all local radio. Indeed, I am very grateful to Wandsworth Radio for its coverage of the by-election hustings when I was victorious in June.

Labour is proud to have encouraged the proliferation of small-scale radio in government. We welcome the opportunity for community and small commercial channels to expand on to DAB frequencies, and we support the establishment of more new local media. We have questions, some of which I have mentioned and more we shall be discussing in Committee if the Bill succeeds in having its Second Reading. I greatly look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

12.59 pm

**Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): It is a pleasure, tempered only slightly by the small element of party politics injected into what has been a very non-party political and good-humoured debate, to follow the shadow Minister. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for introducing the Bill. He is always an assiduous parliamentarian and performer in this Chamber. It is always a pleasure to listen to him, even more so when he is presenting his own Bill. I pay tribute to him for what he said and for the work he has done on this issue.

As those who know me will be aware, I am not a particularly technologically minded individual. Debates like this always provide a great opportunity to learn something that one had not known before, not only by participating and listening to what is said, but by doing the research beforehand.

Like many Members, I am a great fan of radio. In my view, no radio broadcaster will ever quite compare to the late, great Sir Terry Wogan. I was a TYG in my youth, a "Terry's Young Geezer"; I was not quite a TOG at that stage. Sir Terry will continue to be missed. Nevertheless, as many Members have pointed out, there are some fantastic broadcasters today. I greatly enjoy listening to "Test Match Special" and the wonderful John Suchet on Classic FM, and also to the wonderful Jim and Jo on the BBC Radio Leicester breakfast show.

Today's debate reflects the success of digital radio. Huge technological strides have been made, and that is a massive positive. However, the legislative, regulatory and licensing framework that governs this area is still rooted in the Broadcasting Act 1996 and the Communications Act 2003, and has not managed to keep pace with the changes that we have seen. Although the regime is not explicitly anti-small community radio stations, that is often the effect of the way in which it operates. As we have been told today, carriage fees can be as much as £5,000 a month, which is clearly excessive for many small community or voluntary radio stations. The trials about which we have heard—which I understand will now run until 2018—are hugely important and very positive, but they are not a basis for the sustainable long-term footing on which we wish to put community radio stations.

The Bill deals with three key elements: innovation, localism and proportionality. Let me deal first with innovation. We are aware of the huge strides that have been made in DAB radio technology, and we have observed that an increasing number of our constituents choose to listen to radio in this way. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) spoke of the huge successes achieved by the technology. He also said that there were still challenges to be overcome, but I believe that they are being actively worked on and will indeed be overcome. We have heard about, for example, the innovations in software technology.

We have also heard about localism. Nearly all the Members who have spoken so far have rightly talked about their constituencies. As constituency Members, we know that each of our villages and towns, and each part of our cities, has a distinct and proud local identity. Local and, indeed, community radio stations focused on towns and villages play directly into that, because people want to hear local news. They want that intimacy with the radio station that serves them.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) about the role that such radio stations play in combating loneliness—an issue that she was right to mention, given the amazing work that she is doing in connection with it. We have also heard about their potential for introducing new broadcasting talent. My hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), who has moved from his previous place but is still in the Chamber, spoke of people's sense of identity and the stickers that they put in their windows—doubtless, in the early summer of 2015, alongside others advocating his election to the House.

The third element in the Bill is proportionality: the proportionality of regulation to what is being regulated and what we are seeking to achieve. The current regulatory framework may well be, and probably is, entirely appropriate for the regulation of multiplexes when applied to the BBC—national stations, or stations serving large regions—but I would argue that it is neither proportionate nor reasonable when applied to small local community stations serving particular towns or villages.

This Government, and particularly this Minister, have a strong track record of supporting innovation, especially in technology. I appreciate that the Minister probably sometimes despairs at my unwillingness to embrace all the elements that the technological revolution in this country can deliver, but he continues to champion the cause of technological innovation very proudly. He is also a great champion of localism and—in this role and his previous roles—of deregulation, to ensure that any regulation is proportionate to the risk involved and to what is being regulated. In this case, the aim is to free up small and community organisations, the better to deliver services to their communities.

I would argue that the Bill is overdue, given the innovation and developments in technology that we have seen in this country, but it is extremely welcome. Seizing the opportunities that technology brings, harnessing the innovation and passion of our local communities and freeing them from unnecessarily onerous or costly regulation and licensing frameworks are all extremely worthy ambitions and objectives. I believe that the Bill meets those ambitions head-on and addresses them in full. I very much hope that the House will fully endorse the contents of the Bill so that it will be able to proceed to its next stage. I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, but I have no doubt that he will be similarly supportive towards the extraordinary and important efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay.

1.6 pm

**Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I am very pleased to be following my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who has, as usual, raised lots of very good points.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on bringing forward the Bill. I have to confess that this is not an area that I am particularly familiar with. Indeed, like my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood, I am actually a bit of a technophobe. I still cannot work out how to do certain things on my mobile phone, for example, but I now have a DAB radio in my car, so I am probably a bit more familiar with the technology than I was in the past. I had not realised that there were significant barriers to local community and voluntary radio stations getting access to the infrastructure. I was interested to learn about that, and it made me look at how things were going in my own constituency and what opportunities there might be there.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) mentioned earlier, this is a technical Bill. It focuses on opening up something that we already have, in order to make it more accessible for communities and small organisations. That must always be a good thing. We are really lucky in my constituency of Rochester and Strood, because we have a radio station called

KMFM which operates across Kent and Medway. It is run by the KM Group, which operates a number of radio stations at regional level across the county. In Medway, it is sited in my constituency, but it also operates on a DAB multiplex across the county. That involves one radio station operating across the county on that system. The separate analogue stations around the county also play a major role in getting news out.

One of the things that KMFM is really good at doing is supporting local events. It provides coverage of all the events in my constituency. Whenever we have a big festival in Rochester, Chatham or Strood, the local radio station always covers what is going on. It is massively important that local people can hear about and be part of what is going on by listening in if they are unable to get to such events.

Another key thing is live, real-time news. In some cases, it is far quicker and far more accurate than what we get from some of the bigger regional radio stations, such as BBC local radio. Only yesterday, the local radio station was able to get out news about the snow and about an unfortunate incident involving a man whose boat was set alight. He had to jump into the river and was taken to hospital. That news was live very quickly via local radio. I have not yet heard whether he is okay, but I am sure he is now.

The local radio station is also good at covering business, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham). Local radio is far more accessible for local businesses and for the local authority. When we want to advertise local events, local radio provides a cost-effective option for promotion, which is a major thing for the local community. Local radio is also prepared to cover the small events, such as village fetes, that larger radio stations will not cover. My sport is sailing, but the national regional stations rarely cover sailing events. However, our small community radio stations will cover what we are up to, which is important not least for getting out the message about what is actually going on in the constituency.

The range of programmes and coverage on small community and voluntary radio stations is diverse. Kent has a station called Channel Radio, on which Sian Murphy, a constituent of mine, hosts a show called “Women In Business”. Many women come to speak on her programme and talk about entrepreneurship or raising a family while running a small business from home. It presents a real opportunity for listeners to network without actually being face to face, and I have received feedback that that is really important. Loneliness might play a part, but if someone is bringing up a family at home and trying to contribute to the growth in our economy by setting up their own business, they can listen to other females’ experiences of what it is like to run a business and some of the challenges that they face. It is a really interesting programme. Sian is a businesswoman herself and does the show voluntarily because she just wants to help women get on.

**Rebecca Pow:** My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does she agree that local radio stations, such as BBC Somerset in Taunton, are great places to help spread education? I did a couple of gardening programmes—“What’s Growing On” and “Grow it, Cook it, Eat it”—that were about encouraging people not only to garden, but to grow food to feed their families healthily for little money.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** My hon. Friend makes a wonderful point. She is absolutely correct. That is the beauty of small community and voluntary radio stations. They have the opportunities, the time and the capacity to deliver interesting programmes that help the particular demographic that they serve. I have definitely seen that in some local radio programmes.

Paul Andrews runs Kent Business Bunker Radio and hosts a programme that covers a range of topics, such as jobs across Kent and interesting industries to get into. He also talks about funding for start-up businesses and businesses that want to grow, as well as talking about business and helping the local community. In constituencies such as mine that have a small-business economy, such opportunities and programmes are especially important.

I have not spoken much about this, but many speakers have talked about particular voluntary radio organisations such as hospital radio, which are valuable resources for our local communities. I will not keep going on about this because we have all said it, but one reason why I am pleased to support the Bill presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay is that it represents progress. The Bill takes something that already exists and asks how we can open it up to small sections where there is a clear need. There are many opportunities where we can look at opening it up to small businesses or the voluntary and community sectors.

This is a lovely, ideal proposal, and I have no hesitation in supporting my hon. Friend today. I congratulate him on his very detailed and well-explained introduction, which gave me better knowledge of the digital radio industry. I thank him and look forward to supporting his Bill.

1.16 pm

**Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) for her speech. I concur with many of her points, particularly on connectivity. I also add my voice to those who rightly paid tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for presenting such a pertinent Bill that will not only enable businesses to grow but will start allowing us to pull down barriers and reduce regulation, which is what we are about. The Bill is also about showing that we are a flexible and adaptable Parliament. In these modern times we all work differently to how we worked in the past, so we must be about enabling more effective modern communications.

I declare myself a radio nut. My DAB radio is on top of my kitchen cupboard, where nobody can reach it. It was originally put there so I could get a better signal, and now it stops my children changing the channel—it seems to work well on both fronts. I do a lot of radio listening through my phone, and I echo the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) about whether we could use mobile phone connectivity in a more beneficial way. I am no technical buff, but I ask the Minister to look into that. In previous debates on mobile phones and notspots, we heard that churches, as often the tallest buildings in rural communities, have said that they are happy to help facilitate masts, and so on, to drive greater connectivity in communities.

My hon. Friends the Members for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) and for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) spoke about loneliness and connectivity. It is vital that people can hear about what is going on in and around their local area, and in and around their life. I would welcome an answer on that.

Radio is brilliant, and it brings comfort. The Minister and I share not only Radio Suffolk but West Suffolk hospital. Radio West Suffolk brings real support to the hospital's patients. I will give a shout-out to Ian Norris at this point. He volunteers and we have heard so much about that today: how people running these radio stations give of their own time so selflessly. Given that 87% of all local radio stations support young people volunteering, we see that this is a hugely important area of our life, as this grows skills as people move into the workplace. I do not know whether I am right, and perhaps the Minister would like to respond on this, but I believe I read that he had some time on a local radio station. I think it was called radio Oxygen—I hope he does not run out of that when he is responding positively to this afternoon's debate!

I had the great privilege of visiting the British forces radio in Canada last summer. It, too, is hugely important for connecting people's lives and driving information into places that would not normally have that accessibility. We are talking about giving little personal bits of information that make people feel so much better at a time when they cannot always get out of their hospital bed or across parts of the world to put their arms around a loved one.

We are taking things slowly, and my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay explained eloquently in opening this debate how things would proceed. As I said, I am not a technical person, but this Bill is a good idea that we should all be supporting. Today in particular, when snow is falling outside, local radio travel news, which has been spoken about by other Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), acts as a vital conduit. These stations also tell us when our schools are open. As I said, we are dealing today with flooding issues along the east coast, and people who are not using the Environment Agency's buzz to find out about what is going on with flooding locally are going to be listening to local radio. That shows its huge importance in our community. Public information is disseminated brilliantly in this way, so we need to enable this sector of our creative economy—an economy that drives an awful lot of money into this country—so that it can help with volunteers and with skills and build on those.

It is now 1.22 pm, so Lesley Dolphin will be entertaining people across Suffolk. I have had the pleasure of being on her show and chatting to her. Earlier in the day on Radio Suffolk we have Mark Murphy, and he is leading a great campaign on people not using mobile phones when they are driving. That is another great thing community radio stations can do: they can start that campaigning zeal which we all appreciate in this place. The use of a mobile phone in the car is one of the top four causes of death, along with not putting a seatbelt on, drink-driving—[*Interruption.*] Somebody might have to help me out with the last one.

**Kevin Foster:** Excessive speed.

**Jo Churchill:** Yes, excessive speed. Well done. Once again, my hon. Friend comes to my rescue.

The last speaker told us that local radio, and community radio in particular, covers 10,000 local events, such as the fêtes. I was recently interviewed by people from local radio at our fireworks event in Bury St Edmunds, but I have also come across them at a plethora of fêtes across the country and all sorts of different events. More importantly, these stations raise £25 million for charity. As my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak mentioned, they announce that an event is going on, they drive it forward and get people to visit, and then get people to put those contributions into the bucket. Therefore, we are talking about another huge community asset.

**Rebecca Pow:** My hon. Friend is making an exceedingly powerful point. About a year ago, I mentioned in this Chamber that we might light up the Wellington monument, which had not been lit for years, and our amazing local radio station, BBC Somerset, broadcast that. When we turned up in the dark, unexpectedly, with the National Trust, hundreds of people turned out because they had heard about this on local radio. That is what convinced the National Trust to support my project to raise money to restore the monument. That is all thanks to radio, so does my hon. Friend agree with me about how effective it is?

**Jo Churchill:** I readily agree, and congratulate my hon. Friend on getting included in the autumn statement the money to repair the monument in her constituency.

After all we have said about work experience, volunteering and so on, I want to give a shout-out to a member of my staff who goes home from her day's work here to the community radio station for the Harrow area. The station is the result of a merger back in 2012 of Northwick Park hospital radio and Harrow Community radio, and operates out of the hospital. It is primarily about the community and is run entirely by volunteers. It provides befriending and wellbeing services, and volunteers spend time on the ward with patients and tailor the shows to their patients. It is a chance for volunteers to gain hands-on experience in the totally new field of radio broadcasting.

**Oliver Colville:** I am told that BBC Radio Hereford & Worcester has not yet been mentioned in the debate; I want to ensure that it appears in *Hansard* as well.

**Jo Churchill:** I am delighted to give my hon. Friend the chance to have those words written in *Hansard*.

Many broadcast journalists and ambitious young broadcasters use the Harrow community radio station as a platform to get involved. It runs fundraising events, sponsors community activities and brings local news to local people—and it is all done by volunteers.

Only yesterday, I heard that Radio Caroline, which most Members are probably too young to remember, has applied to Ofcom for a licence to broadcast on AM across East Anglia. The station's ship, *Ross Revenge*, will be moored in the Essex estuary, so only the northern part of Suffolk will be able to receive DAB broadcasts. It would be good to extend that ability to broadcast across the piece, along with any new business ventures.

Whether it is someone's source of news, music, travel, politics or a little bit of something different, the radio is also their friend, as my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak said. When I was raising a small family, "Woman's Hour" used to mark the time through the day. When I was recovering from having been quite poorly, when I heard the afternoon play I would think, "I'm nearly at teatime." I have many other memories. I am so sad that I even take my radio gardening with me, as I potter about to pull a few weeds—

**Kelly Tolhurst:** Only weeds? [*Laughter.*]

**Jo Churchill:** I do know the difference—vaguely.

A radio is not only a piece of technical equipment but a friend by one's side, so I urge the Minister to take those thoughts on board. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay for introducing the Bill and look forward to hearing from the Minister that we are now going to action stations—I think that is the radio term. I look forward to supporting the Bill.

1.28 pm

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):**

It is a pleasure and an honour to be called to the Dispatch Box to respond to this debate.

Like everybody else, I put on the record wholeheartedly my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for introducing the Bill. He gave a great exposition of the Bill and set out in good detail what he hopes we can achieve. I also put on the record my thanks to the officials in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport who have worked with my hon. Friend on the Bill and prepared me for it. We have in DCMS an incredibly dedicated radio team who care deeply about the success of radio in this country, and I thank them. I had proposed to try to answer directly many of the questions that had been asked in the debate, as well as set out, quite briefly, what is in the Bill, but because that was done so well by my hon. Friend at the start, I shall be relatively brief.

I am grateful to all Members who have contributed to this debate. Perhaps we should start with the position of the Labour party and the Labour Front-Bench team. It was, I think, the maiden performance, at length, from the Dispatch Box by the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan). She was elected only in June and gave a great performance with lots of questions. So impressive was her performance today that I wonder whether she, like an increasing number of her friends, will be opting for a job outside Parliament soon.

I will go through the hon. Lady's questions in detail. I was really impressed that she started off with the important matter of rural areas. It was addressed in the trials, and in Ofcom's response to the trials. We will go through the technical details that will lead to the orders in a further consultation. Given the hon. Lady's interest and the fact that we have support for this Bill from all parts of the House, I am sure that the question about rural areas will be properly addressed.

On the frequency plan, the hon. Lady seemed to imply that it was not possible to vote in support of the Bill until that plan was in place. I caution her against such an approach, as the process has already started. The frequency trials were very positive. Of course further

[*Matt Hancock*]

consultation will address the technical details, but those technical details are a matter for the orders and statutory instruments that follow the Bill rather than the principles that we are debating today. The same is true about the comments made by Radiocentre and the Community Media Association. Those are matters for the regulations.

The hon. Lady rightly raised the matter of skills. The Ofcom report was clear that the trials delivered exactly the sorts of skills that we should be looking for in this space. She also talked about money, saying that this all comes down to funding. Well, I caution her against that view. Although Labour thinks that everything comes down to public funding, we think that human ingenuity is quite impressive, too.

As it happens, in this spending review period funding for community radio support was increased and guaranteed out to 2020, but it is amazing what people can achieve if they are given the permission to do so. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay set out many times in the course of his speech, this Bill is ultimately a permissive piece of legislation: it is about allowing people to do things that, currently, they cannot do. Therefore, it is about a further unleashing of human ingenuity.

The hon. Lady asked, perfectly reasonably, why this Bill and the clauses in it are not part of the Digital Economy Bill. The reason is that we wanted to see the conclusion of the trials before putting out the legislation. We published the Digital Economy Bill back in the summer, but the trials had not concluded at that point, so we did not want to put these details in that Bill. There have been odd noises from the Opposition Benches about why the Digital Economy Bill was not delayed. I do not think that we can delay in bringing forward the transition to digital, whether in this or the other Bill.

The hon. Lady also raised a question that had been mentioned by a number of others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), about the matter of public only or public and private. I know that some of her friends on the Front Bench think “public good, private bad” but we on the Government Benches reject such an approach, because we think that there can be a contribution from both public and private. That question will be addressed in the consultation. Again, this Bill is permissive on that basis. It does not require either public or private backing. However, there is an important balance to be struck in the consultation, which is that, ultimately, small-scale digital radio is about enabling communities and community support. We do not want it to be completely gobbled up by large commercial providers for whom there are other options. We want to ensure that there is space for the innovative and for the very small. As my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) said, people need to be able to start a radio station from their garden shed. That is what this is all about. There is a reasonable case for limiting the commercial element, but there is also a case for small commercial operations, and we will address the balance of those cases in the forthcoming consultation. I hope that addresses the points made from the Opposition Front Bench.

Let me now address some of the questions asked by other Members. My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) asked how the masts will work in practice. Of course, individual radio stations will not

necessarily have to put up their own masts; the whole point is to have a network of masts. The masts can go on to existing masts that are used for other things, and they can go on to buildings. In fact, we have just relaxed some of the planning regulations on masts. Like my hon. Friend, I represent a rural constituency. I had the great privilege of opening our local digital mast, which has gone up next to a school in north Suffolk, which means we can now get BBC Radio Suffolk on digital radio. The technology is there and the planning system is in increasingly good shape to allow this. Therefore, although a radio company could put up its own mast, there are also ways to start up a radio station without having to go down that hardware route.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who is a great supporter of radio, provided not only insight in the debate, but entertainment. In fact, one could say that as well as the music, he has provided the lyrics. He made a passionate case about the positive impact of radio in times of distress, such as the serious storms and flooding in his constituency just over a year ago. He paid tribute to his local radio station in what I thought was a very balanced way. There is no reason to think that DAB will be any less reliable and resilient during storms. By allowing for more localised digital content, we can get even more local information in times of distress. I hope that he is reassured on that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) made an important point about political balance in community radio. Of course, anyone in broadcasting has to follow the law of the land and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and ensure that their output conforms to what is required. He made a strong case for radio, mostly on the grounds of cricket. I remember well the time he astonished not only the entire Indian parliamentary cricket team, but the rest of the British parliamentary team by taking a wicket in Dharamshala. I also recall spending an awful lot of time recovering the ball from the boundary.

**Oliver Colvile:** I must say that I, too, was deeply surprised. My right hon. Friend might also recall that although there were only 250 people in the grounds, the match was being watched by 19 million people on Indian television.

**Matt Hancock:** I have no doubt that all 19 million were totally astonished. It just shows that if you put on what might be regarded as niche broadcasts—in this case, a cricket match between the UK and Indian Parliaments—sometimes many, many people will watch.

**Andrew Bingham:** Does the Minister recall that I was actually commentating for Indian television when my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) took the wicket?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, I remember that. On a slightly more serious note, I think there was a reason why 19 million people in India were watching that cricket match, and it was not due to the quality of the commentary, the bowling or the fielding. It was because there is very heavy regulation on the number of broadcast channels in India, so there was nothing else to watch. Putting

ourselves in the eyes of the viewer or the ears of the listener, it is far better to have more stations, especially local ones, so that people can do something better than watching my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport and I play cricket.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) raised the issues of signal power strength and financial restrictions. Her point on financial restrictions is actually slightly out of date. Since 2014, we have slightly relaxed the financial restrictions on community stations precisely because of the argument that she made—that a community station still needs to raise the money to continue to run. Maybe I can write to her with the full details of the changes that we have made and she can tell me whether she thinks we have gone far enough.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) made the case that small-scale multiplexes should be able to run on a commercial basis as well and asked when all this will be in place. The answer is that, should the Bill proceed and, alongside it, we consult on the details of the orders, our goal will be to have the system in place by early 2018 before the trials finish at the end of March 2018. We are on the path to get that timing right, but we need to get the Bill through to make that happen.

My hon. Friends the Members for Charnwood (Edward Argar) and for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) professed not to be technological. In fact, towards the end of the debate, that crept into everything. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill)—the Suffolk Bury—made the same argument. Many people, and I count myself as one, are incredibly enthusiastic about and excited by technology, but technology is only any good if it caters for people because of what it does, not what it is. People who are not enthusiastic about technology can still use digital radio including, for instance, to listen to “Test Match Special.”

As long as the gradual move to digital is handled correctly, it has the potential to free up spectrum that can be used in other ways. It has to be done carefully. I come back to a point made a lot at the start of the debate: this is about adding a capability, not turning off analogue. By coincidence, I met the Norwegian Minister on my way here this morning and she told me about the progress Norway has made in starting to turn off the analogue services. We are not there yet. We still hope to do it, but we must make sure that enough people are on digital first and that we support those who are still on analogue in the transition.<sup>1</sup> There have been some big changes in the past couple of years, including in the car market.

Nearly 95% of new car radios are digital. The change is happening and it is a good thing, but we must do it sensibly and carefully, and the Bill has no impact on those plans.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds mentioned BBC Radio Suffolk and Radio West Suffolk, which I visited in the last Parliament. It is true that, as a student, I was on Oxygen 107.9 FM, a radio station in Oxford where I learned how to handle a radio mic. I had the same sort of experience as my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane and it taught me a huge amount. I was the minority sports correspondent and I had a lot of fun. In fact, I am sure that the radio show was more fun to make than to listen to.

I pay tribute to the work of those who are helping with the expansion of digital radio, and particularly to Ford Ennals, who has done an enormous amount of work outside this House to make sure people understand what digital radio is—indeed, he is often on the radio talking about why digital radio matters.

Currently, about 200 smaller commercial radio stations covering small markets and 244 commercial radio stations transmitting mainly on FM and medium wave are not broadcasting on digital radio. The details of the Bill have been well discussed and set out today, and the purpose of the Bill has been well set out. I am delighted the Bill has cross-party support and support from everybody who has spoken in the debate, and I hope it can make progress. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay for bringing it forward with such panache.

1.41 pm

**Kevin Foster:** With the leave of the House, may I thank all Members, and particularly the Minister and the shadow Minister, for their remarks and support? I am glad to note that I seem to be on the same wavelength as everyone else in the Chamber today. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] I am sure we can look forward to a range of broadcasts when we take the Bill into Committee.

I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and for Erewash (Maggie Throup) for their support in bringing the Bill forward. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), who has to play a silent role, but who was very effective in ensuring that I was fully aware of all the procedure. With that, I thank Members for their support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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

1. [Official Report, 16 January 2017, Vol. 619, c. 4MC.]

## Civil Partnership Act 2004 (Amendment) Bill

### Second Reading

1.46 pm

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am very excited because, in almost 20 years in the House, this is the first time that a Bill of mine has ever got an airing on a Friday morning. That shows what can happen if we persevere, and I do hope the Minister is not going to spoil it when he gets up to signal his vast support for this very sensible and much needed measure.

The debate over the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 has passed. The Act has become law, and over 15,000 couples have taken advantage of that new opportunity. Whatever people on the opposite sides of the argument, then or now, think, the world has not fallen in. However, as some of us argued at the time, the extension of marriage then has unwittingly created a new inequality, and a Government who argued zealously that same-sex marriage was an equality issue seem to have rather lost interest when it comes to an equality that affects opposite-sex couples. That new inequality is that marriage is available to same-sex and opposite-sex couples, yet civil partnerships are available only to same-sex couples.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): I absolutely support my hon. Friend's Bill. He will recall that, at the time, the same-sex marriage Bill was known as the equal marriage Bill by many people. Does he agree that, for it to be truly an equal marriage Bill, it is essential that his Bill is enacted to make the situation properly equal as between homosexual and heterosexual couples?

**Tim Loughton**: I do agree, which is why, at the time, I argued that the amendment that forms part of the Bill would have prevented the inequality that was created, closed that loophole and made that Bill more acceptable for people who had difficulties with it. My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): Many constituents have contacted me about this issue—different-sex couples who wish to give legal recognition to their relationship but not necessarily to get married. Does the Bill not deal precisely with that situation?

**Tim Loughton**: That is right, and I will come on to explain precisely why the Bill is needed.

I have described the inequality, but some people may say, "Well, so what?" Opposite-sex couples have always been able to get married in a church or a register office—or even, now, in medieval castles, on exotic beaches, or, increasingly, wherever else takes their fancy. The problem is that a great many of these couples choose not to go down that traditional marriage route.

The Office for National Statistics estimates that there are just under 3 million cohabiting opposite-sex couples in this country—almost double the figure reported some 15 years earlier—of whom over a third, about 38%, have children. Indeed, cohabitation is the fastest growing form of family in the UK. We need to recognise that our society is changing, just as we did when recognising

same-sex partnerships in law back in 2004. That was the right thing to do, and I enthusiastically supported it at the time. It was a glaring inequality and injustice that until then loving same-sex couples were not recognised in the eyes of the state and enjoyed no protections under the law. That anomaly was rightly addressed by this House back in 2004, and I was proud to be part of that.

People choose not to get involved in the paraphernalia of formal marriage for a variety of reasons. It is seen as too much of an establishment thing to do. For many, it is identified as an innately religious institution; even if done in a register office, it has religious connotations. Some see it as having a patriarchal side—as being some form of social control and not a proper partnership. Those are not my own views, necessarily, but they are certainly how many people see it. There are a whole lot of complex motives as to why many of our constituents do not go down the formal marriage route. They are mostly still in committed, loving relationships, but if they do not want to go for traditional marriage, they have no way of having those relationships recognised in the eyes of the state, just as was the case for same-sex couples pre-2004.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): Can my hon. Friend think of any reason why all those who supported the same-sex marriage legislation would not want to support his Bill?

**Tim Loughton**: Absolutely not. At the time, my proposal, which I set out in an amendment, was the policy of the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats, and supported by a good many Conservative Members, but for various reasons people voted against it. The logic is that of course we would want to address this inequality.

There are also various practical reasons for doing this. Particularly worrying is the common misconception that there is such a thing as a common-law wife or common-law husband, as a woman typically finds out abruptly on the death of a partner when there is an inheritance tax bill on the estate and potentially on the family home.

**Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend think that if people realised that there was no such thing as a common-law wife or husband, they would opt for this to give them the protection in law that they do not have currently so that they would not lose their home?

**Tim Loughton**: That is a very practical advantage of this Bill. There is a great deal of ignorance among constituents who think that they have these protections.

If a woman has a child with her partner and the relationship breaks down, she is not entitled to any automatic form of financial support if they are not married, and there is no automatic entitlement to property even if she had been paying into the mortgage. Surely couples should not be forced to choose between having no legal protection or entering into an institution that is not right for them.

**Oliver Colville** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): The other issue that is incredibly important is dependency, whereby, for example, a daughter who is

looking after her elderly mother finds that when her mother dies her home is therefore in danger. Is that not something else that needs to be looked at?

**Tim Loughton:** This is about the future maintenance of children. It is about an inheritance tax bill that happens all of a sudden that could lead to the sale of a property so that someone finds themselves, in effect, homeless. These are all potential dangers currently faced by people who are not in a formal, legally recognised relationship.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very sound case. I was fascinated to hear the current statistics on cohabiting. If we are to build a balanced society, bringing up our children in a fair and good way, surely it is very important to bring forward the ideas encompassed in this Bill in order to help society as a whole.

**Tim Loughton:** My hon. Friend pre-empted a large plank of my speech. Rather than let everybody pre-run what I want to say, I think I shall get on with saying it. Perhaps I will take some contributions at a later stage.

Returning to the problem that I have identified, when one partner is much older than the other and there is a reasonable expectation that they will die some years before the other, the long-term survivor would not receive the same tax benefits as a married person or someone in a civil partnership, which is also discriminatory towards the couple's children. Even a couple who are engaged to be married have more rights than a cohabiting couple. Offering a formalised role within an opposite-sex civil partnership could save a lot of retrospective ignorance and the ensuing heartache and financial implications.

It is for those reasons of natural justice and protecting the rights of partners that I am yet again promoting a private Member's Bill to extend civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples, which I have been trying to do since the change to the legislation back in 2013. There is a deal of *déjà vu* involved in my reappearance on the same subject here today.

Without Government support, the Bill is unlikely to make headway, despite the support of hon. Members from all parts of the House and a nationwide campaign that has so far attracted more than 71,000 signatures to a petition. I am particularly pleased that we have the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady), who is the chairman of the 1922 Committee, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). We have the support of hon. Members from just about every party represented in this House. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who speaks for the official Opposition on equality matters, wrote on her blog:

"we have the chance to take another step in extending true equality, admittedly only in one aspect of our lives; choosing the type of partnership that best suits our needs, faith and aspirations."

She gave her support and that of her party to the Bill, and is sorry she could not be here to give it in person.

**Christina Rees** (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward the Bill. I have supported this proposal for a long time, as it is all about

equality. I had a private Member's Bill, which did not get as far as his, that would have corrected another anomaly in the law by putting mothers' names and occupations on marriage certificates. The hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) has taken up the mantle on that. The Bill before us is about equality. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, despite the result of the appeal in the High Court, which is being challenged, it is for this House to decide the matter because it is of great public interest?

**Tim Loughton:** The hon. Lady is right. I will refer to that case, which will go to appeal imminently, as she says. My Bill may not get much further than hers if I succeed in talking it out in the remaining minutes, so I will make some progress.

The Bill has high-profile supporters, including Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan, the couple who instigated the campaign. I pay tribute to them. They appeared in the royal courts in London last November seeking to overturn the Government ban on different-sex civil partnerships, arguing that it is unfair because it treats people differently dependent on their sexuality.

By contrast and more recently, Claire Beale and Martin Loat became the first UK-based heterosexual couple to enter into a civil partnership in the British Isles. The catch is that they had to travel to the Isle of Man for the privilege. Bravely, the island recently made this reform to its legislation. While our British island cousins have made this step towards equality, the Government on the mainland of the United Kingdom claim, as they did when Rebecca and Charles first went to the High Court in January, and when I first tabled an amendment to the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill, that such a change would be costly and complicated. I just cannot see how or why.

I am not convinced by the Government's excuses. This change is very straightforward. Just as with same-sex civil partnerships, it would not be possible for someone to become a civil partner with a close family member or someone who is already in a union. Such a union would need to be subject to the same termination criteria. All that is required is a simple one-line amendment to the Civil Partnership Act 2004, which is what my Bill would enact. That is why it is a very short, one-clause Bill. It could all be done and dusted in Committee by tea time.

**Philip Davies:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Tim Loughton:** I will give way very briefly.

**Philip Davies:** I promise not to interrupt my hon. Friend again. Obviously, the other way of equalising the law would be to ban civil partnerships for gay couples. Would he be in favour of equalising the law in that way?

**Tim Loughton:** That would indeed provide equality and close the loophole, but it would be a retrograde step. For the reasons I mentioned, some couples do not want to go down the formal marriage route, whether they are of the same sex or opposite sexes. We would therefore be denying the civil partnerships to an awful lot of people. Many people have chosen to go down that route and many have chosen not to convert a same-sex civil partnership into a marriage, which they can now do.

[Tim Loughton]

Clearly, they have reasons why civil partnership suits them, but those of the opposite sex cannot have that same privilege if it suits them better than traditional marriage. My hon. Friend suggests one way of doing it, but there would be serious downsides.

In the Government's original consultation before the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, 61% of respondents were in favour of extending civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples. Alas, for some inexplicable reason, it never made it into the legislation, which would have made it a better and fairer Act. Other hon. Members and I wrote recently to the Secretary of State for Education, who is also the Minister for Women and Equalities. In her reply on why the Government do not support the measure, she said that, as part of the exercise after the Act was introduced, the Government examined whether or not people supported extending civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples and found that the majority did not. However, a clear majority in a more extensive consultation before the Act did support the extension. Why do those views no longer count?

Aside from the equality question, there is a further major practical benefit of opening up civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples: family stability, which my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) mentioned. The Centre for Social Justice has calculated that the cost to this country of family breakdown is some £48 billion each and every year, or some 2.5% of gross domestic product. That is a big, growing and costly problem—it is costly both financially and socially.

Fewer than one in 10 married parents have split up by the time a child reaches the age of five, compared with more than one in three of those who are cohabiting but not married, and 75% of family breakdowns involving children under five result from the separation of unmarried parents. There are all sorts of statistics showing that those children are more susceptible to not doing well at school and not ending up in good jobs, and that they have problems with housing, mental health and so on. That is not to be judgmental about parents who find themselves having to bring up a child alone through no fault of their own, but two partners make for greater stability.

We know that marriage works, but we also know that civil partnerships are beginning to show evidence of greater stability for same-sex couples, including those who have children, be it through adoption, surrogacy or whatever. There is a strong case for believing that extending civil partnerships would improve that stability for many more families in different ways. If just one in 10 cohabiting opposite-sex couples entered into a civil partnership, it would cover some 300,000 couples and their children. It would offer the prospect of yet greater security and stability, less likelihood of family breakdown, and better social and financial outcomes. That, surely, is progress, and would be particularly good for children in those families.

There is a further application. Many people who have strong religious beliefs, particularly Catholics, who end up getting divorced, which is in conflict with certain religious teachings, may not be inclined to get married again if they meet a new partner because their Church supposedly believes that they should be married for life. In many cases, however, they would be able to reconcile that position by entering into a new formal commitment

through an opposite-sex civil partnership. There are a number of practical real-life scenarios in which civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples could achieve something very positive that would not be available to those loving couples otherwise.

Opposite-sex civil partnerships have not been cooked up haphazardly in this country. In South Africa, the Civil Union Act 2006 gave same-sex and opposite-sex couples the option to register a civil union by way of a marriage or a civil partnership on the same basis. In France, the *pacte civil de solidarité*, or PACS as it is known, was introduced in 1999 as a form of civil union between two adults of the same sex or the opposite sex. Gay marriage has been added. Interestingly, one in 10 PACS has been dissolved in France, while one in three—many more—marriages ends in divorce. There is evidence that some of those civil partnerships have created greater stability, whether they are opposite-sex or same-sex partnerships. In countries such as the Netherlands, where marriage and civil partnerships are open to all, the vast majority of different sex couples continue to choose marriage, so the measure in no way tries to undermine the traditional partnership of marriage. A significant minority choose civil partnerships, so surely UK couples should have that choice.

In the many years I have been banging away on this subject, support for the campaign has grown. The London Assembly recently gave its unanimous support to the change in the law and passed a motion that states:

“The Assembly notes that whilst same-sex couples are able to form a civil partnership, different-sex couples cannot.

The Assembly acknowledges that approximately one in five households in London consist of a cohabiting different-sex couple.

The Assembly believes that the current legal situation which prevents different-sex couples from forming a civil partnership is unfair and prevents these couples from being able to get legal recognition for their relationship in a way that matches their values.

The Assembly recognises that City Hall has often been at the forefront of efforts to extend rights and liberties: in 2000 it introduced the first ever registration scheme for same-sex couples.

The Assembly calls on the Mayor to support the equal civil partnerships campaign and urges him to make representations to the government for a change in the law if the Court of Appeal rejects Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan's appeal against the High Court's decision to reject their application to form a civil partnership.”

Last week, there was a very supportive article in the *Solicitors Journal*, which referred to the current anomaly as “discriminatory”. Marilyn Stowe, the senior partner at Stowe Family Law, said:

“To some couples the concept of marriage is outdated. They do not wish to marry but equally seek a legally recognised civil union where vows and promises to each other are not required.”

There is, therefore, a lot of support for this measure. I have received many emails from couples around the country who are waiting for this change in the law to be able to signal in the eyes of the public, their friends, the law and the state that they are part of a loving, secure and sustainable long-term union. It is just a different arrangement from that which many other people choose.

I would like to quote from two emails I have received in recent days:

“Dear Mr Loughton, my partner and I have lived together for 25 years. We are not religious, nor do we feel a registry wedding is suitable for us. We have worked full-time and very hard all our adult lives and feel we deserve the recognition that other couples enjoy. As we get older”—

they are in their 50s—

“we feel we deserve the financial and long-term benefits that are given to other couples who have contributed to this great nation, but we are currently being denied these rights.”

The second email reads:

“My male partner and I”—  
she is female—

“have lived together for 38 years. We do not wish to marry for many reasons, for example my mother was very adversely affected by marriage in the days when women were immediately ejected from their careers upon marrying, and rape in a marriage was legal until 1991. My mother’s advice was ‘try to enjoy it, as it might reduce the physical damage.’ But we do want a civil partnership. We are now both dependent on our pensions, but if my partner died tomorrow, heaven forefend, I would not be recognised by his pension provider and would receive nothing from them. If we had a civil partnership, they would recognise my claim.”

That is just another example of the instability facing loving couples—in this case, they have been together for 38 years—if one of them dies, because the state does not recognise their relationship.

We need to close this anomaly. I do not understand why the Government have reneged, effectively, on their promise, after the Same Sex Marriage Act, to pursue this properly and to draw an end to the inadvertent inequality that has come about through that Act. Regardless of the Act, there is a case for extending civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples for the whole raft of positive reasons that I have set out in my short comments today. If the Government are to allow people to be as free as possible to make their own decisions without harming the freedom of others, what on earth are they doing failing to make it lawful for people of the opposite sex who happen to love each other to enter into a civil partnership, when they allow that very same freedom to people of the same sex? The current situation is unfair, illogical and needs to change. That is exactly what my Bill will do with minimum fuss and that is why I commend it to the House today.

2.8 pm

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I rise to support the Bill on behalf of Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition. The Bill has genuine cross-party support. It is backed by colleagues who voted on both sides of the argument on same-sex marriage in 2013, including the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). He made a very powerful case. Indeed, he has nicked many of the points I want to make in my speech. Over 72,000 people have now signed the online petition—I think he has slightly old figures.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Martin Loat and Claire Beale. They are my constituents—they live in the next road to me in Ealing—and, as he pointed out, they were the first people in the British Isles to enter into a civil partnership. However, they had to go to the Isle of Man to do that. I am sure the Isle of Man is a lovely place, but if the Bill is passed, no one will have to make that journey again. *[Laughter.]* Let me say, before people write to me from the Isle of Man, that I am sure it is lovely. I have never been there. *[Interruption.]* I am going to crack on, because my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) is going to speak about workers’ rights, we hope and pray.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the London Assembly, and its unanimous vote in favour of this move. Early-day motion 619 expresses genuine cross-party support, from Democratic Unionists as well as the usual suspects. This is clearly a matter of public interest that the Government ought to revisit.

As has already been pointed out, it is a matter of equality. Civil partnerships currently exist only for same-sex couples in the United Kingdom, but in a democracy, all people should be equal before the law. I am proud to say that my party has authored much of our anti-discrimination legislation: the Race Relations Act 1976, the equal pay legislation, the legislation that abolished the heinous section 28, and the Equality Act 2010. The Bill seems to me to be a logical next step.

Civil partnerships were a new Labour creation in the first place. They were ground-breaking at the time, allowing LGBT people to have their loving relationships recognised by law and to enjoy the same benefits as married couples. The present anomaly is, I think, an unintended consequence that was necessary on the long and winding road to equal marriage, and it needs to be rectified now. Although civil partnerships represented a huge step forward in 2004, that was 13 years ago, and it is now time to open them up to all.

As we have heard, that could easily be done. The Bill is very short: it consists of only a couple of lines. All that we need to do is delete the words “of the same sex” from the Civil Partnership Act 2004. No new law is necessary; this would merely be an extension of what is already on offer. The Equal Civil Partnerships campaign estimates that 2.9 million people are in partnerships and, for whatever reason—a long list of reasons has been given today—choose not to marry, although the figure may be higher, and that 39% of them have dependent children.

When same-sex marriage became legal, many gay couples in civil partnerships had an upgrade, “trading up” to full marriage. Here we have the opposite case. We are talking about people who want to take a leaner, modern, 21st-century option, affording their families the same legal protections. Fairness, consistency and equity in legislation: who would disagree with any of that?

Back in 2013, my party tabled an amendment stating that the Government should consult on allowing all couples access to civil partnerships as soon as possible following the passing of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. Since then, however, the Government seem to have found all sorts of pretexts for not granting access to civil partnerships for all, or even revisiting the issue in a serious way. They have argued that the results of their consultation were inconclusive, and that they must await the outcome of pending legal action before they can possibly reopen the issue. To the outside world, all that sounds like excuses.

We can look further afield to other jurisdictions. A French case has been mentioned. When I was an international student in France more than 20 years ago, the term was “concubinage”. The French thought it was completely normal, and could not understand why we did not have it here. I could go into all the complexities of international law, but there are academic papers out there that people can google. Articles 8 and 14 of the European convention on human rights—thankfully, we are still in it, and it seems likely that we will not be leaving in any great hurry—promise equality in the

[*Dr Rupa Huq*]

application of the convention and freedom in relation to family life. It could be argued that the current law contravenes those provisions. Case law shows that our Government have been on the wrong side of the convention on previous occasions. We do not want a repetition of the waste of public expenditure and time that featured in, for instance, *Secretary of State for Work and Pensions v. M.*

I shall not eat up any more time. In short, this is the right thing to do. As my constituents Claire and Martin put it,

“Imagine two houses: one says marriage and one says CP on the front. All couples are allowed in the first house, but only gay couples are allowed in the second. Now heterosexual couples like us just want to be let in to the second house, too.”

For the sake of fairness, equality, the tangible benefits that would flow from it and the right of couples to choose the type of partnership that best suits their needs, faith and aspirations, we support the Bill and urge the Government to revisit this matter without further delay.

2.14 pm

**David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): This has been a fantastic day for private Members’ Bills, and I believe that this Bill will be welcomed across the land. It really is time for us to address this issue, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this date in order to explain his Bill to the House.

My personal feeling is that if people love each other—same sex, heterosexual, it does not matter—it should be entirely up to them if they wish to enter into an agreement or partnership. The law should accommodate any partnership that is legally binding, especially when it comes down to the sharing of property. If, God forbid, one partner should be left behind—either, sadly, through death or for other reasons—they should be legally covered. I know that the previous Government moved mountains to achieve equality by introducing legislation on same-sex marriage, but the question of civil partnerships should now be looked at more intently and as a matter of urgency. My hon. Friend has spoken eloquently and at length today about his wish to see his Bill become law, and I, too, commend it to the House.

2.16 pm

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): I am conscious of the time, so I shall keep my remarks fairly brief. I am planning to get married in June, and I am interested to see this Bill. Hazel and I feel that marriage in a church is the right choice for us, but I know that there are others who feel it is not for them and who wish to go down the path of entering into a civil partnership.

It is good to see the newest member of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), here on a Friday and taking his duty to be a champion for equality seriously. He makes his points strongly. I note that some other Members who might have liked to speak on this subject have not found the time to join us today.

For me, this is about giving people a choice. The Minister might like to reflect on the fact that this links into a wider debate. There is a debate to be had about civil partnerships and civil marriage—obviously, the situation is different for those who want a religious marriage—in relation to if and how we continue the system. If it does continue, it would be strange for civil partnerships to be retained purely as an arrangement for same-sex couples. I think we probably all take the view that that situation should not be maintained in the long term. Perhaps the Minister could also tell us what impact the extension of marriage to same-sex couples has had on the numbers of civil partnerships taking place.

Civil partnerships originated as a bit of a compromise, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) rightly said. At the time, it was felt that legislation on same-sex marriage would not get through, but this arrangement at least gave legal protection to long-standing same-sex couples. There had been numerous notorious examples of families suddenly developing rather Victorian attitudes towards a loved one or relative who had been in a same-sex relationship when they realised that certain legal precedents might help them to get hold of assets and property. Civil partnerships were originally brought in to stop such behaviour and to give people the certainty of legal protection. Then, some years later, the momentous step was taken to equalise marriage in a civil sense, and same-sex couples are now able to be married under the law just as opposite-sex couples can be.

I welcome the Bill. It is right that we should have a debate about what types of relationships we recognise in law. The only thing on which I slightly disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham is that those who seek religious relationships may be disappointed in that civil partnerships will probably be viewed in many parts of the Church as almost equivalent to being married if such a commitment is made. However, whatever my personal religious beliefs may be, they should not affect the legal definition of the type of relationship that someone has. That was certainly something that Hazel and I reflected on in our discussions given what we were looking to do, but we found that the views on marriage of the Catholic Church or the Church of England do not necessarily reflect the position of the law of land, which has been the case since 1836 when the concept of civil marriage was created.

Finally, it is a sadness that it is currently unlikely that I will be able to have my mother’s name on the marriage certificate, but I will sit down now not only because I want to let the Minister speak, but because I will be hanging around until 2.30 pm in the hope that some legislation on that front may be able to make progress as well.

2.20 pm

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon)**: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on introducing this Bill. He said that this was the first time that he has been able to speak on a private Member’s Bill—[*Interruption.*]

**Tim Loughton**: On my own.

**Robert Halfon:** On his own. Given that this is about civil partnerships and marriage, I congratulate my hon. Friend on losing his virginity with this Bill.

My hon. Friend talked about the 2014 consultation, which ran during the time that same-sex marriage was introduced. There were 11,500 respondents, 76% of whom opposed extending civil partnerships. The Government's position is that we want to see what happens and to look at the data before taking any further decisions on the matter.

My hon. Friend also said that marriage has patriarchal and religious associations, but the concept of marriage has moved on from when women were considered chattel. Civil marriage ceremonies are available to all couples and contain no religious element. In fact, when I got married a few months ago, we had the "The Wizard of Oz" playing and a tin man in the registry office. Civil ceremonies can be personalised by the couple, which is exactly what we did, to include non-religious words and vows. There is no requirement for a couple to take vows to honour or obey each other. The only requirement is that the marriage takes place in the presence of witnesses and that the ceremony includes the statutory declarations and contracting words. It is no longer for everybody a religious and patriarchal way of making a commitment.

The Government have rightly taken great pride in championing equality for all. The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act was passed in 2013 and during the passage of the legislation the question arose of whether, if marriage was available to same-sex couples, civil partnerships should be open to opposite-sex couples as a matter of equality. My hon. Friend pointed out that the Government considered the issue at the time and decided that it would be a mistake to rush to amend the Civil Partnership Act 2004 owing to the unknown, untested effects on myriad legislation spanning areas such as pensions, devolution, international recognition, gender recognition, adultery and consummation. At the time, the House recognised that to invite such risk would be irresponsible and that the unforeseen issues that may arise, as with all issues that come from great legislative change, will take time to identify, understand and account for, lest we burden the public with expensive, ineffective laws.

I mentioned the consultation and the number of people who responded to say that they wanted no change to civil partnerships. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who introduced his brilliant Bill, as the Minister for Digital and Culture said, with real panache earlier, also asked about civil partnerships. There has been an 85% decrease in the number of civil partnerships since 2013. In 2015 there were 861 civil partnerships, compared with 5,646 in 2013.

**Tim Loughton:** I understand what the Minister is saying, but all the potential legislative implications of my Bill are no less than, and no different from, the implications of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act itself for laws that had to be changed. Those changes were rushed through in a space of months, whereas we have had several years to think about this. It is almost three years since the consultation, and I repeat that there was a big consultation before the Act was introduced in which the majority said that they wanted civil partnerships to be extended to opposite-sex couples. How much longer will we have to wait?

**Robert Halfon:** My hon. Friend and other hon. Members will know that there are ongoing legal proceedings. I am sure he would agree that it is right for the Government to wait to see the Court's judgment. It is fairly reasonable to say that, as the Court is considering this issue, the Government should wait to see what happens. His Bill would amend the Civil Partnership Act so that opposite-sex couples can form civil partnerships. As has been highlighted, he has tabled the proposal previously, and in response the Government tabled their own amendment to require formal review of the operation and future of the 2004 Act in England and Wales once marriage became possible for same-sex couples.

One reason for the Government moving their own amendment is that the impact on demand for civil partnerships caused by the extension of marriage to same-sex couples could not be predicted. When civil partnerships were introduced, there was a peak in the first year, and it took only a couple more years before the numbers started to stabilise. The coalition Government said at the time of the 2013 Act that we expected an early rush to marry for same-sex couples from 29 March 2014, when the Act came into force, and for there to be a similar initial peak in the number of same-sex couples wishing to convert their civil partnership to a marriage from 10 December 2014.

The coalition Government also believed that some couples might take much longer to decide between civil partnership and marriage if they wanted a legal relationship or, in particular, to decide whether conversion to marriage was a step they wished to take. Even now, it is still too early to tell whether that will happen in practice.

That is not the only reason why the Government now believe that my hon. Friend's proposals would require significant further work. I will take each reason in turn: the legislative complexity introduced by a change to the law; the difficulty in estimating the size of the challenge in successfully making such a change; complications introduced by marriage being a devolved matter; treatment of other overseas relationships; the reaction of religious communities and stakeholders; and finding parliamentary time during this Parliament.

**Tim Loughton:** I understand that every single one of those considerations applied to the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, which was taken through Parliament in a matter of months. Three years on, why is that an impediment?

**Robert Halfon:** There is always the law of unintended consequences, as I am sure my hon. Friend would acknowledge, and it is right that the Government make sure that all these avenues are carefully looked at before making any further changes to the law. That is not an unreasonable position.

My hon. Friend will know that marriage law is an inordinately complex landscape. References to marriage and civil partnerships are peppered through the entire body of law in this country. If we were to change the Civil Partnership Act to amend the definition of a civil partnership so that the term, wherever it appears in legislation, means a relationship between both same-sex and opposite-sex couples, we would need carefully and methodically to assess the impact of the change on all other relevant legislation where the term appears. We would need to check every position in all relevant

[Robert Halfon]

legislation to ensure that the legislation still works as intended and, if not, to provide for consequential amendment of that legislation.

Let me give the House an indication of the complexity of this task. Policy decisions would need to be made by a number of Departments on issues such as pensions and benefit entitlements of same-sex couples entering into civil partnerships, the dissolution of civil partnerships for same-sex couples and the rights of same-sex couples in relation to assisted conception. In each case, the question would be whether—

2.30 pm

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

*Ordered,* That the debate be resumed on Friday 24 March 2017.

### **Business without Debate**

#### **WORKERS' RIGHTS (MAINTENANCE OF EU STANDARDS) BILL**

*Motion made,* That the Bill be now read a Second time.

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February.*

#### **PROTECTION OF FAMILY HOMES (ENFORCEMENT AND PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT) BILL**

*Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (25 November),* That the Bill be now read a Second time.

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 3 February.*

#### **REGISTRATION OF MARRIAGE BILL**

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

#### **MODERN SLAVERY (TRANSPARENCY IN SUPPLY CHAINS) BILL [LORDS]**

*Motion made,* That the Bill be now read a Second time.

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March.*

#### **VEHICLE NOISE LIMITS (ENFORCEMENT) BILL**

*Motion made,* That the Bill be now read a Second time.

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February.*

#### **HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (NATIONAL DATA GUARDIAN) BILL**

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

## Night Schools and Adult Education

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mr Syms.)*

2.31 pm

**Mr David Lammy** (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, to have the opportunity to talk about an important issue as the House adjourns.

Tonight, in a Portakabin in the car park of a small industrial estate, under the dilapidated railway arches in Bethnal Green, east London, Courtney will be teaching a class as usual at The Knowledge Academy. He will be teaching men and women from all backgrounds, ages and races who all have one thing in mind: passing “the knowledge” and becoming a London cabbie. They want to leave behind zero-hours contracts and insecure casual work. They are sick of minimum wage jobs in call centres, labouring on building sites, stacking shelves or waiting tables. They desperately want to get into more secure, better-paid work—the ticket to a better life for themselves and their families. The reason why I called this debate, and why I mentioned The Knowledge Academy, is that it feels to me that it is pretty much the last night school left in London.

When my mother arrived in the UK in 1970 from a tiny village in Guyana, she was unskilled and uncertain of her future. She worked as a home help and then, after she finished work for the day, she went to our local college and trained in shorthand and as a typist. Thirty years later, she retired from her role as a manager at Haringey Council. What does that tell us? It tells us that a woman can start off with nothing and work up from being a secretary to a managerial position, earning a salary to support a family as a single breadwinner. It tells us that if we give people opportunities to get the skills they need, they will go from strength to strength.

The term “social mobility” gets thrown around a lot here in the House of Commons, but it basically means helping people to climb the ladder. Ordinary people do not care about jargon such as “social mobility” but they certainly care about climbing the ladder. They are working two or three jobs, borrowing too much money from the bank and borrowing from friends and family. They are sometimes sleeping on floors to save on rent. They want the security of a reliable job that can pay them a wage that can support their family—here in London, that is between £40,000 and £50,000 a year.

We have a proud history of adult education in this country, stretching back to the early 19th century. In the 1820s, Birkbeck was established, as were mechanics institutes in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Liverpool and Manchester. The Working Men’s College opened in 1854, and City Lit first opened its doors in 1919. Such institutions gave working-class adults the chance to gain the skills that they had not learned at school and certainly would not learn at work. George Stephenson, the inventor of the steam engine, was illiterate until the age of 18 and the product of a night school. The career of L. S. Lowry, one of our most renowned artists, began in an evening course.

I thank Birkbeck, which is doing outreach work in my constituency, Tottenham; City Lit, an amazing institution and a gem in the fabric of London; Morley College; the Workers’ Educational Association; the College of North East London in my constituency; and the

other institutions throughout the country for the work they do to keep the tradition alive. They are making sure that we do not lose the legacy of Samuel Morley, John Ruskin and William Morris or the value of learning for learning’s sake. They are helping thousands of modern-day “Educating Ritas” to gain the confidence that they need to flourish. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) for establishing the all-party group on adult education and pushing it up the agenda.

According to *Hansard*, since 2010 this House has discussed education on 339 occasions. There has not been a single debate on adult education—not one—and there has been just a single question on it in education questions, back in October 2010. That is it: that is what this place thinks of adult learning in this country. Such total disregard for adult education is not good enough. It is not good to say that if someone does not go to university they cannot progress and are limited to a life of low-paid work with no prospects of change.

It is not good enough to deny opportunities to the already marginalised and struggling, and to those who did not have opportunities when they were growing up. The bottom line is that in this place we are totally obsessed with the education policy for 16 and 18-year-olds. We are obsessed with university entrants, and we are currently obsessed with apprenticeships. It is all about getting young people into university or an apprenticeship, but education does not and must not end at 18.

It is important to put this debate in the context of our times—Brexit—not least because we are set to lose the European social fund, which currently contributes between £50 million and £100 million to our colleges each year. Skills shortages already make up nearly a quarter of all job openings, according to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. Some 69% of all UK businesses are worried that they will not be able to find enough people with the requisite skills to fill job vacancies. It looks like we are going to leave the single market, so businesses will not be able to recruit from the continent to plug skills gaps. Much more will need to be done to reskill and retrain people here, in our own country, to take up those jobs.

As has been said in this House so many times since June, the referendum result highlighted the fact that there are many people out there who feel left behind in places such as Great Yarmouth, Blackburn, and Barking and Dagenham here in London. The average earnings in Barking and Dagenham are 40% lower than the London average. In Great Yarmouth, average earnings are £10,000, or 40% lower than the national median. Blackburn has the second lowest earnings of any UK city.

There are growth industries in this country: look at coding, programming and the digital sector more generally. The construction sector is crying out for skilled workers to deliver the infrastructure and homes that our country needs. There is a huge demand for engineers, especially in sectors such as biotechnology and aerospace. Professional services, consulting and accountancy also continue to grow. However, my question is: how are working class people in those places going to access those sectors and get the jobs where they can earn even the average salary—never mind a comfortable salary on which to support a family and enjoy a good life? Millions of people trapped in low-income, dead-end jobs with children

[*Mr David Lammy*]

and care responsibilities have been shut out of adult education. Let me put a question to the Minister, who I know cares about the issue. I am not here, on this occasion, in a partisan way, but I want to know what he will do about this critical issue.

By 2024, only 2% of people in employment will have no formal qualifications. What exactly will happen to the millions of people who did not get qualifications when they were young? What is the strategy for those adults? We need to talk about the 30-somethings, the 40-somethings and the 50-somethings. In a country where we are living longer and longer, how will these people access education? We cannot expect them to go to university and pay nine grand a year; it is unrealistic to think that they can drop their lives and not support their kids in order to do that.

We have an hourglass economy in this country, with a shrinking middle section and a growing section of society trapped at the bottom. We have huge structural problems, especially the loss of manufacturing and the failure to replace those breadwinner jobs. That is the fault not of Europe, of free movement or of migrants who come to this country to work, but of successive Governments—both Conservative and Labour.

What context does the Minister have to address? The Association of Colleges has warned that at this rate adult education will disappear by 2020. The total number of adult learners fell by 10.8% in just a single year between 2014 and 2015. We have had 40% cuts in real terms to the adult skills budget between 2010 and 2015, and spending on the non-apprenticeship parts of this budget fell by 57%.

The Government published their 60-page post-16 skills plan last July. If Members turn to page 31, they will see a couple of small paragraphs dedicated to adults. It says that

“education and training need to become a more important part of adults’ lives.”

The Government’s plan promised to outline a plan for lifetime learning by the end of 2016, but it did not appear. I asked the Minister’s office when that plan would be forthcoming, but I have not had a reply yet. I hope to hear from the Minister on that subject.

The Government Office for Science has said that

“lifelong learning and the challenges of an ageing population is now an urgent issue for public policy in the UK.”

The range of courses on offer has narrowed to basic skills and English for speakers of other languages. Only 4,900 adults achieved level 4 awards or above. Under the adult education budget in 2015, there was a 36% fall in one year. In 2013, the figure was 20,000—a 75% fall in two years. I ask the Minister: where is the strategy? Where is the investment and where are the ideas?

Do not get me wrong: this situation has been caused by funding cuts and the political neglect of successive Governments. Labour implemented Union Learn, of which I am very proud. I was proud to be a skills Minister who worked on that. We also had to focus on basic skills—English and maths—which are hugely important for adults who do not have the basics to move on.

We implemented Train to Gain, and gave employers huge budgets—millions of pounds—to train up their staff. On reflection, I am not so sure about that programme,

because there is a lot of evidence to suggest that employers do not train up people to leave, which is why we need to empower adults themselves to take up these courses.

We need a national strategy, which is led by a Minister working across Departments because the benefits of adult education have a huge impact on employment and health outcomes and our GDP. In the coming years, the Government will be devolving control of skills funding, so we need to ensure that we do not end up with a patchwork of provision across the country. Britain cannot afford that outside the European Union. I hope the Minister will say something about that.

The Government are bringing in £3 billion per year through the apprenticeship levy. Will some of that funding be allocated to support adult education? I hope the Minister will address that point. The present system is hugely unbalanced. If someone decides to go to university at age 18, the Government offer an open-ended commitment to fund their tuition fees and living costs, and the person pays it back only if they earn over a certain threshold. Where is the support for adult learners and those going through technical education?

The answer is not the advanced learner loans, which are not working. In 2015 only £140 million in loans was taken up, of a total budget of just under £400 million that was set aside. In my constituency only 38% of adult learners are taking them up. Leaders in the sector have told me that the uptake is not there because people simply do not know about them. If they do know about them, often the burdens of a loan make them too problematic for the kinds of families we are talking about, who have kids to feed and other commitments. Frankly, if we are going back to life before the EU, we may well have to go back to subsidising adult education once again. That has to be on the table if we think it is economically important.

The Government also need to consider what has variously been called a “single tertiary education entitlement,” a “skills entitlement” or a “career fund”. Ignoring the jargon, in the modern economy people are going to have to learn new skills and change jobs. The jobs of the future have not even been created yet, so there is no way the education that people get in their teens and early 20s can prepare and support them through their whole lives. Creating a fund that people can draw upon throughout their lives to fund training and qualifications reflects the reality of the modern world. I call on the Minister to consider a single tertiary education entitlement or a similar sort of scheme.

I finish by saying this: look across this country, at our seaside towns and post-industrial towns across the north, the midlands and Wales. In places such as Boston, Hartlepool, Blackpool, Oldham and Wrexham, the prevailing wind is to blame immigrants for our problems; for taking jobs, houses, school places and GP appointments. But in a country where people are trapped in low-income, low-skilled work, and where they do not see a way out, we are playing a very dangerous game if we do not listen and act.

People are not trapped in low-income jobs because of immigrants; it is the fault of successive Governments who have failed to equip them with the skills they need to get on in the modern economy. My fear—a very real fear—is that if we do not act now, the consequences down the line will be very grave indeed, and we will be opening up a very dark chapter in our history.

2.47 pm

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon):** May I offer my genuine congratulations to the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this debate? It is customary to say these things, but I really mean it. He knows this subject inside out and he cares about it passionately. He raises some incredibly important points. I am glad that he has put the issue on the agenda, because adult education is incredibly important.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Brexit. When people raise it with me, I always say that we have been in the European Union for over 30 years, yet Governments of all persuasions and businesses have hugely underinvested in skills, so the idea that it has all been caused by Brexit—he did not say that, but other people do—is not true.

Advanced learner loans have been going up substantially—I am happy to send the right hon. Gentleman the figures. He talked about apprenticeships which, as he rightly pointed out, are not just about 16 to 18-year-olds. In fact, I get a lot of stick because people say, “Not enough 16 to 18-year-olds are doing apprenticeships.” In fact, there were 377,960 apprenticeship starts among the over-19s in 2015-16. That is a very important part of the Government’s strategy for giving adults the skills they need.

The Government’s priority is to create a ladder of opportunity and ensure that there are various rungs that people can climb. The first rung of the ladder is that we must have a national conversation and change the prestige of skills and adult education. The right hon. Gentleman said, rightly—I did not know this—that the House of Commons has hardly ever discussed adult education and night schools. He can check with my officials, who will say that when I came to this post, before I knew about this debate, I raised the issue and asked for surveys providing evidence, of which there is not currently a huge amount.

Other rungs of the ladder include: having widespread and quality provision; addressing the skills needs of the nation; achieving social justice and a sense of community; and steering people to jobs and prosperity. Social justice is important because, in my experience, the kind of people who go to adult education centres often come from disadvantaged backgrounds. It does not matter whether people are doing cake-making or a maths GCSE; it is a bridge for them to go on to further education and jobs. I do not say “community” lightly either because, in my experience, adult community centres and night schools build social capital, enriching disadvantaged areas. That is why I believe in adult education and why I am looking at what we can do.

As a Government, we are trying to promote a conversation about skills and non-academic paths for young people and adults through the Get In Go Far campaign, ensuring that we have dedicated careers advice and guidance all the way through. We are investing £77 million in the National Careers Service to ensure that people have advice on what adult education, jobs and skills training is available. A strong further education sector is essential to ensuring that everyone in our society is empowered to succeed. We need to equip further education colleges to be high-status institutions that can confer similar advantages to those of traditional

academic institutions, and we need to have apprenticeships that are seen to be as valuable as going to the best universities in the world.

Compared with previous years, the spending review was recognised for protecting the sector, given the funding pressures and what had gone on in the past. The whole purpose of the Technical and Further Education Bill is to expand the role of the Institute for Apprenticeships to include technical education, ensuring that employers shape the technical qualifications as well as apprenticeship standards.

<sup>1</sup>Including the levy and taken together, the adult education budget, apprenticeship funding and advanced learner loans will provide more funding to support adult further education participation than at any time in our island’s history. The flexibilities we have introduced into the FE system will ensure that local demand will determine when and where learning is delivered. I want the new institutions we are establishing to consider the benefits to communities of making evening classes available. For instance, the National College for Digital Skills, which the right hon. Gentleman did so much to make happen, is in discussion with a number of other colleges and providers about utilising its Tottenham Hale campus for level 1 and 2 courses outside standard hours and during college holidays. I share the right hon. Gentleman’s keenness to maintain the tradition of night school learning and evening classes.

From a survey of adult and community learning that I recently commissioned, it has emerged that evening classes are run in 1,380 local centres. The survey is still in progress, but results received from 97 providers so far suggest that about a third of providers use more than 40% of their budget for evening classes. It is important to quote the figures. In 2015-16, of the £1.5 billion for adult skills provision, the Government provided £210.7 million to 315 providers for community learning, £170 million to 139 local authorities, and £29 million to 137 FE colleges. There is more. Ofsted rates 236 community learning providers as good or outstanding. In my constituency, there is very good adult and community learning in Harlow College and in the adult community learning centre. The reason I quote those statistics is that, yes, we need to do a lot more and, yes, there are problems, but things are not completely bleak.

**Mr Lammy:** I just want to make this profound statement: most FE colleges up and down the country are closed at about 8 o’clock in the evening. Most FE colleges carry out about 70% or 80% of their activity with young people—by that, I mean under-25s. Of course, community learning is still going on, but it is at the very basic level—English for speakers of other languages, basic English and basic maths. If we are serious about working people contributing to our economy, that learning will need to be at the higher levels, and that is really where the Minister’s strategy is going to have to be targeted.

**Robert Halfon:** The right hon. Gentleman is right. I remember that anyone going to Harlow College in the 1990s could not get a car parking space because people were doing adult night school learning. Learning is still going on, but it is not as extensive as it was. As the right hon. Gentleman so honestly pointed out, it is not just this Government or the last Government but every Government who have not put resources into this—as far as I remember, that started in the ’90s. Now, people

[Robert Halfon]

can get a space at Harlow College, in the centre of town, in the evenings, so the right hon. Gentleman is right about this issue, and that is what we are looking at.

As the right hon. Gentleman highlighted, people's energy and enthusiasm for evening classes are among the principal drivers of lifetime learning. We will soon bring forward potential policy options from the current review that will enhance a pathway that everybody in the nation can use to climb the ladder of opportunity, but that has to meet our priorities: meeting our skills deficit, as I said; helping the socially disadvantaged and the community; being as widespread as possible, given the funding pressures; and being good quality.

I accept that the problem with skills has been getting worse over the past 20 years. Some 20% of our long-term productivity gap with Germany is due to lower skills levels. We are the only OECD country where 16 to 24-year-olds are no better at literacy and numeracy than 55 to 65-year-olds.

The two skills that employers say are indispensable are maths and English. We are giving adults the best opportunity to gain qualifications in English and maths by fully funding all adults to achieve their first level 2 qualification, be that functional skills or GCSE, as well as other qualifications that help them get to that level. Investment in maths and English provides substantial social and economic returns, which are beneficial to individuals, families, workplaces, communities and the economy.

I mentioned that advanced learner loans have gone up. They are an important offering to those doing adult courses. They are available to thousands of adults aged

19 and above who are studying at level 3 to level 6, who can access loan support to help to meet upfront fees, removing one of the main barriers to learning.

I highlighted the fact that community learning often takes place in accessible local venues such as libraries, children's centres and community centres, and reaches those most in need in the most disadvantaged wards and on the most deprived housing estates, often at a time to suit learners. The outcomes of community learning are many and varied, including better self-esteem, better mental and physical health, more confident parenting, higher-level skills, formal training courses, employment and the confidence to apply for jobs.

We know that FE works. In terms of the destinations of adult students who complete FE courses, 64% get jobs, 20% go into further learning and 4% go to university. Achieving a level 2 boosts earnings by 11% and increases the chances of being employed by 2 percentage points. Some 41% of level 3 FE students live in areas of educational disadvantage, of whom 34% progress to higher education.

We have to be proud of these institutions. Of 385 colleges, 19% are outstanding and 61% are good. Just as in the case of the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, no doubt, my own college and adult and community learning centre have shaped my views as a Minister, showing me how the education system must be part of evening up the odds for those who are disadvantaged. I intend to visit more as our reforms take root, and to lay out further proposals in future.

*Question put and agreed to.*

3 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Friday 13 January 2017

## DEFENCE

### Defence Infrastructure Reform

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster):** Defence infrastructure is a vital component in enabling the armed forces to train and prepare for operations and for the Ministry of Defence (MOD) to deliver its outputs. The MOD spends nearly £5 billion each year operating, maintaining, constructing and disposing of its extensive infrastructure base, which represents 1.8% of the UK land area.

In November, we announced a long-term programme to invest £4 billion over the next decade in an estate that will help deliver strategic defence and security review 2015's ambitious plan for joint force 2025, enabling savings in running costs of £140 million over 10 years, while releasing 91 of our most expensive sites by 2040. This will help to deliver the MOD's contribution of land sufficient for 55,000 new homes towards the Government's housing target.

In parallel, we have reviewed how our estate is managed and infrastructure decisions are approached, taken, and implemented across the whole of defence. This includes the role of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO), the Royal Navy, Army and Air Force commands and MOD head office. The aim has been to ensure that every pound we spend on our estate represents optimum value for money.

We have reached two principal conclusions from this review. First, we will achieve improved allocation of available funding if infrastructure decisions that bear on the work of the military commands are taken by them rather than by the DIO. The commands are better placed to balance infrastructure requirements against other enablers of military capability such as equipment and trained personnel for which they already hold the budgets. In line with the defence operating model, we therefore plan to delegate this authority, and the relevant funding, to the commands and to Defence Equipment and Support (DE&S) from April 2018, subject to confirmation later this year that all parts of the organisation are ready to support this, and that effective safeguards are in place to ensure that we continue to drive towards a better estate that more efficiently and effectively enables military capability.

Secondly, we will restructure the DIO to operate more effectively in the new delegated environment. This means making it more customer facing at both the strategic and operational level, improving its internal operation so that it can work better with and deliver better value from infrastructure providers, and also strengthening its abilities to act to assure that appropriate standards are being met across the defence estate and to provide Ministers with advice on the long-term affordability of the estate and the strategic implications for the estate of decisions taken by the commands. Since 2014 a strategic business partner contract has been in place

with Capita, under which they lead and manage the DIO. Capita have been instrumental in helping us deliver the Better Defence Estate strategy and in sustaining specialist capability. We are reviewing with Capita how their continued support can be adapted to the new infrastructure model we now envisage.

[HCWS410]

## FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

### OSCE Ministerial Council, Hamburg

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** I represented the United Kingdom at the 23rd Ministerial Council meeting of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), held in Hamburg, Germany on 8-9 December 2016 and hosted by German Foreign Minister and OSCE Chairman-in-Office Frank-Walter Steinmeier. The Council is the top decision-making body of the OSCE and was attended by Ministers from across its 57 participating states.

The Council took place in the final month of a year when the OSCE has continued to be at the centre of the international response to the Ukraine crisis, via its special monitoring mission, its observer mission to two Russian checkpoints on the Ukrainian-Russian border and through its membership of the trilateral contact group. Ukraine remained the core element of many statements in plenary by participating states including by US Secretary of State Kerry, German Foreign Minister Steinmeier, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Klimkin and EU High Representative Mogherini among others. In my interventions in the discussions that took place on 8 December I repeated our strong support for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity and expressed deep concern at the ongoing situation in eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

A number of other important issues were also discussed. The UK used the event to highlight the need to resolve other protracted conflicts and to minimise the risk of new conflict, including by reducing military risk through conventional arms control. I joined Georgian Foreign Minister Janelidze and other 'Friends of Georgia', including US Secretary of State, John Kerry in expressing our support to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and calling on Russia to reverse its recognition of Georgia's regions as independent states. I also underlined the UK's ongoing support for the OSCE's autonomous institutions and its field missions including in my bilateral discussions with Michael Link, Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and Dunja Mijatovic, the representative on freedom of the media.

Behind the scenes, the UK delegation continued to negotiate a range of declarations and decisions for adoption by the Ministerial Council. These negotiations made progress in a number of areas, resulting in a declaration welcoming the broad range of the OSCE's project assistance in the field of small arms and light weapons and stockpiles of conventional ammunition. A declaration on the OSCE framework for conventional arms control was also agreed, signalling approval for a structured dialogue between participating states on the

current and future challenges and risks to security in the OSCE area. Declarations and decisions were also made on migration, on reducing the risks of conflict stemming from the use of information and communication technologies, on enhancing the use of advance passenger information, and on strengthening good governance and promoting economic connectivity.

Divergent approaches limited the scope to reach consensus on a number of proposed declarations. It was particularly disappointing that disagreement from certain participating states to the inclusion of a reference to Crimea meant that a declaration on the OSCE's role in, and support to, Ukraine could not be agreed, despite 56 of the 57 participating states agreeing the text. It was also disappointing that, despite the best efforts of the UK and other states, attempts to agree decisions in

the human dimension failed, primarily due to further Russian obstructionism. However, the UK was instrumental in securing the agreement of 42 participating states to a joint statement on human rights which was delivered by the Ambassador to Norway to the OSCE during the closing session.

I met Irish Foreign Minister Dara Murphy and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu on non-OSCE business.

A copy of the UK plenary intervention can be found online on the gov.uk website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/united-kingdom-statement-to-the-23rd-osce-ministerial-council>

[HCWS411]

# WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Friday 13 January 2017

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