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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Friday 27 January 2017

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

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

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

Homelessness Reduction Bill

[Relevant documents: Fifth Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee, The draft Homelessness Reduction Bill, HC 635, and Third Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee, Homelessness, HC 40.]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

DUTY TO UNDERTAKE A REVIEW OF THE ACT

The Secretary of State must undertake a review of this Act, including its impact on reducing homelessness and on local authority finances. Such review must start no earlier than the first anniversary of the commencement of the Act and no later than the second anniversary. It must consider, in particular, whether the funding for the provisions in this Act is adequate and whether additional monies should be provided.”—(*Andy Slaughter.*)

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to undertake a review of this Act, in terms of its impact and its funding, no earlier than the first anniversary of the commencement of the Act and no later than the second anniversary.

Brought up, and read the First time.

9.34 am

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—*Restriction on the termination of assured shorthold tenancies*—

“(1) After section 19A of the Housing Act 1988 (Assured shorthold tenancies: post-Housing Act 1996 tenancies) insert—

“Section 19B longer term tenancies

Any assured shorthold tenancy (other than one where the landlord is a private registered provider of social housing) granted on or after April 1, 2018 cannot be terminated by the landlord within thirty six months of being granted other than for the breach of an express or implied term of the tenancy if the termination would result in the tenant becoming homeless. It is an implied term of such a tenancy that the tenant may terminate the tenancy by giving two months’ written notice to the landlord.”

(2) In Section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 (Recovery of possession on expiry or termination of assured shorthold tenancy) insert—

“(4ZAA) In the case of a dwelling-house in England no notice under subsection (4) may be given for thirty six months after the beginning of the tenancy.””

This new clause is an amendment to section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 which would prevent landlords from using the “notice only” grounds for possession for the first three years of the tenancy by private sector landlords where the tenant would become homeless.

New clause 3—*Controls on rent increases within a tenancy*—

“(1) After section 23 of the Housing Act 1988 insert—

“Section 23A: rent increase

(1) This section applies to any assured shorthold tenancy granted on or after 1 April 2018 in respect of any property in England other than one granted by a private registered provider of social housing.

(2) It is an implied term of all such tenancies that the rent may only be increased in any year on the anniversary of the commencement of the tenancy and that the rent may increase by no more than the percentage specified by the Office for National Statistics as the Consumer Prices Index figure for the month immediately preceding the proposed increase if there is a significant risk that that tenant would become homeless.

(3) Any term of the tenancy (or any other agreement, whether between the landlord and tenant or any third party) which is inconsistent with subsection (2) is of no effect.

(4) The landlord must serve written notice of the new rent on the tenant and any other party who is responsible for the payment of the rent.

(5) The notice must be in a prescribed form (or substantially to the same effect) and must specify—

- (a) the present rent;
- (b) the percentage increase proposed; and
- (c) the proposed new rent,

together with any other matters or information which may be prescribed.

(6) A person served with such a notice may, within 28 days of being so served, refer it to the appropriate tribunal for a determination as to the validity of the notice and, if necessary, to examine the risk of the tenant becoming homeless.

(7) Should a court or tribunal in any proceedings find that the landlord has received rent in excess of that permitted by this section, it must either—

- (a) order that the excess rent be repaid to the tenant (including to any former tenant if the tenancy has come to an end),
- (b) order that it stands to the credit of the tenant in respect of future rent which will fall due; or,
- (c) set it off against other sums which the tenant owes to the landlord under the tenancy.

(8) The Secretary of State has power to prescribe a form for the purposes of this section and may make different provision for Greater London and the rest of England. The power must be exercised within a reasonable period and, in relation to Greater London if the Mayor of London makes a written request that it be exercised and provides a draft form, must be in the form proposed by the Mayor.

(9) The Secretary of State has power to modify subsection (2) by order and may make different provision for Greater London and the rest of England. Any modification is limited to substituting an increase which is lower than the Consumer Prices Index. That power must be exercised within a reasonable period and, in relation to Greater London if the Mayor of London makes a written request that it be exercised and specifies a particular substitution, must be the substitution specified by the Mayor.

(10) In this section—

“Greater London” shall have the same meaning as in the London Government Act 1963 (c.33)

“Mayor of London” shall have the same meaning as in the Greater London Authority Act 1999 (s.29).””

This new clause concerns rent increases. It provides that it is an implied term of all assured shorthold tenancies granted on or after 1 April 2018, that the rent can only go up once a year and by no more than CPI if there is a significant risk of the tenant as a result of the increase becoming homeless. It requires a notice to be given to the tenant, giving them details of the increase and for a right to appeal that notice to the First Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber). The Secretary of State has a power to prescribe a lower increase and must do so in respect of London if the Mayor of London requests it.

Andy Slaughter: It is a pleasure to open today's proceedings on this important Bill that, if passed, will mark a sea change in the way in which homelessness is treated in this country. This is a rare creature—a private Member's Bill with a hope of success. I should not tempt fate this early in proceedings, but I cannot see the usual suspects sitting behind the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the promoter of the Bill, so I am already encouraged.

I think that the Bill has support from all parties. Importantly it has the support of the Government; otherwise, I suspect that we would not have got this far. We should not forget the good work that the Communities and Local Government Committee and its Chair have done in support of the Bill. I also pay tribute to the promoter of the Bill, who now knows more about the intricacies of homelessness law than he perhaps ever wanted to.

There are matters still to be resolved but—and I say this advisedly—I hope that, as far as this House is concerned, they can all be resolved this morning. For my part, I do not intend to go on at length. Although certain important matters need to be covered, I hope that in the time we have available today, the Bill will be able to complete all its stages.

Let me be clear from the outset that I do not intend to press new clauses 2 and 3 to a Division. I am hopeful that when the Minister speaks, I will hear words that will encourage me not to press new clause 1. One interesting feature of the Bill has been that we have had constructive discussions about it—outside the Committee, of course; not in it, as that would not be at all appropriate. My last email to the Minister was sent at about 11 pm last night. I appreciate that that might have been past his bedtime and he has not had time to respond, but we are getting where we want to go.

New clause 1 deals with perhaps the central unresolved issue, which relates not to the content of the Bill—we will come to that when we consider the Government's amendments—but to its implementation and, in particular, whether the resources that the Government have set aside are sufficient. New clauses 2 and 3 are also important because they address what stands behind the Bill—the fact that legislation of itself will not tackle the homelessness crisis. To be fair to the promoter of the Bill, he has at all stages said that that is the case, and he repeated it in his article that has been published on PoliticsHome.com this morning. I appreciate that, but we cannot look at the Bill in a vacuum; we have to look at the surrounding circumstances. Nothing illustrates that better than the figures on rough sleeping that were released two days ago, which revealed a shocking 16% increase year on year. More than 4,000 people are now sleeping rough on the streets of the UK. One rough sleeper is one too many, and what should alarm the House in particular is the fact this is a crisis that does not need to exist.

Under the previous Labour Government, rough sleeping fell by three quarters, because of direct Government intervention and co-ordination with not only local authorities, but the many fine homelessness charities, which also stand behind the Bill. This crisis is solvable, but the fact that street homelessness has gone up by more than 130% since 2010—under the coalition Government and now under this Government—really should shame the Government. We are here to pass an important Bill, but that does not get them off the hook.

I must strike one small note of discord: we do not want this to become a battle about who is more in favour of the Bill. The promoter's article mentioned the danger of the Bill being delayed because of our new clauses. There must be a lot of confused pots and kettles out there, given that the Government have tabled 21 complicated amendments that no one would wish to consider on Report—they should have been taken in Committee. I am hopeful that we can deal with them, but the point is that it is not unreasonable or irrational for the Opposition to take a little time to debate important principles.

In Committee, Government Members spoke for two and a half times as long as Opposition Members. I realise that there were one or two more of them, unfortunately—

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy Slaughter: In a moment.

We all—even I—must sometimes curb our prolixity, and we were very disciplined in Committee. We withdrew many new clauses and amendments before the Christmas break to speed the passage of the Bill. Even though my colleagues in Committee had huge expertise and a lot to say, we were very disciplined. I wish that I could say the same for the Minister and Government Back Benchers, including the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson).

Michael Tomlinson: It was a great pleasure to serve in Committee with the hon. Gentleman. I am delighted to hear that he is still in favour of the Bill and that it still attracts cross-party support. Today he can rely on my discipline and, I am sure, that of all colleagues to ensure that the Bill goes through.

Andy Slaughter: Excellent. I am sure that those rousing words will be followed by action. That might even be the last we hear from the hon. Gentleman today.

I do not want to labour the point, but we should have been able to get through the Bill in less time, notwithstanding the fact that it is an important and, for a private Member's Bill, quite long Bill. It is considerably longer than the Bill that we will debate next week, although I suspect our consideration of that one will take rather longer.

It is regrettable that this Bill spent so long in Committee, but we know why it did: the Government were filibustering in order to keep the parliamentary boundaries Bill, which is promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass), out of Committee. I am not saying that we do not all play these tricks from time to time; I am just saying that we should not start pointing the finger over who is to blame for delaying the Bill, and instead get on with this now.

I want to deal with the point about money. Right at the beginning of our Committee stage, the Minister said, “I hope to tell you before the end of Committee how much money there will be.” The Government gave a welcome commitment to fund the additional costs fully—there will be substantial additional costs on local authorities, and under the new burdens doctrine, the money has to come from central Government—but we waited week after week with bated breath to find out what money there would be. He kept his promise—just—and at the last moment, some money came forward. It was not a negligible sum: about £48 million over two years. However, that amount must be compared with the sensible estimates from individual local authorities and their collective bodies, such as the Local Government Association and London Councils. For example, while £37 million or £38 million has been set aside for the first year of the Bill’s implementation, London Councils estimates that the cost will be about £160 million. There is therefore a massive disparity in the figures.

9.45 am

The Bill takes us into new territory, and no one really knows what the full cost will be, so the solution alighted upon is to have an early review of whether the amounts allocated for those two years are sufficient and—perhaps more controversially—of the truth of the Government’s assertion that no additional funding will be necessary after two years because the Bill will be self-financing. There is huge scepticism about that.

I disagree with another thing the promoter said in his article. He said that there was no support for our new clauses, but there is total support for them. There is, however, an issue about timing and ensuring that the Bill completes its stages here and in the other place. The scepticism about the financing of the Bill is shared not just by local government, but by the charities that support the Bill.

It is only fair, reasonable and right that local government is properly funded, as the new burdens doctrine says, but the crucial point is that if there is not enough money, the Bill will not work—it will simply be words on a piece of paper. If that is the case, we will not see the necessary sea change in how we address homelessness or, in particular, the extension of duties around prevention and cure, which apply to those in priority need, to single homeless people and everybody else who presents as homeless. If we are sincere about the Bill, that is what we should all want.

New clause 1 would simply set out in the Bill that the review must be held. It provides that, following the Bill’s implementation, we must judge whether there is sufficient money—the Government say there is; everybody else says there is not—for the purposes set out in it. The Minister has raised one or two procedural points about when the Bill’s provisions will take effect and the appropriate time for a review. I am open to debating those matters but, on the principle of the review, I hope to hear him say that it must take place in a reasonable time while money is still available to local authorities, and, in particular, that it will cover not just whether the Bill is succeeding, but whether the money available is sufficient to cover the full costs. I suspect that all Members on both sides of the House would want that, because they will not want their local authorities to be the ones that fail. Against a background of local authorities experiencing

cuts to their budgets of 40% or 50% over the past few years, it would not just be unfair to expect local authorities to cover those substantial costs; it would be impossible for them to do so.

The Minister says that, apart from clause 13, the substantive clauses in the Bill will not take effect until regulations have passed—I appreciate that. Indeed, that is entirely reasonable, given that local authorities will need a substantial period in which to gear up to their new responsibilities, as they will need to recruit and train staff, and to put procedures in place. As is often the case, however, the devil will be in the detail of the guidance. The Minister can speak for himself, but I think that his view is that full implementation could take up to a year.

Clearly, until it is implemented, we do not know what the costs are likely to be. It is a question of what is a reasonable period, and new clause 1 suggests that a reasonable period is between one and two years. I propose that we should go to the end of the two-year period, but that we should also ensure that we are then in a position to establish whether the money has been sufficient, because that is when the money will run out.

There is a slight disconnect between the funding announcement in last week’s written statement, which dealt with the financial years 2017-18 and 2018-19, and what the Minister is now saying, which is that the Bill is unlikely to be implemented until 2018. Either the Government are giving local authorities money upfront, which would be slightly unusual in my experience, or that needs to be corrected. In any event, it is clear that there is only two years’ worth of money, that the money may be insufficient, and that at the end of that two-year period it will run out.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Newham Council has looked into the cost of implementation, and thinks that it will be £2.5 million in the first year alone. I am delighted that the Bill has been introduced, but does my hon. Friend honestly believe that the Government will fully compensate councils for the money that they will need to spend?

Andy Slaughter: I am one of nature’s optimists. The Minister is such a reasonable fellow, and so kind-hearted, that I am sure that if he says he wishes to provide the full amount, he means it. Unfortunately, however, the record of the Government as a whole is not one of being particularly kind-hearted, particularly to local government. They have a habit of passing the buck by cutting the budget of the Department for Communities and Local Government, as is clear from the fact that local government cuts have been the biggest of all.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) is absolutely right to be sceptical. That is indeed what we want to hear. There are many figures floating around, but Newham Council knows what it is talking about, because it has one of the most pressing housing needs in the country, some of the poorest communities in the country, and, I am afraid, some of the worst housing in the country, especially in the private rented sector.

These are matters of real concern. All we are asking for is a commitment from the Minister not just to a review, but to a review that will be undertaken at the right time and will be all-encompassing. As I said

[*Andy Slaughter*]

earlier, the Select Committee has played a key role—its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), is an acknowledged expert, and he has also benefited from the able assistance of Members on both sides—and it, as well as local authorities themselves, should be involved in any review process.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Enfield, like Newham, contains some of the poorest people in the country with the greatest housing need, and obviously we want the Bill to be implemented, but good councils throughout the country are already embarking on the prevention measures specified in the Bill under the current funding settlement, and will welcome the provision of more money to enable them to continue those measures.

Andy Slaughter: I think the best thing to say is that there is a mixed economy among local authorities. Some do very well—some have to do very well because of the pressures on them—and others do less well. Part of the Bill's purpose is to bring them all up to the same standard. However, the hon. Gentleman's point cuts both ways. If it is true that Camden Council, for example, is already preventing 80% of those who present themselves from becoming homeless, the savings that are likely to be made—most of which, I understand, will result from an increase in prevention work, which will avoid the need to find alternative accommodation or fund the costs of homelessness in other ways—will be less. The Government rather piously hope that after two years there will be no need for funding, but I do not think anyone believes that, including the Government.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): This is not just a problem in London. In 2015-16, there were more than 1,000 homelessness prevention and relief cases in Wirral as a result of the council's actions. Does my hon. Friend agree that any new duties that councils will have to take on should be fully funded, both now and in the future?

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. However, the problem is clearly greater in some areas than in others. The precedent for the Bill is legislation passed by the Labour-run Government of Wales, which has already been successful: there have been substantial falls in homelessness. Of course there are parts of Wales where there is a real crisis, as there are in the rest of the United Kingdom, but there are also hotspots, and the big cities, particularly London, are hotspots.

We cannot rely on the example of Wales. It is still possible in many Welsh authorities for accommodation to be made available to people including those who are not in priority need. In London boroughs—and, I suspect, in my hon. Friend's constituency and many others—that opportunity disappeared years ago, and the reverse is now the case. We spent some time in Committee talking about the disgraceful attitude of Westminster Council, which is sending its homeless people quite literally to Coventry, and I fear that other boroughs are doing exactly the same. That is the difficulty with which we are grappling.

I am not going to labour the point. We want assurances, which we believe new clause 1 would deliver, that the full funding of the Bill's implementation by local authorities for which my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West

(Margaret Greenwood) has rightly asked will be provided. Yes, the Government have made a start, and, yes, I think that we shall hear more about money today, given that some of the Government amendments will involve additional costs. We are pleased with what has been done so far, but we must have that funding, because otherwise the Bill will fail, and local authorities will be in an even more parlous state.

Let me now deal briefly with new clauses 2 and 3. We could have tabled a great many more new clauses illustrating the same point, which is that the Bill's provisions cannot be seen in a vacuum. We all welcome the greater concentration on prevention to which the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) referred, and we also welcome the new relief duties requiring local authorities to assist homeless people who are not in priority need. However, the pattern of homelessness is utterly bleak, and that is a perfect storm which, I am afraid, derives from the Government's own actions or inactions.

The first problem, as the new clauses make clear, is the crisis in the private rented sector. The huge inflation in rents over the past few years has meant that many private landlords take advantage of the “no fault” eviction process for which the Housing Act 1988 provides. They say to people, “You are on benefit, and I can get a higher rent from someone else”, or they simply say, “I want a different tenant and I do not have to give any reason, so off you go.” Provided that the payments are in order, the consequence of that swift process, with no argument to the contrary, is that many thousands of people present themselves to local authorities as homeless. I believe that more than 40% of homelessness cases are caused by private sector evictions, with all the misery that they bring.

Again, however, the problem is not insoluble. The inclusion of new clauses 2 and 3 would make a significant difference. This is a modest proposal. I am suggesting that if there were longer tenancies—three-year tenancies—and if, within the period of those tenancies, there were controls over the levels of rent increases, we would end the present chaotic market in evictions in which landlords bid against each other.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting this point. I will pass over the typo in line four of his new clause 2 and simply ask: does he remember from the Bill Committee that the average length of tenancies was in fact four years, yet in his new clause 2 he refers merely to three years? Does he not accept that there also needs to be a balance, to encourage sufficient landlords?

10 am

Andy Slaughter: I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman does when he is not passing over typos, but I am afraid his argument works both ways. If, as the Residential Landlords Association says—this is, I think, the point the hon. Gentleman is making—tenancies are already on average longer than three years, what is the problem with ensuring that that is the case? Good practice suggests that a good landlord wants to keep a tenant for a period of time; that gives stability and continuity, and there are no breaks in tenancy and no additional fees involved. But not all landlords are good landlords, and some are playing this lottery game where they think they can get more money. Unfortunately, we have even

had the spectacle of local authorities outbidding each other for tenancies, so desperate are they in this regard. All the hon. Gentleman's intervention illustrates is how modest and reasonable this proposal is. When the Minister replies, he might want to say what the Government's thinking on this matter is at the moment.

This is an issue in itself. It is not just an issue about homelessness, but these specific new clauses relate to the risk of homelessness and state that we would achieve the purposes of this Bill—put less pressure on local authorities, and have less need to prevent homelessness—if some landlords were not acting in the manner that they are. That is the purpose of the new clauses. I think they are quite reasonable. I appreciate that, given the time constraints, unless the Government suddenly decide to accept them this morning, it is unlikely that we are going to make progress on them in the course of this Bill, but we will return to this subject time and again until it is resolved.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): There is an extremely high rate of homelessness in Tooting among those aged over 60. I know that Wandsworth Council battles with this greatly day in, day out. Do you agree that it is absolutely unacceptable that we are failing the older members of our society, and that people over 60 need to be taken into account?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Just for good order, would the hon. Lady mind asking the hon. Gentleman to agree, rather than asking the Chair? She should ask whether he agrees, because she does not care whether I agree or not.

Dr Allin-Khan: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is absolutely outrageous that residents aged 60 and over have to suffer in this way and that he must do all he can to ensure the Government address this issue?

Andy Slaughter: Absolutely, and I know that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, also care about homelessness in Tooting. What my hon. Friend illustrates is that we are in new territory. Even though there were big problems, particularly in the private rented sector, 20 or 30 years ago, I doubt that we would then have been talking about homelessness among people of pensionable age. It illustrates how deep this goes in society now that we are worried not just about groups that were at risk in the days of "Cathy Come Home", but about people who are at a time in their life when they deserve, and should have, stability and security.

I am not keeping to my promise, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will conclude now, but let me just say this. Yes, new clauses 2 and 3 illustrate a clear point, but this is only part of the problem. Alongside that is the issue of housing supply and the terrible record, I am afraid to say, that this Government have on genuinely affordable housing, on allowing councils to build and ensuring that there is specialist housing.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy Slaughter: Can the Minister not make the point in his own comments? [*Interruption.*] Very well, I will give way if he wants to intervene.

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his forbearance in taking my intervention. Does he not welcome the record amount of £3.15 billion that this Government are providing to the Greater London Authority to provide affordable housing in London, which has been welcomed by the London Mayor?

Andy Slaughter: As the shadow London Minister, I welcome everything the London Mayor welcomes. I do not want us to go off on a tangent, but I will just say that we were beginning to make progress; we were beginning to make progress towards the end of the last Labour Government, and the best illustration of that is that under the coalition Government eight out of 10 council homes completed were started under the previous Labour Government. I do not mind the Minister taking credit and talking about the building of additional affordable and social homes, but his Government need to have their own record, not leach off ours.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andy Slaughter: For the last time, I will.

Ms Buck: I am extremely grateful. While we are on this topic, is my hon. Friend also aware that the Chartered Institute of Housing estimates that 250,000 social homes will be lost as a result of right to buy and other measures between now and 2020, so whatever assurances the Government are giving us about the construction of new affordable housing, they are the equivalent of turning on the taps while leaving the plug out?

Andy Slaughter: Absolutely, and when I mentioned the quality of members on the Committee from my side, I was of course particularly thinking of my hon. Friend—as well as the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East, and my other hon. Friends on the Committee. I am afraid that they put my feeble efforts to shame, but there it is.

My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) is absolutely right. We have a crisis in housing supply, we have a crisis in the private rented sector, and we also have—which the Government are directly responsible for through the benefit caps, the freezing of local housing allowance, and the cuts in Supporting People—a manufactured homelessness crisis which we are now seeing reflected in the figures I quoted earlier.

I pay tribute to the Minister for the work he has done on this Bill, as well as to the sponsor, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and the sincere comments made by Conservative Back Benchers during the course of this Bill, but they cannot put their heads in the sand and look at this Bill in isolation from everything else that is happening—and when they have looked at that, they have to change their policy. I am sure we are going to get the housing White Paper, possibly even this year, but when it comes, we will be looking for those matters to be dealt with, and that is the purpose of these new clauses. Their purpose is to make sure that this Bill functions and that Government policy as a whole functions in relation to homelessness. That is why I would like to hear from the Minister, if not warm support and acceptance of the new clauses, at least what he intends to do in relation to them.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, as always, Madam Deputy Speaker, and it is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). Before I start, may I draw the House's attention to my entry in the register of Members' interests?

We should get back to the fact that this Bill is about reducing homelessness and is entitled the Homelessness Reduction Bill. At some stages during the hon. Gentleman's rather lengthy speech, I began to wonder whether we were moving off on to the whole policy of housing. I think we should confine ourselves to this Bill, rather than broadening out to the wider aspects. I accept absolutely that one person sleeping rough on our streets at any one time is a disgrace; I have regularly gone on record to say that that is a national disgrace, as, equally, is the fact that we do not know the exact level of homelessness in this country. I start from that principle.

It is of course fair to say that the level of rough sleeping has increased. It is also fair to say that the level of homelessness has increased. However, as the hon. Gentleman will know well, the level of homelessness in this country peaked in 2002-03, when I suspect another party was in government. There was a reduction, which took place as a result of both Government intervention and local authorities taking appropriate action, but, actually, no change in legislation; we should remember that, effectively, legislation on this subject has not changed for 40 years. So we must get back to that particular issue.

Hopefully, we will have more details about the Bill by the time we get to Third Reading, but I will just gently mention that we spent some 15 hours in Committee debating the 13 clauses in this Bill. There were opportunities for amendments. The hon. Gentleman did table amendments, but then withdrew them before we could even debate them. The difference between the amendments that my hon. Friend the Minister will move later and the proposals from the hon. Gentleman is that the Government amendments are a direct consequence of the discussions that we had in Committee. They are designed to improve the Bill and to achieve the outcomes of discussions with housing charities, local government representative bodies, local government generally and the landlords associations. There is therefore a marked difference between those amendments—I accept that there are 21 of them—and the hon. Gentleman's proposals.

I commend my hon. Friends across the House who served on the Bill Committee for their service. They will be aware that, at the last sitting, the Government made a firm commitment to reviewing the Bill at an appropriate point after implementation. I suggest to the Minister that it would be helpful if he were to repeat that commitment today and to clarify it further, so that no one can be in any doubt of the Government's willingness to accept the fact that, as we have funding of £48 million over two years—I thank the Minister for that—we hope that that will lead to the provision of all the funding that local authorities will need to carry out their duties under the Bill, which we hope will become an Act in the not too distant future.

As I have said, however, we do not know what level of demand local authorities will experience as a result of the new burdens they will face. We do know that many local authorities are already accepting a prevention duty, and the funding will clearly be welcome to those

authorities that are acting in a good and positive way. We could look at the stats from every local authority to see how many people are turning up for help, but we also know that the vast majority of single homeless people will be turned away by their local authority without any help or advice. Now, because of the massive change in the law and in the culture of local authorities, the numbers of people are likely to increase, especially during the first year.

Mr Burrows: We also know that the Government are wholeheartedly committed to fulfilling the responsibilities outlined in the Bill, including the financial responsibility to provide funding of £48 million. If, beyond the current spending round, additional finances were needed in order to fulfil the duties in the Bill, having taken account of savings, does my hon. Friend agree that that wholehearted commitment should continue and that we would expect the money to be available for that?

Bob Blackman: I think the whole House would expect the Government to recognise that there will be extra cost pressures on local authorities and, given the commitment that they have made, to continue to fund these measures in the years to come.

One of the problems with new clause 1 is that it proposes a review after a fixed period of time, and then that would be it. That is not an acceptable way forward. I want the Government to keep this matter continually under review, and I am sure that the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee and the rest of its members, who are joint sponsors of the Bill, will ensure that the Minister—or whoever is the Minister at the time—continues to have their feet held to the fire.

Michael Tomlinson: Long may he reign.

Bob Blackman: Indeed, but this Minister cannot commit his successor to maintaining a particular position. However, we on the Select Committee will keep this matter under review. We will scrutinise the level of activity and the funding that follows.

10.15 am

The hon. Member for Hammersmith pointed out that a whole range of activities will be carried out by local authorities, many of which will result in additional funds being raised and costs being reduced. One of the stats from London Councils shows that, in 2014-15, the total expenditure on temporary accommodation was £611 million. Reducing that figure by just 5% would pay for the cost of the Bill. One problem is that, because local authorities are not yet implementing their prevention duties early enough, families and other people in crisis end up in temporary accommodation at the last minute, which is very expensive. If we can reduce that expenditure just marginally—5% is not a huge amount—it would pay for the cost of the Bill. If councils across the country can achieve their prevention duty, that would prevent anyone from becoming homeless at all, and the cost reduction to local authorities would be enormous. I accept that there will be a peak in the first year; we should all understand that.

The Bill Committee and, prior to that, the Select Committee spent some considerable time discussing how long it would take for councils to prepare for the extra duties that the Bill will require of them. Obviously,

they will need to recruit and train staff. They will also need to completely change the culture that exists within housing departments. Because of that, the Bill has been drafted to allow the substantive clauses to be commenced only when those preparations have been completed. New clause 1, as drafted, would provide a commitment to review the Act before we had the necessary data and before some of its provisions had even commenced. I am sure that that is not what the hon. Member for Hammersmith intended, and on that basis, I urge him to reconsider his new clause. I trust that we are going to get a commitment from the Minister on reviews, and we will hold him to account if that is not the case. However, I am sure that we will get such a commitment later this morning.

Turning to new clauses 2 and 3, I commend the hon. Member for Hammersmith for his ingenuity in getting them into the scope of the Bill. They relate to the operation of the private rented sector, rather than to the homelessness duty of local housing authorities, and the Minister will no doubt respond to them in detail. I would point out, however, that we intervene in markets at our peril, often with unintended consequences. I want to draw the House's attention to some of the problems in the market right now. I am a great supporter of longer tenancies, and the Communities and Local Government Committee has regularly campaigned for such tenancies. One problem in the market is that mortgage lenders are very reluctant indeed to offer mortgages to landlords who offer tenancies of longer than six months. I understand that some mortgage lenders have recently relaxed their rules on that, to allow for 12-month tenancies. That is a welcome move, and I hope that the Committee will look at that with a view to encouraging the process. However, to have such a provision in the Bill would run the risk of reducing the supply of private rented sector accommodation and of putting up the rents of the people we are trying to help. These proposals would therefore be completely counterproductive.

Another issue is that mortgage lenders are now insisting on deposits of between 25% and 40% from landlords, and then insisting that the rent level is at least 1.4 times the amount of the mortgage repayment. The reality is that lenders are forcing up the rents of private sector landlords. That does not make sense and Government policy must intervene. Rent controls have been tried, but they have failed. If rent controls are imposed, rents are artificially forced up to start with, the market becomes overburdened with red tape and the supply of rented housing goes down. The consequence of that is more homelessness, not a reduction.

The new clauses would lead to more homelessness, not a solution. I urge the hon. Member for Hammersmith to withdraw the motion—although the new clauses clearly relate to a policy matter that should be debated. I have made it plain from the beginning that my Bill will not actually increase the supply of housing—the number of units—in this country, but that is a matter for the Government and something that needs to be achieved. However, my Bill will ensure that homeless people, particularly those who are homeless for the first time, get help and advice. I am worried that the hon. Gentleman's new clauses would reduce the supply of housing and penalise the very people whom we aim to help. I look forward to the Minister's response and invite the hon. Gentleman to withdraw his new clause.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I rise to support new clause 1. This is my first speech on this important Bill, so I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on introducing it. He has done so with great persuasion and has performed an important service for us all. I also congratulate both Front-Bench teams on working constructively to bring the Bill to this point.

I support the Bill but, as good as it goes, we will be kidding ourselves today if we leave this House, pat ourselves on the back and believe that the House has done everything that it could to tackle an emergency that is unfolding before our eyes. I chose to speak in today's debate to reflect the rising concern among my constituents in Leigh—a concern that is shared widely in Greater Manchester—that an increasing number of people can be seen huddling in doorways across the region. People will not just walk on by; they do not accept that things have to be like this. Homelessness and rough sleeping are not inevitable facts of life in 2017. Our society is wealthy enough to ensure that nobody should spend a night without a roof over their head. We need new urgency on both sides of the House to bring forward appropriate action to address the situation.

If there is a problem with the Bill, it is that it goes nowhere near far enough to tackle the scale of the problem. It does not address the wider cross-governmental work that is necessary to provide an appropriate response. Let us take a reality check. The Minister will be aware of the figures that came out this week showing a 16% rise in rough sleeping over the past year—my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) referenced that in his opening remarks. Since 2010, rough sleeping has doubled across England and is increasing at an alarming rate. The problem is even worse in Greater Manchester, with a 41% increase in the past year across the 10 boroughs. According to local officials, that figure does not reflect the full picture. They believe that at least 300 people across Greater Manchester will spend tonight out on the streets. That is simply unacceptable, and I have not heard from the Government what they are doing about that. What are they doing now to help people find warmth and shelter?

As I said, the number of people rough sleeping has doubled, but the Bill will not reverse that trend and our eyes need to be open to that. I support new clause 1, because urgency is crucial in this debate. We need a clear commitment to review what is happening. I take the point of the hon. Member for Harrow East, but we all know that timetables shift after a Minister at the Dispatch Box commits to review something. The civil service will say, "We will review it in the autumn," and that becomes the winter and then the spring. That is what happens, but it is not good enough. The problem is bigger than that. We need clarity and certainty. There should be a commitment to review how the legislation is working—both whether it is reducing homelessness and whether the Government are giving councils adequate funding.

For the reasons outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) a moment ago, I do not believe that the funding is adequate. I differ from my Front-Bench team here in that I think the review should take place within one year. We need more urgency. Although I expect the Bill to have a modest but welcome impact on homelessness, I believe that an annual review would reveal that it goes nowhere near addressing the

[*Andy Burnham*]

scale of the problem and that Government funding for councils is inadequate. We must remember that most of the funding comes next year and then reduces sharply in the year after. In the third year, there is nothing at all. I do not want to wait until the third year to find out whether the legislation is working. The review should be conducted within 12 months.

We need to hear much more from the Government. If they want to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, there must be a cross-Government response. When Labour was in government, we established a rough sleepers unit, bringing together all the Departments with a role to play. I do not see that level of cross-Government working here. In addition to that commitment to work across Government, we need a clear ambition. What is the Government's ambition on rough sleeping? I am not aware of one. Rough sleeping is increasing at an alarming rate, so what are they going to do about it? Will they reverse that trend? Will they make the same commitment that I have made in Greater Manchester that we should work to eradicate rough sleeping by 2020? [*Interruption.*] It is all very well the Minister looking the other way and talking to his colleagues, but what is he going to do about rough sleeping now and in the next few years? What is the Government's ambition? Are they committed to reversing the increase? Will they go further and eliminate rough sleeping? We need to hear about that from the Minister today. I do not want to inject a partisan note into this debate, but we will be doing nobody any favours if we sit here today and think that the Bill, as good as it is, is enough. The Bill will not reverse the looming cuts to housing benefit.

Michael Tomlinson: The right hon. Gentleman admits that he did not sit on the Bill Committee and that he did not contribute on Second Reading. Had he done so, he would have seen the cross-party nature of proceedings. While I am sure that his points are relevant to new clauses 1, 2 and 3, they will not attract the same cross-party support that has to date been the nature of the Bill.

Andy Burnham: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying. There is cross-party support. I support the Bill—the hon. Member for Harrow East and the Government have my support today—but I am entitled to speak for the people who will be on the streets of Greater Manchester and the hon. Gentleman's constituency tonight. I am entitled to give them a voice in this House. The Bill will not change their situation or reduce rough sleeping anytime soon, so who is speaking for them? It is unacceptable for the House to debate homelessness in a cosy way without facing the reality that rough sleeping is rising at an alarming rate. What is the Minister doing about that? The House and, more importantly, the people out there on the cold streets deserve an answer.

Ms Buck: I urge my right hon. Friend to pay little regard to the comments of the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) because, although he is absolutely correct that there was and is cross-party consensus on the provisions and the culture underpinning the Bill, which we want to see implemented, in Committee and on Second Reading virtually all the comments from Opposition Members have been that

the wider context in which homelessness and rough sleeping exist, from universal credit to housing benefit cuts and housing supply, is going in reverse. It is absolutely right that we should draw attention to that.

10.30 am

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Bill focuses solely on the duties of local authorities, and we must remember that those local authorities are operating in the context of massive cuts to their budgets. We need to be honest with ourselves about whether they are going to be able to rise to the extra pressures that the Bill places on them.

As my hon. Friend says, the Bill will do nothing to reverse the cuts to housing benefits that are coming down the line, which many experts believe will make homelessness and rough sleeping worse. The Bill does nothing to reverse cuts to mental health services that are pushing more people out on to the street. The Bill does nothing to reverse the cuts to social care, which are having the same effect. The Bill does nothing to build more affordable housing.

I am sorry if that injects a note that the Minister does not quite like, but tough. I am here to say it because he needs a better response than the Bill. If he thinks this is it, it is simply not good enough. The Bill is a step in the right direction, but I am afraid that that is all it is. In Greater Manchester, working with my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) and Councillor Beth Knowles from Manchester City Council, we are committing ourselves and our councils to trying to end rough sleeping. If we can do that at our level, the Government should at least do something at their level.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): The briefing note from Crisis, the housing charity, says:

“Whilst we understand the intention behind these amendments we are very worried that, if pushed to a vote and passed, there would be further amendments in the Houses of Lords, leading to ‘Ping-pong’ between the two Houses. This could result in the Bill failing to receive Royal Assent before the end of the parliamentary session, thus killing the Bill.”

My reading of the briefing note is that Crisis would like the Bill to go through without these new clauses. Does the right hon. Gentleman have a view on that?

Andy Burnham: I have also read the briefing note from Crisis, and the hon. Lady will have seen that Crisis does not believe that the funding allocated to the Bill is adequate to meet the obligations that are being placed on local authorities, nor does it believe that the Bill will do anything to address the wider issue of housing benefits.

However, I accept the hon. Lady's point. I have not come here today to do anything to disrupt the passage of the Bill. It would help everybody if the Bill contained a commitment to a review so that we all know where we stand and so that there is a degree of urgency about how the House is addressing this issue.

Mr Marcus Jones: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. I am slightly disappointed by his approach and by the important time he is taking up. It is a shame that he did not come to make these points on Second Reading. That said, he asked me the very serious question about what the Government are doing to help address

the important issue of rough sleeping in Manchester. We have already announced more than £600,000¹ for a social impact bond in Greater Manchester to support entrenched rough sleepers who have the most complex needs. Does he not welcome the work that will be done by the Government and the Greater Manchester combined authority?

Andy Burnham: I will welcome every single thing the Minister does to address this problem and, yes, I welcome that funding. What I do not welcome is the alarming rise in rough sleeping on the streets of Greater Manchester. I am sorry if it is inconvenient for the Minister to hear this, but it is clearly right to put those concerns to him.

Lyn Brown: I was not going to say another word because I want the Bill to go through, but I am amazed by the Minister's chutzpah in moaning about an excellent speech that is relevant and pertinent to the Bill, given that Government Members, week after week after week, talk out excellent Bills. If the Minister does not mind, I would like to listen to what my right hon. Friend has to say because it is actually pertinent, unlike the drivel we normally hear from Government Members week after week after week.

Andy Burnham: The Minister mentioned time. If the Government were making the Bill a priority, perhaps they would make time to debate these issues and to propose their own initiative. Instead, we have a debate on a Friday as a result of a private Member's Bill. I will welcome anything the Minister does to address the issue, but I do not accept a cosy cross-party debate today when the number of people sleeping rough on our streets is increasing every single week. It is a bigger issue than just patting ourselves on the back. More needs to be done, and the Government need to set out today their ambition to cut rough sleeping in the next few years. That is why I am here today. I fully support the Bill, but let us be honest about what it is: a modest first step.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): It was interesting to listen to the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). If I did not know that he represents Leigh, I might have thought that he was standing for some position in Manchester.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on the effective way in which he has secured progress on such a sympathetic Bill on this compelling subject. One would hope that every debate in this place is worthwhile, but few issues are more significant than this Bill, which endeavours to ensure that no one has to endure sleeping rough on the streets of England, that no one has to face the frightening prospect of the lack of a roof over their head if nobody can put them up, and that no one has to be subject to the appalling mental and physical degradation that accompanies homelessness.

It is important to note that homelessness is not the same as rough sleeping, which the right hon. Member for Leigh perhaps misunderstands. We must not dismiss the plight of those who, although they might not be sleeping on the street, are plagued by anxiety and disquiet at that very real possibility. Britain is a developed nation with a strong economy, and I would be so bold as to say that I speak for everyone in this place when I

say that it is shameful that so many people in our country are homeless. We must do all that we can to help them.

It is, of course, agonising to see somebody sleeping on the street, and it is even more concerning when we have freezing weather at this time of year, as we have faced in London this week, because a night out on the streets becomes even more unbearable than it is at the best of times. It is not possible to scrutinise the Bill effectively without understanding the complex nature of homelessness and just how extensive the problem is across the country. Quantifying homelessness is, in itself, an extremely difficult task. The way in which homelessness is recorded varies and, even if a unanimous method were both agreed and employed, the number might still be underestimated, as many people often sleep out of sight, moving from place to place.

Indeed, because of the appalling physical abuse to which rough sleepers, particularly women, are subjected, many actively try to leave places where they can be spotted. Despite that difficulty, Government statistics show that 4,134 people slept rough on any one night across England in 2016. Shockingly, that is more than double the number recorded in 2010. In London alone, local agencies report that 8,096 people slept rough in 2015-16, a 6% rise on the previous year.

Andy Burnham: The figures showing the rise since 2010 are shocking. Does the hon. Lady think that her Government are doing enough to tackle rough sleeping?

Pauline Latham: The Government are trying to tackle rough sleeping, which is not an easy subject to address. The fact that they are allowing the Bill to go through shows that they are taking it seriously.

David Mackintosh (Northampton South) (Con): Members on both sides of the House need to be aware that many people who are sleeping rough, even if they present to a local authority, will find that local authorities do not currently have the power to help them—it is not a question of money. Does my hon. Friend agree that the powers in the Bill will give local authorities the ability to intervene?

Pauline Latham: I am pleased that my hon. Friend made that point, which I can clearly illustrate with a case I dealt with over Christmas. I had to ring a helpline for a family whose rented house had burned down. They had four children. Derbyshire County Council was not interested in the fact that they were homeless and would have to come back from family to homelessness after Christmas, although the parents would have to continue with their jobs and get the children back into school. It was interested only in whether the children were vulnerable and were being abused. That is a clear example of a local authority not being interested in the fact of homelessness. Even when I phoned on Christmas day and several days after that, we could not get Derbyshire County Council to put anything in place for these people because its view was, "Well, they are not homeless. They are staying with friends in Bournemouth,"—or wherever it was—and not that the parents had to come back to Borrowash to get the children back into school and go back to their jobs. There are therefore problems at the moment.

1. [Official Report, 1 February 2017, Vol. 620, c. 3MC.]

[*Pauline Latham*]

The problem of homelessness is getting worse and the Bill could not be more necessary. Breaking the numbers down, certain groups are at particular risk. In England, women make up 26% of the clients of homelessness services, but as a group they are often much more vulnerable. There are high levels of vulnerability within the female homeless population. Mental ill health, drug and alcohol dependency, a childhood spent in care, experiences of sexual abuse and other traumatic life experiences are all commonplace.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the fact that organisations such as Crisis back the Bill shows that the Government and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) have got this right?

Pauline Latham: I agree with my hon. Friend. The Government are getting it right. They are acting for the benefit of homeless people in this country.

Interviews with homeless women that have been conducted by the fantastic homelessness alleviation charity Crisis, which was cited a few moments ago, show that more than 20% became homeless to escape violence from someone they knew, with 70% of them fleeing violence from a partner. That shows that the Government need the cross-party support that they are getting—or were getting; it seems that that is perhaps not as strong as it was. We need to move forward with the Bill so that it can go successfully to its next stage and become law.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): I am sure that new clauses 2 and 3, which were tabled by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), are well intentioned. New clause 2 would give tenants assurances on their length of tenure and new clause 3 would give assurances on rent increases. However, I am concerned that, rather than helping vulnerable homeless people, they would hinder some of the best work in the Bill.

We know that private landlords are increasingly reluctant to accept benefit claimants—that is certainly the experience of Portsmouth City Council. The Bill represents an effort to change that situation, but new clauses 2 and 3 would frustrate it. Tenants are currently encouraged to remain in occupation until they are evicted by a court order so that they cannot be considered to be voluntarily homeless. That is a stressful and debilitating practice for the tenant, and a disincentive for landlords to take on cases from local authorities. That would be especially true under new clause 2 because it would lock landlords into an unbreakable three-year tenancy agreement if the result of giving notice would be to make the tenant homeless.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the reality is that only around 50% of mortgage lenders lend to buy-to-lets with tenancies of more than one year? The measures might restrict the market even further, so they could cause many more problems than they would fix.

Mrs Drummond: That point was discussed earlier. It would be good if mortgage lenders could extend their offer to three years or even beyond, because we do want long-term tenancies.

New clause 2 would make landlords reluctant to take on anyone who might need local authority help, most of whom would be vulnerable people in receipt of benefits or on low incomes. As Portsmouth and District Private Landlords Association has stressed to me, landlords do not usually evict good and responsible tenants, nor do they want to risk finding bad replacement tenants or to bear the costs of eviction and establishing a new tenancy. But nor do they want their hands to be tied. What if they wanted to sell the rental property or occupy it themselves? New clause 2 makes no provision for that. As a result, it would be a strong disincentive for landlords to take on any tenant who might call on the local authority's duty to house, if they were given notice.

10.45 am

New clause 3, which would cap rent increases, would have a similar effect. Landlords do not want to give notice unnecessarily and this month's National Audit Office report shows that private landlords are not profiteering. Since 2001-02, social housing rents have increased faster than earnings. By contrast, in all regions outside London, median full-time weekly earnings have risen by more than private rental prices, or are within 1% or 2% since 2006. New clause 3 would allow special provision to be made for London rents, but only by setting a lower cap. The motivation for that is presumably that, in London, rents have gone up by 32%—twice as much as earnings. That means that there would be even more of a disincentive for landlords in London to take tenants in receipt of housing benefit.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith would cap private rent increases at the consumer prices index level, yet CPI will almost always be lower than the retail prices index plus 0.5% cap that the previous Labour Government thought reasonable for housing associations. The combination of fixed three-year tenancies and the inability to determine their own rent would mean that landlords would either refuse to take on social tenants, or be obliged to give them notice to get reasonable rent increases by starting a new tenancy. As it stands, the Bill will work with landlords to ease the burdens on tenants and local authorities. New clauses 2 and 3, despite their best intentions, would undo that good work, so I hope that they will not be pressed.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I will be brief because I recognise that we want to get to the final stages of this excellent Bill by the end of the sitting.

In terms of wider reach, the Bill is of course only a partial solution. The report of the Communities and Local Government Committee on homelessness drew attention to wider issues that need to be addressed. We need to build more homes in this country, particularly more affordable homes, and we need to build more affordable homes to rent. The Committee recognised that housing needs vary in different parts of the country. Different housing markets need a different response, particularly in terms of tenure mix.

We look forward to the housing White Paper, which we understand is coming soon. We hope that it will be published before the end of February, when Ministers will be coming before our Committee to give evidence as part of our inquiry into the capacity of the housebuilding industry. We will be able to pursue further some of the points about the ability to provide the homes that are needed at that time. I hope that, as the Minister for

Housing and Planning seems to be indicating, we will see a move away from the idea that starter homes and shared ownership are the total answer to the country's housing needs.

A lot has been said about longer-term tenancies in the private rented sector. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is absolutely right. When the Select Committee looked at that in the previous Parliament, we supported longer-term tenancies. We want to encourage everyone to move towards them. Within those tenancies, people can get the certainty of an agreed annual rent increase, which is different from having an artificially imposed rent control from outside.

In the here and now, money is absolutely crucial to the Bill's success. We are getting a little confused about the timings of reviews. From the Select Committee's point of view, two years on from implementation seems to be a good time to review whether the legislation is working and whether the money available had enabled it to work over the previous two years. I hope that the Minister sees the commitment to a review as a helpful proposal. Alongside the Government, we will review the working of the legislation and the position regarding money. Although there is money in the first year to help local government with start-up costs, after the regulations have been put in place, the Act will probably not be implemented for about a year. We then have a second year with limited funding, and then no funding in the third year, which is probably the second year of operation. I have concerns about that.

I cannot see that there will not be costs to local councils, so I think there is a need for a more immediate review after the Bill is passed, with regard to that third year. If Ministers are looking at a quicker, more immediate review of the finances as soon as the Bill is passed, that would be helpful. The Select Committee would be ready to do an immediate review on that very limited basis, if it would assist the process.

Mr Marcus Jones: It is a pleasure to follow the Chairman of the Communities and Local Government Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts).

Right hon. and hon. Members have spoken quite a lot about the whys and wherefores of process, and about who tabled which amendments where and when—which side is more sanctimonious than the other almost springs to mind. I am not going to get into that because the Bill is very much about outcomes for people who are at risk of homelessness and people who have unfortunately become homeless.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to the new clauses tabled by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). New clause 1 would put on the face of the Bill a statutory requirement for the Secretary of State to review the legislation no earlier than one year and no later than two years after commencement, and would require the review to consider the funding of the provisions. The hon. Gentleman will recall that the question of reviewing the costs of the legislation was raised and discussed at length in Committee, but for the benefit of those who were not there I shall state my commitment very clearly.

I will review the implementation of the legislation, including its resourcing and how it is working in practice, concluding no later than two years after the commencement

of its substantive clauses. I will also carry out, in the same timeframe, a post-implementation review of the new burdens to review the robustness of our assessment of the estimated cost to local authorities and the underlying assumptions. As part of both reviews, I would welcome the input and expertise of the Select Committee, and I am happy to discuss how it could be involved. The resources and funding requirements related to the duties I have outlined will also be considered alongside all the other responsibilities of local authorities as part of future spending reviews.

It is important to bear it in mind that the Bill's provisions will not be implemented on the day it receives Royal Assent, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith acknowledged. We were clear in Committee that the Bill's successful implementation will depend on working with local government to ensure that resources, guidance and training are in place before its provisions are enacted. For that reason, each measure in the Bill can be commenced independently, once local authorities are ready. Given that fact, a statutory requirement to review, tied to the commencement date of the eventual Act, is unworkable, because the substantive clauses will be commenced at a later date. I also argue that such a statutory requirement is unnecessary given the commitments already in place and the long-standing new burdens assessment procedures.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): First, will my hon. Friend make sure, as he always does, that his civil servants are completely aligned with his objectives? Secondly, I welcome his commitment to work with local authorities; I know that my local authority, Broxbourne, would welcome the chance to discuss these matters with him to ensure that the Bill is successful, as I know it will be. Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his excellent work over the past few months to make sure that today's proceedings happened and that new legislation comes into effect.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes an important point about working with local authorities, which we are absolutely determined to do during the Bill's implementation. He knows that I have already met Broxbourne Borough Council to discuss these important issues, and I would certainly be keen to do that again. He also mentioned making sure that my civil servants' intention is aligned with my own; I can tell him that the civil servants working on the Bill have done an absolutely excellent job in very testing circumstances. Although the Government wanted to introduce legislation, we must acknowledge the fact that the process for this Bill has been different, in that it is a private Member's Bill that has also been worked on by the Select Committee, and then had input from local government, the Local Government Association and the housing charities. Our civil servants have done a magnificent job of helping us to bring all those groups together to come out with a product that has broad support.

Ms Buck: On the issue of working with local authorities, the Minister will know my concerns, which I raised in Committee, about Westminster City Council's recent decision to discharge its duty to homeless people mainly outside the local authority, and in some cases as far away as the midlands. His colleague, the Minister for Housing and Planning, told me on "Sunday Politics"

[Ms Buck]

last week that Westminster City Council was wrong to do that and that, in the long run, it should be stopped. Will the Minister confirm that today and tell me what he thinks the long run actually means?

Mr Jones: We discussed that issue in some detail in Committee, so I am not going to go into great detail today, but the law is clear on placements out of borough. The Government are absolutely certain that we want that law to be observed, particularly in relation to making sure that councils look at people's circumstances—such as where children go to school and where people work—before they make any decisions that may affect a particular family.

Andy Burnham: The Minister spoke a moment ago about successful implementation and a review to check that it has been achieved. Part of that success is about the bureaucracy—the successful implementation of the powers and provision of the money required so that local authorities can discharge their functions—but, as new clause 1 says, it is also about the effect the legislation has on actually reducing homelessness. Before he moves on, will he tell us what the Government's objective is and what test they are setting themselves with respect to reducing both rough sleeping and homelessness by 2020? We can judge then whether they have been successful.

Mr Jones: We have set out a significant determination to reduce both rough sleeping and homelessness in general. Nobody should ever have to spend the night on the street, and it is regrettable that that is currently the case, but the Government are absolutely determined to ensure that nobody has to sleep rough. It is a complex matter, as I am sure the right hon. Gentleman is well aware. Some of the things we are doing will have a significant impact. For example, there is a challenge in getting people moved from hostel accommodation into an intermediate position, before they are able to go into accommodation of their own. We are bringing forward £100 million for move-on accommodation, for which a bidding process will open very shortly. I hope that, in the spirit of the Bill, the right hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that the Government are not resting on their laurels and do not see the Bill as the be all and end all to deal with homelessness and rough sleeping, which we take very seriously. We are doing a whole package of things to try to improve the situation for people.

If accepted, under new clause 2 private sector landlords would not be able to rely on the no fault ground for possession, known as section 21, within the first three years of a tenancy, if the termination of a tenancy would result in a tenant becoming homeless. Landlords, and in many cases tenants, welcome the flexibility of the current assured shorthold tenancy regime, which does not lock the parties into long-term commitments, and promotes mobility. Without the certainty that landlords can seek repossession of their property when required, perhaps for their own family to live in, many would be reluctant to let their properties. The unwanted outcome would be landlords withdrawing from the market, which would not help landlords or indeed tenants.

Before assured shorthold tenancies were introduced under the Housing Act 1988, the private rental market was in decline. Regulated rents made being a landlord

simply not commercially viable for many property owners, but since 1988 the private rented sector has increased steadily, growing from just over 9% of the market in 1988 to 19% today. The current framework strikes the right balance between the rights of landlords and tenants, and our efforts should be focused on encouraging a voluntary approach to longer tenancies for those who want them.

With those points in mind, I hope that the hon. Member for Hammersmith will follow through on the comments that he made at the start of the debate and withdraw new clause 2.

11 am

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): It is true that, recently, the liberalisation of permitted development rights has released many more properties for rent, which is a very good thing, but does my hon. Friend agree that changes in fiscal policy, buy-to-let, and, in my own area, selective licensing are encouraging more landlords to resist letting properties? This proposal from the Opposition will exacerbate that trend.

Mr Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend. Layering more regulation on to residential landlords will have the net effect of reducing supply. Many of our constituents rely on renting private properties, so we need to be very careful that the balance is right.

Finally, if new clause 3 is enacted, it will introduce rent controls in the private rented sector by compelling landlords to limit rent rises to no more than once a year and by no more than inflation in cases where there is a risk of the tenant becoming homeless as a result of a rent rise. Although I understand the spirit in which this amendment has been tabled, introducing rent controls is fundamentally the wrong approach and is not borne out by evidence. Experience from Britain and around the world shows that rent controls lead to fewer properties on the market and less choice for tenants. Returning to the situation in the 1980s when the private rented sector was in decline will not help landlords or tenants.

The key to improving affordability and choice for tenants is to build more homes rather than impose rent controls. Our build-to-rent fund has now contracted investment worth £630 million to deliver more than 5,600 high-quality homes specifically for private rent. Our £3.5 billion private rented sector housing guarantee scheme will increase the stream of investment in new private rented sector housing.

We have also established the private rented sector affordability and security working group to explore options to reduce the cost for tenants who access and move within the sector. This group is expected to submit its report to Ministers next month.

I therefore urge the House to agree that new clause 3 is not desirable, and, given the commitment I have made to Opposition Front Benchers, I hope that new clauses 1, 2 and 3 will now be withdrawn.

Andy Slaughter: I thank everyone who has spoken in this debate. I appreciate all the comments that have been made. I particularly thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) for speaking so passionately about the situation in Manchester and the issues of rough sleeping, reminding us that these problems go around the country.

I said in my opening remarks that I would not press new clauses 2 and 3 to a vote, and that is still the case. Their purpose was to try to elicit some positive comments from the Minister, but I think I have failed in that respect. We will return to those matters at an early date. Eviction by private sector landlords is the single greatest immediate cause of homelessness, and it does need to be tackled. We are living not in the world of 1988, but in a very different and less stable climate. I was disappointed by the Minister's rather wholesale rejection of that issue today, but I hope that we will return to it on a future occasion.

On a more positive note, I said that I hoped not to press new clause 1 to a vote. I am greatly encouraged by what the Minister said, and I thank him both for entering into the spirit of the discussion and the specific words he used. He gave us the comfort that we were looking for in relation to a proper, timely and comprehensive review of the finances behind the Bill. I am particularly pleased that he said that the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and the Select Committee itself will be engaged in that process as well as local government. That is extremely helpful, especially given the time pressures we are under to get these matters sorted out here rather than in the other place. I am sure that the other place will be watching and listening to what the Minister and I have said. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the new clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 4

DUTY IN CASES OF THREATENED HOMELESSNESS

Mr Marcus Jones: I beg to move amendment 1, page 5, line 32, at end insert—

“() But the authority may not give notice to the applicant under subsection (5) on the basis that the circumstances in subsection (7)(b) apply if a valid notice has been given to the applicant under section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 (orders for possession on expiry or termination of assured shorthold tenancy) that—

- (a) will expire within 56 days or has expired, and
- (b) is in respect of the only accommodation that is available for the applicant's occupation.”

This amendment prevents a local housing authority from bringing the duty in section 195(2) of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 4) to an end after 56 days if the applicant has been given a notice under section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 that has expired or will within 56 days expire and which is in respect of the only accommodation that is available for the applicant's occupation.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government amendment 2, page 6, line 11, after “accommodation” insert—

“and, on the date of refusal, there was a reasonable prospect that suitable accommodation would be available for occupation by the applicant for at least 6 months or such longer period not exceeding 12 months as may be prescribed”.

This amendment provides that a local housing authority can only bring the duty in section 195(2) of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 4) to an end on the basis that the applicant has refused an offer of suitable accommodation, if on the date of the refusal there was a reasonable prospect that suitable accommodation would be available for 6 months or such longer period not exceeding 12 months as may be prescribed in regulations made by the Secretary of State.

Government amendment 3, page 6, line 22, at end insert—

“(9) The duty under subsection (2) can also be brought to an end under sections 193A and 193B (notices in cases of applicant's deliberate and unreasonable refusal to co-operate).”

This amendment inserts, into section 195 of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 4), a reference to sections 193A and 193B of that Act (inserted by clause 7) under which the duty in section 195(2) can be brought to an end.

Government amendment 4, in clause 5, page 7, line 45, after “accommodation” insert—

“and, on the date of refusal, there was a reasonable prospect that suitable accommodation would be available for occupation by the applicant for at least 6 months or such longer period not exceeding 12 months as may be prescribed”.

This amendment provides that a local housing authority can only bring the duty in section 189B(2) of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 5) to an end on the basis that the applicant has refused an offer of suitable accommodation, if on the date of the refusal there was a reasonable prospect that suitable accommodation would be available for 6 months or such longer period not exceeding 12 months as may be prescribed in regulations made by the Secretary of State.

Government amendment 5, page 8, line 9, at end insert—

“(9) The duty under subsection (2) can also be brought to an end under—

- (a) section 193ZA (consequences of refusal of final accommodation offer or final Part 6 offer at the initial relief stage), or
- (b) sections 193A and 193B (notices in cases of applicant's deliberate and unreasonable refusal to co-operate).”

This amendment inserts, into section 189B of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 5), references to section 193ZA (inserted by amendment 10), and sections 193A and 193B of that Act (inserted by clause 7), under which the duty in section 189B(2) can be brought to an end.

Government amendment 6, page 8, line 18, leave out paragraph (a) and insert—

“(a) for subsection (1) substitute—

(1) If the local housing authority have reason to believe that an applicant may be homeless, eligible for assistance and have a priority need, they must secure that accommodation is available for the applicant's occupation.

(1ZA) In a case in which the local housing authority conclude their inquiries under section 184 and decide that the applicant does not have a priority need—

- (a) where the authority decide that they do not owe the applicant a duty under section 189B(2), the duty under subsection (1) comes to an end when the authority notify the applicant of that decision, or
- (b) otherwise, the duty under subsection (1) comes to an end upon the authority notifying the applicant of their decision that, upon the duty under section 189B(2) coming to an end, they do not owe the applicant any duty under section 190 or 193.

(1ZB) In any other case, the duty under subsection (1) comes to an end upon the later of—

- (a) the duty owed to the applicant under section 189B(2) coming to an end or the authority notifying the applicant that they have decided that they do not owe the applicant a duty under that section, and
- (b) the authority notifying the applicant of their decision as to what other duty (if any) they owe to the applicant under the following provisions of this Part upon the duty under section 189B(2) coming to an end.”

See amendment 8. This amendment also makes the circumstances in which the interim duty to provide accommodation under section 188(1) of the Housing Act 1996 comes to an end where the local housing authority decide that the applicant does not have a priority need.

[Mr Speaker]

Government amendment 7, page 8, line 26, leave out from “for” to end of line 27 and insert—

“pending a decision of the kind referred to in subsection (1)” substitute “until the later of paragraph (a) or (b) of subsection (1ZB).”

See amendments 6 and 8.

Government amendment 8, page 8, line 27, at end insert—

“(o) for subsection (3) substitute—

“(2A) For the purposes of this section, where the applicant requests a review under section 202(1)(h) of the authority’s decision as to the suitability of accommodation offered to the applicant by way of a final accommodation offer or a final Part 6 offer (within the meaning of section 193ZA), the authority’s duty to the applicant under section 189B(2) is not to be taken to have come to an end under section 193ZA(2) until the decision on the review has been notified to the applicant.

(3) Otherwise, the duty under this section comes to an end in accordance with subsections (1ZA) to (1A), regardless of any review requested by the applicant under section 202.

But the authority may secure that accommodation is available for the applicant’s occupation pending a decision on review.”

This amendment, together with amendments 6 and 7, ensure that any interim duty of a local housing authority under section 188 of the Housing Act 1996 to accommodate an applicant continues pending the conclusion of a review of the suitability of accommodation offered in a final accommodation offer or a final Part 6 offer under section 193ZA of that Act (inserted by amendment 10).

Government amendment 9, in clause 6, page 11, leave out lines 14 to 16 and insert—

“(3) For the purposes of this section, a local housing authority’s duty under section 189B(2) or 195(2) is a function of the authority to secure that accommodation is available for the occupation of a person only if the authority decide to discharge the duty by securing that accommodation is so available.”

This amendment ensures that where a local housing authority decides to discharge their duty under section 189B(2) or 195(2) of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clauses 5 and 4, respectively) by actually securing that accommodation is available for occupation by the applicant, sections 206 to 209 of that Act apply. Those sections contain various provisions about how a local housing authority’s housing functions are to be discharged.

Mr Jones: I shall start with amendment 1. At our last Committee sitting on 18 January, I committed to tabling an amendment to clause 4 to ensure that tenants at risk of becoming homeless were sufficiently protected and had access to the required help and support. The Committee agreed amendments to clause 1, so that it now extends the period an applicant is “threatened with homelessness” from 28 to 56 days and clarifies that an applicant is “threatened with homelessness” if they have a valid section 21 eviction notice that expires in 56 days or fewer.

Amendment 1 to clause 4 extends the prevention duty to cover instances where a household that has been served with a valid section 21 notice still remains in the property after receiving 56 days of help from the local housing authority under the prevention duty, and is still at risk of becoming homeless. Specifically, it covers instances where a valid section 21 notice has already expired or will expire in relation to the only accommodation the household has available. The amendment ensures that, in such instances, the prevention duty will continue to operate until such time as the local housing authority brings it to an end for one of the other reasons set out in clause 4, even if the 56 days have passed.

I will also address a related question about other ways of ending a tenancy, which was raised by a number of Members—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson)—during the Committee’s consideration of clause 1. That clause and this amendment address the particular need to clarify the status of an applicant who has been served with a section 21 notice, but, obviously, people can be threatened with homelessness in a number of ways, as was pointed out in Committee, and any eligible applicant who is at risk of being homeless in 56 days or fewer will be entitled to support under the new prevention duty.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does the Minister agree that it is absolutely fantastic that we are addressing this situation? Given that the leader of the Liberal Democrats is on the front page of my local paper saying that if the Liberal Democrats were elected to the council they would supply more than 1,000 new homes to address homelessness, is the Minister not shocked that not one of them is in the Chamber today?

Mr Jones: I have been shocked at how little input there has been from the Liberal Democrats: not one Liberal Democrat was here on Second Reading—and, as we can see today, they have not appeared on Report. My hon. Friend makes a good point. Although at a local level there may be some suggestion that the Liberal Democrats want to address this important issue, at a national level, they do not appear to be showing a massive interest.

Mr Burrows: One of the concerns expressed on Second Reading and in Committee, not least by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), relates to councils that seek to ignore statutory guidance and that will recognise someone as homeless only when a bailiff’s notice is served. Shelter has expressed continuing concerns about that issue in respect of clause 1. Can the Minister reassure us that the guidance and prevention duties will mean that councils cannot simply hide and wait for a bailiff’s notice before acting on these vulnerable households at risk of homelessness?

Mr Jones: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. Furthermore, given how the legislation will now work, it will be in the local authority’s interest to work more quickly with people at risk of becoming homeless. As we discussed many times in Committee, the legislation will very much drive a culture change, so that people are helped far further upstream than they have been to date. We are particularly keen to end some councils’ practice of saying to people, “Just wait for the bailiffs to arrive and then we’ll try to help you.” We want people to be helped far earlier. We do not want them to face a court appearance and a county court judgment; that will not help them to secure accommodation later.

I move on. The remaining amendments in this group relate to the issues that we identified with clause 7 but that we were, unfortunately, unable to address at an earlier stage. We identified a key issue: what is a workable balance between incentives and protections in cases where an applicant refuses a suitable offer of accommodation at the prevention and relief stages? We have been working closely with the local government sector and the homelessness charities to resolve the issue and to develop a way forward; I thank all those

who have provided their expertise and support. We will discuss the core amendments to clause 7 in the next group: they are amendments consequential to amendments made to clauses 4, 5 and 6.

Amendments 2 and 4 clarify the circumstances in which the new prevention and relief duties can be brought to an end by a local housing authority. They would require not only that a suitable accommodation offer had been turned down but that accommodation would have been available for at least six months. Clauses 4 and 5 insert new sections 195 and 189B respectively into the Housing Act 1996. Those set out the duties owed to those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. Both clauses have provisions allowing those duties to be brought to an end if a number of circumstances apply.

Amendments 2 and 4 would change new sections 189B and 195 to require that the grounds for giving notice would not only be the refusal of an offer of suitable accommodation but that, on the date when the accommodation was refused, there was a reasonable prospect that it would be available for at least six months or a longer period, not exceeding 12 months, as may be prescribed in regulations. The amendments are relatively simple and ensure consistency with provisions elsewhere in the Bill.

11.15 am

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I do not want to take up much time. In the cross-party spirit of the debate, I give credit to my council and all councillors in the borough of Richmond upon Thames for all the work that is done.

I have a concern about these clauses. Every single homelessness case in my constituency of Twickenham is absolutely unique. I have come across a very small number of cases in which the homeless person has refused suitable accommodation for reasons of their individual situation: they are not sectionable, but the issue is to do with mental health. Will the final accommodation not be a full stop? Will the homeless person be able to come back to ask again for the accommodation?

Mr Jones: I certainly agree that many local authorities across the country work very hard to help homeless people. We hope that the Bill will improve the situation further. On the circumstances that my hon. Friend mentions, I should say that a person could go back to the local authority for a review; there is a safeguard for people in that sense.

Will Quince: Will the Minister confirm my understanding that the Bill incorporates a particular and special safeguard—a full written warning—before any duty is then withdrawn? That is an extra protection to ensure that those facing a termination of duty know exactly what they are getting themselves into.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend has been a diligent member of the Bill Committee, and I thank him for his intervention. He is correct: the Bill provides for a final written warning. Obviously, we want to make sure that people have an incentive to do the right thing and accept an offer of suitable accommodation, but we also need to consider people who present challenges and need a final warning, in some circumstances, to make them think again and take up the offer the local authority has made.

Amendments 3 and 5 insert helpful signposts into clauses 4 and 5 to ensure that they are appropriately cross-referenced with clause 7. Specifically, they insert references to the provisions in clause 7 about ending the prevention and relief duties when an applicant has deliberately and unreasonably refused to co-operate, and to the provisions about ending the relief duty when an applicant has refused a final accommodation offer or a final part 6 offer. That simply means that the ways in which the prevention and relief duties can be ended are easier to see and understand for those reading the clauses.

Amendment 8, along with amendments 6 and 7, deal with the provision of interim accommodation while a local housing authority is helping an applicant to secure accommodation under clause 5. Amendment 6 sets out that, if a local housing authority has reason to believe that an applicant may be homeless, eligible for assistance and in priority need, it must secure interim accommodation. It also sets out how that duty comes to an end.

In cases where the local housing authority has concluded its inquiries under the homelessness legislation and decides that the applicant does not have a priority need, the duty comes to an end in two circumstances: first, if the local housing authority notifies the applicant that the relief duty is not owed; and secondly, if the local housing authority notifies the applicant that, once the relief duty ends, they will not be owed any further duty to accommodate.

Amendment 7 is a technical amendment to the Housing Act 1996 required as a result of amendments 6 and 8. Where an applicant has been provided with interim accommodation and refuses a final offer, they may request a review of the suitability of that offer. Amendment 8 ensures that the duty to secure interim accommodation continues until any review has been concluded and the decision has been notified to the applicant.

Finally in this group, I turn to amendment 9. The duties to applicants under clauses 4 and 5—the prevention and relief duties—are to help the applicant to secure accommodation. In some cases, this will entail the local housing authority securing this accommodation directly, rather than helping the applicant by, for example, providing a deposit guarantee. Amendment 9 provides that, where that is the case, the provisions of sections 206 to 209 of the Housing Act 1996 apply in the same way they would if the local housing authority secured accommodation under the main homelessness duty.

Those sections contain various provisions about how a local housing authority's housing functions are to be discharged—for example, about how authorities may secure that accommodation is available and how they can require an applicant to pay a reasonable charge for the accommodation. Provisions also cover the requirements relating to placements in and out of district, including notifications to the hosting local housing authority.

I will leave it at that on amendments 1 to 9. I hope that the House will look favourably on them, in the spirit in which proceedings on the Bill have been conducted, and support them.

Andy Slaughter: I must say that, after the 14 hours and seven sittings in Committee that we have heard about, I was somewhat alarmed when the Government tabled 21 amendments on over six pages last week.

[*Andy Slaughter*]

I have to say that, on my first reading of them, I was not much the wiser as to what was happening. However, one perseveres, as one always does with legislation.

I must say two things. First, I do appreciate the difficulties the Minister and the promoter have had in squaring the circle so that local government, landlords and homelessness charities are all happy about the way the Bill works, rather than about the principles of the Bill, which I think have been agreed. I am also grateful to the Minister for giving us time with his officials to go through in some detail the implication of the amendments and why they are necessary, and I think I speak for my hon. Friends in saying that. It is regrettable that things could not have been done differently, but we are where we are, and the Opposition regard these amendments and the next set, which we will come to in due course, as either necessary or improving of the Bill, so we will not oppose any of them today, and I can be fairly brief in responding.

I have only two concerns to raise. I think we have all struggled with clause 1. When you start debating clause 1 in the sixth session of a Committee, you know that something is awry. There have been real difficulties with getting this operative clause of the Bill correct, and it is still not perfect. Much of the original clause 1 had to be omitted because it created more problems than it resolved. The key point—about extending the duty from 28 to 56 days—is still there, but there are concerns that, notwithstanding that, and notwithstanding the further amendments before us, which will extend that duty beyond the 56 days where necessary, local authorities will be able to continue to drag their feet in some cases. However, everything that has been said on all sides, and the refinements before us, which add to what is in clause 1, certainly show that the spirit of the Bill—I hope the same is true of the letter of the Bill when we come to the codes of guidance—really does require all local authorities to act at an early stage and to deal, particularly in the case of section 21 notices, with homelessness and threatened homelessness at an early stage.

The other point—the Minister may address this when we deal with the subsequent provisions—is what additional costs there are likely to be. There will undoubtedly be cost implications in relation to continuing prevention assistance beyond 56 days and—this is quite proper—to being clear about when interim duties come to an end and continuing them while reviews continue. I would like to hear from the Government not only whether those costs will be fully funded but whether the funds have been calculated. Will we hear about that today? We certainly need to before the Bill leaves both Houses. However, with those two caveats, I can be commendably brief and end my comments there.

Bob Blackman: I am pleased to support these amendments and to follow the hon. Member for Hammersmith (*Andy Slaughter*).

It is fair to say that the amendments have been some time in coming. I commend my hon. Friend the Minister, his officials, the homelessness charities and the landlord associations on assisting us in reaching an appropriate compromise. The hon. Member for Hammersmith pointed out that clause 1 was debated some way into the Committee

sittings, as, indeed, was clause 7. By that time, we had passed clauses 4, 5 and 6, and these amendments relate to those clauses.

Clearly, the amendments we made to clause 1 in Committee had consequential impacts, which needed to be reflected in clauses 4, 5 and 6. Those clauses refer to the duty in cases of threatened homelessness, the duties owed to those who are homeless and the duties to help to secure accommodation. So the amendments before us are largely technical and follow up the changes made by the Bill Committee.

The most important aspect of this is that the prevention duty cannot end after 56 days with the individual or family still sitting in their home facing eviction under a section 21 notice under the Housing Act 1988, and with nowhere else to go.

Clause 1 of the original draft Bill was substantially changed before Second Reading, after pre-legislative scrutiny, and was substantially changed again in Committee. That had a consequential, knock-on effect on the other clauses in the Bill, and that is why the amendments are essential.

We have now got to a position with these clauses where we can help to make sure that local housing authorities act at an early stage. We do not want—I think this is true right across the House—a single individual or family to be told by their local housing authority, “Yes, you may be threatened with homelessness. Go back to your home, stay put and wait until the court action follows and the bailiffs arrive.” That is completely against the spirit of the Bill and is against what everyone wants to see. If we get to a point where landlords are taking tenants to court, gaining possession orders and getting bailiffs and county court judgments against tenants, those tenants, who will then be evicted and face huge costs, will be extremely unlikely to get accommodation in the private rented sector ever again.

In correcting this position, we have to end the bad practice followed by some local authorities—by no means all—of telling tenants to go back and stay put. It is important, above all else, that individuals who are faced with homelessness can get help and advice from the word go, once they approach the local housing authority. The clarifications proposed by my hon. Friend the Minister ensure that the local authority is not allowed to end its duty on reaching the technical position where the 56 days has expired. That is a very positive move.

The rest of the amendments in this group reflect the changes that we made to clause 7 in Committee. Once again, they ensure that protections are in place for applicants.

11.30 am

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman says that the protections are in place for applicants. Amendment 2 guarantees a tenancy of at least six months. As I understand it, that is a reduction in the current level, which is at least 12 months. I am not saying that this is necessarily wrong, but I would like him to comment on it. Often, because of the complexity in their life, people at least need security in their tenancy so that they can sort out other problems that they may have. Is six months really

long enough? Might it not lead to repeat homelessness as people do not have that longer-term security behind them?

Bob Blackman: This has been discussed during the Select Committee's homelessness inquiry, in the Bill Committee, and during our debates not only in this place but outside it with the various organisations involved. I am very keen that tenancies should be longer than six months, but I am also mindful of the fact that we do not want to get to a point whereby we reduce the amount of accommodation that could be available for people in this vulnerable group. I am equally certain that we do not want to get to a point, as we could have done during some of the debates, where we have an unrighteous circle, as it were, of people becoming homeless, being put in accommodation by a local authority, their tenancy coming to an end, and back they go to being homeless—it just becomes a repeat cycle. We are all committed to wanting to end that cycle. We do not get the opportunity to change legislation on homelessness very often. As I said, it has been 40 years since such legislation was introduced. We therefore want to put in the minimum standards so that, if necessary, the law can be changed by regulation to increase the period. We want a bare minimum to start with.

Andy Burnham: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and I accept that we would see six months as a minimum, but why cap it at 12 months in the amendment? If we want a minimum standard, that is fine, but why put an upper limit on it?

Bob Blackman: The Minister will explain that when he winds up. In certain clauses, there is provision for 12-month tenancies, and during our debates we reduced the position to six months with a cap of 12 months. The right hon. Gentleman should remember, though, that a variety of duties are addressed in the Bill: the relief duty, the prevent duty, and the duty owed to priority-need applicants. The predominant aim has always been not to place priority-need families in a worse position than they would otherwise have been facing.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for introducing this Bill. I have listened to Members on both sides of the House, and the debate has been very collegiate. Will the Minister, and the House, consider the effects on our servicemen who leave the armed forces under the armed forces covenant? Due to problems that they have in certain cases—each one could be unique—would they be seen as a priority under this Bill?

Bob Blackman: If my hon. Friend would like to go through the 18 pages of the Bill, he will find that people leaving the armed forces are specifically mentioned as being owed a duty under it. Under the armed forces covenant, they should already be provided with accommodation and with help and assistance from their relevant local authority, but there is a new duty on the armed forces to refer people who are leaving to the relevant local authority so that they get help and assistance early on rather than having to seek advice separately. Someone who is leaving the armed forces, as a planned move, should be referred to their relevant local authority, which of course may not be where they are currently based as a member of the armed forces.

I am particularly pleased that the Minister has proposed in his amendments that the requirement for interim accommodation is continued until any reviews are completed. One of the key aspects of the Bill, from my perspective, is to make sure that applicants who are facing an absolute crisis point in their lives, many of whom are becoming homeless for the first time ever, are not put in a position whereby they are told by a local authority, "This is what you're going to have—take it or leave it." It is absolutely imperative that there is an agreement between the applicant and the local authority. If the local housing authority acts in an unfair way from the perspective of the applicant, there must also be a process whereby they can seek external help or assistance from appropriate charities in order to get a review to make sure that they are given the proper help and advice and end up being in a position to be offered accommodation.

I welcome these amendments and hope the whole House will support them.

Mr Betts: When we discuss a Bill on Report, there are times when we find ourselves dealing with an awful lot of Government amendments and suspect that Ministers are trying, at the last minute, to slide one or two contentious issues past the House under the radar, thinking that people might miss them due to the great complexity of our discussions—[*Interruption.*] I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) never did that when he was a Minister, as he has just indicated. This, however, is not one of those occasions.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said, there has been a great deal of discussion not only in the House, by Members on both sides, but outside it with the charities arguing the case for homeless people, the Local Government Association and landlords, among others, to try to get this right. It is important that we do get it right, even though the process has taken a bit longer than some of us would have wished.

Once again, I pay tribute to the diligence and forbearance of the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) in trying to get us moving forward in a consensual manner on these issues. As he said, it took us a long time to get to this version of clause 1, which has appeared in many formats. It goes to the heart of the concerns that many of us have about the workings of existing legislation. One of the worst aspects of the way in which homeless families are currently treated—even those who are acknowledged to have a priority need—is that they are told to go away, sit at home and wait for the court to hear their case, and that then the authority may act, once a court order has been made, to deal with their situation. In the very worst cases, they are told, "Wait until the bailiff has arrived and while you are out on the street, we might decide to deal with you as a homeless family." That situation is not acceptable, so it is important that it changes as a result of this Bill. The hon. Gentleman said that, importantly, the 56-day provision will not end responsibility—the prevention duty continues beyond that time if a family does not yet have settled circumstances.

I had concerns that the specific requirement to deal with homelessness once a section 21 notice had been served, rather than allowing the matter to get to court,

[Mr Betts]

which was in a previous version of clause 1, had been taken out. I accept that the requirement for local authorities to exercise the prevention duty means that as soon as a section 21 notice is served and the family provide the local authority with that information, the duty kicks in and the local authority immediately has to seek to resolve the family's homelessness and look for alternative accommodation for them.

The code of guidance, which was discussed at length in the Bill Committee—I had a discussion about it with the Minister outside the room and then we referred to it in Committee—will be important to make it clear to local authorities how they should treat a family who are subject to a section 21 notice and in priority need. They will need to make sure that they do not get to the court stage before action is taken. It is also important for making sure that an offer acknowledges, as far as possible, an individual family's circumstances with regard to the schooling of children, the employment of family members, caring responsibilities and so on. Moreover, if a family have to be offered accommodation outside the borough, the receiving borough has to be notified that they are coming. Many of those important issues are in the existing code of guidance, but authorities have not implemented the code or addressed them.

We all hope that the Bill will be enacted before long. The Minister said helpfully in Committee that he will present the code of guidance to Parliament for approval, which is welcome. Our Select Committee has said that we will quickly arrange an evidence session on the code because we want to make sure that it is right. Getting the Act right but having a code of guidance that does not work will leave us no better off; getting both of them right will make the situation much better so that local authorities are able to address the issue of homeless families. I hope that Ministers will welcome that as another way in which the Select Committee can play a constructive role in this private Member's Bill process by ensuring that the legislation has cross-party support and really works for homeless people.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman—I shall call him my hon. Friend—for giving way. We look forward to the publication of the code of guidance once the Bill is enacted. The Bill also makes provision for issuing statutory codes of practice, so if local authorities fail to live up to both the spirit and the letter of the law, the Secretary of State will have the opportunity to impose on them a requirement to do what we expect them to do.

Mr Betts: That is very helpful. The Select Committee might well want to extend its remit and look at those codes of practice as well to make sure that everything is working. Indeed, the Minister has gone further by saying that he wants local authorities to indicate to the Government how they intend to implement the Bill. Ministers want to work with the LGA to get templates for how elements of the Bill, including giving advice to individuals who are not in priority need, should be implemented. Those are welcome measures and the LGA will want to be thoroughly involved in the process. With those comments about the issues that will need to be addressed once the Bill becomes an Act, I am happy to support the Government amendments.

Mr Marcus Jones: I will start by responding to the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). Significant concerns were raised on Second Reading, particularly with regard to the views of the Residential Landlords Association. In keeping with the spirit of the way in which this legislation has been developed, significant work took place to try to resolve that issue so that the Bill would not be put at risk during the parliamentary process. That work was done in conjunction with not just the RLA, but a number of charities and the LGA.

11.45 am

We want to get the registration right. I acknowledge that it would have been desirable to consider these amendments in Committee. Unfortunately, however, due to the challenges—some of them have been outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—in getting to a position in which the Bill works across the housing sector, it has taken some time to get where we are today, but I think we now have a good product, so to speak.

I thank not only the RLA and the LGA, but the various charities that have made a contribution. I also thank my hon. Friend for his patience and my officials for working tirelessly and at all hours to tie things up with various organisations and to achieve a good outcome.

Andy Burnham: On Government amendment 2, which I asked the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about, why cap the tenancy at 12 months? That seems to encourage local authorities to offer shorter-term tenancies, rather than making standard offers of longer-term tenancies. The Select Committee did not recommend a 12-month cap, so why have the Government inserted such a provision?

Mr Jones: If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will make the points that I was going to make and then I will directly address his point.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith mentioned Shelter's concerns about clause 1. I assure him that we reached agreement with Shelter and other organisations that the clause would be acceptable before it was drafted and before the amendments were tabled. He also mentioned costs, about which we had a long debate in Committee. I note that he has been reassured by comments today, given his willingness to withdraw new clause 1. I undertook to consider further amendments and, once the Bill has been amended, I will be more than willing to share with the House what the additional costs will be.

I hope that the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) will be reassured that there is no upper limit. The reference to 12 months means that the minimum length of tenancy can be increased to 12 months through regulations. Basically, if the rental market changed and we were in a position to change legislation to reflect a 12-month rather than six-month tenancy, that provision would give us the flexibility to do so. It does not put a maximum cap on the tenancy that can be secured. If a local authority is able to secure a three-year tenancy because that is what a landlord is offering, people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness would be able to take up that offer of a longer tenancy. I hope that that reassures him.

I thank my hon. Friend—I nearly went too far. I am not sure that "hon. Friend" would be the right term, bearing in mind that I have another appearance before the Select Committee on Monday, but I thank the hon.

Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for the part that he has played on the Committee. I thank him and the hon. Member for Hammersmith, as well as other Members, especially the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for the work that they have been willing to do behind the scenes to get the Bill to this point.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East talked about the code of guidance, and it is critical that we get that right. As he knows, the code of guidance will be updated. The Bill includes a commitment to put that before the House, and we will work with the LGA on that code to ensure that we get it as right as we can. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East pointed out, the Bill contains powers to put in place a code of practice, so the Secretary of State can reinforce any existing legislation through regulations, or introduce new regulations.

There is a positive consensus across the House that the amendments will improve the Bill and make it more workable.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Amendments made: 2, page 6, line 11, after “accommodation” insert

“and, on the date of refusal, there was a reasonable prospect that suitable accommodation would be available for occupation by the applicant for at least 6 months or such longer period not exceeding 12 months as may be prescribed”

This amendment provides that a local housing authority can only bring the duty in section 195(2) of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 4) to an end on the basis that the applicant has refused an offer of suitable accommodation, if on the date of the refusal there was a reasonable prospect that suitable accommodation would be available for 6 months or such longer period not exceeding 12 months as may be prescribed in regulations made by the Secretary of State.

Amendment 3, page 6, line 22, at end insert—

“(9) The duty under subsection (2) can also be brought to an end under sections 193A and 193B (notices in cases of applicant’s deliberate and unreasonable refusal to co-operate).” — (*Mr Marcus Jones.*)

This amendment inserts, into section 195 of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 4), a reference to sections 193A and 193B of that Act (inserted by clause 7) under which the duty in section 195(2) can be brought to an end.

Clause 5

DUTIES OWED TO THOSE WHO ARE HOMELESS

Amendments made: 4, page 7, line 45, after “accommodation” insert

“and, on the date of refusal, there was a reasonable prospect that suitable accommodation would be available for occupation by the applicant for at least 6 months or such longer period not exceeding 12 months as may be prescribed”

This amendment provides that a local housing authority can only bring the duty in section 189B(2) of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 5) to an end on the basis that the applicant has refused an offer of suitable accommodation, if on the date of the refusal there was a reasonable prospect that suitable accommodation would be available for 6 months or such longer period not exceeding 12 months as may be prescribed in regulations made by the Secretary of State.

Amendment 5, page 8, line 9, at end insert—

“(9) The duty under subsection (2) can also be brought to an end under—

- (a) section 193ZA (consequences of refusal of final accommodation offer or final Part 6 offer at the initial relief stage), or

- (b) sections 193A and 193B (notices in cases of applicant’s deliberate and unreasonable refusal to co-operate).”

This amendment inserts, into section 189B of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 5), references to section 193ZA (inserted by amendment 10), and sections 193A and 193B of that Act (inserted by clause 7), under which the duty in section 189B(2) can be brought to an end.

Amendment 6, page 8, line 18, leave out paragraph (a) and insert—

“(a) for subsection (1) substitute—

(1) If the local housing authority have reason to believe that an applicant may be homeless, eligible for assistance and have a priority need, they must secure that accommodation is available for the applicant’s occupation.

(1ZA) In a case in which the local housing authority conclude their inquiries under section 184 and decide that the applicant does not have a priority need—

- (a) where the authority decide that they do not owe the applicant a duty under section 189B(2), the duty under subsection (1) comes to an end when the authority notify the applicant of that decision, or
- (b) otherwise, the duty under subsection (1) comes to an end upon the authority notifying the applicant of their decision that, upon the duty under section 189B(2) coming to an end, they do not owe the applicant any duty under section 190 or 193.

(1ZB) In any other case, the duty under subsection (1) comes to an end upon the later of—

- (a) the duty owed to the applicant under section 189B(2) coming to an end or the authority notifying the applicant that they have decided that they do not owe the applicant a duty under that section, and
- (b) the authority notifying the applicant of their decision as to what other duty (if any) they owe to the applicant under the following provisions of this Part upon the duty under section 189B(2) coming to an end.”

See amendment 8. This amendment also makes the circumstances in which the interim duty to provide accommodation under section 188(1) of the Housing Act 1996 comes to an end where the local housing authority decide that the applicant does not have a priority need.

Amendment 7, page 8, line 26, leave out from “for” to end of line 27 and insert

““pending a decision of the kind referred to in subsection (1)” substitute “until the later of paragraph (a) or (b) of subsection (1ZB).”

See amendments 6 and 8.

Amendment 8, page 8, line 27, at end insert “;

) for subsection (3) substitute—

“(2A) For the purposes of this section, where the applicant requests a review under section 202(1)(h) of the authority’s decision as to the suitability of accommodation offered to the applicant by way of a final accommodation offer or a final Part 6 offer (within the meaning of section 193ZA), the authority’s duty to the applicant under section 189B(2) is not to be taken to have come to an end under section 193ZA(2) until the decision on the review has been notified to the applicant.

(3) Otherwise, the duty under this section comes to an end in accordance with subsections (1ZA) to (1A), regardless of any review requested by the applicant under section 202.

But the authority may secure that accommodation is available for the applicant’s occupation pending a decision on review.” — (*Mr Marcus Jones.*)

This amendment, together with amendments 6 and 7, ensure that any interim duty of a local housing authority under section 188 of the Housing Act 1996 to accommodate an applicant continues pending the conclusion of a review of the suitability of accommodation offered in a final accommodation offer or a final Part 6 offer under section 193ZA of that Act (inserted by amendment 10).

Clause 6

DUTIES TO HELP TO SECURE ACCOMMODATION

Amendment made: 9, page 11, leave out lines 14 to 16 and insert—

“(3) For the purposes of this section, a local housing authority’s duty under section 189B(2) or 195(2) is a function of the authority to secure that accommodation is available for the occupation of a person only if the authority decide to discharge the duty by securing that accommodation is so available.”.—*(Mr Marcus Jones.)*

This amendment ensures that where a local housing authority decides to discharge their duty under section 189B(2) or 195(2) of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clauses 5 and 4, respectively) by actually securing that accommodation is available for occupation by the applicant, sections 206 to 209 of that Act apply. Those sections contain various provisions about how a local housing authority’s housing functions are to be discharged.

Clause 7

DELIBERATE AND UNREASONABLE REFUSAL TO CO-OPERATE: DUTY UPON GIVING OF NOTICE

Mr Marcus Jones: I beg to move amendment 10, page 11, line 19, at end insert—

193ZA Consequences of refusal of final accommodation offer or final Part 6 offer at the initial relief stage

(1) Subsections (2) and (3) apply where—

- (a) a local housing authority owe a duty to an applicant under section 189B(2), and
- (b) the applicant, having been informed of the consequences of refusal and of the applicant’s right to request a review of the suitability of the accommodation, refuses—
 - (i) a final accommodation offer, or
 - (ii) a final Part 6 offer.

(2) The authority’s duty to the applicant under section 189B(2) comes to an end.

(3) Section 193 (the main housing duty) does not apply.

(4) An offer is a “final accommodation offer” if—

- (a) it is an offer of an assured shorthold tenancy made by a private landlord to the applicant in relation to any accommodation which is, or may become, available for the applicant’s occupation,
- (b) it is made, with the approval of the authority, in pursuance of arrangements made by the authority in the discharge of their duty under section 189B(2), and
- (c) the tenancy being offered is a fixed term tenancy (within the meaning of Part 1 of the Housing Act 1988) for a period of at least 6 months.

(5) A “final Part 6 offer” is an offer of accommodation under Part 6 (allocation of housing) that—

- (a) is made in writing by the authority in the discharge of their duty under section 189B(2), and
- (b) states that it is a final offer for the purposes of this section.

(6) The authority may not approve a final accommodation offer, or make a final Part 6 offer, unless they are satisfied that the accommodation is suitable for the applicant and that subsection (7) does not apply.

(7) This subsection applies to an applicant if—

- (a) the applicant is under contractual or other obligations in respect of the applicant’s existing accommodation, and
- (b) the applicant is not able to bring those obligations to an end before being required to take up the offer.”

This amendment provides that a local housing authority’s duty to an applicant under section 189B(2) of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 5) comes to an end, and the applicant does not proceed to the main duty under section 193 of that Act, if the applicant refuses a final offer of an assured shorthold tenancy of at least 6 months or an offer of social housing under Part 6 of that Act. In either case, the offer would have to be of accommodation that is suitable for the applicant.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government Amendment 11, page 11, leave out lines 29 and 30

This amendment, and amendments 12 and 13, limit the grounds on which a notice can be given under new section 193A of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 7), so that it can only be given if the applicant deliberately and unreasonably refuses to take a step that the applicant agreed to take, or that was recorded, under new section 189A of that Act (inserted by clause 3).

Government Amendment 12, page 12, leave out lines 9 to 11

See amendment 11.

Government Amendment 13, page 12, line 16, leave out from “refuse” to “after” in line 17 and insert “to take any such step”

See amendment 11.

Government Amendment 14, page 13, line 16, after “made” insert “by a private landlord”

This amendment, and amendments 15 and 16, make it clear that a final offer of an assured shorthold tenancy would not be made by the local housing authority itself, but rather be made by a private landlord and approved by the authority. A local housing authority cannot grant an assured shorthold tenancy - see sections 1 and 19A of, and paragraph 12 of Schedule 1 to, the Housing Act 1988.

Government Amendment 15, page 13, line 19, leave out “by or”

See amendment 14.

Government Amendment 16, page 13, line 29, leave out from “not” to “unless” in line 30 and insert “approve a final accommodation offer, or make a final Part 6 offer,”

See amendment 14.

Amendment 17, page 13, line 39, after “if” insert “—

(a) section 193ZA(3) disappplies this section, or

(b) ”

This amendment inserts, into section 193 of the Housing Act 1996, a reference to section 193ZA of that Act (inserted by amendment 10), under which section 193 can be disappplied.

Government Amendment 18, in clause 9, page 15, line 6, after “section” insert “193ZA or”

This amendment allows an applicant to request a review of a local housing authority’s decision as to the suitability of accommodation offered to the applicant by way of a final accommodation offer or a final Part 6 offer under section 193ZA of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by amendment 10).

Government Amendment 19, in clause 12, page 17, line 22, after “section” insert “193ZA(6) or”

This amendment applies the provision in article 3 of the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2012 (S.I. 2012/2601), about when accommodation is to be regarded as unsuitable, to a decision by a local housing authority as to whether they should approve a final accommodation offer by a private landlord for the purposes of section 193ZA of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by amendment 10).

Government Amendment 20, in clause 12, page 17, line 26, leave out “vulnerable person” and insert

“person who has a priority need”

This amendment applies the provision in article 3 of the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2012 (S.I. 2012/2601), about when accommodation is to be regarded as unsuitable, to accommodation secured by a local housing authority, in discharge of their duty under section 189B(2) or 195(2) (inserted by clauses 5 and 4, respectively), for all persons who have a priority need rather than just “vulnerable persons”.

Government Amendment 21, in clause 12, page 17, leave out lines 32 to 37

See amendment 20. This amendment removes the definition of “vulnerable person”.

Mr Jones: This is the last set of Government amendments and I am grateful for the forbearance of the House. As I explained on the last group, we identified a number of issues with clause 7 that we were unfortunately unable to resolve in Committee. This group contains the core corrections to clause 7. We have already discussed the related amendments to clauses 4, 5 and 6, and this group also contains related amendments to clauses 9 and 12.

Amendment 10 delivers an important change, and has been laid following extensive discussion with the local government sector and with Crisis and Shelter. It deals with the consequences for applicants of refusing offers of accommodation made by the local housing authority during the relief duty. The Bill already provides that the local housing authority can bring the relief duty to an end if an applicant refuses an offer of suitable accommodation. The applicant can then go on to the main homelessness duty under section 193 of the Housing Act 1996, if they are owed it. We believe it is right that where an applicant is made a suitable offer under the relief duty, they should not be able to move into the main duty by refusing that offer. That is an important part of the balance between rights and responsibilities for applicants. However, it is also essential that, if the offer is intended to be the applicant’s final offer, appropriate safeguards are in place.

Amendment 10 provides that where an applicant refuses an offer and the relief duty is ended, the applicant will not proceed to the main duty, but that will apply only if the offer reaches a particular standard. The offer must be either a final accommodation offer or a final part 6 offer, and the applicant must be informed of the consequences of refusing and of their right to request a review of the suitability of the accommodation. A final part 6 offer is a suitable offer of social housing. A final accommodation offer is an offer of an assured shorthold tenancy with a term of at least six months in the private rented sector.

Amendments 14, 15 and 16 clarify that a final offer of an assured shorthold tenancy made to an applicant who has refused to co-operate will be made by a private landlord. This clarification brings the clause in line with other provisions relating to private rented sector offers in the homelessness legislation.

Amendments 17, 18 and 19 reflect the relevant changes introduced by clause 10 to the relevant parts of the Bill, including providing that the applicant can request a review of the suitability of the accommodation and that appropriate suitability requirements apply.

The last set of amendments to clause 7 relate to another issue we identified during Committee stage. At the moment, clause 7 is drafted in a way that means that the definition of deliberate and unreasonable co-operation is drawn more widely than we intended, covering co-operation with the local housing authority in the exercise of its functions under the prevention and relief duties. Amendments 11, 12 and 13 make it clear that the provisions apply only when the applicant’s refusal to co-operate relates specifically to the steps set out in their personalised plan.

Finally, on amendments 20 and 21, clause 12 amends article 3 of the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2012. Article 3 currently requires that when a local housing authority approves an offer in the private rented sector for those in priority need under the main homelessness duty, additional checks are required to ensure the property is in reasonable physical condition, is safe and is a well-managed property. Those additional checks are extended by clause 12 to those defined as vulnerable persons and to secured accommodation in the private rented sector under the new homelessness prevention and relief duties.

Hon. Members on both sides of the Committee were concerned that the protection did not go wider. In particular, the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) suggested that other types of applicant should be afforded this protection, including families with children and pregnant women. These concerns were echoed by my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), for Colchester (Will Quince), for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) and for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan). I have listened carefully, and I am pleased to bring forward amendments 20 and 21 to provide that these additional checks be made in respect of all those with a priority need where the local housing authority secures private rented sector property under the new prevention and relief duties.

In conclusion, this is an unusually long list of amendments for the Report stage of a private Member’s Bill, but I have worked closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the local government sector and homelessness charities to ensure that the Bill is fit for purpose, and I want again to thank them all for their efforts in putting together what is now a very strong package.

12 pm

Andy Slaughter: The purpose of the amendments is to clarify and give certainty, where required, to certain provisions in the Bill and, in some cases, to correct drafting or extend the ambit of clauses. We have no problem with any of the amendments, and I am pleased to say, having just reread the briefing from the local government and charities sides, that although one side supports them more than the other, as one would expect, both agree that they should go forward as a package.

Amendment 10 makes it clear when the interim duty comes to an end, about which the LGA and others have been anxious for certainty. Amendments 20 and 21, which the Minister just referred to, were particularly called for by Shelter and in Committee by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who led for the Opposition on that part of the Bill. I am pleased the Government have tabled the amendments

[*Andy Slaughter*]

because they address a key point by providing that all priority need households be included, rather than just those that are vulnerable, which clears up an important omission. One side, in particular, favoured the amendments, but all sides are at least content with them.

Another thing the amendments, particularly amendments 10, 20 and 21, have in common is that they incur costs. The Minister said, slightly coyly, that when the amendments passed, he would return to the matter of costs. I hope that means on Third Reading, because, from what I have heard, I assume the amendments will pass in a few moments. The costs will not be negligible. Obviously, he goes into this with his eyes open, but it would be helpful if we had an update today or at least were told when we will have it. We need to be certain not only about what the Bill means—that it addresses the key points—but that it will be fully funded.

With those comments, I need not prolong the debate, because we have gone through the amendments with the Minister and the officials, and I think we have a pretty keen understanding of why they are necessary and should form part of the Bill.

Bob Blackman: I am delighted to rise for the last time on Report in support of a group of amendments. My hon. Friend the Minister introduced them at length, so I will keep my remarks to the pertinent points. I thank him and the officials for all their work in getting us to the point of these detailed amendments. I am sure that all would agree that it has been a long and almost tortuous journey to identify the different issues with clause 7, but we have worked patiently and appropriately with the LGA, Crisis and, in particular, Shelter to resolve the issues such that everyone now supports the amended clause 7, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (*Andy Slaughter*) pointed out.

As I said earlier, we did not want a change in the law to put priority-need families in an even worse position than they were already in. We wanted to enable single homeless people, and others who were not currently owed a statutory duty, to be given help and advice and an offer of suitable accommodation. At present, that accommodation will almost certainly be in the private sector, but it is up to local authorities to establish whether they can find a social rented property to provide for such people.

I particularly welcome amendments 20 and 21. As we heard from the Minister, in Committee there were representations—not least from the hon. Member for Westminster North (*Ms Buck*), who kicked off on the issue—about the scope of what is now clause 12 in relation to the suitability of offers in the private sector. Ideally, local authorities would inspect and approve every single offer to every potential tenant, but during the pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill we decided that the cost to them would be beyond what was reasonable. We therefore focused on priority need, and, indeed, vulnerable people. I am delighted that the Minister has found a way of extending the provision to all those people, not least pregnant women.

Jonathan Reynolds (*Stalybridge and Hyde*) (*Lab/Co-op*): We have all managed to make this part of the Bill sound very technical, but it seems to me that what it basically

means is that the quality of private rented homes offered to families will improve, which is something that a great many people want to happen. Is that the hon. Gentleman's understanding as well?

Bob Blackman: Obviously, we do not want families or individuals who are reaching a crisis point in their lives, having become homeless, to be placed in completely unsuitable accommodation, or with rogue landlords who are unsuitable people to be offering accommodation in the first place, and it should be the duty of local authorities to ensure that that does not happen. The amendments will ensure that the current position is corrected for the benefit of society. Ideally, no one would ever be offered unsuitable accommodation, but, as I think we all recognise, that is sometimes the case.

Clause 7 deals with

“an applicant's deliberate and unreasonable refusal to co-operate”.

A balance needed to be struck. As the Bill's promoter, I must make it abundantly clear that homeless people will not be able to just turn up to their local housing authority and say, “You have a duty to find me somewhere to live”, and then fold their arms and wait for it to happen. They will have a duty to co-operate with the plan and carry out the actions required under it, and if they fail to do so, the housing authority will be able to terminate its duty. So there are duties on both sides, which must be right.

Equally, however, I do not want applicants to be unfairly penalised for some minor discrepancy. For example, if an applicant missed an appointment because of a need to visit a doctor or hospital, or as a result of some other commitment, it would be unfair and unreasonable for a local authority to penalise that individual. As the Minister has explained, the review process will be tightened to ensure that people receive written notices and are given an opportunity to review any unfair decision. That strikes the right balance, ensuring that applicants can receive a service—help and advice, and an offer in the private or socially rented sector—while also requiring them to take actions themselves.

I am grateful to the Minister for his time and forbearance, particularly in respect of that issue, which has occupied a substantial amount of time for all concerned. The compromise that has been reached will improve the Bill yet further and ensure that all people who have a priority need, and indeed those who do not, are secured private rented accommodation under these new homelessness relief duties. It will also ensure that those additional suitability checks will be carried out by the local housing authority to ensure that the property is safe and well managed. On that basis, I trust that all hon. Members will support these and the other amendments that the Minister has brought forward, so that we have a suitable package of measures to present to the other place, it will see the wisdom of our lengthy debates and close scrutiny of these proposals, and view them as a package of measures that together improve the lot of those people who are homeless.

Mr Marcus Jones: I would like to respond to several of the matters raised by colleagues.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (*Andy Slaughter*) mentioned the work with the LGA around amendment 10. He is correct on that, as he is on amendments 20 and 21,

in relation to the concerns of the charities, particularly Shelter. He showed that he is extremely sharp when he raised the point about costs and the comments I made earlier about when I would bring forward further details of the additional cost incurred due to amendments that have been made to the Bill this morning. Indeed, my intention was to bring those costs to the House once the Bill had been amended. I will not tease the hon. Gentleman any further. In a few minutes, I hope to be giving further detail on the cost.

Before I conclude, I want to correct one point I made this morning when we dealt with the second group of amendments and I was responding to the points made by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). He raised the issue of the code of guidance and it being put before the House. I inadvertently said that the code of guidance would be put before the House. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will recall from all those long Committee sittings that it is in the legislation that the code of practice will come before the House, rather than the code of guidance. However, I will seek to reassure my hon. Friend, or rather the hon. Gentleman—I was straying into risky territory again, there. I want to reassure him by saying that we would certainly welcome his Committee's involvement in relation to the consultation on the revised code of guidance that will come out of the provisions in the Bill.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for that helpful clarification. The Committee will try to play a constructive role in that. We welcome the code of guidance coming to us, and we will as quickly as possible take a look at it and get comments back to him. Equally, if the code of practice is coming to the House, we will probably want to play a role as part of that formal process as well.

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As ever during this process, he has sought to use a very constructive tone in the debate and has shown pragmatism. We have been able to all work together; that goes for the Opposition Front-Bench team, too. It has not been easy at times, but there has been a pragmatic approach to making sure that we get this legislation into a good place and to the other end of the Corridor, thereby encouraging noble Lords to support not just the amendments dealt with today, but the overall Bill as a significant package towards helping people who are at risk of becoming homeless, or who do indeed become homeless.

Amendment 10 agreed to.

Amendments made: 11, page 11, leave out lines 29 and 30.

This amendment, and amendments 12 and 13, limit the grounds on which a notice can be given under new section 193A of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by clause 7), so that it can only be given if the applicant deliberately and unreasonably refuses to take a step that the applicant agreed to take, or that was recorded, under new section 189A of that Act (inserted by clause 3).

Amendment 12, page 12, leave out lines 9 to 11.

See amendment 11.

Amendment 13, page 12, line 16, leave out from “refuse” to “after” in line 17 and insert—

“to take any such step”.

See amendment 11.

Amendment 14, page 13, line 16, after “made” insert “by a private landlord”.

This amendment, and amendments 15 and 16, make it clear that a

final offer of an assured shorthold tenancy would not be made by the local housing authority itself, but rather be made by a private landlord and approved by the authority. A local housing authority cannot grant an assured shorthold tenancy - see sections 1 and 19A of, and paragraph 12 of Schedule 1 to, the Housing Act 1988.

Amendment 15, page 13, line 19, leave out “by or”.

See amendment 14.

Amendment 16, page 13, line 29, leave out from “not” to “unless” in line 30 and insert—

“approve a final accommodation offer, or make a final Part 6 offer.”.

See amendment 14.

Amendment 17, page 13, line 39, after “if” insert “—

(a) section 193ZA(3) disapplies this section, or

(b) ”—(Mr Marcus Jones.)

This amendment inserts, into section 193 of the Housing Act 1996, a reference to section 193ZA of that Act (inserted by amendment 10), under which section 193 can be disapplied.

Clause 9

REVIEWS

Amendment made: 18, page 15, line 6, after “section” insert “193ZA or”.—(Mr Marcus Jones.)

This amendment allows an applicant to request a review of a local housing authority's decision as to the suitability of accommodation offered to the applicant by way of a final accommodation offer or a final Part 6 offer under section 193ZA of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by amendment 10).

Clause 12

SUITABILITY OF PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR ACCOMMODATION

Amendments made: 19, page 17, line 22, after “section” insert “193ZA(6) or”.

This amendment applies the provision in article 3 of the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2012 (S.I. 2012/2601), about when accommodation is to be regarded as unsuitable, to a decision by a local housing authority as to whether they should approve a final accommodation offer by a private landlord for the purposes of section 193ZA of the Housing Act 1996 (inserted by amendment 10).

Amendment 20, page 17, line 26, leave out “vulnerable person” and insert—

“person who has a priority need”.

This amendment applies the provision in article 3 of the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2012 (S.I. 2012/2601), about when accommodation is to be regarded as unsuitable, to accommodation secured by a local housing authority, in discharge of their duty under section 189B(2) or 195(2) (inserted by clauses 5 and 4, respectively), for all persons who have a priority need rather than just “vulnerable persons”.

Amendment 21, page 17, leave out lines 32 to 37.—
(Mr Marcus Jones)

See amendment 20. This amendment removes the definition of “vulnerable person”.

Third Reading

12.15 pm

Bob Blackman: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This is a very proud moment for me. Reaching this stage of the proceedings has been a long road. When my name was drawn out of the hat and I was No. 2 in the ballot, I needed to consider what issue to take on. I was

[*Bob Blackman*]

mind to choose something that would make a difference to thousands of people across the country. Little did I know how much work and effort would be involved in getting a Bill to this stage.

The expert panel was convened by Crisis in the summer of 2015. We then had the Communities and Local Government Select Committee inquiry last summer, to which many of us in the House contributed, plus its pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill in September, and finally an unprecedented seven Committee sittings, involving some 15 hours of debate. I think it is fair to say that no private Member's Bill has ever been so well informed or well scrutinised. Indeed, it is unique among private Member's Bills in that it has been the subject of a Select Committee inquiry and report and of pre-legislative scrutiny, and that it is the longest such Bill, with 13 clauses and 18 pages of detailed legalese. It will probably also be the most expensive private Member's Bill, and I look forward to hearing good news in a few minutes' time from the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) on the funds that could be allocated in addition to the £48 million that he has already set out.

I would like to thank a number of people and organisations who have been instrumental in bringing the Bill to this stage. It is clear that, although I am the promoter and leader of the Bill, this has been a team effort. The contribution of the Select Committee and its Chair, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), has been invaluable. We could not have got to this stage without their input. In particular, the Committee's pre-legislative scrutiny provides an example that all hon. Members should consider, should they be fortunate in future private Members' Bill ballots. Select Committee Members continued to offer their expertise to the Bill Committee, and I thank them for their time and constructive support.

I also want to put on record my thanks to all the members of the Bill Committee for their hard work and dedication. They asked constructive questions and scrutinised the proposed legislation in detail. The fact that 21 Government amendments have been tabled and passed today is a direct consequence of all the detailed work that was done to ensure that we got the Bill absolutely right.

The outcome of Bills such as this should not be left to a lottery. The Procedure Committee, on which I have the honour of serving, recommends that the first four private Members' Bills be subject to a bidding process through the Backbench Business Committee so that well-researched Bills with cross-party support can get to the House without depending on the current lottery procedure.

I thank Crisis, which has supported me from the start and facilitated consultations right across the piece to ensure that the Bill was delivered properly. There has been huge interest from a whole host of groups from across the country. I thank the LGA, individual local authorities, Shelter, St Mungo's, the National Landlords Association, the Residential Landlords Association and the many others that have written or spoken to me about the Bill. Members from across the House will want to mention the charities and support groups that

have provided much-needed help and assistance to rough sleepers and homeless people. The advice, work and challenges that I have received from the people at the sharp end have enabled me to ensure that this strong Bill is in the best possible shape to send to the House of Lords and that, critically, it will have long-lasting impact on people who suffer the crisis of being homeless.

I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for supporting and championing the Bill from the outset and for ensuring that we got the Government's full support. Not only has he devoted a significant amount of his personal and ministerial time, but he secured resources from the officials to ensure that the Bill reached this point. He also followed through on his commitment to fund the new burdens associated with the Bill. The Government will be providing £48 million for local government to implement the new duties in the Bill. We do not know whether that will be sufficient to meet those new duties, but I am delighted that the Minister has committed to review the figure following not only the amendments that we have passed today, but the new burdens that we are placing on local authorities. I thank the Minister and all his officials for their work in getting the Bill to this point.

I want to put on the record my thanks to Martine Martin, my parliamentary assistant. For those who have not had the pleasure of meeting her, she has ensured that the whole process has remained smooth. Her calmness has kept me calm, and I owe her a particular debt of gratitude.

I also thank the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter)—something that is hard to do at times—and the Opposition members of the Bill Committee for ensuring that the Bill was well scrutinised and in good shape ahead of Report today. I thank all the hon. Members who are in the House today to wish Godspeed to the Bill so that it reaches the statute book as fast as possible. Many were here on Second Reading way back on 28 October, when we had some 39 speeches, and many have followed the Bill's progress with interest, subjecting me to appropriate scrutiny and challenge on the details. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith pointed out earlier, I have rapidly become an expert in homelessness and housing law even though I have no legal background whatsoever.

I thank everyone for their time, effort and dedication, but we must remember that this is a process and that we are implementing a Bill that changes the law for the most vulnerable members of society. We must ensure that people who are sleeping rough or threatened with homelessness get the help and support from local authorities that they need and deserve. I have said from the word go that having one rough sleeper on our streets is a national disgrace; the fact that we have so many is something that we must end. Equally, I have said from the word go that the Bill, which will hopefully become an Act, will not deliver any new housing units, which is part and parcel of a new strategy that I look forward to the Government pursuing. What the Bill will do is change the law and the requirements on local authorities to ensure that they deliver help and advice to vulnerable people who need it at a crisis point in their life.

The Bill will also mean a massive culture change for local authorities, and we should not underestimate how much of a culture change it will be. I passionately believe that people enter public service to help people,

not to deny them service. For 40 years, at local authority level we have routinely denied vulnerable people service, help and advice. That has to come to an end. It will be a big shock to most local housing authorities when the Bill becomes law and the various regulations are laid before the House, but the key point is that we are aiming to ensure that, for people who face the prospect of having nowhere to live, we move on from an approach where homelessness is always a crisis to one where local government has the duty and the ability to work with people as early as possible so that they never become homeless by helping them to tackle their housing and welfare issues before the crisis point is reached.

I sincerely hope that our work over the past year will make a significant difference, and I firmly believe it will. I am extremely proud to be standing here today with the support of the whole House in bidding the Bill Godspeed and safe passage through the other place so that it can end homelessness once and for all.

12.27 pm

Andy Slaughter: I begin where the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the Bill's promoter, finished by wishing the Bill every success in completing its passage as it leaves for the other place. I also echo some of his thanks. I thank him for putting extraordinary effort into the Bill. I do not know how long he intends to stay in the House, but I suspect that, whenever he departs, the Bill will be one of the things about which he is most proud—it will be a lasting testament to his work—and I am sure that many of us envy him. Such praise is well deserved because he has had to put time and effort in the Bill. I suspect that he now thinks it was all worth it, but I bet there were times when he doubted that.

Obviously the Bill would not be where it is without the support of the Government, which should be acknowledged, as well as that from the official Opposition and others. The Minister has been particularly assiduous in pushing through the Bill. Although he may or may not reveal this in his speech, he has had difficulty with his colleagues in other Departments. The hon. Member for Harrow East will recognise the Minister's personal devotion to the Bill, which he will count a success.

I extend my thanks to all Members on both sides of the House who have been involved. I particularly thank the Labour members of the Committee who are sitting behind me: my hon. Friends the Members for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and for City of Chester (Christian Matheson). They shared the burden with me in Committee and brought their considerable expertise to our proceedings. I am sure that the Minister and the Bill's promoter would say the same of Government Members. It has been a good session.

We must also acknowledge the various interest groups involved, not only because they stood up strongly for their interests, but because, in the end, they wanted the Bill to succeed. They include the landlords and charities, but we should not forget local government, because it is local government that will have to execute the provisions of the Bill and on which its burdens fall. It knows more than anybody else the difficulties in dealing with homelessness, given the levels of funding and demand.

The officers and councillors who are at the sharp end deserve our thanks. Some do fail—a number of authorities have lamentable records—but many do their very best under difficult circumstances. That is true of my own council and, I am sure, of many others.

The Bill has been a collective effort, and my final mention is to the Communities and Local Government Committee. Its work has formed the bedrock of the Bill and the basis on which it can go forward.

As the hon. Member for Harrow East said, our proceedings have been something of a template for the way in which complex private Member's Bills can go forward. I, like him, hope that it can be a precedent for a change to just not just the House's procedures, but the way in which the Government approach private Member's Bills. It might change the way in which some of our colleagues approach such Bills, but perhaps that is a matter for another day.

As we have discussed the Bill for so long, it is quite easy to gloss over what it does. It does several fundamental things, such as introducing the prevention duty. Although, as we have heard, that is nothing new—the previous Labour Government encouraged that approach through legislation, and it is also encouraged by best practice in local government—the Bill puts the matter clearly and firmly into statute. That is a major change to the way in which homelessness is addressed.

The Bill also extends the relief duty to anybody who is homeless. Although the assistance to be given to those who are non-priority homeless cannot, for reasons of resources, be as comprehensive as it is for those who are priority homeless, that is, again, a significant change.

Let us not forget the duty to co-operate, about which we have had quite an extensive discussion. Perhaps the co-operation that will be required does not go as far as some of us would have liked—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East moved an amendment relating to that in Committee—but local authorities cannot avoid their responsibilities. We know that the homelessness sector and the charities have been working to perfect the way in which they deal with the complex needs of homeless people. Sometimes other institutions do a good job—those in the health service or probation, for example—but we really need everyone to step up to the plate. I am pleased that the duty to co-operate is in the Bill, but I hope we hear more about it as the codes are developed.

With the current pressures on the public sector, it is easy for people to say that these things are just too difficult. The reality is that a number of homeless people have been in mental health units or have just come out of prison. They need assistance, and that cannot come only from homelessness charities and local government. Everybody has to do their bit.

For those three reasons, among others, the Bill is a significant piece of legislation. I will not repeat what I said in the previous debate about what remains to be done, but let me mention just two things. First, when the White Paper is published, I would like to see in chapter 1 a commitment from the Government that is the same as that given by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) before Christmas on behalf of a future Labour Government: rough sleeping will be eliminated over a single Parliament. Earlier this week, we saw shocking

[*Andy Slaughter*]

figures showing that 4,134 people are sleeping rough in England. That is a 16% increase on the previous year, and a 134% increase since 2010. I could not have agreed more with the hon. Member for Harrow East when he said that one person in that situation is one too many, but 4,134 is a national disgrace. Nevertheless, it is a figure that we can manage.

Many other aspects of homelessness are getting much worse over time. Statutorily homeless households have increased by almost 50% since 2010, with the number now standing at just under 60,000. That is a huge problem, and while the difficulties with housing conditions such as overcrowding all need to be tackled, the first step has to be dealing with rough sleeping and the street homeless. I would love to hear from the Minister today that that will happen, but I will look particularly at whether the issue is addressed in the White Paper. I would not say that that would silence us—we will never quite be silenced—but it would be an effective way of dealing with the points that have been made throughout the passage of the Bill when we have said, “Yes, legislation is great and yes, this Bill does some great things, but in itself it is not going to build one more house or house one more person—it is words on a piece of paper.”

I plead with the Minister to do what I have said. I praise the initiative of the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne, in taking the lead, but he will be the first person to say congratulations if the Government go ahead with this.

There are so many aspects of the problem that need to be dealt with to start to tackle homelessness that we could think that it is all just too much. I was impressed by the briefing that Shelter sent to us, which highlighted two aspects. It said:

“we consider it inevitable that, to be able to help people under the new duties, councils with significant levels of existing homelessness will require not only additional resources but, more importantly, an adequate supply of accessible, affordable and suitable homes in the social or private rented sectors.”

That is self-evidently true. The two things that are at the top of Shelter’s wish list are:

“Reverse the freeze on Local Housing Allowance rates”;
and an

“indefinite suspension of the forced sale of high value council homes in areas with high levels of homelessness”.

Neither of those is going to solve the problem, and they might not even be the most effective steps that could be taken, but they are the two most obvious ways in which the Government are actively making the situation worse. It is very difficult to accept the Government’s wholehearted support for the Bill when at the same time they are pushing those measures through.

I say that with clear personal knowledge from my own constituency, where, when a Conservative council was in charge for eight years, social homes were regularly sold when they became vacant. Several hundred individual homes were simply sold off at market rates rather than being used to rehouse homeless families. That has created devastating problems, the consequences of which we are still suffering. If we see that replicated on a grand scale throughout the country through the sale of high-value council homes—in my borough it would mean, over time, 50% of council homes being sold off—the homelessness situation is going to become far worse.

Local housing allowance rates are utterly distorting local housing markets and leading to what the Minister, the hon. Member for Harrow East and others have said today that they do not want to see: people being forced out of central London—and out of London and the south-east altogether—and separated entirely from their support networks, their families, their children’s schools and sometimes their jobs.

I am beginning to see another disturbing trend that I hoped never to see recurring. I shall refer to a case that I dealt with in my surgery only last week. Landlords are letting properties at rates that are just within local housing allowances, but they are doing so by letting properties that are unsafe and degrading, with no proper electricity and in danger of collapse. I never thought that I would see those housing conditions in this country.

The Government have to come to terms with the effects that their policies have on individual families living in the private rented sector. I beg them to look again at the freeze on the local housing allowance rate, because it is having a severely detrimental effect on thousands of families around the country.

We wish this good Bill well as it goes through its stages in the other place. We will do what we can to assist to ensure that it is enacted. I still look forward to the Minister’s comments about the extra funding, and I know that people in council finance departments all around the country are hanging on his every word about that. Let us celebrate the Bill today, but let us also be aware of how much we need to do if we are to tackle one of the worst crises in homelessness that we have experienced, certainly in my political lifetime, and one of the worst blights on our society.

12.40 pm

Pauline Latham: I rise to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on getting so close with this Bill, and with relative speed. Interestingly, most of our constituents will not understand that it is really hard to get private Members’ Bills to this stage and that very few such Bills make it to the end, so he has done incredibly well. Obviously, as he said earlier, he has had help from an awful lot of people, not least from a couple of Opposition Members whom he has already praised.

Cross-party work to help vulnerable people is one of the most important things that we as Members of Parliament do, and my hon. Friend was fortunate to be drawn high enough up the ballot to be given an opportunity to bring something into law.

Homelessness is a very difficult issue. Not many Members in this Chamber will remember “Cathy Come Home” or even Rachmanism, but it is clear that we have progressed hugely as we no longer see those sorts of problems on our streets and in private rented households today.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) talked about private landlords. I think that that problem is bigger in London than in places such as Mid Derbyshire. Our landlords are better sorted out by the local authorities than they are in London, which is a much harder market on which to focus.

I wish to return to an earlier point, which is that, when women are on the streets, they are one of the most vulnerable groups. Very often, they are on the streets

because they have been abused by their partners or their husbands. It is a very difficult situation when a vulnerable young woman—or a woman of any age—is thrown out on to the streets, or chooses to leave, and has to sleep rough. I have experience of that with a family member who, because she was being beaten up very severely, had to run away and sleep on the streets. In the end, she had to go back, because she had nowhere else to go—or so she thought. Eventually, she went back to her family. It was a very difficult situation. It does not matter where in the country vulnerable people are, they depend on the support mechanism to pick them up and help them out. Some people have nowhere to go. That may be due to the fact that they were in care as a child or are mentally ill. As constituency MPs, we know how many mentally ill people there are out there. They write to us on a regular basis on a range of issues because they do not know where else to go. Some of the most vulnerable people become homeless for those and many other reasons.

My hon. Friend talked about all the charities that helped him to prepare for this Bill. I pay tribute to many of the charities that I have worked with over the years in Derby city and Derbyshire. A huge number of people want to help the vulnerable, and I commend them for their work. An organisation called the Padley Centre in Derby helps vulnerable people not only by housing them overnight—and sometimes for extended periods—but by giving them additional skills so that they can eventually get a job as well as housing. Very often, the homeless out on the streets do not have a job because they have missed out on education.

At this time of year, the city centre churches come together so that a different church is open every night or every week; seven churches have participated. In that way, people do not have to sleep out in this really cold weather that we are experiencing at the moment. The initiative has been incredibly successful. Even the cathedral in Derby city has opened its doors to the homeless. Milestone House and Centenary House in Derby work hard with the homeless to support them and give them a roof over their heads. The YMCA, of course, has been going for many years and particularly helps young people, although it also helps others as well.

I am sure that all those organisations will appreciate the Bill's coming into law. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said that he felt proud standing in the Chamber today talking about his Bill and about having got so close. So he should: he should accept the praise he deserves. His Bill is tackling a problem that many people would like to have addressed but never have. I am pleased that this Conservative Government are supporting him.

Women are more vulnerable when they are out on the streets. There are fewer places where they feel safe to go and ask for help because of the predominance of men. I clearly remember coming across a woman while walking through the centre of Derby after a council meeting. I do not generally give money to beggars on the streets because I would rather contribute to a charity that will help them. But this particular woman came up to me and said, "I'm in the middle of my period. I have no money, so I cannot buy any Tampax." I had never thought about that, and I decided to give her the money. As every woman will appreciate, it must be very difficult for a woman on the streets to have a period and no

money. Perhaps we forget about that. As I say, I did give her the money—whether it went on that or whether she bought drugs I will never know. I hope that it was a genuine call for help from this poor, young woman who looked freezing cold and needed help from people. I hope that the Bill will help such women.

Earlier I mentioned the family from Borrowash who found themselves homeless. They had been in a private rented house that burned down—when they were not there, fortunately. They had no insurance because they are very poor. Both parents work but they have four children and do not have any savings to fall back on. They have received some money through crowdfunding, which has helped them get back on their feet. They are the sort of people who have a problem when they are with private landlords. In such situations, it is, apparently, the landlord's job to rehouse such families—but if there are no vacant houses, how can they, particularly if four children are involved?

I rang the Derbyshire County Council helpline, but all the people there were interested in was whether the children were being abused or vulnerable. All homeless children are vulnerable, of course, but so were the parents. I did not feel that the mechanisms to help were in place. Eventually, Derby City Council, which I would not normally praise for very much at all, stepped in and helped this couple with their children.

I am delighted that the Bill is to pass into law. I wholeheartedly support it. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and many others have worked incredibly hard to get it on to the statute book and I commend him for his hard work. I support him, this Bill and the Minister.

12.49 pm

Mr Betts: This is obviously a time for congratulations, and I shall not disappoint, but we should still remember that, tonight, in this rich country, there will be people sleeping rough on our streets, individuals sleeping on sofas that belong to friends, families trying to live with relatives in overcrowded accommodation, and other families living in unacceptable and inadequate interim accommodation.

We also have to be careful not to give the impression that, as a result of this Bill, all these problems will be resolved. It will make a contribution to solving the homelessness problem, but it will not actually solve it. It will help to reduce homelessness—that is what the title of the Bill says—but it will not, of itself, solve the problem of homelessness.

However, congratulations are due, particularly to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—on this occasion, I will reciprocate and call him my hon. Friend. We should not underestimate the amount of time, sheer hard work and effort that he and his staff have put into bringing the Bill to this stage, as well as the forbearance—there must have been times when he was tearing his hair out. [*Interruption.*] Yes, it's the same with my hair. He must have been tearing his hair out at the complexities and at the need to get different competing forces together to take the Bill forward on a consensus basis. There have not necessarily been problems with getting consensus across this House, but there has been a lot of consensus-building to do outside, and everyone does not always see and appreciate that.

[Mr Clive Betts]

I express many thanks and congratulations from the whole House, I think, to the hon. Gentleman for what he has done.

The cross-party nature of proceedings extended right through the Bill Committee to all Members. That applied particularly to the Minister—[*Interruption.*] I thought for a minute that he had gone—that he had given up and left us to it, but he is still there. Throughout, he engaged with all members of the Committee. Where we had issues we needed exploring, he tried to deal with them in the Committee, but also outside—either himself or through his officials. That is really appreciated. Even today, he has suggested ways in which the Select Committee can continue to be involved in the code of practice, the code of guidance and the reviews. That is really constructive and helpful, and it shows a recognition of how the whole House can make a contribution.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who has obviously held the Government to account, and quite rightly, including on some broader issues today. Nevertheless, he has played a constructive and positive role. My hon. Friends the Members for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who are here with me, also played their role.

I want to say a little about the Select Committee. It is good that, as well as the hon. Member for Harrow East and my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood, the hon. Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) has seen this process right the way through. Indeed, I think I am right in saying that he first suggested that the Select Committee look at homelessness as the subject of a report. It was around a year ago that the Committee started taking evidence. Indeed, I have the report here—I carry it around with me at all times, of course—and we had our first hearing on Monday 14 March. It is appropriate that, on that occasion, some of our first witnesses were from Crisis, St Mungo's and Shelter, and they have certainly been an important part of this whole process, along with other organisations.

As I mentioned on Second Reading, the way in which the Select Committee was involved from the beginning—doing our report and then the pre-legislative scrutiny—has not merely followed precedents, but actually set precedents for the House, and I hope those precedents will be followed on other occasions. That is very important, and the Committee will follow the Bill with a look at the new burdens review the Government are doing, at the code of practice—when it is produced—at the code of guidance and then at the two-year review of how the Act is operating.

Let me finish by saying that the Select Committee's initial report looked at the wider issues. There is still the issue of the shortage of homes in this country. We are now doing an inquiry into the capacity of the house building industry, and as part of that we hope to ask Ministers questions about the housing White Paper. I think that the permanent secretary said when she came to the Select Committee two weeks ago that it will be available soon, and we hope it will be. The word “soon” has an expandable quality in Government circles, but I certainly hope it will be before the end of March.

Building enough homes, particularly homes that people can afford, or afford to rent, is absolutely crucial in dealing with the problem of homelessness in the long term. I will not go into issues about the sell-off of high-value assets, although it is interesting that the permanent secretary used the word “if” in relation to that when she came to talk to us. Of course, Ministers could not possibly comment, but let us hope that there may be substance to the word “if” on this occasion. We want co-operation in dealing with homelessness. Organisations at the local level—health authorities and others—need to properly engage with councils in tackling homelessness. That is absolutely crucial. It is also important that Government Departments get their act together and understand that the policies of one Department can affect the operation of policy in another.

In our report we drew attention to welfare reform in general terms, and to the particular issue of the withdrawal of housing benefit from 18 to 21-year-olds and how that can affect people. Young people who lose a job should not be put out on the streets or forced out of their home while they try to find another one. We addressed the problems with universal credit and the difficulties that can be created, and already are being created in some parts of the country, in driving up rent arrears. That is a serious potential problem. We hope that Ministers will look at this to see whether, on occasion, payments direct to landlords, where tenants are satisfied that that is appropriate, can help to stop such problems occurring—and stop homelessness occurring, given that one of the major causes is the loss of private rented tenancies, as we heard in evidence.

With just those caveats about issues that we need to look at further, I very much welcome and support this Bill. I am really pleased that we have got to this stage. Once again, I particularly thank the hon. Member for Harrow East for selecting this subject and for operating so consensually and collectively to get the Bill to this stage.

12.57 pm

Mr Burrows: It is a great pleasure to follow a whole litany of speeches rightly paying heartfelt tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I congratulate him and all those who have been involved in this Bill. I am glad that it is a cross-party effort, and also that there has been collaboration across the sectors that he has had to navigate and deal with over the past weeks. I am proud that a Conservative Member of Parliament has led the way on this. It is right that that should be the case. I was pleased to encourage him down this path when he was picking a subject. Everyone, including the Government, wanted to encourage him to take an easier route—a hand-out Bill. That would have involved less effort but would not have addressed a burning injustice—a phrase rightly used by the Prime Minister. Homelessness is a burning injustice, and it is right that my hon. Friend chose it. It was a great pleasure on this occasion, and probably the last occasion, to be a “Whip” on a Bill. [*Interruption.*] Who knows? We live in interesting and surprising times.

There is a long track record of Conservatives tackling homelessness, not least one of my predecessors from a part of Enfield; there were boundary changes then and we may or may not have boundary changes to come. In 1967, 50 years ago, Iain Macleod helped to found the

homeless charity Crisis, to which we pay particular tribute for its great work in supporting this Bill. It is right to pay homage to him for that. Like others, I pay tribute to the other homelessness charities that have been supporting us along the way, particularly Shelter, St Mungo's, and Centrepoint.

Iain Macleod fought for the first piece of legislation to protect homeless families. It is right and fitting that, 40 years on from the last substantive piece of homelessness legislation, Members across the House acknowledge that this is a good Bill. It will make prevention a statutory and core duty for all councils, which will make a significant difference. Homeless households will no longer have to put up with the current situation. There is some good practice on preventing homelessness, but that will now become the norm across the country.

My council in Enfield will no longer be able to wait for a bailiff eviction notice before it has to help vulnerable people threatened with homelessness. A constituent of mine fled domestic violence and needed help to move to alternative, private sector accommodation that would not be known to her attacker. She and those like her will no longer have to put up with the response she received from the housing officer when she made the call for help. They said, "What do you expect us to do?" She and others like her now know that, under this Bill, there is an expectation and a clear duty of prevention with regard to vulnerable people.

The Bill will also help—this is a particularly challenging case, but I look forward to it being delivered on—an elderly 72-year-old in my constituency who as we speak is in unsafe and unsuitable temporary accommodation. Basically it is a bedsit. The bed is propped up by chunks of wood and cold air comes through big gaps in the windows. There is very little furniture. There is an office chair. He and his wife have serious health needs, but they have been placed in unsuitable accommodation. He told my office manager recently, "My life isn't worth living because I've been sent to a hellhole." A lot more needs to be done, but I hope that the Bill will help to address the issue of inspections and the private sector, which, sadly, is increasingly a cause of homelessness, so that that does not happen again to that 72-year-old and others like him.

As has been said, the Bill will not end homelessness. There are structural issues, but those are for another day. We need to debate the issues of welfare reform and the local housing allowance; matching housing costs and benefits; the supply of affordable and supported housing; and the forthcoming White Paper. I look forward to the Bill being part of making progress on a cross-Government homelessness strategy.

I welcome the progress that has been made in London and the Mayor's announcement of a record-breaking £3.15 billion deal for affordable housing, supporting 2,000 places for adults with complex needs. We have spoken about reviews and assessments, but the litmus test for the Bill will be its success in addressing the complex needs of those individuals who visit our constituency surgeries because they are always in and out of the system. The Bill will break that cycle of crisis management. It is about early prevention to help those complex individuals into sustainable housing.

In conclusion, in 1967, Iain Macleod spoke at a candlelit vigil in Hyde Park to raise awareness of homelessness. Sadly, his words continue to resonate 50 years on:

"This is an appeal to help those who no longer have any dignity and self-respect... What we do expect is that you will acknowledge that they are fellow human beings, and that they have nothing left to look forward to... We call upon the talents, ideas and enthusiasm of people from all different prejudices and beliefs in a constructive attempt to tackle this growing urban problem."

The Bill is a constructive attempt to follow in that spirit of continued and sustained collaboration, with the aim of finishing the race—on a cross-party, cross-Government and, indeed, cross-housing sector basis—to end homelessness.

1.4 pm

Ms Buck: There is indeed a cross-party consensus in support of the Bill, as we showed on Second Reading, in Committee and again today. It is a step in the right direction and will, I hope, lead to a significant cultural shift in the way that homelessness is treated, especially—although not exclusively—for single homeless people and those who have traditionally been non-priority need. It is a good thing that we will put into legislation the duties in the Bill to assess and to co-operate and the duties of prevention.

I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on introducing the Bill and leading on it in recent months, as well as Members who helped to put it together, with the support of Crisis and the expert panel. We want the Bill to proceed with speed and to bring about a transformation. Although in many cases local authorities have no barrier to carrying out the kinds of duties in the Bill, we know that given recent financial pressures—and, in some cases, for other reasons—local authorities have taken the law literally and tested and challenged it to its outer limit, and beyond in some cases. It will be good to have a legislative framework that will make it harder for some of those bad practices to continue.

It is also true, as my hon. Friends and other hon. Members have said, that the Bill does not exist in isolation. We have already referred to the fact that existing non-statutory duties for the prevention and relief of homelessness, which assist some 100,000 households every year, have not been able to check the remorseless upward trend in homelessness, for those in priority need and non-priority need, and rough sleepers, in recent years. That is because the pressure on resources—in many areas, and by no means exclusively local government—has been a contrary driver to any attempts to bring down homelessness.

Rough sleeping, the sharp edge of homelessness, has leapt by 16% just this year—Westminster, my local authority, is on the frontline with the highest number of rough sleepers. New information that I obtained from the health service last week shows not only a rise in rough sleeping but—terrifyingly—an escalation in the number of rough sleepers for whom mental health problems are the main driver. Since 2010, the number of rough sleepers with serious mental health problems has gone up by 80%. That is a really disturbing figure and reflects something else that is happening across the public services, especially the NHS.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend on her support for the Bill. As I am sure she knows, last Sunday was Homelessness Sunday and I happened to be in her borough, although not her constituency. Attention was drawn to the large number of church-based night shelters of various kinds that operate all over the country to try to meet the rapidly growing need. Will she join me in commending those initiatives for their efforts?

Ms Buck: I am happy to do that. Stunningly good work is being done by volunteers, churches and other faith communities on homelessness. At Christmas I went to the Crisis centre at the City of Westminster College in my constituency and met volunteers, some of whom have been going to Crisis for 20 years to provide the support that is given over the difficult holiday period. We should congratulate those people, whether it is their job or a voluntary commitment, who put so much into helping the homeless.

The fact remains that fundamental problems are pushing in the opposite direction to the Bill. On welfare reform, the House of Commons Library briefing confirms that, this year alone, £2.7 billion less will be spent on housing support than would have been the case on trends from 2010 and that £5 billion has been taken out altogether since 2010. Unfortunately, that puts the £48 million contribution to the Bill into rather alarming context. Of course, the delay in universal credit payments is driving more and more tenants into arrears, which in turn is making private landlords—the default option for many homeless people—less likely to let. I see no signs of that problem reducing. In fact, the trend is likely to go in the opposite direction. The hon. Member for Harrow East said that we should judge the Bill on its merits, and I am happy to do that, but we cannot ignore the wider context.

As the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) reminded us, this is fundamentally about people. It is not just about money and the legal framework; it is fundamentally about those at the sharp end. In the last few weeks, I have dealt with many cases of people either homeless or at risk of homelessness. This week, I heard from a young mother of two children, 20 years resident in my constituency, who was made homeless from the private rented sector. Her sick parents, for whom she provides care, live in the constituency. She had to wait until the bailiffs came before she could be rehoused, and she has now been rehoused in north London, over an hour away from her support network and sharing a single room with her two children. That is the reality of homelessness.

Even more acute was a case that came to me just before Christmas. It goes to the heart of the challenge, particularly of single homelessness. With the House's permission, I will read a few lines from the letter that came in from a young man who was kicked out of home for reasons that I will not share with the House but which are very profound and difficult and which I understand:

"After I was kicked out, I was forced to live in a friend's car through the winter of 2016. One night when I was sleeping the car was broken into... the people held a knife to my neck and took everything I owned in the world, even my only shoes. I slept on a park bench in Victoria until a stranger told me about a hostel... I was given a place 3 days later... In the meantime, I went back to sleep at the park, which I found very unfair."

Unfortunately, at the hostel, he was subject to an attack and robbery, and so the hostel place broke down. When he finally came to me the week before Christmas, he had been sleeping rough for the whole year. His letter finishes:

"I don't want to be robbed or killed... 2016 has been the worst year of my life. I have wanted to kill myself so many times... You hear about people being killed on the road every day, and I know if I don't get help, I will be the next to be killed."

That boy is 19 years old. He will be scarred by that experience for the rest of his life. The mother of the two young children will also be scarred. Homelessness scars people's lives, even after they have been found somewhere to live. If the Bill can do anything for that 19-year-old boy, I will happily support it, but the test of the Bill, for that mother and her children and for that 19-year-old boy, and indeed for the hon. Member for Harrow East, is whether it can exist in a context of support and financial backing that seeks to deal with the drivers of homelessness, whether housing supply, the failures of universal credit or the impact of welfare reform. If it does not, welcome though the provisions will be, we will unfortunately find ourselves back here again, in a year or two, facing yet more increases in homelessness and yet more individual lives scarred by this terrible scourge of modern life.

1.13 pm

Mr Jackson: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who has always been diligent in pursuing the issue of housing in her constituency. I am also delighted to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his wonderful work and my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), the Bill's de facto Whip.

Today, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East is a bit of softy—we are being very consensual and cross-party—but, having known him for 20 years as a political bruiser, I know how painful it must have been for him to praise inordinately the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). In the same spirit, however, I echo his remarks. We are all here to help needy and vulnerable people, whom we have the great honour and privilege to represent in the House. I was concerned a few days ago when it appeared that the Opposition were intent on effectively—potentially—wrecking the Bill. I am glad that they resiled from pushing the amendments to a vote, not necessarily because that was indeed their intention, but because when the Bill reached the other place peers might have complicated the issue, thereby endangering the Bill's viability in the long run. That has not happened, for which I thank the Opposition and, indeed, my hon. Friends.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said earlier that the Bill was in the great Conservative tradition of progressive social change. We look back on public health reform, municipal reform, local government reform and, of course, the housing boom of the 1950s in the Macmillan era, and we see that the Bill demonstrates a similar commitment to encouraging people to make the world a better place.

I think I am fairly unusual in being a Conservative Member of Parliament who is very keen on house building, and who believes that we must tackle the housing crisis at source by building more homes. That does not always happen. I do not decry the motives of my hon. Friends, and other Members, for wanting to

protect the residential amenities and quality of life in their own areas, but I think we all accept that if we are to solve the housing crisis in the long term, we must build more homes. I was, I think, a lone voice when, a month or so ago, I argued against some of the more restrictive amendments in the Neighbourhood Planning Bill, because in doing so I was arguing against not building more homes.

We look forward greatly to the housing White Paper, and I thank the Minister for the excellent work that he has done with his colleagues. I particularly thank the Department for allocating funds to Peterborough City Council as part of the £48 million homelessness reduction programme. Peterborough has seen an uptick in the number of people presenting themselves as homeless and in the number of rough sleepers living on the streets. The impact of welfare reform has been an issue, as has the large proportion of peripatetic foreign workers from eastern Europe who may lose their jobs very suddenly and be unable to pay their rent. However, as we heard from the hon. Member for Hammersmith, the precipitous termination of housing agreements under section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 is also having an impact, and I therefore think that the Bill is extremely timely. I strongly supported it on Second Reading, when I also did some work with charities in my constituency.

While I am at it, let me give a plug to the fantastic work done by the congregation of my own local church, All Saints parish church in Park Road, and to the parochial church council. This winter, All Saints, along with other churches in Peterborough, has participated in an ecumenical initiative to provide a night shelter for some of the more vulnerable people in the city, who would not otherwise have a bed on a very cold night. Those people have been treated with the warmth and human kindness and given the dignity that one would expect from good Christian people pursuing their mission. So I say thank you to Father Greg Roberts and the others for that.

This is the beginning of a journey. The Bill will not end homelessness and rough sleeping. However, we are on that journey, and the good thing about the Bill is that it represents a proactive effort, especially in relation to early intervention and advice. We have to concede that it is not just about dry, arcane legislation; it is about human beings and the problems they are suffering, which mean they are having to take difficult decisions. I therefore urge the Minister to think in a more holistic way around substance misuse and mental health issues as that impacts on people who are homeless. If it is possible to give more support in the course of the secondary legislation of this Bill to assist local authorities, that will be very important indeed.

Another important issue to raise is that for those authorities such as Peterborough, which participated in a large-scale stock transfer some years ago, there just is not the capacity to think ahead in terms of local trends for homelessness. Therefore, they need some expertise and help, and that costs money. But it should not be the case that the first time anyone can receive help is when the bailiffs are knocking on their door.

I welcome in particular the help-to-secure parts of the Bill and of course the individualised plan, because we are talking about individuals, each of whom has a different set of circumstances that have brought them to make the decisions they have made—life sometimes “happens to you while you’re busy making other plans”,

to quote John Lennon from many years ago. The fact is that that proactive forward-looking advice will be good for the taxpayer, and, more importantly, good for those individuals, particularly individuals with families. That is very important.

On selective licensing, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), who is no longer in her place, made the important point about vulnerable women who are affected by homelessness. Vulnerable women are also affected by very poor quality housing and very poor quality private sector lets. I am honest about saying that I am willing to look at the trade-off of ending slum landlords by reducing some of the provision, because I do not want my constituents living in slums at the whim of rapacious landlords who are milking the taxpayer. That might mean some turbulence in the market, but the duty does not end once we have housed that person; the duty ends when we are convinced that that person or family is in decent accommodation. A number of years ago Cambridgeshire Constabulary looked at crime committed against women in new migrant households—sexual crime, theft and other crimes. So we have, and should have, a much more general duty to people in private accommodation.

May I say a bit about the saga of St Michael’s Gate, on which I had a Westminster Hall debate? This was the ludicrous Alice in Wonderland situation where my local authority was forced to move people who were statutorily homeless and who it had been housing in a Travelodge into a development called St Michael’s Gate. Its landlord, Stef & Philips, had a dubious and morally reprehensible business model which I mentioned earlier, which meant that it served a section 21 notice on 74 of those households and made a number of them statutorily homeless. So it was recycling homelessness. It did that because it was more lucrative for it to cream off the administrative fee for overnight homeless accommodation—and of course those people who were chucked out of St Michael’s Gate have ended up as statutorily homeless. That is a ludicrous situation. I have asked the Local Government Association to look at that in detail, to make sure it can never happen again, or is very unlikely to do so.

That brings me to the key issue of the trend of many local authorities to begin to discharge their homelessness obligations under the Housing Act 1996 by shuffling the most vulnerable people around the country—different authorities are keen to push people to other local housing authorities. There should be at the very least a protocol or concordat in place to make sure that stops, because it is not fair on those people and ultimately it is not fair on the taxpayers.

I warmly welcome this Bill. It is the culmination of an enormous amount of effort and hard work. I particularly welcome clause 2 and the duty to provide advisory services, which was sorely needed, and of course clauses 4 to 6 on homelessness. We have seen the best tradition of the House of Commons today, with people of goodwill and faith coming together in the service of our constituents, sticking up for decent people who want a better life and who have a human right to a roof over their head. It is our job to look after their interests; they are the people we serve. I warmly endorse the Bill and I hope that it will soon receive Royal Assent and become an Act so that it can begin to make a difference to the lives of many needy people.

1.25 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome the Bill, and I want to add my tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for taking on this subject and for the diligence and commitment he has shown in seeing the Bill through. I also welcome the process of the Bill. I have been pleased to be closely involved from the beginning, taking part in the inquiry as a member of the Select Committee and also serving on the Bill Committee. This is an excellent example of evidence-based legislation.

The Select Committee saw undeniable evidence that the problem of homelessness is increasing at an exponential rate and that the current system is not working. The Bill will play an important role in setting some of that right. This is a principled reform that will set the basis on which homeless people receive support on the right footing. It is right that local authorities should have a responsibility—and indeed a statutory duty—to intervene earlier when residents are threatened with homelessness, to provide help and support and, wherever possible, to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. This is the compassionate thing to do, and it is what a decent society demands, but it is also the cost-effective thing to do. When someone becomes homeless, the personal cost to them and the many different costs to the public sector rise to a level that we simply cannot afford. Money spent propping people up and dealing with a situation that should never have arisen in the first place is not money well spent.

It is also right that more people should be eligible to receive support than is currently the case, and this legislation will help in that regard. We have all had examples in our constituencies of people, usually single people, who common decency demands should receive support but who are not eligible to receive it under the current system. The Bill will help to address that problem. It is also absolutely the case that the culture of work around support for homeless people should change, as well as the practice. The Select Committee saw evidence of significant levels of gatekeeping by local authorities, and of people being treated in ways that are simply unacceptable. They were made to feel that they were somehow to blame for their predicament or that they were a problem or just a statistic. Witnesses described the dehumanising effects of being in the current system, and it is absolutely right that this legislation seeks to change that.

I support the Bill on its own terms and I believe that it will make a significant difference to the nature of the support that homeless people receive. However, we cannot for one minute kid ourselves that by supporting a piece of legislation that has the words “homelessness reduction” in its title we are solving the problem of the housing crisis in this country. I cannot speak about the Bill without speaking in the same breath about the wider context of the housing crisis. This Government’s record on housing is shameful. Under Labour, rough sleeping fell by 75% in 11 years. Under this Government and the coalition Government, it doubled in just five years and it has gone up again by a further 30% in the last year alone. The number of people in temporary accommodation is rising, and the experience in my constituency is that homelessness is becoming more intractable for those who find themselves in that predicament. Individuals and households are in temporary accommodation for

longer and it is much harder for them to secure the affordable accommodation they need. That is about the supply of new homes and, more importantly, of secure, high-quality, genuinely affordable homes.

People face insecurity in the private rented sector, and I urge the Government to take reform of the private rented sector seriously. If someone decides to become a landlord, their primary responsibility should be to their tenant under the terms of the tenancy agreement, but the problem is that far too many people are living under tenancies that are not fit for purpose and do not provide the security that they need. While we wait for new homes to be built, reform of the private rented sector would make a rapid difference to people facing the terrible situation of homelessness. If more people had security in the private rented sector, fewer people would present to our hard-pressed councils’ homelessness departments for help and support. The LHA cap, uncertainty around funding for supported housing, the bedroom tax, the forced sale of council homes and many other aspects of Government housing policy are simply not helping to deliver the secure, affordable homes that we need to solve the problem of homelessness.

Funding for the Bill’s provisions is the second issue that I want to flag up. I welcome the Minister’s assurances about reviewing the funding and how the Bill works in practice. I accept that there are many unknowns about the new burdens that the Bill introduces and that a greater focus on prevention is expected to save councils money, but the Government’s working to date lacks clarity about what councils will be expected to use the funding for. Will it be for additional staffing costs only, or will it enable the provision of additional support to help people bridge a gap if they are finding it difficult to pay their rent for a period of time? Serious doubts exist about whether the funding will be enough.

I am particularly worried on behalf of Lambeth and Southwark Councils about the severe problems and pressure that they face. Some 5,000 children in Lambeth—more than 1,500 households—will spend tonight in temporary accommodation. While the Bill will help the councils to provide more support to families to prevent them from becoming homeless, the system is clogged up to the point of being at a standstill. We all want councils to be provided with sufficient resources to implement the new duties in a way that enables them to be effective. I hope that the Government will use this process of developing legislation in a private Member’s Bill on the basis of evidence through the Select Committee process as a precedent for their approach to housing in the future. They should look at the evidence of where the current system is simply not working and take decisive action on the wider contributors to our housing crisis.

I end by once again offering my congratulations to the hon. Member for Harrow East. I thank Crisis and the other homelessness charities that provided input and supported the Bill. I also thank the Minister for his support and for seeing the Bill through. Finally, I thank my Front-Bench colleagues and the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for their excellent contributions and for scrutinising and pressing the Government on this most important issue.

1.34 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow so many passionate speakers, not least the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who spoke well and with great knowledge of this issue. I join the tributes to the enormous success of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). In my working life, I was part of the Government machine that produces legislation, so I am in awe at how he has managed to go through the process effectively alone, albeit with the team he outlined earlier.

I am pleased that the Bill has Government support and that funding has been promised, although I hope the Minister was listening carefully to my hon. Friend when he said that more might be necessary. On that note, I thank the Department for Communities and Local Government for the £790,000 that has been given to Oxfordshire under the Government's homelessness prevention programme to fund the trials of new initiatives on homelessness.

We have heard a great deal about the importance of co-operation and cross-party working, and I make a plug for the cross-party co-operation in Oxfordshire over the past year that has led to good practice in the reduction of homelessness. For example, our district council and charities have been working closely together to reduce the number of rough sleepers in our district by 20%, which shows how well a more holistic approach of the type set out in the Bill can work.

We have seen some great initiatives in the past year, including the production of a pocket guide for the homeless. That might not sound like much, but having all the phone numbers in one place for short-term and long-term solutions to homelessness problems is useful to people whose life is chaotic and who are moving from place to place.

We also have some great local charities. I have seen the Beacon centre at St Mary's church in Banbury offering friendly but firm advice to some of our rough sleepers, and one of my favourite buildings in my whole constituency is the one that houses the Banbury Young Homelessness Project, which takes a forward-thinking, holistic approach to preventing the causes of homelessness. The project provides counselling and therapy for family groups, and it has a brilliant job club. In 2012, the project won the Queen's award for voluntary service. I love going there; it is very much like being at home with one's own teenagers. Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that you will understand and empathise with the fact that the sort of support it provides is almost that of a parent for a group of teens who are uncertain about which way to go, who need a bit of help and encouragement to get through job interviews, and who might not get such support from their family or at home in the way that we hope our own children do.

The Salvation Army has been turning lives around, particularly those of rough sleepers, for many, many years. It helped members of my family who came home from the first world war, and I am impressed by the cutting-edge work it continues to do. It is clear that rough sleepers have very different needs—families at risk of eviction differ greatly from people with drug and alcohol dependencies who have been rough sleeping—and our charities and council, working together, recognise that. I accept that not all are working together so well

and that we need the safety net enshrined in the Bill, but it seems right that there should no longer be a double standard of priority need. Anyone who does not have a bed for the night is, of course, a priority.

We have heard a lot this week about difficulties in the Prison Service, and it is right that we draw attention to the link between homelessness and imprisonment. Some 15% of new inmates going into prison for the first time are homeless, and 80% of those previously homeless prisoners reoffend in the first year after release, which compares very badly with a reoffending rate of under 50% for those who were not homeless when they went into prison. Dealing with homelessness will really help in the battle to reduce reoffending, so I add my support to this well-balanced Bill, which will support the homeless without putting undue pressure on councils. I hope that, by working together, claimants and councils will help to reduce the problem of homelessness.

1.39 pm

Mrs Drummond: I was pleased to serve on the Bill Committee and to be part of the consideration of a Bill that will make a big difference to many vulnerable people. There are two aspects that I particularly welcome: the extension to 56 days; and the measures on the personal adviser and assessment. I hope that I will no longer have constituents in my surgery who are waiting for the arrival of the bailiffs as that is the only way they can declare themselves homeless under existing rules.

In Portsmouth, the average time spent in temporary accommodation is three to four months. I hope that under the new system created by the Bill, temporary accommodation could become unnecessary for the majority of homelessness cases in my city, saving the local authority money. Removing the threat of a prolonged fight to regain possession will also encourage private landlords to take on benefit claimants referred by the local authority. The measures in the Bill will therefore ease the need for temporary accommodation at both ends of the process. Private landlords will take on more tenants, and those who are given notice will more frequently be found a new tenancy without an interval.

I hope that local authorities will look on the Bill not as a burden, but as an opportunity. Many, including Portsmouth City Council, are already working on the Bill. I hope that it will pass smoothly through the other place and will return to us with few changes, unless they make things dramatically better.

I thank the Minister and his civil servants, and the charities, especially Crisis, for providing excellent briefings. Of course, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) in particular for his many hours of hard work to get the Bill through.

1.41 pm

Michael Tomlinson: It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), with whom I served on the Bill Committee. It is right that we pay great tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—he will be blushing all afternoon, I am sure. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) might be right that this process will be the model of how to get difficult legislation through in a private Member's Bill. All the praise that has been given is due.

[Michael Tomlinson]

The hon. Member for Hammersmith invited me to exercise iron discipline today. In fact, he invited me not to speak at all, but that would have been a step too far. However, I will exercise discipline, not least because as you will have noted, Madam Deputy Speaker, my Bills appear on the Order Paper at positions 3 and 4. I am sure you will be interested to hear that my speech on Bill No. 4 refers to cricket in some detail, so it would be a shame indeed if we were not to get to that. Pages 3 to 5 of my speech are beautiful prose about cricket, and the House will be disappointed if we do not get to those Bills this afternoon.

I want to sound a note of caution. I was disappointed by one speech this afternoon—that from the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who is no longer in the Chamber. I was disappointed because it sounded more like a campaign speech than points about new clauses 1 to 3. It might be that he misunderstood the situation because he was not here on Second Reading and did not have the benefit of sitting on the Bill Committee. He was wrong when he said that there was a cosy consensus. There is cross-party support for the Bill, but there were robust debates in Committee involving exchanges from both sides to ensure that the Bill got through.

If there was consensus, it was on one fact. I believe that every member of the Bill Committee, and every single individual in the Chamber, shares the same view—my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and the hon. Member for Hammersmith have mentioned this—that one person sleeping rough is one person too many. If there is a cosy consensus around that, so be it; I stand guilty as charged.

Moving on from that one sour note, let me say that it was a huge pleasure to serve on the Committee. This was my first private Member's Bill Committee, and if they are all like that Committee, they will be a pleasure indeed.

We cannot pat ourselves on the back at this stage because there is more work to be done as the Bill goes through the Lords. I agree with the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) that this is but one step—it is not the complete answer—and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East made the same point. The Bill is not the whole answer, but it is a big step in the right direction.

1.44 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am delighted to support the Bill and to have served on the Bill Committee. I commend the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who has worked tirelessly on the Bill, giving 100% commitment and garnering cross-party support, which is quite an achievement. It is important to note the extent of the involvement and input of local authorities throughout the country, as well as that of national homelessness charities. We should also note the dialogue that each of us has had with our local charities. I am a long-term supporter of a homelessness charity called Doorway in my Chippenham constituency. Its views on the Bill have proved invaluable in giving me a more detailed insight into the exact impact it will have on the ground.

There has been some talk today about what the Bill does not cover, despite, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East pointed out, it being one of the longest ever private Members' Bills, and perhaps the most expensive. It is important that we emphasise what it does cover. We must remember that while there is much more to be done and the Bill will not do everything that we hope it can achieve—it will not be a cure-all—the existing legislation has not been changed in 40 years, so perhaps this is a monumental step forward.

The key aspect of the Bill is prevention: it does exactly what it says on the tin. Yes, it is true that some local authorities are already going above and beyond, but that is not consistent; in fact, the provision is patchy throughout the country. The Bill will end the atrocious postcode lottery and ensure that one minimum yet high standard is in place throughout the country to address and prevent homelessness. It will give local authorities guidance and create a level playing field, ending the hit-and-miss policy that has gone on for far too long.

Prevention really is the key. Perhaps the most important element of the Bill is the prevention duty that enables local authorities to provide help from 56 days before homelessness, rather than 28, meaning that they will be able to help while there is still time and that action can be taken before complex needs develop any further. That point has been raised with me several times by local charities. It will save local authorities, the NHS and other bodies money in the long run. It will prevent people from getting county court judgments, as has been mentioned, as well as helping with similar issues, and it will ensure that desperate people really do have the opportunity to get back on their feet. It will free up homelessness charities so that they have more time to help effectively.

Above all, however, prevention is the right thing to do. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said that if one person is sleeping rough on the streets, that is one too many and a national disgrace. I fundamentally agree with him. A key role for all MPs is to create opportunities and help the vulnerable and needy in our society, whatever our party. Surely the Bill goes right to the heart of that. I know that other Members wish to speak, and I never intended to speak for long because I have talked about this issue in the House numerous times. I shall finish by reaffirming my support for the Bill and its intention to prevent homelessness.

1.47 pm

David Mackintosh: It is a pleasure to support the private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). He deserves congratulation, and it has been a pleasure to work with him.

It is great that the Bill has reached this milestone in the legislative process. Our debates in Committee were thorough and productive, and we were able to analyse every aspect of the Bill, so I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I am also pleased with the role played by the Select Committee, which played an important part in giving the Bill proper scrutiny, so I thank its Chairman, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts).

Throughout the process, I have always believed that, as others have said, one person who is homeless is one too many, so every opportunity we have to highlight

this problem in modern society is helpful. All Members taking part in the debate will be particularly mindful of the human stories behind the statistics, and it is important that we remember the people whom we are trying to help. I put on record my gratitude to the Hope Centre in my constituency, of which I am proud to be patron. The staff there do fantastic work to help homeless people to rebuild their lives.

I express again my wholehearted commitment to the Bill and what it would achieve. Along with many other colleagues, I have said that it will not be the only solution to end homelessness, but it is a crucial step on the path towards helping people who are at risk. I am sure that in the near future the opportunity will arise to make further changes, and I eagerly anticipate the Government's housing White Paper. The all-party group on ending homelessness will continue to push on these issues. Indeed, just this week we had an informative and helpful session on prison leavers. Last night, I had the pleasure to watch a new documentary called "Slum Britain: 50 Years On", which was created by Shelter, Channel 5 and ITN. It focuses on the plight of hidden homelessness in our country. At the screening, which was also attended by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), we were able to meet one of the families whom the documentary had followed. We were told of their struggles with their local authority and the seemingly impossible challenges that they faced when trying to access help. Such things remind us why the Bill is so necessary and why it must progress through the House and into the other place. People are looking to us to help them in their most desperate times.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has already thanked the many people who have contributed to this Bill from both sides of the House. I am grateful to the Minister and his officials, colleagues from the Select Committee and the Bill Committee, and the charities that have backed us so strongly, including Crisis, Shelter, St Mungo's, and Homeless Link. I am glad to give my support to the Bill today.

1.50 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I do not want to repeat too many of the comments that have already been made, but I cannot fail to pass on my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his tireless work, drive and dedication on the Bill. I, too, very much hope that the Bill does proceed through this place and becomes an Act. I wish to thank the Minister and his officials, not least for setting aside the £48 million that will go to help local authorities support the implementation of this Bill. I also thank Opposition Members, who have played such a key role in this Bill.

It has been an absolute pleasure to serve on the Bill Committee. It was the first real Bill Committee on which I served. Seeing such consensual cross-party working made me wish that more Bills and private Members' Bills operated on such a basis.

So many years on from "Cathy Come Home", there is no doubt that we have become blind to things such as rough sleeping. There is also the problem of the homelessness that we do not see—I am talking about the homeless people who are sofa surfing or who are having to sleep over with a friend. We do not see them because they are not visible on the streets. I am as guilty as anyone else of walking past those who are sleeping in

doorways. I do so partly because we are advised by many charities, for all sorts of reasons, not to give money. Occasionally, I will buy sandwiches and other types of food.

Something interesting happened to me just a few weeks ago. I was walking along the road to catch the 91 bus back from the Covent Garden area, and a homeless lady approached me. I thought that she was going to ask for money, but in fact she did not; she asked for a hug, because we had had a chat. She said, "Thank you for talking to me. Thank you for engaging with me like a human being. Thank you for recognising that, just because I am homeless, it does not mean that I am not a person." We must not forget that we cannot ever lose our humanity.

As many Members from across the Chamber have said today, one person who is sleeping rough, one person who is homeless, one family who is sofa surfing or living in a one-bedroom temporary accommodation unit is not acceptable. It is not acceptable in any country; it is certainly not acceptable in the fifth largest economy in the world. That is why I am so proud to support this Bill. As the Minister knows, our record is not great: we have seen an increase in rough sleeping and in homelessness. I am proud that the Government are now taking action by supporting this Bill, which puts prevention at its very heart. Yes, we must do far more to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping on our streets, but the key must be prevention and ensuring that we interact and engage as early as possible with those who come to us asking for help. That is why I am really proud that this Bill increases to 56 the number of days that we can help someone before they become homeless. That means that we can intervene, engage and help those who rightly seek support at the point at which they know they need help but before they reach crisis.

I support this Bill and hope that it progresses to the next stage. I also hope that all Members across the House will support it fully.

1.53 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): First, let me apologise for not referring Members earlier to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I, too, wish to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), because, having piloted two private Members' Bills through the House in the previous Session of Parliament, I know how much hard work is involved. I wish this Bill every success when it goes through the same stages in the other place.

I wish to put the Cornish perspective to the House, and to say how grateful we will be in Cornwall for the changes that this Bill will introduce. Despite the 49% fall in unemployment in South East Cornwall since 2010 and a strengthening local economy, low incomes remain a challenge across Cornwall. Conversely, as a result of our thriving tourist industry, we have one of the highest proportions of second homes, and that naturally has an impact on housing affordability. Only a strong economy that enables incomes to rise will help everyone to be safe and secure and ensure that those who deserve support and care receive it. Unfortunately, however, homelessness remains a considerable challenge in my constituency and across Cornwall—one played

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

out in the casework that comes across my desk every day. That is why I support the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East: it will refocus the efforts of English authorities to prevent homelessness.

We have heard of cases in which people have had to wait until they have been given a bailiff's letter before the local authority will consider rehousing them, and the situation is exactly the same in South East Cornwall. There are also considerable difficulties for people seeking alternative accommodation. I often see constituents who feel that they have been let down by the Liberal Democrat, independently led local authority. That is why I pointed out in an intervention that the leader of the Liberal Democrats was selling a message of wanting to provide more houses without there being anybody here from that party to support the Bill. I would not be proud of that, but I am so glad to see so many Government Members here today supporting a Bill genuinely to introduce measures to help homelessness.

I am aware that other Members need to speak, so I will not repeat what other hon. Members have already said. I finish by quoting what Crisis said about the Bill:

"It brings much-needed reform to England's 40-year-old homelessness legislation."

I could not agree more. I really applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East.

1.57 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I want to add my respect and blessings to the Bill, but first I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

My absolute respect goes to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman); as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said, my hon. Friend has surely provided a template for MPs on how to get a private Member's Bill through and on the tone and thoroughness of work that should go into such a Bill. I give credit to colleagues who have been involved in a lot of work in Committee. I am in awe of their work and it is a pleasure to applaud them now.

I agree with other Members that this is but one part of a whole strategy. In that spirit, I wish to pay tribute to a lot of people in my community. I hope that we do our jobs as MPs and that the Lords will play their part, but local government is also vital. Brian Castle was a housing officer; he has recently retired. I could call him any time during the day or evening if I was concerned about a homeless person in my constituency. He would tell me that day, within hours, what services were being provided and help was being given to that person. That was a great asset for me as an MP.

I also give credit to Colin Kennedy, my previous borough commander. He invited me to go out with the police on a Saturday night-Sunday morning shift. I witnessed how amazing the police are in dealing with people sleeping rough who may not wish to go to A&E. I saw amazing policemen cajole those people, initially against their will, into getting help so that they received the services they needed.

I also pay tribute—this does not happen often—to the Secretary of State for Health, because we are now putting mental health on the agenda. Having psychiatric

services in A&E departments, in the triage system, is a vital part of the whole strategy for everyone, and particularly for people who find themselves rough sleeping or homeless. I will not have been the only person in the NHS who treated somebody for an injury and who was then heartbroken to see them walk out of A&E, knowing they had no home to go to.

I also pay tribute to Mia, a young schoolgirl in my constituency who sold amazing cupcakes she had baked to raise money for Streetlink. As she said on her JustGiving page, she smashed it—she smashed her target.

I think my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has also smashed his target. There are some heroes who wear capes, and some heroes who have spider webs drawn on their faces, but today there is a hero wearing a suit, a tie and a little lapel pin saying, "Back the Bill. Reduce Homelessness." It is a privilege to be here.

2 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): How can I follow that tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)? I have known him for some time now—since before we both came into the House—and he is a very caring man. He is also a good friend to not only me but other colleagues on the Government Benches and on the Opposition Benches as well. I pay tribute to my friend for getting this Bill through; it is well overdue. I thank him so much.

I pay tribute to the Minister for being patient. It has been quite a marathon, but it is good to know that £48 million is going to be available for these new duties—there is an intimation that there could be more, and I hope there is.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I have not always seen eye to eye with him, but I more or less agree with everything he said today, and it has been a pleasure to sit here and listen to him speak, from 9.30 am, when we started, to this point.

It is good that we can now even out the playing field for people who are needy—especially people who were in the armed forces, people with mental health issues and people who find themselves on the streets for no other reason than that life has dealt them a bad blow.

We do not have to be reminded of the problem of homelessness; it has been creeping up over the years—I think we can all agree on that. When I leave the House every night, there are people sleeping in the underpass, and it always makes my heart sink to see that.

Even though I have had nothing to do with the proceedings up until this final point, I feel proud to have sat here today and just to look at everybody who has actually worked on everything that has got us through to this point. What we have done today—what you all have done today—in this Chamber is historic and nothing short of miraculous. I just hope that the Bill reaches the statute book as soon as possible.

2.3 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I want to say how pleased I am to be here to see the passage of this very important Bill, particularly as I am sitting just in front of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who put his case, as he did on Second Reading, with passion, with conviction, with real dedication and with real knowledge about this cause.

I also want to thank Crisis and Shelter for all their work behind the scenes and for their public advocacy, and Members have turned up to speak to the Bill and to ensure its passage through the House. I know of the great work that Crisis, in particular, does, because my mum spent Christmas volunteering with it two years ago and had a really fantastic time. I would thoroughly recommend volunteering to all Members of the House.

The Minister and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), were right when they said that legislation alone would not be sufficient to tackle homelessness. We do need legislation, and that is why we are here today—to pass the first significant piece of legislation on homelessness for 40 years. This legislation will, among other things, end the nonsense that I hear time and time again in my advice surgeries, where 40% of the cases I see are about housing: that tenants facing eviction must be made to wait for a bailiff's notice before receiving homelessness protection from the council.

As well as legislation, to tackle homelessness we need money from the Government and involvement from third sector organisations. Having convened a homelessness summit in Kingston with our many third sector organisations, council officers, the leader of Kingston Council and the lead member for housing, thereby gaining a lot of knowledge of the local processes, practices and needs, I was able to lobby the Government for homelessness funding with, I think, some authority. I am pleased that Kingston is part of a tri-borough homelessness prevention trailblazer area that is to receive £1 million of Government funding to tackle homelessness. This is great news for the Royal Borough of Kingston, which in virtually every funding formula applied by the Government, be it the revenue support grant or the schools funding formula, does not do very well. It was dismissed as a “leafy borough” by the noble Lord Prescott when he sat where my hon. Friend the Minister sits today, but that woefully fails to recognise the fact that it has pockets of social deprivation as bad as those in any other area of London—and yes, it has rough sleeping, which we must tackle.

Third sector organisations are, and have always been, vital in the fight against homelessness and in homelessness prevention. It is notable that many of these are faith-based organisations where people, as part of their worship and devotion, give service to the most needy in their local community. In Kingston, that includes Kingston Churches Action on Homelessness; the Joel Community Project; the YMCA; Churches Together, which offers up churches as night shelters in the winter; and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. I thank all those organisations, and others I have not mentioned, for their work, in collaboration with the council, to tackle homelessness in Kingston. I look forward to working with all of them, and with Kingston's Conservative council, in implementing the provisions of this Bill, and working out how best to spend the trailblazer funding

we have been granted by the Government to end the disgrace of homelessness in Kingston and in our country as a whole.

2.6 pm

Victoria Atkins: I join hon. Members on both sides of the House in thanking and congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I think that today we have heard the beginnings of his next general election leaflet, “Hero for Harrow East”.

I very much welcome the Bill's emphasis on preventing homelessness. It is practical and compassionate, and has the added benefit of being cost-effective. I welcome the fact that the Government have committed £48 million for councils to help them to improve services throughout the country. It is also welcome that the formula will be flexible enough to ensure that the money is directed to the boroughs and districts that need it most. I am very conscious that the House of Commons Library has estimated that there are seven rough sleepers in the entire district of East Lindsey. Although that is a tragedy for each and every one of them, I am, I hope, mature enough to realise that there are other parts of the country where, sadly, the figures are far higher, and I would much rather that the formula is flexible enough to help the areas that most need it.

I end with the words of the very helpful briefing paper from Crisis:

“The Homelessness Reduction Bill could transform the help available to homeless people, and if passed could represent one of the most important developments for homelessness in nearly 40 years.”

If that is not a fantastic sending off for this Bill, I do not know what is. I wish the Bill a speedy legislative journey to its natural home on the statute book—pun properly intended.

2.8 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), my fellow Home Office Parliamentary Private Secretary. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—a doughty campaigner who has shown great determination in steering this Bill through this House. I look forward to its receiving Royal Assent in due course and becoming an Act of Parliament.

It has been an absolute pleasure to be here on a couple of Fridays to support this Bill. I have been conscious on both occasions that I did not want to get in the way or detain the House for any length of time, so I have chosen to speak at this point. This Bill shows the real value of private Members' Bills where it is possible to command support across the House we can really get things done. The process is a useful vehicle to achieve that. It may well be that modifications are needed to the system, but when it works well, it works very well, and this is an example of its value. It is good to see the House working so collegiately, which people out there in the country will think makes a refreshing change.

The issue of prevention is very important. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) put it better than I ever could. Our public services more generally are going to have to focus more on prevention in the years ahead to get things right and to relieve the

[Tom Pursglove]

pressures. The Bill is considered, logical and sensible. It is right to clarify the importance of rights and responsibilities not just for local authorities and public services, but for the individual concerned, and the Bill does that very effectively indeed.

I want to say a few words of thanks to people in my own constituency. The housing departments of both East Northamptonshire Council and Corby Borough Council do a terrific job in making sure that we do not often get to the point where people find themselves homeless. I pay tribute to them for all the work they do, including with me as their local Member of Parliament, and the support they provide to my constituents, to try to get these things right.

I also pay tribute, as many other Members have done, to both Crisis and Shelter for all their efforts, not only on the ground, but in getting the Bill's provisions right, and for working so constructively with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and the Bill Committee members to achieve that.

I also thank those in my constituency who do so much good work to help those who find themselves in the most difficult of circumstances. Over Christmas, Rev. Dennis Binks and his congregation led a delegation on to the streets of Corby and Kettering on many cold winter evenings. They helped a number of people and I am very grateful to them for their efforts. I know that Ministers and everyone else in this House will send their thanks and appreciation to them as well.

There is clearly more to do—I do not think that any Member in this House would dispute that—but this Bill is a significant and important step forward in eradicating homelessness once and for all.

2.12 pm

Mr Marcus Jones: I am very pleased and proud to speak in support of the Bill's Third Reading. Homelessness, as we all know, is a chronic issue with which successive Governments have grappled. Given the complex issues that many people face, no one could claim that tackling homelessness is easy, but, as I and many colleagues have said many times, one person without a home is one too many. Everyone who can help clearly has a duty to do what they can.

Supporting important proposed legislation such as this Bill is what we can do in this House. We have scrutinised and improved the Bill, and we all hope that it will complete its passage without incident and deliver the change that we want to see. Royal Assent is only the start, however, and I want to talk about what the Government will do to make the Bill a success on the ground.

On 17 January, I announced £48 million of funding to local government to meet the new burdens cost associated with the Bill in this spending review period. When I made that announcement, I was clear that the figure of £48 million reflected the Bill as drafted at that time. I committed to updating the new burdens assessment to reflect any changes to our estimates in the light of any further amendments to the Bill on Report. The Government have today made significant amendments to further strengthen the Bill, and I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House are keen to understand their impact on the new burdens cost.

I can confirm that the amendments agreed today are estimated to increase the cost of the Bill by £13 million over the course of this spending review period. That increases the total new burdens cost of the Bill from the £48 million that I had announced, to £61 million. I am pleased to confirm that the Government will meet those costs.

I do not know whether it is true or not, but I suspect that, as several hon. Members have suggested, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has achieved a record in having the private Member's Bill with the most significant cost implications for Government spending. In that sense, he can consider that he has had a very good outcome.

The final new burdens assessment will be published once the distribution formula for the funding is complete, and when the Bill has completed its passage through the House. As I said in Committee, we will work with local authorities and the Local Government Association to develop a fair distribution model for the funding. That needs to reflect the different need in different areas, reflecting, for instance, the additional pressures and costs faced by many councils in London.

Ahead of implementation, we will work with local housing authorities to ensure that they have the resources and support they need. Key to that is updating the code of guidance, which will be reviewed in co-operation not only with local housing authorities but others with an interest and expertise, such as the homelessness charities and the landlord groups—not to mention the continuing role that the Select Committee will no doubt play in the process. That guidance will be needed by local authorities as they prepare to implement the new duties in the Bill, and as they support their staff to understand the new legislation and undertake the training they will need.

The Government will also have key implementation tasks. We will prepare the regulations setting out which public authorities will be subject to the duty to refer, identifying those authorities and working with them to ensure that they understand their new responsibilities and are ready to play an active role. We will also continue our work to improve the data we collect, so that we can monitor implementation and assess the impact and success of the Bill.

We do not see the Bill as the only way to reduce homelessness. It is an important part of our armoury, but it is not the panacea. The Government have initiated and are working on several other programmes in this area, because we are determined to do as much as we can to tackle the issues of homelessness and rough sleeping.

I want to finish by paying personal tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for all the effort that he has put into the Bill. It has been an absolute pleasure to work with him over many weeks on his Bill. As he mentioned, the time and scrutiny the Bill has been through is unusual, but he has remained calm in the face of some real challenges and has been focused on his final aim, which has been a key factor in getting the Bill this far.

Earlier, I mentioned hon. Members on both sides of the House who have been instrumental in bringing the Bill forward, but I also wish to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes),

who—in the absence of a Government Whip in a private Member's Bill Committee—acted as Whip and wing man for my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East. I also wish to thank one of our long-suffering departmental Parliamentary Private Secretaries, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), for the effort that she has put into the process. The other person on the Committee I have not mentioned is my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), who also made an excellent contribution to the debate today.

I also wish to mention Martine Martin, the parliamentary assistant to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East. I will not say she kept him in check, but she worked extremely hard and diligently to help him to bring the Bill forward.

Finally, I also thank my officials for doing a tremendous job, the charities, particularly Crisis, Shelter and St Mungo's, the relevant landlords associations, the LGA and the many individual councils and others in local government. I look forward to the Bill's enactment. I am sure that my hon. Friend will remain hot on my heels as it is implemented, and I look forward to continuing to work with him on this extremely important issue.

2.20 pm

Bob Blackman: With the leave of the House, I rise to say a few thank yous and to wish the Bill Godspeed through the other place.

I would like to thank the no fewer than 20 right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed on Third Reading. This is a complicated Bill with 13 clauses. It was 18 pages long before we agreed the Government amendments today, so I suspect it is now about 20 or 21 pages. It is a comprehensive Bill that attempts to ensure that anyone threatened with homelessness, or who has already reached that crisis point in their life, receives help and advice and a plan for securing accommodation from the local authority. The Bill, which

encompasses the whole public sector, will concentrate efforts in the hands of experts so that they can assist those who face this terrible crisis.

I particularly thank hon. Members for their appreciation of me, and I point out to my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) that it is national cake day, as well as Holocaust Memorial Day—and we should remember the plight of those individuals too. As for the Bill, the heroes are not in this Chamber; the heroes are those who go out every day to combat homelessness throughout the country—they are the people who deserve the plaudits.

I thank the Minister for his kind remarks, and for the extra money he has managed to stump up—perhaps we should have put his feet to the fire even more. But I will draw a line there. We have done as much as we can, although the Select Committee will be following carefully the implementation and operation of the Bill to make sure that sufficient funding is available and that local authorities are doing their job. I reiterate my thanks to the officials from the Department. I will miss our regular briefings, and the texts and emails requiring my assistance at 11 o'clock at night. I hope that once the Bill is enacted we can work together again in the future.

I would like to commend and thank the charities, particularly Crisis, Shelter and St Mungo's, as well as the landlords associations, which helped get the Bill to this stage, the LGA and all the local authorities—they, after all, have to implement the Bill. Most importantly, I hope that they plan now for the Bill's enactment, rather than waiting for it to become a reality. Finally, I wish the Bill Godspeed. I hope that the other place will have observed our proceedings today, as well as our Second Reading debate and all our hours in Committee spent scrutinising the Bill, and that they speed it through their House, so that it might become an Act as fast as possible and start to combat homelessness on our streets straightaway.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (Amendment) Bill

Second Reading

2.25 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Let me begin by echoing the comments that others have made. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and, indeed, all our colleagues who took part in the debate on the Homelessness Reduction Bill. It was an extremely enjoyable morning.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to present my Bill. It would remove primary schools and nurseries from the scope of the statutory Prevent duty, which requires teachers and others to scrutinise and report on the thoughts and ideas of children in their care and seek out signs of extremism. Although we have only a little time today, Members who take an interest in the important issues addressed in the Bill will be pleased to know that there will be more time to debate them next Wednesday in Westminster Hall.

The Prevent statutory duty was imposed by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 on nearly 600,000 public sector workers in the wake of a proliferation of terror attacks. In fact, the Bill's Third Reading took place on the day of the horrific Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris on 7 January 2015. It was also taking place in the run-up to the 2015 general election. It would have been a brave politician to oppose those measures at that time. Had I been in this place then, I might well have taken the Government's word for it that this was a good thing—a benign development to keep our children safe. However, we have now had an opportunity to see how the legislation operates in practice. We have the benefit of hindsight. It is time to evaluate the operation of the Prevent duty, and to determine whether it is working or whether unintended consequences are negating its underlying and worthy objectives.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Members of the Home Office Committee, of which I am a member, have spoken both to critics of Prevent and to its supporters in the police force. Has my hon. Friend spoken to Prevent co-ordinators and police officers in her own area to establish whether they support the continuation of these measures?

Lucy Allan: The Home Affairs Committee has done an excellent job and has produced an excellent report. If I had time, I would say more about it. I have indeed met Prevent co-ordinators, and I have seen examples of good work being done under the Act. However, I want to concentrate on the unintended consequences, and the impact on certain communities who perceive what could be seen as a benign state intervention as something to be feared. I think that the Government should take that on board.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Given that the hon. Lady has only a few minutes, I am genuinely sorry to intervene on her speech, but may I ask her a very simple question? Does she think that the Prevent strategy as a whole is now damaged, or does she think that there is still hope for it?

Lucy Allan: I know from my preparation for the debate that many members of all our communities are adamantly opposed to Prevent, and for good reason. I hope to say a little about some of the issues that have led them to that conclusion.

The Government naturally have a duty to protect the public, and it is a duty that they are prioritising with the utmost seriousness. Of course it is right to tackle extremism that leads to violence, but the issue becomes a little more delicate when it comes to the suppression of political or religious views that the Government perceive to be too conservative or too extreme. What they see as helpful and benign may seem authoritarian to a person who experiences the intervention, and it has the potential to undermine the very values that we all hold dear and seek to protect.

At its heart, this debate is about the sort of society we want to live in and to what extent we allow the very real terrorist threat we face to interfere with our fundamental freedoms. Since its introduction in 2015, there has been increasing disquiet about the implementation of the statutory duty and the impact upon community cohesion. These concerns have come from many different quarters and I have taken the time to meet with many of these groups—

2.30 pm

The Deputy Speaker interrupted the business (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

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

Business without Debate

ROAD TRAFFIC OFFENDERS (SURRENDER OF DRIVING LICENCES ETC) BILL

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

USE OF PROPERTY (PROTECTION) BILL

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

DEFIBRILLATORS (AVAILABILITY) 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.

FARRIERS (REGISTRATION) BILL

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

STATUTORY NUISANCE (AIRCRAFT NOISE) 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 March.

Provision of Cervical Screening

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

2.32 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who is no longer in the Chamber. He has worked incredibly hard to get a very important and much-needed Bill through this House.

I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group on women's health. I am thankful for the opportunity to hold this debate today because this week is Cervical Cancer Prevention Week. The phrasing is important, because cervical cancer is notable for being not only treatable but preventable, under the right screening conditions. The events of this week are all about trying to ensure that those conditions exist for as many women as possible throughout the UK.

I start by acknowledging the invaluable work of Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust, which I believe is unique in the UK in being dedicated to this issue. I thank it for its work in raising awareness during this week, such as through its #SmearForSmear campaign—there is still plenty of time to take up the offer to do your selfies, gentlemen—in which women, and indeed men, are encouraged to take a selfie with smeared lipstick to raise awareness of smear testing. I look forward to seeing those pictures later.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): That is a fantastic idea. Only this week, I went for my own smear because of the campaign and the highlighting of the issue. All of us might want to join together to do #SmearForSmear, and tweet the pictures after the debate.

Paula Sherriff: I absolutely agree. I definitely expect the Minister, at least, to partake in such activity.

I thank Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust for the work that it does all year round towards the eradication of this disease. It has been my pleasure to work with it, through the auspices of the all-party group, on issues to do with access to cervical screening, and I look forward to doing so again in the future.

I am glad that the Minister is sitting down, as I would also like to break with my habit in this House by giving a word of praise for current Government policy. As almost all cervical cancers are caused by persistent human papillomavirus—HPV—I welcome the Government's commitment to the HPV vaccination programme, even though I feel that its effect could be amplified with compulsory sex and relationships education in our schools.

Successive Governments have developed a successful cervical screening programme and, to their credit, this Government have maintained it. It is responsible for saving an estimated 5,000 lives a year. That is to be applauded, but it should not be taken for granted. Recent years have seen a drop in cervical screening coverage, and this risks an increase in the incidence of cervical cancer and the danger of further unnecessary deaths when we have been very close to making a breakthrough. We need to be vigilant if we are to maintain the progress we have already made and make up further ground in tackling the disease.

Even with the progress that we have made on screening, some 3,000 people a year are diagnosed with cervical cancer, and an astonishing 890 a year people die of it. The figures for 2015-16 show that the coverage in England sits at 72.7% of eligible women, which is the lowest for 19 years. This is in spite of the so-called Jade Goody effect, when the TV star's death from cervical cancer in 2009 resulted in 400,000 more women getting screened. Sadly, that effect has now been completely reversed. The numbers of screenings have been falling year on year, and they now stand at 3% lower than they were in 2011. Screening coverage rates across all age groups are falling.

I cannot stress strongly enough how significant and worrying these statistics are. They mean that more than a quarter of women in this country are leaving themselves open to a cancer that can be prevented, but that can easily be fatal if left undetected. As we all know, the general rule of cancer is that early diagnosis leads to a better prognosis, and cervical cancer is no different. The later the diagnosis, the poorer the health outcomes, and the more invasive and personally costly the treatment options. It benefits everyone involved if cervical cancer can be prevented, or detected and treated early.

Let me address one of the groups with the least coverage: young women. Women are invited for smear tests from the age of 25, but new research by Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust has shown that more than a quarter of women in the 25 to 29 age bracket are too embarrassed to attend one. Shockingly, the same research also suggested that 70% of young women did not believe that smear tests could reduce a woman's risk of cervical cancer. Let me be clear: they absolutely can. We know that 75% of cervical cancers can be prevented from developing through regular smear testing, yet more than 220,000 of the 25 to 29-year-olds invited for a test in England in the past year did not attend.

The research found several other causes for concern, including the fact that 24% of young women were unable to recognise a single symptom of cervical cancer, and that only just over half of them recognised that bleeding outside of periods was a symptom. That is the most common symptom of cervical cancer. Additionally, fewer than half knew that smear tests look for pre-cancerous cells, and almost a quarter incorrectly thought that the test was for ovarian cancer.

This problem is not unique to the younger generation. The 25 to 29 age group remains the group with the lowest coverage, but the 45 to 49 age group has seen the fastest decrease in coverage in recent years. Women over 50 display a similar tendency to put off or ignore smear testing, with a third having delayed or not attended their test. A shocking one in 10 have delayed for more than five years. This is particularly disconcerting because women aged 50 to 64 are the most likely to receive an advanced stage diagnosis, with half of those being stage 2 or later. As I mentioned earlier, this means more invasive treatment and risks poorer outcomes.

By far the biggest risk factor in developing cervical cancer is not attending cervical screenings, but Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust has found that attendance declines with age. The charity's long-term modelling has shown that if screening coverage continues to fall at its current rate, incidences of cervical cancer will have increased by 16% among 60 to 64-year-olds, and by a shocking

[Paula Sherriff]

85% among 70 to 74-year-olds, by 2040. If screening coverage falls by another 5%, the mortality rate among 60 to 64-year-olds will double.

Age is not the only determining factor of one's likelihood of being screened. One area of particular concern is that only 78% of black and minority ethnic women knew what a cervical screening test was compared with 91% of white women. This fell to 70% when looking at Asian women alone. Worryingly, only 53% of BAME women thought that screening was a necessary health test. This needs to be addressed, both nationally and within those communities.

The anxieties that all women were found to have about being screened, including embarrassment, worries about taking their clothes off in front of a stranger or discomfort with their body in general, are all heightened in particular ethnic communities with certain cultural norms. I have heard examples of mothers in certain minority ethnic households intercepting NHS screening invitation letters, leading to distress among younger women, who may experience cultural pressure that they should have maintained their virginity. If such factors put young BAME women off getting screened, that exposes them to significant risk of the disease. Particular focus should be paid to ensuring that mothers in those communities appreciate the dangers of cervical cancer, and that such cultural norms are not worth risking their daughters' lives over.

We must ensure that coverage does not continue to fall. Indeed, it must be raised to an acceptable level, but the current outlook is mixed. A new report by Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust for this year's Cervical Cancer Prevention Week found that local provision is confused. While there is some evidence of best practice among local authorities and clinical commissioning groups, almost half of local authorities and almost two thirds of CCGs in England have not taken steps to increase cervical screening attendance in the past two years. The report also found regional disparities. In Yorkshire and Humber, 65% of CCGs had taken steps to increase screening, compared with just 18% of CCGs in the west midlands and the north-east. Similarly, 78% of local authorities in the north-west have taken action compared with just 33% in the east midlands. Perhaps most shockingly of all, in London, where coverage lags behind the rest of the country at just two thirds of women, 20 out of 32 local authorities reported no activity at all towards increasing screening coverage. That has all the appearance of a postcode lottery. We risk coverage continuing to fall in some areas of England while other areas make progress. Nobody wants a situation in which someone's likelihood of developing cervical cancer is determined in no small part by the area in which they live. The Government should play their part to ensure that improvement happens across the board.

What can be done? We must seek to make access to cervical cancer screening as easy as possible. Screening takes five minutes and can save a life. Great strides have been made in recent years in making another simple test—blood pressure—available at every opportunity, which has been remarkably successful. There is every reason to expect that we could do the same for cervical cancer screening. However, I fear that the Government have taken a step in the wrong direction in recent years.

Cuts to sexual health funding have led to a significant reduction in the provision of cervical screening through sexual health services. Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust found that screening is available to all women through sexual health services in less than a third of areas, which again points to a postcode lottery. That seems like a grave misstep when over a third of women in the 25 to 29 age group expressed a wish to access screening through such services, while one in five women over the age of 50 wanted more flexibly timed access to screening. My GP practice offers cervical screening only every Tuesday morning, making access difficult and deterring many women from going for an appointment. I hope that the Government will look again at how much their cuts to local government funding have affected sexual health services, particularly the accessibility of cervical screening.

We must also move with the times. In addition to the cultural issues about invitation letters that I mentioned earlier, the use of letters is now old fashioned. While I appreciate that many NHS services across the country now use text message reminders, we should ensure that reminders to come in for screening are, to the greatest possible extent, accessible in the format of the patient's choice, be that text message or email. Digital accessibility is necessary in the modern world. We must also be cautious about the wording of the reminders. It has been brought to my attention that the current NHS literature sent out with reminders reads:

"It is your choice whether to have a cervical screening test or not. This leaflet aims to help you decide."

I fail to see how that in any way contributes to the aim of urging as many women as possible to attend cervical cancer screening. We already know that far too many women across all age groups and ethnicities are already content to put it off for a potentially dangerous length of time. I implore the NHS to reconsider the wording of the leaflets and to include a greater degree of urgency, because the phrasing will undoubtedly have an effect.

You will note, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I might not have been my usual challenging self this afternoon. Because of the gravity of the issue at hand, I happily recognise where the Government are on the right path. The inclusion of a commitment to increase cervical cancer screening in the 2015 cancer strategy is particularly welcome, as is the Government's commitment to HPV primary screening, the implementation of which could prevent at least 400 cases of cervical cancer a year.

I will finish by asking several questions of the Government. Will the Minister commit to a national campaign to prioritise an increase in cervical screening attendance? How will the Government encourage co-operation between the different levels of the health service to ensure that we see cervical screening rates rising once again? Will the IT systems for HPV primary screening be up and running as planned, or will we experience unnecessary delays that could result in avoidable diagnoses? Will the Minister look at the quality and outcomes framework incentives for general practitioners to make sure that GP practices are really incentivised to improve cervical screening coverage? Finally, how do the Government intend to address problems with the accessibility of cervical cancer screening among particularly hard-to-reach groups, such as BAME women?

It is not unthinkable that we could see the effective eradication of cervical cancer if we take the necessary action. Although I applaud the Government's existing

programmes and their commitment to tackling cervical cancer, I hope that the Minister will take note of the research from Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust—perhaps he will even work with it to identify where there are still gaps in provision—and take that action now.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Just before I call the Minister, I say to the hon. Lady that Jade Goody lived in my constituency. When she died, I wrote to her mother to say that her daughter's death had not been in vain because it had drawn attention to the situation and had warned generations of women of the action that they must take to protect themselves and give themselves a chance.

I am shocked that the hon. Lady has drawn to the attention of the House this afternoon the fact that that has not been the case. I sincerely hope that her bringing this debate to the House this afternoon and the Minister's attention to the points she has made—I am sure he is about to address them now—will reverse that situation.

2.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): Thank you for those comments, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) for her constructive speech, which was challenging towards the end. She raised four important points, which I will try to address in my remarks.

I also thank the hon. Lady for her work with the all-party parliamentary group on women's health to lead the charge on cervical screening. On Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust and the #SmearForSmear campaign, during her remarks I was able to check with both my Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), and the Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), and we will be delighted to take a selfie with her that we can use for #SmearForSmear. This debate is about asking challenging questions, but it is also about awareness. We will do anything we can to help a charity such as Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust do its job better. Perhaps we can take the selfie together after we finish.

As the hon. Member for Dewsbury said, nine women a day are being diagnosed with cervical cancer and two to three women a day are dying. It is a cancer that is almost entirely preventable through screening although, as she said, the symptoms are hard to detect, which I will cover. She said that the cancer strategy, which is being led by Cally Palmer, covers screening in some detail, including how we will proceed, and addresses the need right across the cancers for clinical commissioning groups to take a consistent approach to survival rates, early diagnosis, 62 day referral-to-treatment times and the whole cancer experience.

One of the things that I always say when we in this place have a debate about cancer is that we spend too much time—I am as guilty, or have been in the past, as any other Member—discussing the bricks and mortar of the health service and not enough thinking about some things that probably matter more to our constituents, such as one-year survival rates for cancer. We should be evaluating and holding our CCGs to account much more often over differential one-year survival rates, because, in the end, they probably matter to more

people and have more impact on their lives than perhaps some of the accident and emergency reconfigurations that we discuss.

There is a cervical cancer screening programme, and the hon. Lady made some good points about take-up. She did not talk about the campaign that has been waged in some areas on screening under the age of 25. I do not think that that is something that Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust wants, but I will cover it and the reasons we do not do it.

The hon. Lady mentioned the importance of the enhanced HPV screen that is coming in, asking a question about the IT systems to support that. We are planning that that will be in place—I have confirmed that; I think written questions have been tabled on the issue—by April 2019, when it will be rolled out. That will be in place. I can give her that assurance.

I want to talk a little about the point the hon. Lady made about GP awareness and clinical practice, because, as she said, there is not enough awareness of the symptoms of cervical cancer. It is hard to detect the symptoms, such as abdominal bleeding and its many causes. I will also cover the fact, which she rightly referred to, that the UK is doing a lot in the area of vaccination, which is probably what will achieve the most progress in the future and make the biggest difference in getting rid of this disease, which is, as you said, Madam Deputy Speaker, quite preventable.

On screening, I will start with the good news: we have screened 3 million women a year between the ages of 25 and 49. Every three years, a screening is available. After that, to the age of 64, it is every five years. The view is that, if that screening were not being done, there would be about 5,000 more deaths a year, rather than the 700 to 800 that are happening now.

Although there are few areas of cancer treatment, performance and survival rates on which the UK could say that it is a world leader, the screening figures from the OECD show that we are No. 4 of the 30 OECD countries. We do more screening than countries such as Germany, Denmark and Austria. However, the hon. Lady raised the point, and she is right, that screening rates are going down. They are going down across the world and we do not wholly understand why. We need to do more to get them up, as about 25% of women who are entitled to be screened are not being screened, and that percentage increases for women coming for their first screen at the age of 25 to 29. That is arguably the most important one, but the percentage of those not coming is about 33%.

As the hon. Lady said, the incidence of that is higher among ethnic minority women and among women with learning disabilities. There is a correlation with social deprivation as well. Perhaps that is predictable, but it is nevertheless true.

On the reasons for that, the hon. Lady talked about, perhaps, embarrassment. I think Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust has done some work on that. Some people say that they have no time to go to their GP, or they are scared about what the procedure involves or they think it is not important. We need to do what we can to improve that.

The hon. Lady raised some interesting points about the letter people receive, and she quoted from it. I am told that that correspondence is being reviewed, but it

[David Mowat]

strikes me—she made the point in her speech—that we are all on the same side in this regard. One way forward might be for her and Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust to come and speak to me about some of those suggestions, because they would be pushing at an open door. We can do that in the next few weeks.

We are trying to make the information more accessible, particularly for women with learning difficulties, because there are specific issues there—there are specific issues with their health in general, but particularly with regard to this issue. As the hon. Lady said, a lot of work is going on to target those GP practice areas and understand why they have such high incidence of no-shows. It is somewhat correlated with ethnic minorities, and it might involve some behavioural norms, for the reasons that were mentioned. I should say at this point that the Chancellor gave £650,000 from the tampon tax to Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust, which has used that money to try to understand, behaviourally, why a quarter of women are still not coming forward for screening in spite of a second reminder, and to increase awareness. None of that is to say, though, that there is not more to do. I am happy to speak to her and Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust about it.

From time to time there have been petitions and discussions about lowering the age limit for screening. I was pleased that the hon. Lady did not mention that, because it has been looked at again by the UK National Screening Committee, the World Health Organisation and, indeed, Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust, and there is agreement that earlier screening would do more harm than good because it is particularly likely to lead to false positives, which would create a pressure for biopsies that are not necessary. Notwithstanding the tragic case of Amber Cliff, the view is that screening that cohort of women earlier not only would not be beneficial—it is not a question of it not being cost-effective—but would actually make things worse. In that cohort of women, about five a year die, so it is particularly important that they understand the symptoms and go to their GP as quickly as possible. I should emphasise that there is no EU or other UK country that screens women under the age of 25. I shall discuss vaccination in more detail in a moment, but it is one of the things that will make a difference to women in that age group, and it will help with the screening no-shows, because we are getting much better uptake numbers for vaccination.

The hon. Lady talked about HPV as a significant indicator of risk. One thing that is being introduced on the back of the normal, historical screening is screening

for the virus on the first occasion. If it is present, the woman will be monitored much more closely going forward, because it is a very good indicator of the likelihood of cervical cancer developing. As I said, that programme will be rolled out nationally from April 2019. We are at the forefront of countries that are doing that around the world. I used to work with IT systems, and the hon. Lady is right to continue to ask about this one. The referral system and database will be ready to make that roll-out happen.

The hon. Lady rightly discussed the need for a GP outcomes framework. NHS England has done work to ensure that GP awareness is as high as it should be and that women, particularly those with mid-period bleeding, understand that it is serious and should be investigated and, if necessary, that they should be sent to a gynaecologist.

HPV, which is the indicator of this and other cancers, lends itself to vaccination, and we are one of the first countries in the world to bring in a very high volume of vaccinations of girls aged between 12 and 13. I am pleased to say that, last year, 85% of year 9 girls received the vaccination, which almost entirely takes away the likelihood of cervical cancer developing. That 85% is a higher number than the screening number, and it will help us to catch the people and the areas that have traditionally been hard to reach. Indeed, it is one means that we will use to address the issue of those hard-to-reach groups.

As HPV leads to other cancers, it has been suggested that the vaccination should also be given to boys. That is under discussion now, and we will be making a decision in the next few months. At the moment, only girls are vaccinated.

Let me finish by thanking again the hon. Member for Dewsbury for the points she raised, and for the way in which she did so. This is not a party issue—all of us are against cervical cancer. However, it is right that we challenge the postcode lottery that she mentioned and discuss ways to improve the take up of screening. If the five of us who are in the Chamber can do a selfie at the end of this debate and give it to Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust it will perhaps show that, at least, the awareness part has been achieved.

Question put and agreed to.

3.1 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 27 January 2017

DEFENCE

Defence Equipment Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): I am pleased to place in the Library of the House today the fifth annual summary of the Defence equipment plan. The plan shows the Ministry of Defence (MOD)'s progress in delivering an affordable programme.

The National Audit Office (NAO) is publishing in parallel its independent assessment of the affordability of our equipment plan. Its report notes the size, challenges and financial complexity of the Defence equipment programme. One consequence of the progress we have made to date is the agreement between the NAO and the Department to move from the NAO providing external assurance of the major projects report, to internal, but still independent validation by the MOD's Cost Assurance & Analysis Service. The NAO also points out where we must continue to improve and

refine our work in the future. We will continue to work openly with the NAO to demonstrate the financial robustness and affordability of the equipment plan.

The Government are committed to the Defence budget increasing by 0.5% above inflation each year for the remainder of this Parliament. We are planning to spend £178 billion on equipment and support out to 2025-26, which will provide our Armed Forces with the equipment to deliver Joint Force 2025.

[HCWS442]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

NATO Parliamentary Assembly

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I wish to confirm that the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Jamie Reed) will be replaced by the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) as a Member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

My right hon. Friend the then Foreign Secretary (Mr Hammond) published the full list of the United Kingdom delegation in his written statement on 23 November 2015.

[HCWS322]

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