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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Friday 14 January 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

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

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Many Members will have been shocked to see the newspaper headlines this morning, not just because of the terrible revelation that there were not one but two additional parties at Downing Street in 2021, the night before the Queen sat mourning alone at her husband's funeral—the defining image of lockdown—but because the story in one newspaper this morning appears to be a leak of the outcomes of Sue Gray's inquiry into those parties. On Wednesday the Prime Minister promised that on the publication of the report into the Downing Street parties, he would make a statement to this House. Mr Speaker, you have previously made clear that the Government should make important policy announcements to this House first, so that we can fulfil our job representing our constituents who will, of course, want to question the Prime Minister over these findings. For an issue of such importance, what guidance can you offer to ensure that Government Ministers and officials do not leak the outcomes of the report in advance, especially if those attempts to do so look as if they are exonerating the Prime Minister before we in this House see the contents of that report?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. The issue she has raised is a very important one, on a matter in which the House is extremely interested. It would be entirely inappropriate and discourteous to this House for any findings of the inquiry to be released to the media before being announced to this House. I cannot be clearer on this matter: I expect the Government to announce the findings of the inquiry to this House first, and I would treat any failure to do so as a gross discourtesy to this House.

Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

Clause 1

EXTENSION OF DUTY TO PROVIDE CAREERS GUIDANCE IN SCHOOLS

9.36 am

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, after subsection (4) insert—
“(4A) In subsection (4)(c), omit “the person giving it considers”.”

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 2, page 1, leave out subsection (5).

Sir Christopher Chope: Let me put the amendment in context, for colleagues who have not looked at the text of section 42A of the Education Act 1997. Under section 42A(4)(c), the Act states:

“The responsible authorities must secure that careers guidance provided under subsection (1)...is guidance that the person giving it considers will promote the best interests of the pupils to whom it is given.”

In other words, the test is a subjective one on the part of the provider, rather than an objective test. My amendment would remove the words

“the person giving it considers”

thereby making it an objective test for the responsible authorities when securing the careers guidance required by the Act.

The context of the amendment is very much about quality. I was delighted that in the debate that took place in Westminster Hall on Tuesday there was much emphasis on quality in careers guidance, and a lot of reference to what the Gatsby rules set out. Let me briefly tell the House about some of the points raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), who introduced that debate. She said how important it is that children know what they want to do when they leave school, but that they will not be able to do that if they are not told about all the career opportunities available to them, the qualifications they will need, and the different educational paths they can take.

For example, when my daughter was at school she aspired to become a member of the veterinary profession, and I am proud to say that that is what she is. However, it was difficult because her teachers said, “Well, I'm not sure you're going to be suitable for science A-levels”, and obviously without them she would never have been able to get the qualifications to go to veterinary school and attain the qualification that she has. The good advice she got from a teacher at the school meant that she could embark on science A-levels. That is a personal example from my own experience of the importance of quality. I do not doubt that some people at the school would have taken the view that the best thing was for her not to do science A-levels, but on any objective assessment it was the right decision. I therefore agree absolutely with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton.

[Sir Christopher Chope]

My right hon. Friend went to say:

“The latest report from the Centre for Social Justice says that there is a growing need for tailored, innovative and inspiring career guidance with links to role models and employers.”—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2022; Vol. 706, c. 211WH.]

I think everybody agrees that that is so, but it is a concern that there is no single place where a young person can get comprehensive Government-backed careers information. The Centre for Social Justice also found that schools are not consistently delivering good-quality careers advice. About one in five schools does not meet any of the eight Gatsby benchmarks, a series of internationally respected benchmarks that help the Government to quality assure careers advice in schools. That is very serious.

Everybody seems to agree that the Gatsby benchmarks should be the standard, yet we know that only one in five schools meet any of them. The question I want to pose, in moving the amendment, is this: what are the Government doing to ensure that we get not just careers guidance, but good-quality careers guidance? I remind the House of the eight Gatsby benchmarks of good careers guidance: a stable careers programme; learning from career and labour market information; addressing the needs of each pupil; linking curriculum learning to careers; encounters with employers and employees; experiences of work places; encounters with further and higher education; and personal guidance. The fact that so many schools do not even comply with any of them should raise significant alarm bells. That is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton, in concluding her remarks in the Westminster Hall debate, said:

“How do the Government plan to ensure that careers guidance is of a high quality for all pupils, irrespective of where they come from?”—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2022; Vol. 706, c. 212WH.] That is the issue.

I am delighted to see the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who was not able to attend the Westminster Hall debate, on the Front Bench. In welcoming him to the debate, may I say how much I appreciate his decision to give Ferndown Upper School in my constituency a significant capital grant for its T-levels programme, which was announced just before Christmas? That is much appreciated. Ferndown Upper School has made enormous progress over recent years under excellent leadership and has expanded its numbers accordingly. If we were able to see an equivalent increase in the quality of careers guidance in schools across the country, we would all be absolutely delighted.

Let me turn to the response to the Westminster Hall debate from the Minister for Higher and Further Education. She said:

“The foundation of making that a reality is careers guidance in our secondary schools.”

She went on to say:

“That is why we are strengthening the legal framework so that every secondary pupil is guaranteed access to high-quality, independent careers guidance. Careers guidance, in itself, is not the panacea; the quality is absolutely crucial.”—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2022; Vol. 706, c. 224WH.]

How will we ensure that we have that quality, which we are told will increasingly be assessed by Ofsted, if it is going to be constrained? If Ofsted goes to a school and

says, “Your provision is not of sufficiently good quality”, the school will be able to say, “Under the guidance—under the existing legislation—we think, or the person giving the advice thinks, that that is the right advice to be given for this child,” and there is no objective test. If the provider thinks that what it has done is correct, there is no possible way of criticising that or exercising any sanctions against it. That is why removing these words is of absolute importance if the Government want to deliver much better quality careers guidance in our schools. That is a small but important point, and I hope that we will get a constructive response from the Minister. If there is resistance to accepting the amendment in this place, perhaps it can be considered in the other place. However, we need to have more than just words about the importance of good quality; we need to ensure that the legislation facilitates it.

9.45 am

Amendment 2 is more of a probing amendment. It would remove subsection (5), which removes the application of the 1997 Act for provisions

“in relation to pupils over compulsory school age”.

As hon. Members know, compulsory school age is up to 16. If the Bill goes through as it stands, there will be no duty on schools with a sixth form, for example, to continue to provide careers guidance. I do not understand why, because although it could be said that careers guidance is important to enable pupils to decide their A-level options, even when they are taking those options and preparing to apply for higher education, they still need or would benefit from careers guidance. They may be doing, say, history or English at A-level, which will open up massive fields of opportunity in higher education and careers, but surely people who are taking those subjects, which are not obviously designed to enable them to go on a specific professional path, could benefit from getting proper guidance in school.

Why does the Minister think that schools with a sixth form should not be required to continue to provide careers guidance for pupils who are over 16? I am sure there must be a really good explanation—as there always must be if the Government have put forward a proposal to the House—and I look forward to receiving it from him. If he wants to intervene at this stage, I am very happy for him so to do, but perhaps he will hold his thunder until later.

The amendments do not need to be introduced at enormous length. However, the Bill has come before the House and this is an opportunity for us to explore these two aspects of it in more depth and with more focus.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for his interest in this important Bill and for focusing the debate on the importance of good-quality careers guidance. I note that he took interest in the Westminster Hall debate held by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), as I did, and I was happy to see so many in that debate refer to this Bill. He and I are on the same page on the importance of good-quality careers guidance, but I hope to assuage some of his concerns. His points about consistency are exactly what this Bill seeks to address, in extending the statutory requirement to provide careers advice to all

state-funded schools and across the entirety of secondary education. His other point was about the single point of careers guidance. I am not convinced that that is the answer. Although it might help with consistency, it may also bake in consistently bad advice from a single source.

On amendment 1, I take my hon. Friend's point about removing subjectivity, but of course the idea of good careers advice is that it is subjective and depends on many things, which the Gatsby benchmarks address, such as local labour market provisions. He will be pleased to know that section 45A of the Education Act 1997 makes it incumbent on schools to "have regard to" statutory guidance. The statutory careers guidance, which continues to be updated by the Minister's Department, imparts the need to adhere to the Gatsby benchmarks. On his personal experience of his daughter's careers advice, let me say that that does include addressing the needs of each pupil. The Bill, in extending the duty and putting all state-funded schools on the same footing, gives Ofsted the teeth it needs to apply that statutory guidance and the Gatsby benchmarks to a level playing field, across the board.

On amendment 2, I think there is a slight misunderstanding as to what clause 1(5) does, which is to disapply the need to offer advice on 16 to 18 options to those over 16, for obvious reasons. The statutory careers guidance to which all schools need to have regard does include the provision of careers guidance at 16 to 18, and that will remain. This provision disapplies the need to talk about 16 to 18 options once people get past 16, for fairly obvious reasons. The Minister may wish to address some of the points in more detail, but I hope that I have been able to assuage some of the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch. I hope that he will not force the House to decide on his amendments.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Let us start by congratulating the hon. Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) on reaching this stage with his Bill. I fully anticipate that he will ultimately achieve his aim of aligning academy provision with current state-maintained provision in the sphere of careers guidance, and I am pleased to give Labour's backing for this small but important Bill. Careers guidance is an important component of any serious social mobility strategy. For many people, and certainly for people in my family and other young people I have spoken to in Chesterfield, careers guidance and work experience are often the first time that young people really get a chance to put their head up and start looking into the future.

Mr Speaker: Order. Is the hon. Gentleman making a Third Reading speech or speaking to the amendments?

Mr Perkins: Am I going to get two different opportunities?

Mr Speaker: Yes.

Mr Perkins: Okay, so I will just speak to the amendments. That will speed us up nicely. None the less, I thought it was important to give some background to that point. Let me turn to the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). I suspect it would not be a sitting Friday if we did not hear the view from Christchurch. I have often wondered

whether a sitting Friday when we did not hear what the residents of Christchurch thought would be followed by a Saturday at all. Today, we have heard their views on careers guidance.

The hon. Gentleman made a number of significant points, and I have good news for him. We in the Labour party share his fear about quality, breadth and objectivity when it comes to understanding whether provision is of a high standard. I think his proposed amendment is not necessarily the way to address that, but several of the Labour amendments to the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill are. Quality and breadth of provision are important so that young people have the opportunity to consider a broad range of alternatives, and some careers guidance may be of a high standard but lack breadth. Our amendments to the Skills Bill—they have been supported by Lord Baker and others, and I hope they will return from the other place—will give the hon. Member for Workington the opportunity to get the assurances he seeks about quality and breadth. I look forward to speaking to the Bill further.

Mr Speaker: Order. If Members wish to speak, it would be helpful if they stood when the Member who is speaking sits down. I am just trying to put some names down.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Thank you for calling me so early in this debate, Mr Speaker. It is a pleasure to speak in it, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) on bringing this Bill before the House.

I want to give a little bit of perspective from my own background. In my maiden speech, I referred to my family background as moving from workhouse to Westminster. My great grandmother was born in a workhouse in the east end of London. She was a foundling and she met my great grandfather in the Foundling Hospital, so they had very modest beginnings. The emphasis in the Foundling Hospital was not on a choice of careers but on set career paths. All the boys who were put into the Foundling Hospital were trained to become Army bandmen, and all the girls were trained to become maternity nurses—midwives. They did not have a choice in that.

My great grandparents went on to have great careers, in the Army and as a midwife. They met each other in the hospital, and it absolutely changed their lives. They had rewarding careers and their own family, and—workhouse to Westminster—I managed to get here, for some reason. I think that shows the fundamental need for a career and a job to make our lives what we want them to be. That opportunity, which is fundamental to levelling up and everything that we stand for—

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to be helpful, but Members should be speaking to amendments to the Bill and not making Third Reading speeches. I think, unfortunately, you are making one of those, which I would love to hear later rather than now. If you can speak to the amendments and what we are dealing with, that would be helpful to the Chair.

Julie Marson: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your guidance. On the amendment, I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Workington said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher

[Julie Marson]

Chope). I think that the Bill, as it stands, answers the questions that it seeks to address, so I support it as it is presented today. But I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch—I like to relate things to personal experience, and I think his daughter's experience is very telling. It shows us about the cart and the horse. If someone has a vision for the future, they need to know the pathway to get there, so it is important that they have advice at an early stage. I absolutely take what he says, but I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Workington has answered that question.

10 am

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): I will not speak at great length about the amendments, only to say that every time my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) speaks, I always think that I went to the right university, because like him I am a graduate of Queen's College, St Andrews, now Dundee University. I was interested in the way that he rationalised the idea of moving to an objective test. He will know that that relies on the man on the Clapham omnibus being the benchmark as the unified standard of quality, shall we say. My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) eloquently made the point that that could end up baking in that quality.

I can speak only to my own experience. I was dead set throughout most of my A-levels on being a doctor. I have no scientific aptitude, but I convinced myself that that was what I was going to do—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Chris Clarkson: I do apologise, Mr Speaker. We are doing so well today. I have suddenly got louder—that is good.

It took a tutor who recognised that that might not have been my best skillset to point me in the right direction, and I am very glad that she did when she did. It led to a fulfilling career, with one slight blip when I was elected in 2019. I will not support the amendment if it is pressed to a vote, but I have a great deal of sympathy with my hon. Friend's intentions.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. You are all going to have to stand if you want to speak, because I am having to guess here. If people do not want to speak, can they let their Whip know and at least then I know what I am working to?

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) on bringing his Bill to this stage, and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) on his amendments. I have some sympathy with what the latter said about his first amendment. My own daughter is at university at the moment and she has found the mentoring skills offered by industrialists to be extremely helpful. I agree with the spirit of the amendment but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Workington said, the Bill is well established and structured, and is sufficient as it stands.

On the second amendment, I have made recent visits in my constituency to Ysgol y Grango in Rhos and Ysgol Rhiwabon, and I have seen how keen students are there to discuss their future career prospects. The more that we can satisfy that thirst for knowledge, the better, especially by bringing professionals into schools to provide their experience.

I respect very much the spirit of the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, but I feel that the Bill is sufficient as currently constituted, as my hon. Friend the Member for Workington said.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): I have made newbie mistake No. 1,273 procedurally, so I am happy to accept the Bill as it stands and I look forward to speaking on Third Reading.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I wish to touch briefly on the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope).

I had not intended to speak in today's debate because I am confident that my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) will get his Bill through. My main comment is about ensuring that there are no unintended consequences. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is right in seeking, through his amendments, to ensure consistency throughout the piece and the quality of the advice that young people get. I am slightly concerned, though, because we do not want to create arbitrary methods that do not take into account local social and economic needs. As I said on Second Reading in interventions on my hon. Friend the Member for Workington and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), sometimes the careers advice provided does not necessarily fall within a strict framework in respect of the needs of the individual.

The amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch are intended to ensure clarity and consistency. He gave the moving example of his daughter and how careers advice can have an impact; it is important to make sure we do not allow ambition to be stifled in any way. It is also important that his amendments do not have any unintended consequences. My hon. Friend's intention in respect of both amendments is clear, but the issue is what the operational delivery will look like.

I was reassured by the response of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington to the amendments: he explained what his Bill seeks to do and how he has worked to address the concerns expressed. That being said, as the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) said, it would not be a sitting Friday without the wise words of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch. I very much endorse the intent behind his amendments, but they might be somewhat wanting in respect of delivery, so I am reluctant to support them.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) for long championing all things education and for standing up for children. I have seen him, not just in respect of this Bill but on many other occasions, be a lone voice for children and for opportunities in education.

I appreciate the issues raised by the amendments. I agree that we need further scrutiny in that respect and to look into how we can help to give tailored support to everyone in need. In particular, clause 1, which extends

the careers duty to all pupils to secure education in all types of state-funded provision—particularly alternative provision—is excellent, but the amendment talks about giving advice to all from one set point and I have an issue with that. We could look at further ways to dig down into a bespoke way of targeting, perhaps through a funding settlement agreement that provides a funding incentive for those providers that are able to get students into an apprenticeship successfully. The school could get an economic settlement for that in the same way as applies when students are able to get into university at sixth-form level.

From my previous work, I have found that alternative provision is often overlooked—it is often the way in which schools shunt off students who are more challenging and they are not then given the support that they need. When I worked in disadvantaged areas and with schools with low skills, my concern was that children were being taken out of the main school, put into alternative provision and then left at 16 with no qualifications, no help, no skills and no guidance. I appreciate the fact that the Bill and the amendments are trying to target that inequality.

The nuanced issues raised by the amendments are great but I would go even further. Clause 1(3), which extends the duty to secure careers guidance to academies and alternative provision, is welcome, but I would like to see a way of incentivising schools to pursue apprenticeships and to stress that they should. Many schools do not pursue apprenticeships because it takes a lot of time to liaise with the businesses and with the educational provider. Schools need an extra financial settlement or incentive to do it correctly, so we should look at how to move that forward. I know we are not allowed to discuss that in a debate on a private Member's Bill, but I wanted to put that out there as we are discussing the amendment.

This is a nuanced issue. If things are done correctly, the Bill could help the levelling-up agenda throughout the UK. This is where children are falling through the cracks. They are being put through their paces until they are 16 and then left. They are not being diagnosed with learning difficulties and they are not being given careers advice, which would help the most disadvantaged access the career choices that they need.

I love that the amendments and the Bill are looking at how we target young people—people younger than 16 to 18. Young people from a disadvantaged background who have no family member in a job or career need to be told which A-levels to study. They need to be told that they need a triple science if they want to do something science related. If a young person does not come from that background, they have no idea that that is something they should be doing. This is a way to give that information to every child from every background. The immigrant child might be the only member of the family who speaks English as their first language. They are trying to navigate the British system and this kind of careers advice can give them the levelling-up advantage that they need.

I welcome the Bill and think that we can look further at these amendments to find a way to make the Bill as sharp and crisp as we possibly can.

Mr Speaker: If there are no other speakers, I will call the Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart): You are very kind, Mr Speaker, and it is lovely to be here with you this Friday morning.

What a very interesting debate we have had on the amendments of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), even if some of our colleagues have been so anxious to get on to Third Reading. I can understand why, but we do have a couple of very important amendments to discuss.

I must declare a small amount of interest: I grew up very close to my hon. Friend's constituency. Many is the time that I have cycled past Ferndown Upper. I am delighted to hear that it is joining us on the T-level journey, which will help transform the lives of so many young people who want to have excellent vocational training as well as qualifications that have been designed with employers. They want to get that really serious long-term experience on the job while they are still at school or in college, knowing that they are getting the skills that the economy needs. I am absolutely delighted that Ferndown is part of that journey.

I often think of my hon. Friend when I am reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which is one of my favourite early medieval texts. As you will know well, Mr Speaker, after King Alfred the Great died, his nephew, a nobleman, tried to seize the throne. He did so by starting at Tveoxneam, which is the archaic name for Christchurch. Whenever I think of that noble rebel of old, my mind sometimes flits to my noble friend from Christchurch today.

The thrust of my hon. Friend's amendments is extremely important, because it focuses on quality, and the quality of our careers advice and careers service that we intend to provide young people is paramount. This was something that was central to a debate on Tuesday in Westminster Hall, which, sadly, I was unable to attend. Those present got the Minister of State instead of the mere Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, so they benefited from my absence.

The work that we are doing in the Department for Education centres on this very important issue of quality, and there are a number of changes that we have introduced, and are introducing, on that score. One key thing the Secretary of State has done is commission Sir John Holman to undertake a review of careers advice in the round, not just for young people, but for adults and those furthest from the workplace. I met Sir John yesterday. His work is coming along extremely well. We are looking forward to getting the formal findings of his report in the summer. We are also seeing accelerated progress in schools and colleges of the enterprise adviser—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Minister is almost in danger of doing his Third Reading speech. This is about the amendments—whether we do or do not support them and where we are going with them. I think Members would like to hear this speech in the Third Reading debate rather than now.

Alex Burghart: Absolutely, Mr Speaker. The thrust of my hon. Friend's amendments is about quality in the careers service, which is very much where I was trying to go in my remarks. I will speed ahead to the specifics, and perhaps we will come back to the general points on Third Reading.

[Alex Burghart]

Given the challenges that young people have faced throughout the pandemic, there has never been a more important time to help them plan for the future with confidence. That is why, as I say, we are focusing on quality. That said, the two amendments that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch has tabled, however well intentioned, are unnecessary.

10.15 am

Amendment 1 would amend the duty on the responsible authorities. We all agree that independent careers guidance must promote the best interests of the pupil, but this amendment seeks to take away the responsibility for determining the best interests of the pupil from the person who gives the careers guidance to pupils, and would instead place that responsibility on schools. I believe it is important that the person who gives the careers guidance determines the pupil's best interest by applying their own judgment as to the suitability of the guidance for the pupils. In their role, they will be best placed to understand the needs of those pupils when delivering careers guidance. The key point is that schools must secure careers guidance that is independent of the school: if schools become responsible for determining whether the guidance is in the best interest of the pupils, that independence could be affected. In many cases, for example, the school will bring in a qualified careers adviser to deliver independent careers guidance to pupils. Careers advisers are specifically trained to act impartially and—crucially—in the best interests of the pupil, such as the daughter of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch.

Turning to amendment 2, the Bill seeks to exempt 16 to 18-year-olds from the provision of guidance on options available for 16 to 18 education or training, including apprenticeships. That guidance is thought to be unnecessary, as 16 to 18-year-olds who are not in compulsory schooling will have already chosen their post-16 options. If we adopted this amendment, schools would be obliged to provide 16 to 18-year-olds with guidance on post-16 education or training options, which might simply waste their time and schools' resources. In fact, that exemption—it must be noted—is already in force through the Careers Guidance in Schools Regulations 2013, so the Bill simply seeks to move what we have previously had in guidance into primary legislation: it is more of a tidying-up exercise.¹ Other aspects of those regulations will not be needed, as the Bill will seek to make the duty apply to all secondary-age pupils.

I thank all Members on both sides of the House who have contributed today, and look forward to continuing the debate on Third Reading.

Sir Christopher Chope: I much appreciate the Minister's comments, and his exemplification of the importance of Christchurch—of Tweston—in the history of our country. I am glad that he is so well read in his subjects and knows the locality. I am sure that that had nothing to do with the decision to award this money to Ferndown Upper School, but nevertheless, it is very much appreciated.

I accept what the Minister says about amendment 2—it was very much a probing amendment. However, I invite him to reflect further on amendment 1, because at the moment the Bill says that

“The responsible authorities must secure that careers guidance provided under subsection (1)...is guidance that the person giving it considers will promote the best interests of the pupils to whom it is given.”

Surely, the school should be taking the responsibility for ensuring that the careers guidance that is provided promotes the best interests of pupils. The Minister did not really address the points that I was making about the number of schools that are not complying with any of the eight Gatsby guidance principles.

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend is right about the one in five schools, but allow me to turn that figure on its head: from a standing start really quite a short time ago, four in five schools are now complying with large numbers of the Gatsby benchmarks, and are improving. Our Ofsted regime will include adherence to those benchmarks in its handbook, and I remind my hon. Friend that as part of our post-covid work, all schools will be inspected by Ofsted between now and summer 2025. As far as we are concerned, this is a genuine accountability measure.

Sir Christopher Chope: I appreciate that, but one in five schools is not complying with any of the eight Gatsby principles that I read out, so surely we need to take action sooner than on the timescale to which the Minister refers. That is not a matter for legislation—his Department needs to get a grip on it. If schools are not complying with the basic principles set out in Gatsby, why is that, and why are they not being held to account?

I return to amendment 1. If a school transfers responsibility for careers guidance that is in the best interests of pupils to a provider who gets it wrong, there is no way in which that school can be held to account for having chosen a duff provider. The school will always be able to say in defence, to an Ofsted inspector, for example, that the provider thought that it was working in the best interests of the pupil to whom guidance was being given.

Alex Burghart indicated dissent.

Sir Christopher Chope: The Minister shakes his head, but if the Bill retains the phrase “the person giving it considers”,

surely we are accepting a subjective test rather than an objective one. I will give way again to the Minister.

Alex Burghart: I was not seeking to intervene, but I am glad to take the opportunity. Ofsted would obviously hold the school accountable for procuring poor careers advice. I very much appreciate my hon. Friend's point, but, to be clear, we take accountability for careers advice very seriously and we wish to drive up quality. We believe that it is in the best interests of the pupil to have independent careers guidance in schools where possible, from independent careers advisers who act, and are trained to act, in the best interests of pupils. I hope he will appreciate that we are working towards the aims that he sets out. It is a serious measure to have reference to Gatsby in the Ofsted handbook and a programme to inspect all schools against it, and I hope that no one will make light of that.

Sir Christopher Chope: I much appreciate that full intervention to further clarify the Government's intentions. In the end, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. We will have to see whether we get the improved

1.[Official Report, 25 January 2022, Vol. 707, c. 7MC.]

quality in careers guidance that everyone in the House wants and on which the Government and Opposition are united.

I thank the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) for his comments. I do not always get compliments from the Opposition, but I much appreciate them and take them to heart, as indeed I do the support that I have received from my hon. Friends. They are waiting to deliver their Third Reading speeches, but they nevertheless had a good formula for commenting on the amendments, which was basically, “My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) has got it right and we do not need to comment any further.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Workington has worked hard on the Bill and it is great that he has given us an opportunity to raise these issues and focus on quality. He echoes what the Minister said about the amendments being unnecessary. I will not put the amendments to a vote, so let us hope that they prove to be unnecessary. We will have to see whether the good intentions materialise. For that reason, I once again express my appreciation to all hon. Members who have contributed to this short debate, and to the Minister in particular, and I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Third Reading

10.25 am

Mark Jenkinson: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am delighted to present the Bill to the House for its Third Reading. It heralds a sea change in how we prepare the next generation to meet the career challenges that lie ahead. It will serve to embed careers advice throughout the secondary phase of education through the provision of regular and ongoing support for students every step of the way. In short, it is designed to give our young people the best start and to maximise their opportunities.

I am delighted that, through the Bill, I will make a positive difference to the lives of young people in my Workington constituency and across England. As a father of four, it is an issue that is close to my heart. The changes that the Bill will help to bring about are important and overdue, and I have no doubt that its effects will be positive and far-reaching.

At present, the statutory duty to provide careers guidance falls on maintained schools, special schools and pupil referral units but not academies. The Bill seeks to address that anomaly by placing the same requirement on all types of state-funded secondary schools, which will help to create a level playing field. I hope that that will encourage a culture where young people, regardless of social background, can advance through merit and hard work.

It is essential that the advice available to our young people is consistent, of the highest quality and accessible to everyone. As a blue-collar Conservative from a working-class community, I am a staunch believer in the value of meritocracy. The standard of careers guidance should not be a postcode lottery—we cannot leave the education of the next generation to chance—and must be based on a set of clear principles that are clearly focused on the best interests of children.

It is also important to develop a more joined-up system in which careers advisers, education providers and employers work together to share information and signpost young people to the opportunities available. I know how frightening it can be for a young person to make momentous and life-changing decisions about his or her future career, and that process becomes even more stressful if they are not in possession of the information that they need to make the choices that work for them.

In previous stages of the Bill, I joked that I am 39 and remain undecided about what I want to be when I grow up. At the end of the month, I will hit the big four-o and I am even less decided than I was. On a more serious note, it is easy for young people to find themselves on the wrong path or facing the wrong direction, and without the proper guidance, the risk of that happening becomes even greater.

That is why it is important to give our young people the best careers advice we can at the earliest opportunity. Such a crucial decision cannot be determined on the basis of an occasional meeting, but must be part of a long-term process that is continually reviewed in the light of changes in the labour market and the child, and of the developing aspirations of the young people themselves.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I very much welcome the hon. Member's Bill and the speech that he is giving. Careers advice has come on a long way in the last 50 years. I am sure that we all remember the scene in “Kes” where my constituent, the former lord mayor of Leeds, Bernard Atha, played the careers teacher who gave Billy and all the boys and girls in the school exactly the same careers advice. Although that was a drama, it reflected what happened in the sort of communities that we represent.

The quality of careers guidance depends on the person giving it. We have NVQs at levels 4, 5, 6 and even 7 in higher education for careers guidance, so it is a profession in and of itself. It is not just an add-on or to be left to online quizzes, but that is what has happened to my child at school, so there is still a long way to go. We need to professionalise careers guidance and see it as something in and of itself, not just an add-on.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Member knows that an intervention is not meant to be a speech. You can speak—I will put you on the list—there is no problem there.

Mark Jenkinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that important point. I will talk later about funded bursaries and the training that is available for careers leaders, and will explain how the Minister's Department is putting careers leader training at the forefront of careers advice. We cannot abandon our children to the whims of fortune without a map, a compass or a torch to light the way.

The Bill is particularly timely given the disruption and disorientation caused by covid-19. It is hardly surprising that young people are worried about their education and employment prospects in these unprecedented times. Uncertainty and change inevitably

[Mark Jenkinson]

fuel anxiety, and covid-19 has forced many young people to reconsider their options and look again at their career paths.

As I said in my earlier speech, unexpected change and challenges are not necessarily bad. They can open new doors, and encourage us to be adaptable in our goals and innovative in our approaches. Difficult experiences can help us to see new opportunities that we may not have considered before, bringing out latent talents and teaching us new skills. However, the support structures and safety nets must be in place to help young people. It is incumbent upon us—indeed, it is our duty—to help our children to negotiate these obstacles and to encourage them when they lose their way, or, even worse, lose faith in themselves.

In my constituency, as in others across England, there are pockets of deprivation, unemployment and sometimes, I have to say, hopelessness. I am acutely aware of the stark disadvantages faced by so many young people. They have so much to contribute, but so often they are written off too soon. If we are serious about “levelling up”—if it is to be more than just a slogan or a soundbite—giving all children access to good-quality careers advice is one of the most important weapons in our fight against poverty and despair. We must leave no child behind.

Providing this enhanced careers education and guidance makes economic sense too, as it will contribute to a high-skills and high-productivity recovery. The Bill will help all young people to develop the skills and attributes that will enable them to succeed in the workplace, and in some cases it will nurture the community leaders of the future.

Mr Perkins: As the hon. Gentleman has already heard, we support the aims of his Bill. He has spoken of giving every child access to good-quality careers guidance. Does he agree that that must involve face-to-face conversations? It is not good enough to say, “Do it on the internet.” We need to ensure that every child can sit down with a careers professional.

Mark Jenkinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support, and for making an important point that takes us back to the point made earlier by the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) about trained careers leaders. We must ensure that there is face-to-face careers guidance, rather than children being plonked in front of a computer to figure out their own paths.

The Bill extends careers advice down from the current year 8 to year 7 to ensure that children are given the information they need to make the best possible choices at the earliest juncture. The sooner we can provide children with careers options, the sooner we can address some of the gender, class and other work stereotypes that are already starting to bed in. The Bill also brings academies into line with local authority-controlled schools, ensuring that everyone has the same opportunity regardless of their postcode. As we know, some academies are not statutorily bound but are bound by their funding agreements, while others are subject to no requirements at all. The Bill gives Ofsted the tools that it needs to guarantee that our children benefit from first-rate careers advice throughout their school careers and across the country.

As a direct result of the Bill, approximately 650,000 year 7 pupils across England will become entitled to independent careers guidance, and we are bringing 2,700 academies into scope. The Bill puts into statute the Government’s commitment in the “Skills for jobs” White Paper for the UK’s post-pandemic recovery. It builds on the important work that is already being done nationally to develop a coherent and well-established careers system—a sector in which Cumbria is a leading light.

As Members will know, the Government are already committed to the national roll-out of careers hubs, and have taken action to support the careers of young people through schemes such as kickstart. As I said earlier, the Careers & Enterprise Company is increasing young people’s exposure to the world of work, and helping schools and colleges to deliver world-class careers guidance for their students in line with the Gatsby benchmarks. The National Careers Service provides careers information, advice and guidance through a website and a telephone helpline. More than 3,300 business professionals are now working as enterprise advisers with schools and colleges, doing a lot of the face-to-face guidance that strengthens employer links with schools. The result is that 3.3 million young people are now having regular encounters with employers, up 70% in just two years.

Education providers, training providers and careers services in my Workington constituency continue to rise to the challenge in the face of often large socioeconomic challenges. The Cumbria careers hub was launched in January 2019 to deliver the Government’s careers strategy for Cumbria after the local enterprise partnership’s skills investment plan identified a significant challenge in developing skills in our county.

The process is accelerating, with 100% of schools in the hub matched with an enterprise adviser from a pool of senior business volunteers. It has been successfully replicated across the country, with 45% of secondary schools and colleges now in careers hubs. We are seeing rapid improvements in hubs, with disadvantaged areas among the best performers. The link between careers and career pathways is essential for developing and attracting talent to Cumbria, owing to the area’s declining working-age population, and their success is to be celebrated.

It is therefore critical that we nurture homegrown talent by giving young people the skills and confidence they need to make the most of the opportunities within a forward-looking global Britain, to help close the skills gaps in areas like Cumbria and to attract investment. It is simply not enough to nurture talent; we must also work to retain it and attract it. Furthermore, careers advice, in line with the Gatsby benchmarks, must be tailored to the jobs market in a local area, which is why conversations and relationships between employers, schools and careers advisers are so important. This Bill ensures that those channels of communication are built upon. The Bill helps to ensure young people are aware of the opportunities that lie on their doorstep, as well as those that exist further afield. Young people often tell us that one of the biggest barriers is not knowing what careers exist.

Simplifying the current system whereby careers duties are imposed on secondary schools by a combination of statutory provisions and contractual arrangements, while

there are no requirements whatsoever on some of the older academies, is an important part of this Bill. The importance of extending the careers duty to all secondary pupils cannot be overstated. Extending the duty to all academies and alternative provision academies places the same requirements and standards on all types of state-funded schools, which puts all state-funded secondary pupils on a level footing and gives Ofsted the tools it needs.

We need to start setting out to children, as soon as possible, the options that will be available to them—not just sixth form and university but further education, apprenticeships, T-levels and other technical education qualifications. The earlier our young people start to consider these options and receive the appropriate guidance, the greater their chance of making the best possible choice.

University technical colleges—I have a fantastic one in my constituency—form an important part of the offer, but that could mean changing schools at 14. This option should not be put in front of a child at 13. It should be talked about from a much earlier age. Although it is important that young people are aware of their options, the last thing we want is for them to get to year 9 and feel like options are being imposed on them or, worse still, are non-existent, which is why flexibility must also be built into the guidance.

Engaging with employers from an early age can inspire young people and help them relate to the career opportunities to which their circumstances, abilities and interests are suited. The Bill recognises and makes use of the work already undertaken as part of the national careers system and, more importantly, it continues to raise young people's aspirations through regular and meaningful engagement with employers and workplaces.

Having spoken in depth with education providers, parents and guardians, careers advisers, employers and, most importantly, young people themselves, I am more convinced than ever that this Bill will help to unlock the potential of generations to come. It is difficult to imagine a more worthy cause than to give our children the confidence and skills they need to be able to fulfil their dreams.

I am grateful to everyone who has worked on the Bill and helped to shape it. Their research, knowledge and observations have been invaluable and have created something that will serve our young people well. This Bill is about helping young people navigate through obstacles and avoid blind alleys, and it will prevent them from ending up in a career cul-de-sac.

We spend so much of our lives at work, so it is paramount that we give our young people the tools to find employment that is worth while and fulfilling. It is not simply about boosting the economy; it is also about wellbeing and helping to foster a culture of personal growth and aspiration from the starting line. More fundamentally, it is about creating a fairer system across our education system that allows everyone to realise their potential and make the best contribution possible to their communities, wherever they live and whatever their background.

10.39 am

Mr Perkins: I would like to repeat my congratulations to the hon. Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) on reaching this stage with his Bill. I think it is a very

valuable thing that he is doing with the private Member's Bill allocation that he successfully won. I think he is absolutely right to express the importance of careers guidance, particularly in communities where opportunities are not necessarily plentiful and people need to have an opportunity to see different kinds of careers from those that their parents have enjoyed and that others in their school previously have enjoyed.

For all the reasons that the hon. Gentleman has outlined, we entirely agree that ensuring that every student, whether they be at an academy school or a state maintained school, can avail themselves of a minimum standard of careers guidance is a necessary provision. We know that many schools already have excellent provision and constructive, successful and transformational relationships with employers, but there is a real lack of consistency across the board, and anything that sets out to consolidate and improve that provision across schools should be welcomed.

I have to say that it would be impossible to debate careers provision as an MP who was elected in 2010—as I am—without stopping for a moment to lament the vandalism to careers education that took place under the 2010 to 2015 coalition Government. The Minister said that the Government had done well from a standing start, and goodness me, wasn't it a standing start? The reality is that, between 2010 and 2015, the Government almost deliberately set out to set fire to careers provision such as it was. I think there were legitimate questions about the effectiveness of the Connexions service, but it was scrapped without any serious replacement and then Ministers celebrated—in preparing for this Bill, I looked back at some of the debates we were having in 2010—that the £200 million saved by shutting Connexions would prevent further cuts to the schools budget. It was really an extraordinary approach that, as I say, was an act of vandalism that left a whole generation of schoolchildren without careers provision. I am glad to hear from the hon. Gentleman that this idea is now utterly rejected.

Joy Morrissey: Just on the point of the 2010 changes, I was working in schools at that time and I would like to point out that there was an emphasis on apprenticeships and skills, and moving toward students for the first time being put into jobs. I organised apprenticeship fairs, and I worked with schools that for the first time were actually trying to help children in low educational attainment areas to find careers. I found that the challenge, while we were there promoting apprenticeships, was that the schools only wanted to send children to university. So I do believe that the 2010 shift was a positive shift towards apprenticeships and skills.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Interventions should be quite short and a question.

Mr Perkins: The thing that the hon. Member sets out that is welcome is this shift—*[Interruption]* if she would listen to me—towards apprenticeships. I entirely support that, but I think that getting rid of professional careers advice and moving to a “let the schools decide” model actually did the opposite of that. I think it meant that the rather narrow environment that sometimes exists in schools became the very prevalent one, and I am going to reflect on that in more detail.

[Mr Perkins]

As I was saying, the Government's approach was born of an idea that careers guidance could be provided by a child's parents or their parent's networks. Young Jonny could go and do a week in the City with his father's firm. It bore no relation to the reality of what that meant to children whose parents did not have those networks. It was a move that kept children in their place, with work experience becoming voluntary or something additional for schools to do, rather than an integral part of supporting children to leave our schools ready for the world of work.

The Bill is narrow in scope, but it is an opportunity to discuss what the Government's commitment to the nation's young people and employers should be. As the hon. Member for Workington expressed, as is often the case, much of the Bill will end up being what is in the guidance, rather than what is on the face of the Bill. It is an opportunity for the Government to ensure that they put in place the mechanisms to make the rhetoric about quality and breadth a reality.

Labour believes very strongly that every child should be able to expect quality work experience that opens their horizons and is assessed not just on whether they are safe, but on whether it helps them to experience the wonderful world of work. That means much more than what many of us as parents have seen with our own children, which is a letter home from school saying, "Work experience fortnight is coming up. Go and sort it out and get the employer to fill out this form, so we can assure ourselves that no one is going to die while they are away from the school." It is about much more than safety. Work experience should not just be "go to work with mum or dad week", which is what it so often is around the country. The milkman's son helps his dad on the milk round for a week, while my lad sits in my office upstairs helping an MP. All that happens is that children repeat the experiences they have been hearing about around the breakfast table for the previous 15 years.

I therefore welcome the fact that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has sought to go further, announcing a bold offer that will be introduced by the next Labour Government. It will include the equivalent of two weeks' worth of compulsory work experience to connect young people with local employers and build the skills needed for work, ensuring that every child has access to quality careers advice in their school by giving every school access to a professional careers adviser once a week.

One crucial point made earlier is that careers guidance is a profession. It is not an add-on to the deputy headteacher's job, but a career in its own right that needs respecting. There are many fantastic teachers and school leaders, but often their horizons and experiences are narrow. Many people have been schoolchildren, university students, and then schoolteachers and school leaders. How is that an appropriate background to lead careers guidance? We need people with a breadth of understanding of the many different careers out there. How likely is someone with that kind of background to introduce children to the multitude of different opportunities and alternative paths that follow post-school?

The point the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) just made is very important. If the experience in many schools has only been going to school, university

and then back to school, and if those schools feel that Ofsted wants to judge them on the number of people who go to university, then of course if we put school leaders in charge of careers guidance we should not be surprised if that guidance ends up being, "Get yourself into our sixth form and stay there; don't look at apprenticeships or any of that." I agree with her point.

In defending the abolition of professional careers guidance back in 2013, Lord Nash said in another place:

"That is why we gave responsibility for securing careers guidance to schools. They know their pupils best and can tailor provision to their individual needs."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 4 March 2013; Vol. 743, c. 1268.]

What happened was precisely what the hon. Member for Beaconsfield says. Some schools carried on providing a great service, but in many cases schools got as many pupils as possible into their sixth forms, perhaps because they wanted to stuff their sixth form with students or perhaps because they did not have the experience to know what other opportunities were out there. There was an idea prevalent at the time that it was all about university and that apprenticeships were a second-rate option. That is very much not the approach the Labour party takes.

What Lord Nash's advice meant in practice was that for many children careers guidance and work experience all but disappeared. The legacy of that disastrous approach was that even before the pandemic almost 800,000 young people were NEET—not in education, employment or training. The Government now say—I am sure they are right, because I hear the same thing—that employers tell them that too many young people leave our academic institutions unready for the world of work. We welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Workington is attempting to work with Government to address some of those mistakes and the missed opportunities that previous Administrations have been responsible for. He has our full support, as do the Government. We think that the Bill is a useful first step in ensuring that we have adequate careers guidance for school-age pupils.

From the perspective of the Minister's response to the amendments, we very much agree that the Bill is a standing start, but we think that the Government need to go further. As he knows, we proposed a number of amendments, and supported amendments from the other place, during the passage of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill that would have done precisely that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) said in the House earlier this week, according to Parentkind's "Parent Voice Report 2021", just half of parents believe that their school offers good careers advice. As has been mentioned, the CBI survey in 2019 said that 44% of employers felt that young people were leaving education not work-ready. It is vital that children and young people receive the highest quality of independent and impartial careers guidance, setting out the full array of opportunities available to them.

As many hon. Members will be aware, the Labour party recently supported the Baker clause during the passage of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill, and, as that Bill returns from another place, we will continue to advocate for Ministers to adopt such a rigorous approach to careers guidance to ensure that young people have the opportunity to access it from a range of

sources. It is a real shame that the Government removed the Baker clause in another place and in Committee in this House, because it has real value.

All too often, an academic route has been the default option put forward to pupils. Of course, that is a worthwhile endeavour for those seeking to undertake further academic qualifications. We in the Opposition salute and celebrate our universities as a huge national strength and asset, but it is crucial that vocational opportunities are available for all, not just those who do not go to university. They should be seen not as a secondary option for those who choose not to go to university, but as something for A-grade students to consider, too.

It is important that all students are aware of the full range of options open to them. That is why we think there is real merit in ensuring that a range of organisations and institutions get the opportunity to go into schools and engage with pupils throughout their school journey, and that Ofsted rigorously investigates the careers provision at school and ensures that all pupils are aware of the range of options that might be suitable for them. It has been suggested that no school that has poor careers provision should get an “Outstanding” from Ofsted, and that that idea has real merit. If a school’s careers provision is poor, how can its overall education be seen as outstanding?

In my Front-Bench role, I regularly meet and visit companies across all sectors of our economy that have incredible apprenticeship programmes for young people. Too many young people, however, have no idea what an apprenticeship is or any belief that they would be able to access one, and have no idea how they can progress through a technical route. We believe that apprenticeships should be the gold standard for vocational and technical education. We are exploring ways to extend apprenticeship opportunities, particularly among those aged under 25.

We very much welcome the Bill’s central purpose—to ensure that academy provision is held to the same expectations as state-funded schools—but it will be interesting to hear what the Minister has to say about what that means for the freedoms that academies enjoy. Those of us who were here in 2010 can still remember the messianic zeal with which the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) extolled the freedoms that schools that converted to academy status would enjoy.

Labour’s approach at the last general election was to say not that all academies should convert back into being under local authority control, but that parental expectations and accountability should be the same whether the children are educated in an academy or in a state-maintained school. The Bill seeks, in the sphere of careers guidance, to impose exactly that kind of responsibility on academies, and we welcome that. That is a departure from the approach the Government have taken previously with the majority of schools that were moving to academy status.

It would be good to hear from the Minister about where the balance now lies between Government-imposed expectations on academies, and the freedoms that academies can expect to enjoy. We rather prefer that sort of approach, but it is a departure from what the Government have previously said about academies. It would be good to hear a little from the Government about whether that signals a wider change of approach on the balance between freedoms and guidance.

In conclusion, the Bill is a welcome first step, but it by no means resolves the damage done over the past decade of Tory failures and inaction on careers guidance. I am happy to say that Labour believes the Government’s position is now better than it was in the past. We will continue to push them to go further, but we think there are steps in the right direction for careers guidance. I hope that in the spirit of cross-party co-operation, Conservative Members will look favourably on Labour’s amendment to the Bill in the coming weeks, as it enters Report and Third Reading and comes back from another place.

10.56 am

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I was fortunate to speak in the Westminster Hall debate earlier in the week, and given the time constraints I will confine my comments to an area of careers guidance that I think has not been covered, and will not be covered by other Members. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) on introducing this important Bill.

We must recognise that during their lifetime most, if not all, young people will experience a period of self-employment, either running a business or contracting out their services. That trend is even more pronounced since the pandemic, with the number of new businesses started in the UK increasing by 14% in the first year of the pandemic. However, the skill set needed for self-employment and entrepreneurship is not taught in most schools. It is estimated that one in four Brits operate at least one side business alongside their day job, contributing an estimated £72 billion to the UK economy, and highlighting the importance of equipping young people with the skills they need to take the leap.

The journey starts in school, and research from the National Association of School and University Entrepreneurs has found that 73% of young entrepreneurs agree that the skills required to start and run a business can be taught. Many are in favour of teaching entrepreneurship in schools as an integral part of every college course that leads to a qualification that is preparation for self-employment, whether that is a course in hairdressing, catering or plumbing.

We must also more closely align our school core curriculum with the realities of the modern world of work. Robots, artificial intelligence, and automation are no longer reserved for science fiction movies, and they represent a fundamental shift in the skills our workforce need to improve productivity and compete in the modern globalised world. For example, research from McKinsey shows that 51% of job activities are highly susceptible to automation. We must increase our focus on what we are doing to prepare future generations to thrive in that changing landscape. Young people must be prepared with creative, collaborative and digital problem-solving skills for the future. The Government are right to recognise computer science as part of the core curriculum, but we must invest more to improve uptake and recruit teachers with the required skills. That is just one step we need to take to ensure that our schools teach the right curriculum for the future and not the past.

The two biggest employers in my constituency are the NHS—Stoke-on-Trent has a teaching hospital—and Bet365. One might not think that they have much in common as employers, but the NHS and the world’s

[Jo Gideon]

largest online betting company are both dependent on digital platforms. The city council is right to have launched a prospectus called Silicon Stoke, which illustrates our understanding of and aspiration to harness digital innovation as a key driver for our economic success as a city. Schools have a duty to understand the way the world of work is heading. It is absolutely right that we have independent advice and guidance. I fully support all the intentions of the Bill, and I do believe it is absolutely necessary. On Tuesday, people reflected on their own experience of careers guidance, so I would like to share mine. I went to a state grammar school, where they just said, “You’re okay, you can go to university.” So I did not actually think about what I was going to be. It has taken me 65 years to achieve my full potential, so I am glad to be standing here today supporting this Bill.

11 am

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): It is a great privilege to be called so early in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me start by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) for this excellent Bill. I am a huge fan of careers advice in schools. He has done some great work since he has been in Parliament and this Bill is absolutely the right thing to do, so my congratulations to him on getting it through today.

I was at school once, believe it or not, many years ago. I was in a very good school in Guildford. I was probably a lost cause for most of it, but one reason why I scraped through was that it had a careers office. It was fantastic because it was a warm office in the old part of the school, there were lots of leaflets and newspapers in there, and it was where the students and the kids used to hang out when they were hiding from the headteacher. The important thing is that it was led by a chap called Mr Richard Mant, who was a very inspirational teacher. At the age of 11 or 12, I was absolutely inspired by him, and by the leaflets and articles I read in that careers office, and I went through my school years with an idea and a vision of what I wanted to do when I left school.

Children who are exposed to that at the right age, from year 7, in accordance with the Bill, are at a massive advantage, because it sows the seed of what they might want to do later in life. As Steve Jobs proved so ably, if someone has a vision, they then bend their entire focus, hard work and work ethic into achieving it. Children being exposed at an early age to the whole panoply of what they might want to do when they grow up is really important. They may wish to be an accountant, Army officer, lawyer, politician, apprentice or electrician. It does not matter what someone wants to do, because all work is vital and valuable, but instilling that vision from year 7 is absolutely the right thing to do, and I once again commend my hon. Friend for his Bill.

I know that time is short, but I wish to use my last minute or so to commend the education provision in my constituency, which is fantastic. I have had the privilege over the past two years of visiting most of the schools in the constituency, both primary and secondary. The figures are amazing: 23 of the 26 schools in my constituency are graded “good” or “outstanding”. The education offer in Bracknell is fantastic, which is testament not

just to the excellent education department at Bracknell Forest Council, led by Gareth Barnard but to the fantastic teachers and headteachers we have in the constituency. There is not a bad apple among them, and the offer is absolutely brilliant. Do I think this Bill would work in Bracknell? Yes, I do, 100%. Most of the schools there already have careers provision and excellent careers staff, but instilling this in law and compelling teachers and schools to provide it in year 7 is a brilliant thing to do. Kids in Bracknell, who already are very blessed with superb education, will benefit from this and, we hope, will aspire to great things as they grow up.

11.3 am

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I know that time is short, so I will keep my comments brief. I wish to start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) on introducing this important Bill, which is now before us in its remaining stages. Giving every child the best start in life is a guiding principle of this Government’s approach to education here in England. Every child needs to have access to equal opportunity, and a good education is part of the vital armoury in ensuring that, building the foundations they need—confidence, resilience and commitment—to thrive in adult life.

As we have heard from many Members in the debate on this subject last autumn and today, education is not just about reading, writing and maths—academic training. Schools can help children to develop their social relationships, emotional skills, identity and all-round wellbeing. Academic or cognitive development is essential, but so, too, is careers guidance and support in order for a child to take full advantage of the opportunities available to them. We need an education system that not only focuses on academic or technical training but guides and supports children on their future career path. Good career guidance is a vital key to social mobility, and it is about showing young people, whatever their family or social backgrounds, the options open to them, helping them make the right choices for them and setting them on the path to a rewarding future.

I also want to highlight the need for more people from a variety of careers and a business background to come into our schools and talk to our young people about their careers. We might have to look at some kind of voluntary umbrella organisation in order to really encourage people to take that step. There is no doubt that careers advice and support is crucial, and the Bill will see that such advice is offered independently to all pupils from year 7 onwards.

I will not dwell on the intricacies of the Bill, but I highlight the fact that the Department for Education is supporting a range of measures to ensure that all students choose a career that is right for them, including the Baker clause, which stipulates that all schools and academies must publish a policy statement setting out opportunities for providers of technical education courses and apprenticeships to visit schools to talk to all pupils and to make sure that the policy is followed. The “Skills for Jobs” White Paper aims to improve compliance with the Baker clause through the introduction of a three-point plan, by creating minimum legal requirements and taking more action to enforce compliance. The White Paper, coupled with the Bill, could transform the way in which we provide careers advice and guidance to young people across England.

I am delighted that East Sussex College in Hastings was part of the successful Sussex-wide application under the skills accelerator programme for a joint local skills improvement plan and strategic development fund pilot. I have been listening in to some of the LSIP virtual meetings to go through the various areas, including manufacturing and engineering, and it is fascinating to see the research and evidence that they have built up.

The “Skills for Jobs” White Paper sets out the Government’s blueprint for reshaping the technical skills system to better support the needs of the local labour market and the wider economy, and the skills accelerator is a core part of delivering that. The Bill will go a long way in supporting students with the advice and guidance they need to make reasoned and timely decisions to help them into the world of work. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Workington for bringing forward his Bill, because this is such an important aspect of education.

11.7 am

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I was really delighted to learn that the Government agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) that parity is needed across all secondary and further education providers in giving our youngsters the best possible start in life.

My constituency has produced a lot of talent—many amazing people—over the centuries. In fact, it was the birthplace of the industrial revolution. Now, however, it has a much higher proportion of challenges, with young people not in education, permanently excluded and not in employment. But Dudley has the ability to find a way, and it is doing so. Even though in recent years the council has had some difficult challenges to overcome with its own education department, Dudley has resilience and an innovative way of getting round problems. I have mentioned before in the House the Priory Park boxing club, which has been helping kids who have been excluded from mainstream education. Too often, such children are written off by our society.

Much like the Government, Paul Gough, who runs the club, has said that enough is enough and change is needed—no more talking shops but action. With the support of the council leader, Councillor Patrick Harley, Paul has agreed to support a new school in Dudley in partnership with the club. They want to ensure that these young people get academic qualifications as well as increased strength, belief and confidence and, therefore, opportunities for the future in their lives. These youngsters will be able to pursue worthwhile careers; they will have a future.

A year ago, during Prime Minister’s questions, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agreed to visit the school when it was up and running, and I very much look forward to welcoming him to show him the incredible opportunities that the right kind of guidance and support can give to the next generations.

Would it not be great if one of the alumni of the new school, in some decades to come, were perhaps to become a Member of Parliament, or, indeed, a Dudley Prime Minister of this country?

11.10 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) for this amazing Bill. I was not able to speak

on Second Reading because I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Department for Education, but I was sitting on the Benches cheering him to the rafters from inside. I know how important the Bill is and how important education and guidance are for our young people.

From having visited schools in deprived parts of my constituency, I saw that people often moved to Guildford for its amazing education. I must acknowledge the wonderful schools that we have within both the mainstream and the independent sectors, but I have none the less visited schools where children’s aspirations are not as high as they should be. Even though we have the wonderful University of Surrey, the Surrey research park and wonderful links to those schools, children do not always see such education as a possibility for them. I speak from my own experience. Without careers guidance at school and universities coming in, I would never have gone to those sessions because I did not think that university was for me. Nobody had been to university in my family. My father worked in a family business, but we were told not to go into it because it was third generation and all the cousins would fall out with each other. When I was in the equivalent of the sixth form, my mother was actually at school with me, as an adult student, trying to get some qualifications, so that she could restart her career after being at home looking after children for a very long time.

I understand personally how important it is not only to get the right guidance at school but to overcome family obstacles, especially when it is perhaps not an option to look at going to university. I encourage my wonderful colleges in Guildford to have links with those schools, especially as we want technical qualifications and technical education to have parity of esteem with other education. Apprenticeships and skills are just as important for young people as university education. It is important that we do this for all secondary schools, and it is also important for me as a parent of three teenagers, one of whom is in special education because he is on the autism spectrum. It is important that he has not only a good education but a range of things that are available to him and that he is encouraged to do, so that he is trying not just to get through the education years and achieve the best qualifications that he can but to think constructively about the future and what he might be able to achieve in his life.

In the “Skills for jobs” White Paper, published in January 2021, the Government are trying to bring forward careers hubs, digital support, careers leader training and the enterprise adviser network to all secondary schools in England. This private Member’s Bill, as it will succeed on Third Reading, will be a huge part of the Government’s wider agenda for young people in our schools.

11.14 am

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) on bringing forward this Bill. As a former governor of a primary school, a chairman of governors of a further education college, and a governor at an autistic school, I have seen at first hand how important it is to ensure that children up and down this country understand the opportunities that they have. Part of our role as elected Members of this House is to

[Mr Gagan Mohindra]

make sure that children appreciate that they have opportunities that others around the world may not have. It is always a stark reminder when I am told that about 75% of women in the world are illiterate. For us, that should be a crying shame.

11.15 am

I was not able to attend my hon. Friend's debate in September, but some of the statistics that he shared about careers advice were quite profound and, I think, encouraging:

"More than 3,300 business professionals from local businesses are working with schools and colleges as enterprise advisers to strengthen employer links. Almost 3.3 million young people are now having regular encounters with employers, which is up 70% in two years."—[*Official Report*, 10 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 562.]

My parents' generation would have had a career for life—one job, one industry. The reality of technology and the global world we now live in means that children leaving school, university or technical college today are likely to have multiple different careers. Guidance from professional careers advisers is fundamentally important. It can give them the confidence to make those brave decisions. It can help them to understand the value of soft skills, such as wearing a tie or suit when they go for their first job interview, shining their shoes, turning up on time and being professional—skills that they may not necessarily have been accustomed to or shown in their home environment.

One thing that I am really proud of in South West Hertfordshire is the quality of education. I cannot claim credit for that, but I have some amazing schools and teachers. Irrespective of our local education provision, none of us can rest on our laurels. If we do not continue to strive forward, we will quickly be outpaced by other parts of the world that rightly put a focus on education. The competition for our students of today is not from neighbouring towns or cities; it is from global rivals, who are potentially also friends. We need to fully equip young people, students and loved ones, to be the global leaders of tomorrow. I am conscious of time and I know that some great colleagues want to speak in this debate, so I will leave it there.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak on this important Bill, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) for his immense efforts to secure its safe passage.

When I was at school and college, some of the best careers advice that I received was from my dad, and it is thanks to his wisdom and support that I found my way. He did not tell me what to do; it was quite the opposite. He told me I needed to set myself apart from everyone else my age going to university and graduating at the same time. I had absolutely no idea what that meant or how I was going to do it, but somehow I did.

I secured work experience when I was at college, first in a primary school and later with my local MP, and then I knew exactly what it was I wanted to do. I was lucky enough to get a job with that MP—the previous Member of Parliament for Dudley South, Chris Kelly—and that gave me such great experience

when I was at university. It was essentially like doing a very expensive apprenticeship, where I paid out more than I earned.

Not everyone has parents who can advise them about the industries that they are interested in, or the world of work in general. None of my family had anything to do with politics. In my constituency of West Bromwich East, I have seen some fantastic examples of careers advice at the forefront of a child's progress in the education system, but access to high-quality careers advice from a young age is still something of a postcode lottery and varies greatly from school to school. Aside from implementing many of the proposals in the skills White Paper, this Bill will require secondary schools to start setting out as early as possible the future education, training and careers options that will be available to their students, in line with the Gatsby benchmarks of good career guidance, which apply from year 7 to year 13. I fully support that approach.

Last year, I co-chaired a report for the Skills Commission about the difficulties young people face when they attempt to navigate the careers maze, and we set out nine recommendations for achieving a longer-term career strategy in this country. I thank Policy Connect for the opportunity, and I thank my co-chairs Lord Jim Knight and Dr Siobhan Neary for their hard work. School is not just about achieving good academic results; it is also about crafting the people that we want to be, and inspiring young people. That is why last year, I hosted an online event with Ben Francis, founder and chief executive officer of Gymshark, to give young people from West Bromwich the opportunity to learn from a local lad from the west midlands who used his wages from Pizza Hut to develop what is now a unicorn, with its headquarters in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti).

To conclude, good careers advice is so important. We need it to allow young people to explore their strengths and options, and to give them opportunities to have work experience and support from their school in doing so. I am proud to support this Bill.

Julie Marson: It is a pleasure to speak again in this debate. While I was slightly premature in mentioning some of my family history, it goes to show the importance of careers advice, which my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) described as a torch to light the way—a compass to help guide young people. That is very apposite, and I passionately believe it.

My careers advice slightly contrasted to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland): it was given by a very lovely lady, an elderly French teacher, who I do not think had done anything apart from teach her whole life, in what was formerly a cupboard in the school I attended and consisted mainly of leaflets—it was not a place to hide from the headmistress, either. However, we do it a lot better now, and I absolutely commend my hon. Friend the Member for this Bill, which will make careers advice even better and—crucially—more consistent across the board, which I think is what we all want to do for young people across this country. I am very determined to do that in Bishop's Cleeve, Hertford, Ware and Sawbridgeworth, because although we are blessed with fantastic schools and fantastic careers advice, we should never sit on our laurels. Heads in parts of my constituency, particularly

in and around Bishop's Stortford, have said how much they believe we should consider a further education college in Bishop's Stortford. I am being slightly opportunistic in mentioning that with the Minister present: it is something that we will be looking to speak with him about in future.

I am also a big advocate for apprenticeships. My brother took a different path from me: he did an apprenticeship with a local engineering company, and has gone on to become a pilot in the United States. Both routes are absolutely valid, and both are so important to realising young people's potential. To refer to comments made earlier, if a young person can think of a path early in life, or even know to keep their options open, that is good advice. It is also important to consider the soft skills that careers advice can help young people build. That can direct what A-levels they might do or whether they go for an apprenticeship. Learning soft skills can be incredibly valuable in determining where they go and what they do, and in giving them an all-round education.

I will not take up much further time, but I am grateful to speak in this debate. I am a big advocate of my hon. Friend's Bill, and I commend him for it. It seeks to provide greater consistency and quality of careers guidance in all types of secondary schools. It champions alternative routes of education, and ultimately, I think it will help to improve the life chances of children across this country.

Chris Clarkson: Like my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), I launched into my Third Reading speech a little prematurely—it was very good, but I do not want to spoil Members too much. What I will say is that I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) for having introduced this Bill. What it is doing is so important: education is the silver bullet, the tip of the spear. As the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), said, it is about aspiration; it is about social mobility; it is about opening up horizons and telling the next generation that what is expected of them is not necessarily what they have to do—that they have options and can look at different things. It is also about understanding that young people learn differently, and about getting in early on that in year 7, rather than asking them to make big life choices at that drop-dead point of A-levels: “Are you going to go into further education or are you going to go into something technical or vocational?” It is about giving them a broader perspective on things.

I have seen that work well in my Heywood and Middleton constituency. I am lucky to be served by Rochdale Sixth Form College and Hopwood Hall College for further education. It would be entirely remiss of me not to put on record my thanks to Julia Heap, the principal of Hopwood Hall, and Richard Ronksley, the principal of Rochdale Sixth Form, for their constructive working relationship and the way they identify students who may not be in the correct educational pathway and help them to move into a more appropriate area.

We have mentioned apprenticeships, so I, like everyone else, put on record my enthusiasm for them. I also mention the apprentice in my constituency office, William Lee, who is a great young man. I encourage anyone who is thinking about their future to look into an apprenticeship,

because it is an incredibly good way to get ahead and learn about something new and exciting. With that, I will finish so that other hon. Members have time to speak.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I welcome the Bill and the opportunity to talk about careers advice generally. I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson), who has applied his energy and skills to try to genuinely transform the lives of children and young people, including those of Stroud.

Many people around the country will have had chequered experiences of careers advice in their lifetime. Unfortunately, unless children are lucky and in a fancy-pants school, where successful parents are paraded regularly to tell them about their jobs, they genuinely rely on their school, parents or people on their street to learn about opportunities, which is not a recipe for greatness, brilliance or options.

I remember that my careers advice was a short discussion in an art class about me becoming an air hostess. I made the wrong choice—it is a wonderful job and it would definitely have broadened my worldwide horizons, because I basically chained myself to a desk trying to become a lawyer for years. That narrow discussion meant that I did not have the guidance to make good choices at A-level and I did not go to university—it goes on. We will never know what would have happened if that discussion had been different. I might not be here; I might be doing something better.

It irks me that nobody—but nobody—told me that there was a job called cat scientist. I found that on the telly when I was watching a programme about people following cats around. I would have been a brilliant cat scientist—cats have been training me for that job for years—which just goes to show that we do not know all the opportunities until we get careers advice. I applaud what the Government are doing in backing the Bill.

Stroud has a growth hub in the college that brings employers, businesses and the local enterprise partnership right to our learners, which is exactly what the Government are trying to achieve with the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. All MPs on both sides of the House can do more. When we go out to meet businesses, we should do those little clips to say, “This job is available,” or, “There’s this company that you could create.” I am trying to put together a programme called ambitions, where I do little interviews, which I will build up. Young people will probably not want to watch them, but they will be there as an option to provide more opportunities for learning.

The 2019 Augar review was clear that we need to put more money into careers advice and more opportunity. The Government are now listening. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) was absolutely right to focus on quality earlier and I was encouraged by his comments and the Minister's response. Schools and parents have been desperate for these changes for years. I do not agree with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins): the Labour Administration's focus on getting 50% of children into university meant that, for years and years, they forgot about the 50% who were left over, which unfortunately meant that their opportunities and options were ignored.

Ministers have stepped up with the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill and in support of this Bill today. The Government have appointed Sir John Holman as the

[Siobhan Baillie]

independent strategic adviser on careers guidance. Most importantly, the narrative of the country is completely changing for our children and young people, so that technical education, further education or getting a job straight after school is not a poor choice. All those things are available to us, in addition to university, so I welcome the Bill, which will do so much to achieve that.

11.29 am

Joy Morrissey: I will follow on from the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) on why these things matter. They matter so much for young people who do not come from a wealthy area or background or have wealthy parents who will not be taught in school how to enter a certain profession. In many schools in London and urban areas in particular, there is a complete lack of clarity about going into law, accounting, finance or any kind of professional degree. Time and time again, I saw how those in academies, those not in education, employment or training and those falling through the cracks who had been put into special education were not given any skills to navigate towards a career or any future at all. I watched talented, intelligent young people fall by the wayside, join gangs and disappear off the radar—often into prison—because no one had ever given them guidance saying, “Here’s what you need to do. Here are the steps that you can try to follow.” I welcome the Bill, because it addresses some of the inequalities that I saw again and again.

This memory will never leave me. I mentored a young woman, and I thought, “How hard will this be?” but I could not navigate the system through an academy for her. She was from an immigrant background, and none of her family had ever been to university, and the whole school failed her. Everyone in her programme apart from her left school at 16 with no qualifications. Many of them are now in gangs, but despite the odds she has persevered and she has succeeded.

I did everything in my power to try to help and assist her, and that experience made me realise that the system was broken. If somebody who does not come from the right background but has all this talent, skills and abilities cannot navigate the system, that system needs to change. I thank the Minister and the Government for addressing this issue and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) for bringing the Bill together and fighting in the House for children and those who have no voice.

11.31 am

Simon Baynes: I will be brief, because I spoke to the amendments earlier. I feel strongly about the Bill and applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) for bringing it to its Third Reading. First, although I represent the Welsh constituency of Clwyd South and the Bill applies only to England, the Welsh Government can learn much from it. Secondly, my hon. Friend made a vital point about pockets of deprivation—that is very much the case in my constituency—and better careers guidance is extremely important for young people from those areas.

Thirdly, the point was made about 50% of children going to university—my two children are currently at university—and 50% not doing so. Careers guidance is

of even more importance to those who do not go on to university, because those such as my children can delay career decisions while at university, but those going down a different route cannot.

My hon. Friend also mentioned enterprise advisers, of whom there are now 3,300, and the big increase that we have seen in them. I feel strongly about that. I have seen with my own children how mentors from business play a massively important part in giving them aspiration and ambition as to what they can achieve. It also works both ways, as, importantly, it binds enterprise, business and other communities with education.

One point not made perhaps as much as it should have been is about the particular importance of careers guidance as we come out of the pandemic, which has thrown the lives of young people into disarray; I have seen that with my own children. Careers guidance is therefore extremely important, particularly for the most disadvantaged. My hon. Friend also mentioned that people do not necessarily know what their careers will be, so careers advice is important in helping them come to that decision.

Finally, I am pleased that the Bill will not only extend current requirements but include children in year 7, which I gather means 650,000 extra pupils. Careers advice is extremely important in informing and affecting young people’s decisions about what they will go on to study. It gives me great pleasure to strongly support the Bill on its Third Reading.

11.34 am

Alex Burghart: What a pleasure it has been to take part in this debate. We have had some medieval history from me, some family history from my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) and some personal and socialist history from Opposition Members—or the Opposition Member, I should say.

We all thank my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) for this excellent Bill, which will improve a lot of young people’s lives. That is what we are all here to do. The Government are fully committed to education and to careers education and guidance, which is an essential underpinning of our reforms. It has been clear at every stage that the Bill has cross-party support and co-operation, and I genuinely thank the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) for his party’s support during the Bill’s progress.

We are at an important juncture for skills reform in this country, and I thank my hon. Friends for supporting the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill, which will soon return to the House on Report. The careers work we are pleased to be doing with my hon. Friend the Member for Workington underpins a lot of that Bill, and it is wonderful to hear my hon. Friends cite great examples from their constituencies for us to dwell on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) made a powerful speech on what happens in alternative provision settings. These young people, on whom so much rests, have too often been forgotten. The most important piece of careers advice I ever heard was on a visit to an alternative provision setting in Wandsworth about 12 years ago. It was a fantastic setting in which the headteacher had created a number of studios for practical vocational education: a car mechanic’s workshop; a hairdressing salon; a cookery school; and a bricklaying

studio. The headteacher said to the gentleman who taught bricklaying, “Will you tell our visitor what your last job was? This is what you tell all the pupils.” And the bricklayer said, “I was an armed robber. I earned £10,000 on my last job and now I earn nearly £30,000 a year working here.” That was an extraordinarily valuable and inspiring careers lesson for young people to hear in such a setting.

We want to make sure that young people in all settings, regardless of their background, have access to high-quality careers education, which is what our reforms will do. We want to level up opportunity, and the reforms set out in our skills for jobs White Paper will give a genuine choice between high-quality technical and academic routes. It is vital that everyone has access to careers guidance of the highest standards so that they are well informed on what will happen afterwards.

We cannot overstate the importance of careers advice, and I thank all hon. Members for their contributions at this and previous stages. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Workington again on bringing this Bill to the House.

11.38 am

Mark Jenkinson: With the leave of the House, I am grateful to everyone who has contributed to this debate and to the Bill’s previous stages. I will not take up any further time by naming them all, but I put on record my heartfelt gratitude to each of them.

I also thank the teachers and careers advisers who have taken the time to share with me their ideas for this important Bill. Their expertise and knowledge have been critical in helping to shape the Bill. Their input has been invaluable and has helped me to understand how we can better serve our young people, whether by raising their aspirations, providing direction or helping them to recognise their own talents. A better future is possible for our young people with improved access to the right support and guidance.

I also extend my thanks to the Minister, to his predecessor my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), to the Secretary of State for Education and his Department and to the Opposition Front-Bench team, particularly the hon. Members for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) and for Hove (Peter Kyle), for their support throughout this process.

It was Benjamin Disraeli who said:

“The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches but to reveal to him his own.”

This Bill is true to the spirit of those words.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Local Government (Disqualification) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call Sir Christopher Chope, it may be useful to Members if I set out the differences between Report and Third Reading.

Report is also known as “consideration”, and provides an opportunity for the whole House to consider what has been done in Committee. Members may table amendments either as probing amendments to elicit more information, or because they want to make changes to the Bill. The scope of the debate is restricted to the amendments that have been tabled. Third Reading provides the final opportunities for Members to pass or reject the whole Bill; Members can speak about the Bill as a whole, and the debate is much wider. Members may wish to consider that, and then decide at which stage they want to try to catch my eye.

New Clause 1

MEMBERS OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES: DISQUALIFICATION RELATING TO DRINK AND DRUG DRIVING OFFENCES (ENGLAND)

“In the Local Government Act 1972, after section 81 insert—

“**81A Disqualification relating to drink and drug driving offences etc (England)**

(1) A person is disqualified for being elected or being a member of a local authority in England if the person is subject to—

- (a) a conviction for driving or being in charge with alcohol concentration above prescribed limit contrary to section 5 of the Road Traffic Act 1988;
- (b) a conviction for driving or being in charge with concentration of specified controlled drug above specified limit contrary to section 5A of the Road Traffic Act 1988.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1) a person shall not be regarded as having a conviction until—

- (a) the expiry of the ordinary period allowed for making an appeal against the conviction, or
- (b) if such an appeal is made, the date on which it is finally disposed of or abandoned or fails because it is not prosecuted.”—(*Sir Christopher Chope.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

11.41 am

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—*Members of local authorities: disqualification relating to controlled drugs offences (England)*—

“In the Local Government Act 1972, after section 81 insert—

“**81A Disqualification relating to controlled drugs offences etc (England)**

(1) A person is disqualified for being elected or being a member of a local authority in England if the person is subject to a conviction relating to controlled drugs contrary to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1) a person shall not be regarded as having a conviction until—

- (a) the expiry of the ordinary period allowed for making an appeal against the conviction, or
- (b) if such an appeal is made, the date on which it is finally disposed of or abandoned or fails because it is not prosecuted.””

New clause 3—*Members of local authorities: disqualification relating to anti-social behaviour sanctions issued by the Court (England)*—

“In the Local Government Act 1972, after section 81 insert—

“81A Disqualification relating to anti-social behaviour sanctions

(1) A person is disqualified for being elected or being a member of a local authority in England if the person is subject to a civil injunction made under section 1 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1) a person shall not be regarded as being disqualified until—

- (a) the expiry of the ordinary period allowed for making an appeal against the civil injunction, or
- (b) if such an appeal is made the date on which it is finally disposed of or abandoned or fails because it is not prosecuted.””

This new clause would disqualify persons subject to an anti-social behaviour injunction from serving in local government in England, as consulted on by the Government in 2017.

Amendment 1, in clause 1, page 1, line 6, after “authority” insert “(except a parish council)”.

This amendment excludes parish councils from the provisions of Clause 1.

Amendment 2, page 2, leave out line 2.

This amendment (and Amendment 3) remove being subject to a sexual risk order from the list of reasons for disqualification from serving in local government in England, as consulted on by the Government in 2017.

Amendment 3, page 2, leave out lines 7 and 8.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 2.

Amendment 4, page 2, leave out lines 42 to 48.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Sir Christopher Chope: This is an important Bill, and I think everyone supports it in principle, because it is designed to ensure that those in local government who fall short of the behaviour expected of them in a civilised society are disqualified from being able to participate in local government. My problem with the Bill at the moment is that it is very selective. It deals only with sexual offences, and does not extend to other offences which I think are equally important, particularly in the context of local councillors who have responsibility for road safety, for example, and also for social services and dealing with the scourge of illegal drug taking.

New clause 1 contains the first such addition that I want to make. It accords very much with the strategy of the Bill, which was set out by the current Chancellor of the Exchequer when he was the Minister for local government. In his ministerial foreword to the response to the consultation on updating the disqualification criteria for councillors and mayors, published in October 2018, he wrote:

“The Government considers there should be consequences where councillors, mayors and London Assembly members fall short of the behaviour expected in an inclusive and tolerant society... Elected members play a crucial role in town halls across

the country, and are the foundations of local democracy. They are community champions, and have a leading role to play in building a better society for everyone.”

My view, reflected in new clause 1, is that councillors who fall below the standards expected in relation to drink and drug driving offences should be included in the category of those who are disqualified from being able to serve as councillors and mayors. I think that they fall four-square within the Government’s definition of having been convicted of behaviour which everyone in a right-minded society would say was intolerable. Why should people who are in that position be allowed to continue as councillors while other councillors who have been convicted of a different set of antisocial offences are excluded? That is the essence of new clause 1. If someone is convicted of driving or being in charge of a motor vehicle with excess alcohol or a controlled drug, they should not be able to hold office as an elected councillor in this country.

11.45 am

That brings me to new clause 2, which seeks, similarly, to extend the provisions for disqualification to those who are convicted of offences contrary to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The new clause is particularly topical, because it fits in with the “10-year drugs plan to cut crime and save lives”, which Her Majesty’s Government published in December 2021. As Members may know, that contained a foreword from no less a person than our Prime Minister. He said on page 4:

“And there will be no implicit tolerance of so-called recreational drug users.”

What better way is there of making an example of that and ensuring that the Prime Minister’s words are delivered into action than by amending the Bill through new clause 2 and making it clear that recreational drug users who are convicted would also find that they are ineligible to serve as elected councillors across this country, as champions of local people? If the Government do not accept new clause 2, it would seem that they are already stalling on actually delivering what is a clear objective of the 10-year drugs plan, “From harm to hope”.

I will refer briefly to some of the content of that strategy. Page 13 says:

“Legal consequences for this use”—

in other words, the use of illegal substances—

“have not been sufficiently applied across all levels of society... We will improve our methods for identifying recreational drug users and roll out a system of tougher penalties aimed at this.”

That is what the Government said. The strategy also states:

“For those who nevertheless choose to continue with their drug use, there will be swift, certain and meaningful consequences which will be felt more strongly than today and will escalate for those who continue to offend. Drugs are harmful to society and no one is above the law.”

Surely if those words are true—I certainly support every scintilla of them—we should ensure that we take every opportunity to add to the deterrents and punishments for those who are guilty of recreational and other drug use.

We understand that recreational drug use is treated by some people in our society as relatively unimportant in terms of compliance with the criminal law but the criminal law, under the rule of law, should apply to all. In chapter 4, on page 45, the strategy states:

“Adults using drugs socially often live relatively typical and otherwise healthy lives and may not recognise their role in fuelling the drugs trade or influencing and damaging the behaviour of others, including children. They may also feel that they are not at risk of experiencing any consequences themselves from their drug use. This should not be the case.”

And so say—or so should say—all of us.

At page 57, the Government say:

“Prevention of substance use is a key element of the government’s ambition to reduce the demand for drugs.”

What is also made clear in that document is that both local and national Government are actively involved together in the drugs strategy. It says, under the heading “Local outcomes frameworks”, on page 60:

“For this to succeed, there needs to be alignment between national outcome expectations and local delivery.”

Who are the people who are involved in local delivery? None other than local councillors. So can we tolerate a situation in which local councillors may themselves have been convicted of offences against the Misuse of Drugs Act, in complete defiance of the Government’s strategy, which I think has universal support across the country? That is the essence of new clause 2.

It might be said that we cannot amend the Bill because we have not yet consulted on these issues. In my view, that would be a very technical defence and would not go to, if I can use the expression, the substance of the concerns that I am expressing. The Government did consult on this measure, as I have said, in 2017, with the results of that consultation being published in 2018. I have known my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) for many years, from when we worked together on Wandsworth council and in various other roles, and I very much support the Bill and taking up the proposals from the Government. But what I do not understand is why a subject on which there was consultation—the issue of antisocial behaviour—has been omitted from this Bill.

New clause 3 is designed to add to the Bill the provisions that were originally the subject of consultation in 2017.

Question 3 in that document said:

“Do you agree that an individual who has been issued with a Civil Injunction (made under section 1 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014) or a Criminal Behaviour Order (made under section 22 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014) should be prohibited from standing for election, or holding office, as a member of a local authority, mayor of a combined authority, member of the London Assembly or London Mayor?”

In introducing that, the Government suggested in the consultation paper that they were of the opinion that such people should be disqualified from holding office. In the response to the consultation, they say that 65% of respondents agreed with that proposal—the proposal to disqualify, for such behaviour, from being able to be a councillor—22% were against and 12% of people did not know.

The Government, to give a flavour of the responses received, quoted, among others:

“We agree on the basis that the period of time for which they would be barred would end once they are no longer subject to the injunction or order”,

and

“it would not be considered acceptable for people to stand for or hold office where they have been issued with certain Civil Injunctions and Criminal Behaviour Orders”.

So the responses were very much in support of what was then the Government’s proposition. The Government themselves said:

“The Government considers that an individual who is subject to an anti-social behaviour sanction that has been issued by the court,”—

a civil injunction made under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014—

“should be barred from standing for election...as a local authority member”.

The disqualification period would end when they were no longer subject to the injunction or the order. So not only did the Government consult on the issue and the responses support the measure, but the Government themselves supported the measure in 2018. By implication, I imagine the current Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was then the Minister with responsibility for local government, also supported it. I submit, with all modesty, that new clause 3 has support at the very highest levels of Government from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as we have not heard anything from him to suggest that he has changed his mind since 2018.

Why, then, is that provision not included in the Bill, which is, as I understand it, essentially a Government handout Bill? One can only surmise that the Government are now watering down their support for that proposition, which they consulted on in 2017, said they supported in 2018 and committed to try to get early legislation on at the same time. We have waited three years-plus to get to this stage. Now we are at that stage, why can we not accept new clause 3? The other amendments I have fit in with what I have just been saying.

Amendments 2 and 3 seek to leave out of the Bill measures that were also the subject of consultation and where consultees disapproved of the proposals. Indeed, in the consultation, the Government themselves said they did not want to include in the Bill issues relating to serious risk orders. Paragraph 15, on page 12 of the document issued in September 2017, states:

“The Government does not propose including another type of civil order, the Sexual Risk Order, as this person would not have been convicted or cautioned of a sexual offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and are not subject to notification requirements for registered sex offenders. A Sexual Risk Order does require the individual to notify to the police their name and their home address. A Sexual Risk Order can be sought by the police against an individual who has not been convicted, cautioned etc. of an offence under Schedule 3 or Schedule 5 of the 2003 Act but who is nevertheless thought to pose a risk of harm to the public in the UK and/or children or vulnerable adults abroad.”

The question posed in the consultation was:

“Do you agree that an individual who is subject to a Sexual Risk Order should not be prohibited from standing for election, or holding office”.

The result of the consultation was that the public agreed with the Government’s view in 2017 that the sexual risk order should not be extended to the provisions. What do we find now? We find that that provision, which the Government said should not be included, is now included in this Bill. I cannot understand why because it taints the Bill. It means it is not just confined to people who have been convicted before the criminal courts—it also deals with people who are effectively in receipt of civil penalties. It offends against the very principles to which I have just referred and which the Government thought in 2017 were a reason not to include these measures in the Bill.

12 noon

The respondents to the consultation agreed with the Government view at the time, but we now understand that the Government have changed their mind. Is that not extraordinary? Why is it that the Government are now changing their mind on the issue when they have already consulted on it and the majority of respondents to the consultation agreed with the proposition that risk orders should not disqualify people from being able to serve as a local government councillor in our country?

One can see quite a lot of anomalies in all this. At the beginning of the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, you made a statement about Parliament's role in the scrutiny of legislation. It is a pity that none of the people who were privileged to serve on the Bill Committee thought fit to get down to the detail of the Bill and its background and to test the Minister on the Government's rationale for being so selective in their response to the consultation. I hope that today's debate will give the Minister an opportunity to fill that gap. Had I served on the Bill Committee, I would have been able to raise these issues and table amendments in Committee, but all I can do now is raise them on Report and hope we will get some responses. Madam Deputy Speaker, you said that we can table amendments and new clauses with different objectives; the final group of amendments to which I shall speak are more probing amendments than amendments designed to highlight real shortcomings in the legislation.

Amendment 1 and the consequential amendment 4 are designed to restrict the legislation so that it does not apply to parish councils. I say that because of the tenor of the legislation and the remarks, supported by the Government, about the importance of councillors setting a good example. That applies in particular to what we call principal councils throughout the country, but I am not sure it applies in quite the same way to local parish councils and community councils.

On a practical level, how will it be easy for some parish councils, some of which are very small and do not have full-time clerks, or even part-time clerks with any qualifications, to police the proposals that are designed to apply to them? I ask because there is obviously no point in our having laws that cannot be properly enforced. We would not want to burden parish councils with new responsibilities that they find difficult to fulfil, particularly in respect of sexual misconduct orders. They are not convictions and the people to whom they apply are not on the sex offenders register, so it will be even more difficult to identify them.

We know from recent experience that it will be difficult. For example, the police and crime commissioner legislation prohibits someone from standing for office or being elected as a police and crime commissioner if they have been convicted of a drink-driving offence. In Wiltshire last year, a candidate who was "elected" as a police and crime commissioner had in fact fallen foul of the primary legislation because he had been convicted in the past. Even for a police and crime commissioner election, it was difficult for the authorities to establish whether the person standing in the election had already been convicted of drink-driving. That is even more the case when the offences are not criminal offences and have not been properly recorded. I hope that the Minister will be able to help us on that aspect as well.

This is an important Bill. On the one hand, it gives the House the opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to maintaining the highest standards in public office, and on the other, it also ensures that we respect civil liberties and do not start condemning people for conduct that is not the subject of a criminal conviction or even a criminal charge. Many anomalies remain in the Bill and I hope that we will be able to resolve them in the time remaining for debate today.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak for the Opposition on this important Bill. I commend the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) for using his precious private Member's Bill to close this concerning loophole.

As for the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), there is of course an important discussion to be had about what should disqualify one from being able to run for office, as there is about behaviour while in office. I note that the hon. Gentleman quoted the Prime Minister and his views on what would be needed for higher standards in office for councillors. Given the votes of no confidence being tabled across the country by Conservative associations, I would hazard a guess that not even Conservative councillors are in the mood to take lectures from the Prime Minister about the standards that people should uphold.

What has been missed by the amendments is that the Bill would close a loophole that allows sex offenders in positions where they should be protecting the vulnerable: it is not an opportunity to rewrite the law entirely. I genuinely do not know why the hon. Member for Christchurch is so against protecting some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Sir Christopher Chope: The hon. Lady has just made a ridiculous assertion that is not backed up by anything I have said or anything I believe in. Will she withdraw that?

Sarah Owen: I may be new to this place, and particularly new to the spot I am standing in, but having watched previous debates on closing loopholes on female genital mutilation and upskirting, and now this specific Bill about protecting young children, that is the evidence that I have for making the comments that I made, and I do not see a reason to withdraw them.

Sir Christopher Chope: Just as a matter of record, because the hon. Lady obviously has not read the record, I supported both the pieces of legislation to which she referred. All I did was to try to ensure that they were debated in the House so that they did not pass without any debate.

Sarah Owen: The hon. Member supported them so much that he managed to talk them out so they could not be passed. This time, I ask him to give those tired antics a rest and allow this uncontroversial Bill to pass. I do not think anyone in this place would condone antisocial behaviour or driving under the influence. Any changes to the disqualification criteria such as those he proposes deserve a much longer debate in their own right. The amendments threaten to weaken the specific point of the Bill. I suspect that he knows that, and will not be surprised that we will vote against them if pressed.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I rise to speak to the amendments all together. Before I came to this place, I was a councillor for many years, and I absolutely uphold the principles of the Bill and of the Nolan principles of conduct in public life. I also believe in redemption. I have dealt a lot with issues relating to county lines and there is nothing more powerful than seeing somebody who has been involved as a victim but who is none the less convicted because at a very young age they were involved in something over which they had very little choice. The thought that in later life that person might be disqualified from serving in public office is wrong, and it is my understanding that that would happen if we included these amendments. We need to reflect on the fact that people in public office need to have experience and sometimes that experience may be in areas where they need to advise people of their past mistakes. Safeguarding is a different issue and I absolutely support the Bill in that regard. As a result of that, I will not support the amendments if they come to a vote.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I have known my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), as he said, for some considerable time; we were both on a south London council. Although we are on the same side of the House, sometimes we agree and sometimes we do not. This afternoon, although I have sympathy with what he is plugging for, I do not think this is an appropriate Bill for what he is proposing. It is a Bill that is answering one small point, on which there has tremendous pressure, because there has been evidence of it and of the loophole being abused. As has been said, the loophole is child protection and the relationship with elected councillors. There has been wide consultation with local government before this Bill on the specific issue. The measures it contains are very deliberate and not retrospective. They are also de facto time-limited by the nature of the current legislation relating to the sex offenders list.

It would be fair to say that the new clauses came as a bit of a surprise, although I should have anticipated them because I have known my hon. Friend for some considerable time. I did ask him whether he would like to serve on the Committee, because I knew he would have issues to raise, but he declined to do so. These new clauses will have a draconian effect on local government. I am not a lawyer, but it seems to me that they will be retrospective all the way back to 1971 for drugs offences, to 1978 for drink-driving offences and to 2018 for social disorder offences. There is no time limit for this disqualification and no consideration given to the nature of the offence or the length of the conviction. This is a retrospective, one-strike-and-you-are-out proposal.

If the proposals were put to local government as they are on the Order Paper, I suspect the response would include the far from unreasonable request that such disqualification laws should be applied to Members of Parliament as well. I am sure my hon. Friend has no distant conviction, so there will be no difficulty for him, but if he has, I suspect he may not be alone. More to the point, I would strongly argue that any such purely hypothetical conviction from decades ago would have no bearing on his ability or that of any other hon. Member to discharge their duties in this place.

The same applies to most, if not almost all, of our hard-working colleagues in local government. When I looked at the amendments and new clauses, I had visions of some poor councillor who had the misfortune to be convicted in the late 1970s for a minor drink-driving offence when a student—I remember my life as a student; I got away with it—driving their battered Mini around the university campus. This person may have gone on to serve as a councillor or even as a mayor for decades, rendering great service to their community, but they would be disqualified at a stroke by the conviction many years ago, thereby forcing a by-election. It is worth mentioning a point that will have crossed the minds of some hon. Members. The inevitable and aggressive partisan trawling for past convictions to be used as a tool to unseat councillors will be particularly horrendous should these new clauses be accepted. Certainly, we will see minor, irrelevant incidents from the councillor's past dredged up and used as weapons to force the resignation of people who have given huge amounts to their local community. That cannot be right on the basis of the brief discussion that we have had on these amendments today.

12.15 pm

Finally, my hon. Friend moved an amendment proposing the subject of the sexual risk order as a reason for disqualification from serving in local government. The sexual risk order is made by the court and imposes restrictions on a person's behaviour that the court deems necessary for the purposes of protecting the public from the risk of sexual harm. An order can be made in respect of any person who the police consider poses a risk of sexual harm to the public, notwithstanding the fact that they have not been convicted of a sexual offence. That is decided by the court. To my mind, individuals subject to such orders have no place in local government, and I fail to fathom the reason behind the amendment, which seems to be arguing the opposite.

Sir Christopher Chope: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Paul Beresford: I have listened to my hon. Friend, so I would rather not.

The measure, in my view, only undermines the primary aim of this Bill, which is to protect children. I was on the Committee for a Labour Government Bill in 2003 that brought this through, and we went backwards and forwards on this issue. Ultimately, I supported it then, and I do so now. This is a uniquely important issue, and I do not believe that it should be conflated with broader arguments over what should or should not disqualify an individual from participating in local government, as, regrettably, these new clauses do.

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for taking the time to engage with the legislation. I know that he is keen to ensure that Ministers have thought things through, and I am impressed that he has actually gone through the consultation document from 2018. I disagree with his amendments and I hope that I can convince him from the Dispatch Box that we are doing the right thing. I also wish to put it on record that I disagree with the rather unpleasant accusation that the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) made from the Labour Front Bench.

[Kemi Badenoch]

New clauses 1 and 2 would have the effect of creating a new form of permanent disqualification criteria for individuals convicted of a narrow group of offences under section 5 or section 5A of the Road Traffic Act 1988 or offences under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. There are a number of reasons why the Government are resisting these new clauses. The first is the fact that they propose that the disqualification would be permanent. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) has said, this runs counter to the principle and expectation that underpins our justice system that offenders serve their time and are then rehabilitated into society. It would have the effect of creating a permanent bar to individuals contributing to public life in their local communities for this limited category of offences. So, singling out this narrow group of drink and drug offences for permanent disqualification is disproportionate.

Secondly, the Bill legislates to capture not only local councillors but mayors and London Assembly members. However, my hon. Friend's new clauses apply only to local councillors. Thirdly, serious drink or drug-driving offences are already covered by the existing local government disqualification criteria, which bars anyone from standing or holding public office in local government for five years if they have had a custodial sentence of three months or more.

Amendments that create new, punitive measures to permanently disqualify those receiving a conviction for certain limited drink or drug-driving offences or controlled drug offences are really not the purpose of the Bill. The Bill specifically seeks to update disqualification criteria in line with modern sentencing measures available for registered sex offenders. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) said, these amendments would permanently bar, for example, an individual from standing for local office if, perhaps, at 18 they had had a glass of wine too many and were convicted of being slightly over the limit. Forty years later, they would still be unable to stand, which is a bit draconian.

The Bill is appropriately comprehensive, as it catches all those individuals subject to notification requirements for sexual offences but not subject to custodial sentences. The core purpose of this legislation is to prevent those convicted of sexual offences from having a role as a local elected official that could include access to children and vulnerable adults, and the length of their disqualification would be the length of time that they are subject to the notification requirement.

We also resist new clause 3. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch has identified that we did consult on disqualifying individuals who had been issued with antisocial behaviour injunctions in 2017, and the original consultation was focused in scope. This Bill does not include civil injunctions, on the basis that they represent only a partial selection of the injunctions and behaviour orders available to the courts. The Government support this Bill because, as I said earlier, we are legislating comprehensively to disqualify individuals convicted of sexual offences from local office. This Bill responds to calls for changes to the law to disqualify sex offenders who are not given a custodial sentence but refuse to stand down, so we want to bring the disqualification criteria for councillors in line with the modern sentencing

practice. The current criteria require updating to reflect changes to the law: the courts have tools that they did not have previously, and the disqualification criteria must reflect that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch mentioned my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. New clause 3 may have been supported by the Chancellor in his foreword when he was serving in this role, but he is not the Bill Minister—I am—and I believe that Bills such as this should be specific, targeted and focused. This private Member's Bill focuses on addressing those concerns raised by specific cases where councillors made subject to the notification requirements for registered sex offenders did not resign. Those cases highlighted the fact that those registered sex offenders pose great concern to our communities.

I will now move on to amendments 1, 2, 3 and 4, which all amend clause 1, and which we resist for the following reasons. Amendments 1 and 4 would selectively remove parish councils from the list of local authorities subject to the new disqualification criteria. This would be a significant and troubling reduction of the purpose, intent, and comprehensiveness of the Bill. Parish councils are already subject to the existing disqualification criteria, and rightly so, as there are 10,000 parish councils and approximately 100,000 parish councillors in England. It is vital that the large number of individuals who hold this important position—the grassroots of our democracy—are also subject to the new disqualification criteria introduced by the Bill. People must be given confidence that the individuals they elect to represent them at all tiers of local government are of good character and beyond reproach.

Amendments 2 and 3 would exclude sexual risk orders from the updated disqualification criteria for members of local authorities in England. As my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch has helpfully pointed out, the Government did consult on the inclusion of sexual risk orders in 2017, and we committed to legislate to disqualify persons subject to such orders from holding local office. Individuals are subject to sexual risk orders because they are found by a court to pose a serious risk of harm to the public in the UK and/or children and vulnerable adults abroad. When issuing a sexual risk order, the court needs to be satisfied that the order is necessary to protect the public, or children and vulnerable adults, from sexual harm, and the Government believe it is right that anyone subject to a sexual risk order should be barred from standing for election or holding office as a member of a local authority.

My hon. Friend asked why we changed our mind—why this Bill covers more than the sex offenders register. I should clarify that the 2017 consultation responses regarding the matter of sexual risk orders were mixed: some 39% of respondents were in favour of prohibition, and 45% were against. However, my hon. Friend is not correct to say that the Government have changed their mind regarding the inclusion of sexual risk orders in this Bill. In our response to the consultation, we stated that having considered the responses we received, the Government believe that where an individual is subject to a sexual risk order, they should be prohibited from standing for election. This Bill delivers on that commitment.

My hon. Friend also asked about enforcement—how local authorities will know that a councillor is on the register or has received an order for a sexual offence.

A candidate must declare anything that might disqualify them from standing for, or holding, local office. Not doing so is a criminal offence, and this Bill will update those disqualification criteria and therefore ensure they are captured by this requirement.

Sir Christopher Chope: Does that provision apply to people who stand as police and crime commissioners but already have a conviction that should have disqualified them? Does it mean that the gentleman who was elected in Wiltshire as a police and crime commissioner is now the subject of criminal proceedings?

Kemi Badenoch: This is not retrospective, so it will apply from now onwards. I hope that is helpful.

I hope I have been able to convince my hon. Friend not to press his amendments. They are not trivial, but this Bill is not the right place for them.

Sir Christopher Chope: This has been a useful debate. When we hear from the Minister that the Bill will apply to 100,000 councillors, one can see that this is an issue of significance. As always, she delivered a charming and, dare I say, almost seductive response. She referred to the importance of having people in local government who are of good character and beyond reproach. All three of my new clauses are designed to build on that.

As has happened over many years, the Government have managed to find a technical defect in my new clauses that does not alter their substance but makes the Government able to say that they do not agree with them. My new clauses, if they were accepted, would be subject to the transitional provisions set out in clause 5. For drafting purposes, I did not go into a lot of detail, but the essence is that there should be transitional arrangements so that the new clauses would not disqualify people who were convicted before the Bill became law.

The intention of these new clauses is that they should fit into a Bill that already ensures there is no retrospective provision. That technically affects all the new clauses, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) said, but the substance is whether the Government believe that somebody who has committed an offence under the Misuse of Drugs Act should or should not be disqualified from serving as a councillor, bearing in mind the importance given to the “From harm to hope” White Paper and bearing in mind recreational drug use.

We are even told that recreational drug use may be taking place within the Palace of Westminster. What a bad example that would be, as it would be if recreational drugs were being used in our town halls up and down the country, when the Government and, I think, the people are committed to trying to eliminate the scourge of illegal drug use and all the harm that comes from it. If we are serious about cutting crime and saving lives through the “From harm to hope” White Paper, do the Government intend to include consequences in legislation for those who are convicted?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. I am not a Home Office Minister, so I cannot speak to that Department's policy. He might find it interesting that the Government have an outstanding response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life on the very things he is talking about in relation to local

government and local councillors, and that might be a better place for us to address these points. We are thinking about these issues, but perhaps not in the fora he expects.

Sir Christopher Chope: That was a helpful and constructive contribution. I look forward to seeing the Government's response in due course, but I am delighted to hear that they are working on the issue.

I do not know whether I should disclose this, but I recall sitting in the Members' Lobby with my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley and discussing whether or not I would go on to the Committee, because he was desperate for someone to do so. I said that I would be happy to go on to the Committee, but in the end I was not selected to do so. That is an issue between us, but as it seems to be the subject of a point, I thought I should correct the record.

12.30 pm

Let me return to your initial remarks, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think it important for people outside this place, when we are bringing forward legislation, to know that it has been looked at by right hon. and hon. Members. This Bill's Second Reading went through on the nod with no debate, and I think the Committee spent about five minutes discussing it. If it had not been for the tabling of the amendments and new clauses, it would not have been discussed at all. I think we know from the Minister's response that some useful material has come out as a result of this discussion and scrutiny. I hope that when the Report stages of more private Members' Bills come along on Fridays, some of my hon. Friends will feel free to table new clauses and amendments so that they can participate. Of course, if they are lucky enough to secure the lead new clause or amendment, they will be able to initiate the debate and also finish it, which is a great privilege.

Having said that, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the new clause.

New clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Third Reading

12.31 pm

Sir Paul Beresford: I beg to move, That the Bill be read the Third time.

I will be very succinct, because having looked at the rest of the day's agenda, I am aware that there is a taxi behind me tooting its horn.

This Bill is a tiny, specific response to heavy demand from a number of Members and a number of councillors. It is intended to deal with circumstances in which an individual has been able to stand or remain as a councillor despite being on the sex offenders list, because they have not been put in jail. Today we will pass the Bill on to another place, where, my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) will be intrigued to know, the third former leader of Wandsworth Council to serve in this building will pick it up and take it forward.

I think the Bill is important. It is short, but it meets a need in ensuring that what applies to councillors who are on the sex offenders list and go to jail also applies to

[Sir Paul Beresford]

those who, as a result of some quirk, do not go to jail but remain outside, and are therefore able to remain as elected members.

12.33 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am still a councillor in Charnwood Borough Council, and I am also the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for district councils.

Essentially, I am going to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), and essentially I am going to say that I agree with him. I will take a little more time than that to do so, but not much more.

Sexual offences are some of the most heinous crimes that a person can commit, particularly when they involve children. It absolutely cannot be right that an elected representative who has been convicted of such an offence can remain in office and—as my hon. Friend said—have influence over policy for vulnerable people and contact with them. Those convicted of such offences are harmful to the people they represent, are not acting in accordance with the Nolan principles, and have no place in a position of influence. That is the crux of the matter.

The issues at stake are safeguarding, trust, and —this was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope)—a leading role in society. Those three elements together back up this Bill, and although, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) said, it is small and technical, it is also important, and I support it today.

12.34 pm

Sarah Owen: When my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) spoke about the Bill in Committee, she said she was going to be briefer than she had “ever been in Parliament”. I do not doubt that was the case, and I hope I will not take much longer because Labour fully endorses the Bill. I pay tribute again to the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) for promoting this important Bill. As has already been said, it is very specific and very small, but it will have a huge impact.

As it currently stands, sex offenders who avoid a custodial sentence are not disqualified from running for local government positions in England and Wales. We know that people often seek out elected representatives when they are at their most vulnerable and in deepest crisis, and for thousands of people, councillors are a vital backstop day in, day out. It is only right that the people elected to carry out those important roles are fit and proper to do so. It is unacceptable that a small loophole in existing legislation means that people who should be looking out for the vulnerable, especially children, are in a position where we might doubt that that is the case. It is important that the change to disqualification criteria is made in relation to all representations, with this special focus on those who act as corporate parents. That is why Labour supports the Bill.

12.36 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I join colleagues in what I think is unanimous support for the Bill, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on his admirable work in progressing it to this stage. I spent 23 years in local government, initially as a councillor, and latterly as a member of the London Assembly, and I feel that the action being taken to address this anomaly is long overdue. I pay a sincere tribute to the aims of the Bill, and I do not believe that a great deal can be said against the proposals.

The Bill will apply to individuals subject to notification requirements under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, known as the sex offenders register, as well as the sexual risk order that my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley mentioned. It will apply to local authorities and the Greater London Authority. Councillors are champions of their local communities, and they have so much contact with a variety of groups, not least the vulnerable and children. It is therefore completely right that this change is made, even if for no other reasons than those of safeguarding. The Bill is necessary because, as my hon. Friend set out in Committee, there is a loophole whereby a councillor who is convicted of a sexual offence but avoids a custodial sentence is not automatically disqualified, despite being placed on the sex offenders register. That is clearly not right.

Let me mention a few potential criticisms of the Bill, although they are few and far between. The Local Government Association has indicated that it is supportive of the Bill, but pointed out that it applies only to councillors, Assembly members and mayors. Police and crime commissioners, and indeed parliamentarians, are not affected by the Bill, and that is a curious omission. After all, if a sexual offence would bar someone from sitting on a local council, it would seem odd to allow the same person to sit as a police and crime commissioner. Perhaps my hon. Friend will address that point when he sums up the debate. However, as we heard from the Minister, the proposals in the current Bill have been consulted on for several years, and the Bill should not now be sunk into a quagmire about what it does not do. We should not make the perfect the enemy of the good, and there is a great deal in the Bill that is good.

As the Minister set out in Committee, there are more than 100,000 local councillors in England, virtually all of whom give up their time and are prepared to put their heads above the parapet in the name of public service. Unfortunately, the Bill is still needed, not only to draw parity between the sentencing guidelines, but to have proper rules in place for those rare instances when something does go wrong.

The most appalling example I have seen, and a case that I suspect contributed significantly to much of the motivation behind introducing this Bill, is that of a parish councillor, who I shall not name, in Saddleworth. He was convicted of 16 counts of downloading indecent photographs of children. He avoided a prison sentence, but was given a community order for 24 months and sent on a programme for sex offenders. Despite that, he continued to sit as a parish councillor on Saddleworth Council, which was officially unable to intervene. It did not have the necessary powers to remove him, because he had not been given the requisite prison sentence of three or more months. As I understand the situation,

several other councillors took it upon themselves to see whether it would be possible to call a referendum, but, to make that passable, every member of Saddleworth Council would have to be re-elected. That would have been an excessive administrative exercise when there should have been the much more straightforward remedy that the Bill will provide.

I know that we are pushed for time and want to get on to other business, but finally, as local government is a devolved matter, I want to talk about how the Bill should be implemented across the UK. I am unashamedly a passionate Unionist and, although the Bill extends only to England, I noted with interest the Minister's comments in Committee about commitment to support implementation in Northern Ireland. She stated:

"The Government will work with the Northern Ireland Executive to seek to extend these measures to Northern Ireland in a comprehensive package, addressing candidates and sitting councillors."—[*Official Report, Local Government (Disqualification) Public Bill Committee*, 1 December 2021; c. 5-6.]

I warmly welcome that. More widely, the Bill matches rules across the country as the Assembly in Wales recently legislated on the matter. It would be most welcome if similar measures could be enacted in Scotland so that we would have a shared commonality of rules for public representatives across the whole of the United Kingdom. I think that people across the whole United Kingdom would welcome that. For those reasons, I will support the Bill. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley on bringing it to the House.

12.41 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): My speech will be very short. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on bringing the Bill to the House, which, following both policy debate here today and Government consultation several years ago, is close to addressing an important issue regarding our local democracy.

I strongly support clause 1, which will insert a new and important section 81A into the Local Government Act 1972. I have so much that I would like to say, but will not. However, people who commit sexual offences should rightly be disqualified from holding positions in local government, be that the Mayor of London, a charter trustee or a parish councillor such as in the numerous villages in my constituency. With the passing of the Bill, I am confident that another small barrier will be put in the way of those who may consider committing a sexual offence to be acceptable. More generally, as is set out in the code of conduct for councillors, the Bill speaks to the broader need for those elected or co-opted to local government positions to be held to the highest standards of conduct, consistent with the Nolan principles, including objectivity, openness and leadership.

As a councillor in Rother before I was elected to this House by my constituents in Hastings and Rye, I firmly believe that, in more ways than one, local government office holders are a stalwart and integral part of the country's fine democratic tradition, which has developed over the past several centuries. When considering those who commit sexual offences, the current rules clearly do not go far enough in ensuring that that is always the case, because disqualification essentially has an expiration

period of five years, and I know from constituents who write to me that the victims of sexual offences often suffer from these crimes for much, much longer. It can therefore only be right that the rules surrounding disqualification are strengthened in law. The Bill will at last do just that two months after the House passes it, and I offer my full support for it.

12.43 pm

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Like colleagues, I will not speak for long—no doubt, they will be surprised and delighted to hear that. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on his choice of private Member's Bill, the fashion in which he introduced it and the way in which he moved the motion. As a former county councillor, I very much welcome the loophole closure. I reflect that I am a former county councillor from Wales, and I therefore very much welcome the Minister's commitment to work with the Northern Ireland Executive in further rolling out this measure, presumably through a legislative consent motion or engagement with the Executive. I also welcome the work that the Welsh Government have done to date in closing such loopholes. However, it strikes me that there is an anomaly with the Scottish Government's disqualification orders.

In my contribution, which will end shortly, I want to reflect on whether the Minister could pull together devolved Administration counterparts. Without slowing down the Bill—my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley will be delighted to hear that I am not suggesting a new clause—I wonder whether she could bring the DAs together to look at disqualifications more broadly, whether for a Member of Parliament, county councillor, police and crime commissioner or Member of the Welsh Parliament, and bring a universal element to them. That would be outside the scope of the Bill, so I hope I am in order saying that in the Chamber.

My Montgomeryshire constituency is a cross-border part of the world, and many walks of life, whether they are public sector, private sector or delivering at a county council level, do not see the border, so I would appreciate a comment from the Minister on whether we could bring some universal element to the disqualifications as the United Kingdom. I thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley and wish the Bill speed.

12.45 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I rise to support the Bill in its aims and in its practice. I speak as a former councillor and a former magistrate. Those who put themselves forward for elected office often do a brave thing. It is not something that anyone is trained to do or that anyone can practise to do, so I pay tribute to those in our communities who do it, because they form the backbone of our elected system.

The pandemic has shone a light on the importance of local frontline and community responses in keeping us safe. Most often, the response has been organised through brilliant local government networks, including in my constituency by Hertfordshire County Council, East Herts District Council and all our town and parish councils. We should be grateful to them, because we are so reliant on them.

[Julie Marson]

That reliance on local government in our lives gives it the power to infiltrate our lives for good or bad. That is particularly true of the most vulnerable groups in our communities, including children and young people, who rely on service provision locally as much, if not more, than many others. We place an enormous amount of trust in the system and in those people as a result. As a system and a wider culture, we must ensure that we are worthy of that trust and live up to it, because the consequences of an abuse of power within local government can be catastrophic.

As a magistrate, I reflect on the purposes of sentencing. Punishment, deterrence and a public observation that certain behaviours are not acceptable in our society are part of that, but protection of the public is too, and that is where the Bill comes into its own. It will protect the most vulnerable in our society and I commend it for that. I will leave it there, but it has been a pleasure to contribute to the debate.

12.48 pm

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on his outstanding work in progressing the Bill. I am pleased to reiterate the Government's support for the legislation.

The Government are backing this private Member's Bill because it addresses a critical issue pertaining to people's faith in their elected representatives and in local democracy. It is an issue that affects communities the length and breadth of the country. It will serve to prevent registered sex offenders from standing or serving as councillors, mayors or London Assembly members.

I am grateful to the Opposition Front-Bench team for supporting this important Bill. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) and for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), all councillors or former councillors, for their thoughtful contributions. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), who was on the London Assembly with me when I was deputy leader and he was leader. I am pleased that he and I continue to work together in this place.

To answer some of the questions, I am grateful for the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams) about working with the devolved Administrations. He will know that the Secretary of State is the Minister for Intergovernmental Relations. I am sure that if my hon. Friend wrote to the Secretary of State formally with a request, it is something that the Department could look at.

More broadly on how the devolved nations are taking corresponding provisions forward—this was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington—Wales has already implemented similar provisions via the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, and Government officials have been in contact with Scottish counterparts. It is entirely within the remit of the Scottish Parliament to make corresponding provisions, but my officials stand ready to assist in any way possible. For those who want to know, the Northern Ireland Executive could make corresponding provision regarding sitting councillors, but the UK Government retain responsibility

for elections in Northern Ireland. We will work with the Northern Ireland Executive to seek to extend these measures to Northern Ireland in a comprehensive package addressing both candidates and sitting councillors.

There was a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington about MPs and police and crime commissioners. The answer is that standards and conduct for MPs and police and crime commissioners are governed under separate regimes with their own mechanisms to disqualify or sanction against unacceptable behaviour. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) on Report, this Bill is very specific and focused, and that is why we have not included other measures; we would not necessarily even have been able to do so.

Local councillors are part of the democratic fabric of this country. Throughout the pandemic, we all bore witness to the critical role of local authorities in supporting our communities and the most vulnerable in society. It is hard to imagine a time when local government has mattered more, or indeed when people's faith and trust in it has mattered as much as it does today. People must be given confidence that the individuals they elect to represent them are of good character, deserving of trust and beyond reproach. Mayors and councillors are responsible for the delivery of vital services, including for children and vulnerable adults, and they are empowered to make decisions on a whole range of issues that people care deeply about. Good character in the people making these decisions should be the minimum expectation.

It goes without saying that the vast majority of councillors and mayors are driven by a deep sense of public duty, as we have seen from those of them who have come to this place, and they deserve respect and praise for the excellent job that they do. Perhaps inevitably when there are 120,000 councillors serving all tiers of local government in England, however, there are rare occasions when the behaviour of individuals falls below the standards that the public rightly expect.

Currently, anyone who is convicted and given a custodial sentence of three months or more, suspended or not, is disqualified from local government for five years. These rules date to the Local Government Act 1972. While the existing law may have been effective in addressing serious cases of criminal behaviour, it does not take account of the non-custodial sentences that courts now issue for sexual offences. Those concern individuals who are on the sex offenders register and are subject to the notification requirements to manage sex offender behaviour, because they pose a risk to children and all vulnerable adults.

This Bill is important because it will bring the current disqualification criteria for local authorities in line with modern sentencing practices. Clearly, no community should have to tolerate a convicted sex offender standing or continuing to serve as their local representative. This update to the law governing who can stand as a fit and proper person to represent their community is long overdue and will serve to protect the most vulnerable members of our society, while upholding the high standards expected of locally elected officials.

Finally, may I take this opportunity to say that it has been a great pleasure to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley in taking this much-needed step towards updating the local government disqualification criteria. I look forward to the Bill's successful passage through the Lords.

12.53 pm

Sir Paul Beresford: I will be very succinct. I have mentioned the taxi cab, and I can hear it behind me—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman might like to ask the leave of the House.

Sir Paul Beresford: My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. After all this time, I should have remembered that. I ask the leave of the House to say a few words.

I thank the Minister for her support, and I am grateful for the support from right across the House. Even my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) is behind the Bill, although he was going to add all sorts of thorns to it—much, I think, to the dismay of local government. My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) and the Minister mentioned MPs. If my hon. Friend had spent some time on the Standards Committee, he would have heard of the ghastly accusation of bringing the House into disrepute. That would apply to any MP in this situation, and the door would be shown to them.

I thank everybody again, and I hope that the Bill will progress swiftly through the other place, led by another ex-leader of Wandsworth Council.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Disabled Persons) Bill

Second Reading

12.55 pm

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

For many of the more than 14 million people in the UK with a disability, taxis and private hire vehicles are a vital means of transport and access to daily freedoms that most of us take for granted. That is particularly true for those who live in rural areas, such as the ones I represent, where public transport can be inaccessible or scarce. The willingness of taxi and private hire vehicle drivers to carry people with disabilities and to offer the extra help that makes their journeys manageable therefore matters hugely to the capacity of people with disabilities to get around at all.

This House has legislated in the past to help, with the passing of the Equality Act 2010, which provided specific protections for those using wheelchairs and those with assistance dogs, but we are probably all aware from our postbags that there is still a problem. Among the thousands of taxi and private hire vehicle drivers who do all they can to support their disabled passengers, there are still some who refuse to carry them at all and still some operators who refuse to take bookings or make available the sort of reasonable assistance that would enable people with disabilities to take advantage of their services. The Bill that I propose seeks to build on the protections in that Act and to broaden them to address the discrimination that a wider range of passengers with disabilities still face. Let me set out how it seeks to do that.

The Equality Act requires the driver of designated wheelchair-accessible taxis and private hire vehicles to carry a wheelchair-using passenger at no extra charge, but it imposes no duty on the driver of any other taxi or private hire vehicle to carry a passenger who could transfer from a wheelchair into the vehicle and whose wheelchair could be folded and stored for the journey. The Bill would create that duty, unless it would not be safe or otherwise reasonable in all the circumstances for that to happen.

When a passenger has with them mobility aids, the Bill will create a duty for drivers to carry those aids, again, unless it would be unsafe or otherwise unreasonable to do so. For passengers needing mobility assistance, the Bill will require drivers to offer such assistance as is reasonably required. For all passengers with disabilities, the Bill will create a duty for drivers to take such steps as are reasonable to ensure that they are carried in safety and reasonable comfort.

The language of the provisions is important. They ask nothing unreasonable of taxi and private hire vehicle drivers and nothing, I suspect, that many drivers are not already doing for disabled passengers up and down the country, but they set out in law the expectations that a civilised, inclusive society should have in meeting the mobility needs of its disabled citizens.

The Bill also follows the example of the Equality Act in making it clear that no additional charge may be made for complying with the duties that it provides for; neither can it be acceptable for drivers or taxi or private

[Jeremy Wright]

hire vehicle operating companies simply to refuse to carry disabled passengers at all in order to evade these duties. For that reason, the Bill extends the Equality Act offence for drivers refusing to carry passengers with an assistance dog or charging more for doing so to drivers and operators refusing to accept a person with any disability because of that disability. That offence and offences arising from a failure to comply with the duties that I described will be punishable with fines comparable with those relating to offences already in law under the Equality Act.

When a taxi or private hire vehicle has been pre-booked by a passenger with a visual impairment, learning disability or a cognitive impairment, it can sometimes be difficult for them to identify the vehicle when it arrives, so the Bill will also create a duty for drivers to take reasonable steps to help the passenger to identify and find the vehicle when the driver has been made aware that some assistance is required. Once again, no extra charge can be made.

As ever, there is a balance to be struck. The Bill is designed to improve the travelling experience of disabled passengers, but it should not do so by imposing burdens on taxi and private hire vehicle drivers they are incapable of bearing, or that it would be unreasonable to ask them to bear. That is why the new duties I have referred to describe steps it is reasonable to take and why there are defences to the offences created by the Bill, where drivers could not reasonably have known of a passenger's disability or of the mobility assistance they might require. But where it is reasonable to require actions from drivers that would facilitate the travel of disabled passengers, we should require them.

Some drivers have disabilities or impairments themselves, and the Equality Act provides for certificates exempting such drivers from duties under that Act, but those exemption certificates are currently very widely drawn and, I would argue, unjustifiably so. Of course it is right that drivers unable to render mobility assistance should not be subject to a duty to do so, but it does not follow that such drivers should be entitled to refuse to carry disabled passengers at all where it would be reasonable for them to do that, or to charge extra for doing so. The Bill would therefore limit the scope of exemption certificates to exclude only those duties that should properly be excluded.

It is important to recognise that it is not just taxi and private hire vehicle drivers and operators whose actions have a bearing on the capacity of passengers with disabilities to access their services. Local licensing authorities have a part to play too, including by helping passengers who need a wheelchair-accessible vehicle to find one. The Equality Act provides that licensing authorities may maintain a list of wheelchair-accessible taxis and private hire vehicles, but it does not oblige them to do so. Currently, some 79% of authorities in England maintain lists of wheelchair-accessible taxis, and 70% maintain such a list in relation to private hire vehicles, meaning that potential passengers in 20% to 30% of local authority areas do not have access to that information. Even more troubling, the current duties on drivers set out in the Equality Act apply only if their vehicle has been designated by inclusion on the relevant list by the local licensing authority. So a failure to

maintain a list will make driver duties unenforceable in those areas where no list exists. For those reasons, the Bill would make the maintenance of such lists obligatory.

Taken together, I believe these measures can make a real difference to the travelling experience of many people with disabilities and build on and improve the provisions of the Equality Act 2010. Of course, the Bill is necessarily limited in its scope, and there will be more to do. I am grateful for the views of and support from the organisations I have spoken to about the Bill who support people with a range of disabilities, as well as the representatives of operating companies and local authorities whom I also met. They were strongly of the view that the Bill would be reinforced by a requirement that all drivers of taxis and private hire vehicles should undertake disability awareness training. I am aware that the Government have already indicated that they intend to legislate for that to happen elsewhere, so it is not part of the Bill, but the duties set out in the Bill will be best met if an open conversation takes place between driver and passenger about how the passenger's journey can be made most comfortable and convenient. Those conversations will be more likely if passengers know these new duties exist in law and are confident in expressing their needs, and drivers are equipped to clarify and meet those needs as well as they reasonably can.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to assure the House that the Government intend to legislate soon for that training requirement, and of course that she will be able to express her support for the Bill. I ask right hon. and hon. Members from all parties to do the same and allow the Bill to progress to Committee, in the spirit of our common cause of making journeys in taxis and private hire vehicles better, easier and fairer for those with disabilities.

1.4 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) for introducing this important Bill, which will help to address the barriers that disabled people face in accessing taxi and private hire vehicle services. Indeed, it is a laudable aim that we on the Opposition Benches fully support.

Affordability and accessibility are key for people with disabilities, and the situation today is simply nowhere near good enough. According to research carried out by the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, the household of 60% of disabled people had no car, compared with 27% in the overall population. Fifty per cent. of respondents said that inaccessible transport had restricted their choice of jobs, with the proportion rising to 62% for wheelchair users and 86% for people with a visual impairment. That is the challenge that we as a society face, but the backdrop is more troubling still.

Over the past decade, public transport has become harder and costlier to access. The failed and fragmented privatised model means that by 2024 average fares on buses are set to climb to 60% higher than they were in 2010. Shockingly, the number of bus routes is projected to fall by more than 5,000. Elderly and disabled passenger numbers are set to drop by nearly 26%. Sadly, the trend is not limited to buses: fewer than one in five railway

stations are fully accessible, with the Government having cut the funding to increase disabled accessibility by 42% between 2015 and 2019.

There is a crisis of accessibility and it paints a deeply disturbing picture. Disabled passengers already face a multitude of barriers to travel and the declining provision of public transport has done enormous damage. That is why I commend the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) in making the case for a passenger charter for disabled public transport passengers, to set out their rights and the obligations of operators.

We should be determined to make our transport as accessible as possible and reasonable adjustments need to be made as soon as possible. That is the context in which we debate the Bill, which is focused specifically on taxi and private hire services. It will address the inconsistencies in provision under the Equality Act 2010 and expand the protections currently afforded to wheelchair and assistance dog users to all disabled people, regardless of the vehicle in which they travel. We welcome those provisions.

As the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam outlined eloquently, the Bill will also create a new duty on drivers to assist disabled passengers to identify and find the vehicle they have booked, and they must not make any additional charge for doing so. The new offence to help to prevent discrimination in respect of a driver choosing to accept a passenger will be a welcome step.

The Bill is part of an important broader picture of reform in the private hire vehicle sector, which includes the drivers who were denied rights for too long. Private hire drivers and all those employed in the gig economy deserve the same rights as other workers. Like many Members, I have been contacted by multiple hard-working private hire drivers in my Slough constituency who have somehow struggled through the past two years, having been disproportionately impacted during the pandemic. It is now more important than ever that such workers earn a decent wage, are able to take holidays and earn sick pay.

We welcome the agreement between Uber and the GMB union that is making a tangible difference to the lives and living standards of Uber drivers, but there is much more work to be done. The Labour party would reform taxi and private hire services, including a review of licensing authority jurisdictions, setting national minimum standards of safety and accessibility, updating regulations to keep pace with technological change, and closing loopholes to ensure a level playing field.

Labour welcomes the ambitions of the Bill and looks forward to working constructively with the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam if it makes its way through the House today. However, every Member will know that much work still needs to be done to make public transport accessible for people with disabilities. We must do everything we can to make that a reality.

1.10 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I rise to speak in support of this excellent Bill and I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) on introducing it. It

addresses an issue that has come up for me numerous times over the years, both as a Member of Parliament and as a caseworker for the previous Member of Parliament, whereby people with different disabilities have found it difficult, for whatever reason, to get transport. I want to look at three key elements in the Bill: no extra charge; cannot refuse transport; and licensing to maintain a list of wheelchair accessible vehicles, which is an excellent idea.

In 2019-20, 14.1 million people reported having a disability, representing about 22% of the overall UK population. Of those, about 1.2 million people are wheelchair users. Disabled people make twice as many journeys by taxi and private hire vehicle each year compared with non-disabled people—twice as many journeys—yet many continue to face discriminatory behaviour from drivers and taxi companies, including outright refusal of service, overcharging and a failure to provide assistance to enable them to board, alight and travel in comfort.

The Equality Act 2010 provides disabled people with some protection, but it applies inconsistently and only with respect to certain disabilities. I would like to put forward that “twice as many journeys” as an opportunity. It is almost a marketing opportunity: there is a target market of people who spend, or would spend, a great deal of time and money in the market. Therefore, this is a good opportunity for taxi drivers and owners of private hire vehicles, as well as for those who are disabled.

The list of licenced wheelchair accessible vehicles is also an excellent idea. As I mentioned, I have tried to help people in the past. I did not accept that they would not be able to book, so I tried to book for them. It was quite difficult having to ring round and ring round and ring round, so a list of licensed accessible vehicles is an excellent idea. To sum up those two points, they are useful measures that need to be put in place and perhaps should have been put in place in previous years.

The only other point I would like to make is about taxi drivers who are themselves disabled. I would like confirmation that there are provisions in the Bill to ensure they do not necessarily have to get out of the car and so on. I believe I am right in saying that that is included in the Bill.

Jeremy Wright: I can confirm that. My hon. Friend will have heard me talk about exemption certificates. We wish to refine them in the Bill, but there will still be, within the exemption certificates, an opportunity for drivers who are unable to render mobility assistance not to be obliged to do so.

Jane Hunt: I am obliged to my right hon. and learned Friend for that intervention. That creates a perfect circle whereby disabled are able to be helped, and taxi and private hire vehicle drivers are able to take advantage of the market while being safeguarded from any hindrance because of their situation.

1.14 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I, too, would like to start by commending my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) on the Second Reading of this very important private Member's Bill. I also put on record my thanks to all the drivers of taxi and private hire vehicles in Clwyd South—as I am sure other Members would for their

[Simon Baynes]

constituencies—who have provided an essential service to so many people, particularly during the height of the covid pandemic. Their kindness and concern for their passengers, particularly vulnerable people, is not the subject of this Bill: rather, its purpose is to address those who do not take into account the needs of disabled people.

I took great comfort from the fact that my right hon. and learned Friend has worked in conjunction with the taxi and private hire vehicle sector in preparing this Bill, because whether we like it or not, many of those drivers have had a very difficult time during the crisis, and some have gone out of business in my area on the Welsh borders. It is a very important part of his approach that he sees his work as a partnership with them. Yes, we have to ask more of them in this respect, but we also have to bear it in mind that those drivers' businesses can sometimes be quite fragile.

My second point has been touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt). I, too, have had experience of this issue, in my case as a councillor for 11 years before becoming a Member of Parliament, and formerly as a member of the licensing committee of Powys County Council. That experience strengthens my resolve to back this Bill. The point that my hon. Friend made about how disabled people make twice as many journeys by taxi and private hire vehicles as others is absolutely crucial to this argument. As the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) said, 60% of disabled people do not have a car in their household. He also made a very valid point about access to public transport, which is a concomitant factor in what we are talking about. That is an area that I feel very strongly about, and I have campaigned successfully to bring forward consideration of step-free access at Ruabon station in my constituency of Clwyd South, which is a critical part of enabling disabled people to travel like everybody else can. Without step-free access at the station, it is impossible for disabled people to use it, and Ruabon station is an important terminus within my constituency, so the hon. Gentleman's point was very well made.

My final point is to welcome the common-sense approach taken by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam, given what he was saying about an open conversation between passenger and driver and about the importance of training, which—as I understand it—is not part of this Bill but is another important feature of this issue. In a sense, that goes back to what I was saying earlier: the premises and requirements of this Bill are absolutely vital, such as “no extra charge” and “you cannot refuse transport”, but I like the way in which my right hon. and learned Friend's approach is to use common sense as much as the rule of law to ensure that this change happens.

I will finish by reiterating my comments about the covid crisis. It has been remarkable—many other Members present will have had the same experience—how often taxis and private hire vehicles have been the lifeline for so many people, not only disabled people but many other vulnerable people, during the course of the covid crisis, whether to take them to medical appointments or to any other meetings or to collect prescriptions. I therefore commend this Bill to the House, with a particular emphasis on how that sector has done so much for our community, but can do a great deal more in future.

1.19 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) has made a really important point about the importance of this sector to our community, and how much we have relied on it recently. That is why this Bill is so important, and I welcome it and congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) on introducing it. This sector is important to our communities, but of course, it is a sad reality that some taxi drivers do discriminate against disabled people, just as people do up and down society. That is not an indictment of just that small number who do; it is a reflection of a society that still has a long way to go before we can claim to have equality for everyone, regardless of who they are and the challenges they face in life. There are cases of taxi drivers refusing to pick up people with disabilities at all. Research by the University of Nottingham found that wheelchair users are often told by taxi operators that no accessible taxis are available, and that in many instances taxi companies outwardly refuse to take people in powered wheelchairs. When I was doing my research for this speech, I came across one person who told the story in an interview of how five different taxi drivers refused to take her home one night when her powered wheelchair was just about to give up and die. In 2014, the boss of one regional taxi company decided to stop transporting disabled passengers altogether on what he called “economic grounds”. If these people do get picked up, they often face higher fares than other passengers.

So this Bill is important because it is an important cog in our overall strategy to make all forms of transport more inclusive. An inclusive transport system should enable all of us to access transport wherever we like, without extra cost and with confidence, regardless of our personal characteristics. The reality is, however, that for the one in five people in the UK who are disabled, it is just not as easy as it should be. Disabled people are forced to travel less, on average, than non-disabled people simply because of the barriers they encounter. Adults with disabilities make 39% fewer trips than people without disability challenges. Research shows that 63% of these trips are made by car, not only making it more expensive for them but meaning that it has consequences for the environment and what we are trying to achieve in a transport strategy. Setting aside the moral obligation to correct a system that fails to recognise universal transport equality, there is an obvious economic reason for passing this Bill and making it part of our long-term strategy to create an inclusive transport system in this country.

The barriers to transport faced by people with disabilities prevents many from fulfilling their potential at work, which is devastating for them and a huge loss for UK plc. In 2020-21, 52.3% of disabled people were in employment, whereas the employment rate for people who are not disabled was 81.1%, down from 82.2%. The unemployment rate for disabled people was 8.4% in October to December 2020, which was up from 6.9% a year previously. Disabled people have an employment rate that is 28 percentage points lower than that of people who are not disabled, and this is referred to as the “disability employment gap”. The impact of the pandemic has exacerbated existing problems. Over the past year the proportion of disabled people in employment

has gone down. The proportion of disabled people who are either unemployed or economically inactive has risen. People who are not disabled have also seen an increase in the proportion of that, but it is smaller and we need to be very aware of that. The Bill will not solve all those problems, but it will contribute to the long-term solutions that the Government are committed to, in order to make transport accessible, more affordable and readily available for people with disabilities.

The other major economic benefit of establishing greater transport inclusivity is the net gain that UK plc will create for itself by unleashing more of the UK's spending power. As we transition away from the pandemic, we will need to make sure that the boats rise equally for everybody and that includes—more importantly than many others—disabled people in this country. I commend my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam because this is a major contribution to that effort, and I am proud and pleased to support the Bill.

1.24 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) for securing this important debate. I think this debate ties in nicely with the one we had earlier about careers advice and improving the prospects of all of our population to make sure that they make the best use of their full potential.

As my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), has said, the statistics show that disabled people are twice as likely to make journeys by taxis and private hire vehicles as non-disabled people, so it is really important to ensure that disabled people do not experience discrimination when booking, taking or paying for journeys. If anything we should proactively ensure—and I think the Bill does this—that there are no barriers to entry so that those who are less able can make the best and the most of our society.

As the House will know, my constituency of South West Hertfordshire is a lovely rural constituency, and we are therefore reliant on private hire vehicles or personal transport. While we have some great transport links north to south via both train and tube, our connectivity via buses—this is one of my local campaign items—does need improving. I look forward to working with the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), whom I welcome to her place, in ensuring that South West Hertfordshire levels up, like the rest of the country, so that people can do the right thing by not necessarily jumping in their private car but using public transport where appropriate to help improve the environment.

On this point, I commend the excellent work of my own local cab company, John's Taxis, which I use frequently to commute in to the Chamber. I know from first-hand experience how customer-focused it is in ensuring that all of its consumers do use and are able to use its vehicles so that they can get around. Reference was made earlier to the importance of this particular sector during the global pandemic, and while most people had to isolate, just the ability to get out and about when

needed was quite critical in some instances, and it is definitely worth applauding the efforts of those in this sector.

Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that there are already legal rights in place preventing drivers from denying lifts to wheelchair users and assistance dog owners. The Bill is correct in drawing attention to the need to make sure that the same rights are extended to people with walking frames or sensory, communication and cognitive impairments, who often face being overcharged for their journeys, denied vital assistance or actually denied carriage altogether. I am aware that my Government are looking to create an inclusive transport network by 2030, and I think the Bill works hand in glove in ensuring that.

Finally, I want to make sure that we commit all drivers to accept passengers with disabilities, refrain from charging them extra and provide them with appropriate assistance. By doing this, we will create a fairer society and one that empowers everyone, regardless of their ability.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): My congratulations to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) on the Bill, of which I am hugely supportive.

Listening to my hon. Friend talking about society and creating a fairer society, it struck me that some of the taxi firms in my constituency of South Ribble are really only still here thanks to the Government's support during the pandemic. We valued them and invested in them to make sure that they came out on the other side of the global health crisis, and this Bill sits within that same bucket, with us all working together to look after the most vulnerable in society. Does he agree?

Mr Mohindra: I absolutely agree with what my hon. Friend has said. This House has rightly applauded those who have stepped up to the plate in the last two years during this global pandemic, and I would suggest that the majority of those in this particular sector have done so. Their ability to adapt their vehicles to ensure that consumers had the confidence to use them as methods of transport was really important. I know from my own experience how busy my local taxi company is. The fact that the drivers are on first-name terms with most of their customers shows that, in their own small way, they are part of the community that they are helping with their ability to transport people around.

Simon Baynes: I want to go back to my hon. Friend's comment about the importance of taxi and private hire vehicles in his area, given the rurality of his constituency. This point has perhaps not been drawn out enough in the discussion. Can he say a bit more about the importance of this Bill and of taxis and private hire vehicles in the rural areas of his constituency?

Mr Mohindra: I am always happy to share the joys of my constituency with the House, and I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the ability to do so.

My constituency is approximately 80% green belt. I have some very large and beautiful villages and small towns. People who live in those urban conurbations have some wonderful shops, restaurants and local community spaces to visit, but there are those who live a little further out, or who have difficulty moving—whether

[Mr Mohindra]

that is to do with walking unaided or requiring the use of buses or public hire vehicles. I do not represent a flat constituency. Personally, I live fairly high up on a small hill. It is nice and easy on the way down to the restaurants and to the high street, but I do struggle on the way back. Even at my youthful age, my old knee starts to creak occasionally. I have not yet called on my local taxi company to get me home. That has not been required yet. I can foresee that, sometime in the future, I will need to do so.

I am not blessed locally with the exhaustive public transport network that one sees in London, where there are regular buses, both at peak and off-peak times. I am not able to get a bus to my local train station and from the station to home in the evenings, but I am able to in the mornings. That is something that we need to think about as a society. It may not be commercially viable for bus companies to offer services at peak or off-peak times, but the community will adapt and use them. I know that this is a conversation that the Department of Transport and the Minister will engage with to make sure that we are incentivising people to do the right thing. I know from my personal experience of being in this place that the Government are very much motivated to create the framework so that doing the right thing brings rewards, rather being a barrier from the rhetoric to legislation.

Going back to the Bill, I applaud my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam for his common-sense approach. This place benefits from the evolution of laws. I know that this particular Bill will be a positive addition to what is already on the statute book. I am sure that we will revisit this particular topic to ensure that all people in society, whether able-bodied or not, are able to do what each and every other person can do. I look forward to further discussions in this debate.

1.33 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I welcome this Bill, which has been brought forward by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright).

The Bill is to make provision relating to the carrying of disabled persons by taxis and private hire vehicles and would improve access to private transport for disabled people. It will amend sections of the Equality Act 2010 relating to the carriage of disabled people by taxi and private hire vehicles. It aims to address inconsistencies within current legislation and expand the protections currently afforded to wheelchair and assistance dog users to all disabled people, regardless of the vehicle in which they travel.

The Bill will oblige taxi and PHV drivers to accept passengers with a wide range of disabilities who could reasonably travel in that vehicle and stop them from charging extra, or failing to provide reasonable assistance without good reason not to do so. Drivers must make every effort to ensure that the disabled passenger feels comfortable and safe while travelling. This will be beneficial not only to service users but to the wider industry. The Bill will ensure that the hard-working, honest and compassionate taxi and private hire vehicle drivers do not have their reputations tarnished by the small number

who do not respect their role as professional drivers. That terminology was used by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) in his Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Bill.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): My hon. Friend has just acknowledged that the vast majority of taxi drivers and private hire operators are complying and wanting to do the best thing, and I think we would all acknowledge the fantastic support that they provided during the pandemic, for instance. However, they need to be helped to understand what extra facilities they need to provide. Does she agree that the current shortages of taxis and private hire vehicles up and down the country must not be exacerbated by the imposition of onerous requirements? The requirements must be proportionate and we must encourage more people to be disability aware.

Sally-Ann Hart: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. The Bill does not request every taxi or private hire vehicle driver to make provision for wheelchair access or other such access for disabled users. It contains measures on those people who do provide such access and are known to do so. That is the important thing. I agree with my hon. Friend: I have some excellent taxi and private hire vehicle drivers in my constituency. I want to highlight in particular all the work undertaken by Chris Vale and his team, including voluntary work, during the lockdowns to help our local communities with food parcels and so forth.

Taxis and wheelchair-accessible private hire vehicles are a vital source of transport for many mobility-impaired and other disabled people, in both urban and rural areas. Disabled people make twice as many journeys in taxis and private hire vehicles each year as non-disabled people, but, as we have heard today, many continue to report discriminatory behaviour on the part of drivers, including outright refusal of service, overcharging, and a failure to provide assistance to enable them to board and travel in reasonable comfort and safety.

Although the Equality Act 2010 provides disabled people with some protection, it applies inconsistently and only with respect to certain disabilities. Currently, in some areas—mainly larger cities—licensed taxis have to be wheelchair accessible. In London, for example, all black cabs are wheelchair accessible. Section 165 of the Equality Act obliges drivers of wheelchair taxis and private hire vehicles to carry wheelchair users, and to provide assistance without an additional charge. Drivers of taxis and designated wheelchair-accessible private hire vehicles have various legal duties; non-compliant drivers are liable to prosecution and fines of up to £1,000, and the driver's fitness to continue to hold a licence may be reviewed.

There are legal rights for wheelchair users and owners of assistance dogs to use taxis and private hire vehicles. As others have pointed out, many drivers are extremely helpful, but we hear too many stories of disabled people being denied transport or assistance, or being charged extra for their journeys. The Government have said that they support the creation of an inclusive transport network by 2030, enabling disabled people to travel to work or at their leisure easily, confidently, and without additional cost.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Taxi drivers in Stroud sit outside my office, and they are always quick with a wave and a smile. I do not think they realise how much that makes my day.

Taxi drivers across the Stroud district are genuinely valued, needed and relied on by many people. We have to look at the many barriers that cause problems for them and their customers. Does my hon. Friend agree that, when councils think about closing roads and pedestrianising areas, they should think a little more carefully about the customers who need these taxi services? As we have heard, disabled passengers are prevented from travelling or are having to pay increased fares if councils do not think things through.

Sally-Ann Hart: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. When councils are pedestrianising roads, creating shared spaces or whatever else, we should urge them to ensure measures and safeguards are put in place for taxis and private hire vehicles to access those pedestrianised places so that disabled people are not put at risk.

An inclusive transport network is part of the Government's broader effort to close the 30% employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people of working age. The Government's existing inclusive transport strategy highlights the inconsistent application of the Equality Act in the duty placed on taxi and PHV drivers, and the Government's 2021 national disability strategy commits to introducing legislation to strengthen the law on the carriage of disabled people in taxis and private hire vehicles to ensure both protection from overcharging and the provision of appropriate assistance, regardless of the service they choose to use.

This national disability strategy includes a host of initiatives to provide improvements for disabled passengers, such as an accessibility audit for all railway stations, clearer audible and visual announcements on buses, the introduction of legislation for taxis and private hire vehicles, and £1 million to improve access to seaports. I understand the Government partnered with Scope to develop a charter for disabled passengers that will help boost confidence across our road and rail networks, and to produce a practical guide that pulls together disabled passengers' rights so they understand how they can get from A to B with the dignity and ease they deserve.

Scope research indicates that passengers often encounter a vast number of documents concerning their rights, and these documents can be unclear. Working on this feedback, the charter will bring together existing information for passengers, focusing it into one coherent and easy-to-use format. Once the disabled passengers' charter is complete, it will be published online to create an all-inclusive facility for passenger rights and complaints procedures. I presume it will include rights in relation to taxis and private hire vehicles.

Taxis and private hire vehicles, along with public transport, should be accessible for everyone, and the charter will help disabled passengers to better understand their rights and the standards they should expect across the network, and how to hold providers to account when their travel goes wrong.

Section 167 of the Equality Act provides only that local licensing authorities may "maintain a list" of wheelchair-accessible taxis and PHVs. However, only

70% of local licensing authorities have done so. This means that drivers in areas without a list have been able to continue discriminating against disabled passengers even if their vehicle is technically wheelchair accessible. To address this, the Bill will require local licensing authorities to maintain and publish such a list, and proposed new section 167A creates new offences where a private hire vehicle operator fails or refuses to accept a booking from a disabled person because of their disability, or where they charge extra for fulfilling any of the disability-related duties specified in the Equality Act.

Katherine Fletcher: I thank my—[*Interruption.*] Oh, I have just stabbed myself with my glasses. Another winning contribution to *Hansard*.

My hon. Friend is making a much more erudite and technical examination of the legislation than I am capable of producing now. It occurred to me how important it is to personalise the Bill for the individuals involved. A good friend of mine, who had the unfortunate duty of teaching me how to snowboard, had an unfortunate incident and ended up on the British Paralympian sit ski team. Her freedom is her fabulous hand-driven car. If that car is in for a service, however, a refusal from a taxi firm to accommodate her and the needs of her two young children can put her in a pickle, even though she has competed for the country. My hon. Friend is being much cleverer than I am, but does she agree that although the Bill can sound dry and technical, the technical is important for valued people such as my pal?

Sally-Ann Hart: My hon. Friend raises a valid point. I am talking about the legal technicalities, but essentially the Bill is about people who are vulnerable and in need, and about taxis and private hire vehicles being compassionate and providing them with the right services. She is right that it is about people—what is politics about if not people?

The Government are committed to transforming the transport network, including for taxis and private hire vehicles, to make it more inclusive and to bring in easier travel for disabled people. The first evaluation report of progress against their inclusive transport strategy was published recently, on 10 January, and it incorporates evidence provided by disabled people on their transport experiences. That important report will help to put future changes in place to create a fairer system for everyone. That is why the Bill, brought forward by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam, deserves our wholehearted support.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Chris Loder. [HON MEMBERS: "Shaun Bailey."] Oh, I do beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon. Now that he has taken his mask off, I can see who he is. I was incredibly confused because the other hon. Gentleman, who I mentioned, had asked to speak but appears not to be here, whereas the hon. Gentleman who does wish to speak had not given me notice, but he does not have to. He is more than welcome to speak now.

1.47 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. That is certainly an interesting way to start my contribution. I thank my right hon. and learned Friend

[Shaun Bailey]

the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) for bringing forward the Bill. He has used his skillset to bring real change to people's lives.

Over the last 18 months, we have seen the regulatory landscape of taxis and private hire vehicles dealt with considerably in the framework of a private Member's Bill. In the previous Session, we saw the fantastic work of my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) to ensure that we make the regime more robust. That is important because we are unfortunately still dealing with a regulatory framework that is somewhat patchwork, and this Bill goes some way to tightening that up.

To reflect on the comments of the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), he is absolutely right—I do not often agree with the Opposition Front-Bench team and I will try not to make a habit of it—that the framework is a patchwork and based on localised enforcement. That is not a bad thing, but there has to be consistency. He talked about the Labour party's focus on a more consistent regulatory model, which is definitely worth deliberation and interest. I am sure that the Minister was listening to that intently and that her ears were wide open to that.

I was struck by the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), who gave us the figures on the employment deficit and employment gap, which really highlighted the issue. The use of private hire vehicles and taxis for employment is important and something that I have seen in my constituency. When she highlighted those figures, I was particularly struck by the 52.3% versus the, I believe, 88%. That gap clearly demonstrates the importance of what we are trying to deal with in the Bill: it is about ensuring that people who want to contribute have equal opportunities and that, in the broader landscape, people with impairments and disabilities can access exactly the same opportunities as everyone else. We should get to a point in our society where those things should not matter and people should be able to contribute in any way they wish, regardless of any physical impairments or physical differences.

Hon. Members may believe that that is somewhat of an extrapolation, but it really is not, because the freedom to travel, the freedom to move and the freedom for someone to know that they can access services is fundamental to being a human being. I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam is aware of this, but his Bill is so important because through it he is ensuring those fundamental freedoms that allow people to get on with their lives and contribute. I cannot commend him enough for that.

Let us think about the numbers that we are dealing with: 22% of our population have reported some sort of disability or impairment. We can think about the 1.2 million people with mobility issues as a figure, but that is someone's parent, someone's grandmother and someone's relative. I read that 46% of people of state pension age reported a mobility issue of some form or another. Those people have not necessarily always had an issue; rather, because, unfortunately of the way that age and time progress—it hits us all at some point—they need extra support. It is therefore imperative that we ensure that everyone can continue to lead fulfilled lives.

We have heard a lot about issues in rural areas and the pressures on public transport. There is a broader debate about public transport that I will not get into today, even though I take on board the comments raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Again, I agree with the hon. Member for Slough—I am agreeing with him a lot today—who articulated well the real pressures that people face. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to be in a listening mood. It is really important that we come to the table for such discussions with an open mind, because we know that the pressures are there. The fact is, we have a growing population that will continue to expand, and we also have an ever-expanding population who are reliant on these resources. We therefore need a long-term sustainable strategy—we hear those words all the time, but I do not know whether anyone has defined what that looks like—that understands and accepts that. Of course, the Bill is part of the patchwork of looking at how we reform this space to ensure that it is as accessible as it needs to be for everyone.

Jane Hunt: My hon. Friend is making a good argument. As we are talking about the number of people with disabilities who need access to transport, does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill is formalising that patchwork in a much better format, which will give them confidence that they can use this form of transport and, in fact, gradually increase the market for taxi and private hire vehicle drivers?

Shaun Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for that interesting point. I may take it on a tangent and not do it justice, but I think she is right and that the Bill presents an opportunity. My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) made a fantastic contribution—it was so erudite and so analytical; she is a hard act to follow.

My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) is right, because the Bill helps to bring about consistency. I was shocked to read that only about 30% of licensing authorities having retained lists of available private hire vehicles that were accessible, which means that access to information is not consistent across the board. My interpretation—my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam might correct me—is that the Bill brings that together, enabling consistency in accessing and obtaining information. I think that my hon. Friend was trying to drill into partnership working. There is always an opportunity for that. It is really important for local licensing authorities and local authorities more broadly to encourage partnership working. We have seen locally, in my community, that when the local licensing authority and the industry are at loggerheads, it is not consistent. It was Conservative councillors in my area getting those people around the table with the leadership that enabled them to have a productive conversation.

That is really important, and hon. Members across the Chamber have mentioned the need for a proper and effective dialogue with the industry. We are moving so far forward in this technological age that we should be able to create a fleet that is compatible and can meet people's needs. The Bill rightly makes contingencies for a situation where it may not be possible, for example, to carry a mobile wheelchair. That should not necessarily be an issue in future if we can get the partnership with industry and join together the different stakeholders to

ensure that there is real technological development in how we move the fleet forward and in the vehicles that are being used. This is a really good example of how the private sector, innovation and the fantastic work that this country is doing on R&D can come together so that the Bill's aim of ensuring broader access can be realised.

I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough raises a very valuable point—I appreciate that I have gone somewhat around the houses in responding to her but it would not be a Friday if someone did not do that at some point. The Minister, as one of the key stakeholders, will also need to be in the room to ensure that she can be part of those conversations on behalf of Her Majesty's Government.

The Bill is a really important part of the fundamental framework of opportunity. In preparing for this debate, I thought about the needs of people who are close to me, such as my grandmother, who is 92 and has mobility issues. I thought about when she would need access to a private hire vehicle to do what she needs to do. Luckily, she is still quite independent but she is getting to the point where she would need to do that and this Bill would mean that she can. Her local licensing authority is good. It retains those lists and does what it needs to do. However, this is personal for me because I think of her as a beneficiary of the aims of my right hon. and learned Friend's Bill.

I apologise for somewhat jumping around from point to point, Madam Deputy Speaker, but before I forget, I want to mention exemption certificates. As many have said, this is a really pragmatic and important approach. We have to recognise that it will not be entirely practical at the moment for private hire vehicles to be in a position where they may be able to follow through on this. We need to prepare contingencies for cases where that might not happen. We also do not want to cut off the industry. We do not want to create a friction that may lead the industry to say, "We don't want to bother with this engagement," so it is absolutely right to have the exemption.

Jeremy Wright: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for all his support. I reassure him that there is nothing wrong with agreeing with the Opposition spokesman when he is right. My hon. Friend should also be reassured that when he does that, it will probably be attributed to a completely different Member of this House and people will not have a problem. On the point that he is making, does he accept that the Bill seeks to give protections to those he is worried about in two ways? First, it requires of drivers only those things that are reasonable. Secondly, as he said, exemption certificates will still be available for those who, on medical grounds or for other reasons, are unable to carry out some of the duties that the Bill specifies.

Shaun Bailey: My right hon. and learned Friend articulates that in a way that I could never dream to. He is absolutely right and I completely accept every point that he makes. That is why I wholeheartedly support the exemption regime in the Bill. When I scrutinise legislation, I am very conscious of the unintended consequences, as I am sure he is as a former Attorney General. This is actually quite an ingenious way to get around that, because there is always a risk of unintended consequences and locking people out. I can assure him that he has my wholehearted support on that part of the Bill.

I will bring my comments to a close, even though I am sure that the House would love to hear me continue to opine on the private hire sector. I wholeheartedly support the Bill, which is long overdue and is needed. It brings together so many different strands of the regulatory framework and system, in which I think we are finally starting to see movement. It mitigates unintended consequences, and ultimately it ensures that things we talk about in this House, such as opportunity, access to opportunities, and ensuring that we level the playing field, are truly there. I look forward to the Bill's passage through its remaining stages in this House.

2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Wendy Morton): I wholeheartedly congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) on his success in the private Member's Bill ballot, on bringing attention to the important issue of ending discrimination against disabled people who want to use taxis and private hire vehicles, and on addressing the barriers they face when using those services. I am pleased to confirm that the Bill has the full support of the Government. We support the proposed improvements to the Equality Act 2010 by addressing the inconsistencies in provision, and expanding protections for disabled passengers. Expanding the protections currently afforded to wheelchair and assistance dog users to all disabled people, regardless of their disability or impairment, and regardless of the type of taxi or private hire vehicle in which they travel, is an important step towards our vision of a fully inclusive transport network and building back fairer.

With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will ask my hon. and right hon. Friends to consider that more than 14 million people in the UK—about 22% of the population—report having a disability. That is according to the Scope family resources survey of 2019-20. That includes 19% of working-age adults. Since disabled people make twice as many journeys by taxi and private hire vehicle as non-disabled people, it is clear just how important such services are. By ensuring protection from overcharging, and the provision of appropriate assistance for all disabled passengers, the Bill would take us one step closer to fulfilling the Government's ambition for disabled people to have the same access to transport as everyone else.

As my hon. and right hon. Friends may be aware, that ambition is clearly set out in our 2018 inclusive transport strategy, which supports the Government's broader efforts to close the 30% employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people, by enabling disabled people to travel to work or for leisure easily, confidently, and at no additional cost. I also draw the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends to the Government's landmark 2021 national disability strategy, which demonstrates the Government's commitment to ending discrimination against disabled people through positive changes, helping to remove barriers, improving outcomes and opportunities for disabled people, as well as opening up broader economic benefits from disabled people being able to participate fully as they would wish.

I am pleased that the specific proposals in the Bill have been informed by engagement with representatives from the taxi and private hire vehicle sectors, local licensing authorities, and disabled people's organisations.

[Wendy Morton]

Proposed new section 164A would extend existing protections to all disabled passengers in all types of taxi and private hire vehicle. The Equality Act 2010 currently, and rightly, places duties on drivers of designated wheelchair-accessible taxis and private hire vehicles to carry a wheelchair user, and to do so at no additional charge. However, not all wheelchair users need or wish to remain in their wheelchair while travelling in a taxi or private hire vehicle. In practice, some wheelchair users can travel in a non-wheelchair accessible vehicle by storing their wheelchair or mobility aid in the back of the vehicle. Current legislation unnecessarily excludes such wheelchair users from the protections and provisions of assistance when using a non-designated taxi or private hire vehicle, and I am pleased that the Bill would correct that.

Current legislation also excludes all other disabled passengers who do not use a wheelchair from any protection when travelling in any taxi or private hire vehicle. As my hon. and right hon. Friends will be aware, a huge range of impairments, beyond mobility issues, may result in a person using a wheelchair. So it is right that the Bill would create a new duty to ensure that taxi and private hire vehicle drivers do not refuse carriage to any disabled person who could reasonably travel in their vehicle, making every effort to ensure that the disabled passenger is comfortable and safe while travelling and not charging them any extra for doing so.

Proposed new section 165A concerns identifying and finding the vehicle. I ask Members to imagine being alone, perhaps in an unfamiliar place, waiting for a taxi that they cannot see. How would they know where their pre-booked taxi was? How would they know if the rumble of the engine from the stationary car nearby is a licensed vehicle that will safely take them to their destination? That is reality for some disabled people, who end up calling operators to inquire about the whereabouts of their taxi that should have arrived some time ago, or being charged a fee for not presenting themselves when the vehicle arrived. No more. Under the Bill, disabled people will no longer be at a disadvantage when identifying a booked taxi or private hire vehicle as drivers will be required to assist all disabled passengers who need help identifying and finding their booked vehicle at no extra charge. Crucially, that will give disabled passengers the confidence that they will have the information they need to travel. As is reasonable, the driver must be made aware before the start of the journey that the passenger requires assistance to identify or find the vehicle.

Section 167 is on licensing authorities' lists of designated wheelchair-accessible taxis and PHVs. As we have heard, local licensing authorities are currently empowered but not required to maintain a list of designated wheelchair-accessible taxis and private hire vehicles, and I am pleased that 70% in England have chosen to do so. However, that means that almost a third of local licensing authorities are yet to begin to maintain a list of wheelchair-accessible taxis and private hire vehicles, meaning that wheelchair users in those areas have not benefited from those protections against discrimination otherwise provided under the Equality Act 2010. It is only by appearing on such a list that a taxi or PHV becomes designated as a wheelchair-accessible vehicle, with drivers of those designated vehicles required to fulfil the existing duties

in section 165—to accept the carriage of wheelchair users, to provide assistance and to refrain from charging extra. Thanks to the provisions in the Bill, in future the wheelchair-accessible designation will be relevant only with respect to passengers who need to travel while seated in a wheelchair. Nevertheless, it cannot be right for such access to depend on the local policies of individual licensing authorities, and the Bill will ensure that every authority must maintain such a list.

On proposed new section 167A, section 170 of the Equality Act 2010 places a duty on operators of private hire vehicle services not to refuse a booking because a passenger will be accompanied by an assistance dog, but no equivalent provision exists to protect wheelchair users or people with other disabilities. The Bill would add a new offence for private hire vehicle operators to fail or refuse to accept a booking from any disabled person because of their disability or to charge extra for fulfilling any of the disability-related duties in the relevant sections of the Equality Act.

Of course we must also consider the needs of the taxi and PHV drivers, who work so hard to provide such a vital service, and I am satisfied that the Bill provides appropriate and sufficient defences to ensure that the duties placed on drivers are reasonable. Defences are in place for cases where a driver could not reasonably have known that a passenger was disabled or required mobility assistance or could not reasonably or safely have carried the passenger, wheelchair or mobility aids. Additionally, the Bill allows medical exemptions from the provision of mobility assistance for drivers who are themselves disabled, as appropriate—a point hon. Members raised earlier. However, it is right that the Bill would remove any exemptions from the broader duties to carry disabled passengers without charging extra for any assistance the driver provides. That is an important improvement to the existing provisions.

Ultimately, good transport should work for everyone. That is the Government's aspiration, and I am sure that all Members present today will support it. To support the sector, in 2020 the Government published the REAL disability equality training programme to improve the transport sector's confidence and skills in delivering inclusive journeys for disabled passengers.

I once again thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam for his hard work on this important Bill, which the Government firmly believe will make a real difference to disabled people, their comfort and their safety when travelling by taxi or private hire vehicle—in some cases, perhaps even affording disabled passengers the ability and confidence to use services that they would not have previously considered. The Bill represents an important step towards the fully inclusive transport network that the Government and I—and, I am sure, all Members across the House—want to see. We support the Bill, and we wish it well in Committee and as it travels through the House. I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend.

2.10 pm

Jeremy Wright: With the leave of the House, I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, including my hon. Friend the Minister, for what they have said. I thank the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for what he has said, and for his support. I look forward to working with him as the Bill proceeds.

This Bill, as many of my hon. Friends have said, is not an attack on the very many good and decent drivers who do their best to help people with disabilities; instead, it is designed to make sure that that everyone with a disability, of whatever kind, receives the fair treatment that they are entitled to expect when they seek to travel in such vehicles. I hope that the unanimous support that the Bill has received so far augurs well for its future stages, when I look forward to discussing it further.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Prime Minister (Temporary Replacement) Bill

Second Reading

2.11 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a great pleasure to speak to this Bill. I can say at the start that the support from the Opposition is clear to see. There are no Liberal Democrats, no Scottish National party Members and only one Labour Member on the Back Benches. Clearly, they do not want the current Prime Minister to be replaced.

The Conservative Benches are, of course, full. We need to deal with this issue properly, and I am very pleased that we have here the excellent Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove). He seems to do many things for the Government, not least stopping small boats coming across the channel, and I thank him for being here today.

I suppose I am now speaking in support of Government policy, but I think we should formalise that policy. Let me explain briefly what the Bill does. If the Prime Minister—any Prime Minister—is incapacitated, temporarily or permanently, there needs to be a route to allow us to have a Prime Minister in charge immediately. That person must have all the powers of the Prime Minister and may be required to take exceptionally difficult decisions straight away.

Let me give hon. Members an example. Let us say that a bomb goes off in Cabinet, and the Prime Minister is incapacitated and a number of Cabinet Ministers are killed. At the same time, a civil aircraft has diverted from its route and is heading towards Buckingham Palace. Obviously, a decision has to be made immediately on what to do about that aircraft. Do we shoot it down, or not? The Defence Secretary says, “I need the Prime Minister’s approval before doing that.” There is no Prime Minister, so what happens? Does the Defence Secretary shoot the plane down on his own authority, or does he allow it to plough into Buckingham Palace? This is a real possibility.

It may be that a big argument goes on immediately afterwards. The Defence Secretary says, “I have the right to do this,” but somebody says, “You are not the Prime Minister.” The Cabinet Secretary stands up and says, “Well, I represent the constitution. I need to make the decision if there is not a Prime Minister.” The Prime Minister’s chief of staff stands up and says, “I know everything about the whole world.” What if there is a maniac as chief of staff in No. 10 who is completely off the rails—as people discover later? Let us say for a minute that this person is called Dom: would we want him to make that decision? He could make the case for why he should make it because there was no Prime Minister at the time. That is what my Bill seeks to make clear: who is in charge immediately at a moment of crisis.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I do not know whether my hon. Friend has been nightly watching the series “Designated Survivor” on Netflix, but in this country we have a Cabinet system, with collective

[Sally-Ann Hart]

responsibility, and our Prime Minister is first among equals, so we do not really need to have designated survivors. This country does not have a written constitution and it is right that we do not remove the flexibility in our system of Cabinet collective responsibility.

Mr Bone: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. That line has been argued forever. I am not in the position to go back and ask who would make the decision in the situation that I described, but if my hon. Friend wants to intervene to tell me, I would be most interested. She cannot, because it is impossible: there is no designated survivor, as she calls it. I am not talking about something that might not happen and I will later give a clear example of what happened, why there was a problem and the two reasons why there was a problem.

Let me turn to the Bill, which is very simple and has only two clauses, the first of which deals with the situation I have just been talking about and the second of which says the Bill applies to the whole United Kingdom. Nothing in my Bill would prevent Her Majesty from—[Interruption.] Did I hear the Chinese, who have got in again?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. If something has been heard—I did not hear it—can it be either repeated or ignored? Was something said?

Mr Bone: I think it was an electronic device heckling me and I cannot give way to an electronic device.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We will not be having that. Let us make sure that all electronic devices are disabled.

Mr Bone: Let me go back to where I was. The Bill has two clauses and one schedule. Clause 2 says the Bill applies to the whole United Kingdom, clause 1 deals with the detail and the schedule lists the order in which people would take over as Prime Minister. The list starts with the person who is designated Deputy Prime Minister, then goes to the person designated the First Secretary of State, to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and all the way down to paragraph 1(w), which lists the Chief Whip, and paragraph 1(x), which lists the Attorney General. Actually, I made a mistake with that list: I should obviously have put the Chief Whip last. Nevertheless, under the Bill someone would automatically be in charge as acting Prime Minister, with all the powers to decide what happened. In the case I was talking about, that person could say, “Yes, you shoot down that aeroplane,” or “No, you don’t,” so there would be no confusion.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I am quite interested in the point my hon. Friend has made about the Bill not interfering with the Queen’s prerogative; I suggest that it does. The First Minister serves at the Queen’s pleasure, not at the pleasure of anybody else within the constitution. The First Minister and the First Lord of the Treasury are appointed by Her Majesty; if we subvert that appointment, we subvert the Queen’s prerogative. I suggest that is a major flaw in my hon. Friend’s Bill.

Mr Bone: Which would my hon. Friend prefer: to wait for the Queen to make a decision about the next Prime Minister or to have the aeroplane crash into

Buckingham Palace first? There needs to be an instant decision-making process. In fact, if my hon. Friend looks at clause 1(1), it says,

“Nothing in this Act prevents Her Majesty appointing a Prime Minister.”

It goes on to say in clause 1(7)(b) that if Her Majesty appoints a Prime Minister, that removes whoever is Prime Minister at the time. It also says, of course, that when the existing Prime Minister recovers, they resume responsibility for being Prime Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Bill has been around for a while, and you may have heard me speak on it before. I think it was the Leader of the House of Commons who used to say, “This is absurd. It could never happen. There is always time to organise something.” The difference this time is that we have now had the terrible event that happened to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. When he was taken very seriously ill and rushed into hospital, I—like probably everyone in this House—was praying for his recovery, but clearly there was a period in which he was incapacitated. Who was in charge of the country at that time? There was a lot of uncertainty.

In the end, it was decided that the First Secretary of State was in charge. He carried out his duties ably, but nobody actually knew what his powers were. There could have been enormous arguments then: it could have been that the chief of staff to the Prime Minister said, “I’m the one who knows what the Prime Minister is thinking. I’m the one who should be making the decisions until the Prime Minister returns.” That is not an unreasonable argument, but it is wrong. The chief of staff has not been elected, and he does not have to face scrutiny in this Chamber. Therefore, I want certainty about who is in charge. This is partly a question of who is in charge, and partly a question of whether they would know what the Prime Minister wants to do.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): I am listening to the interesting point that my hon. Friend is making. It is a genuinely decent question, but I have slightly more faith in the British people than he does, or certainly in the British Government. The British people have decided through the Brexit debate that in the 21st century, with various threats, we are better off being a nimbler, smaller island nation and having much more flexibility. We do not have a written constitution that formalises us, and while it could sound a bit “barrow boy” or whatever, the lack of formal rules is one of the greatest assets that we have. I wonder whether my hon. Friend accepts that his proposed Bill maybe imposes rules where they need not be.

Mr Bone: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention, but I am disappointed that she is arguing against Government policy, because since the event that happened with the Prime Minister, the Government have institutionalised a list of who takes charge in a similar situation.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Bone: No, I will carry on. My hon. Friend will have his time in a minute.

The situation is twofold: one part is to know who is in charge, and the other is to know whether that person can carry out the wishes of the Prime Minister who is

incapacitated. The first point is made fairly clear by what happened to the Prime Minister when he was taken so seriously ill: it was decided that the First Secretary of State would be in charge. Members might say, “Hang on a minute, how do you know that the First Secretary of State is going to know what the Prime Minister thinks?” After all, he was thrown into the job.

I remember that first interview with the First Secretary of State. He did look a little bit like a rabbit in the headlights and unprepared. My Bill says that the Prime Minister can designate two people: a Deputy Prime Minister and a First Secretary of State. The First Secretary of State could be the Secretary of State for levelling up or whatever. It gives the Prime Minister the opportunity to name the two people who would take over and act on his behalf.

The second is a more difficult point, and is about having the knowledge of what the Prime Minister would do. May I give you an example from this week, Madam Deputy Speaker? At Prime Minister’s questions, I asked the Prime Minister whether he would attend today to support my Bill, which is lower down the list for debate today, that seeks to abolish the BBC licence fee. He said he would consider my points and I had expected to see him today to let us know his views. He may have let his views be known personally or through his Minister, but of course he has in a way—I know he has not been incapacitated—been removed from being able to come here and give us his views because he is self-isolating.

The point is that we do not know whether the Prime Minister would have supported my Bill, whether he agrees that the BBC is institutionally biased or that the BBC’s interview on the Radio 4 “Today” programme was completely biased. We do not know whether he thinks that taxpayers should fund the BBC, that it should be subscribed to or that there should be a licence. We just do not know, so it is exceptionally important that the person who takes over knows the thinking of the Prime Minister. I do not know if the Minister has had a message from the Prime Minister to say whether he supports the Bill. We will know when we come to consider it in a few minutes’ time.

It is, therefore, a two-pronged thing. It is about having the person designated, but also having that person prepared with the knowledge of what the Prime Minister thinks. We really want somebody who knows he is going to do the job and knows what the Prime Minister is thinking. It has to be an elected person. It could not, for instance, have been Dominic Cummings. It has to be somebody with the knowledge of that person, and that is why, if we have a designated person, they would have to be at all times in the Prime Minister’s confidence so that they could take over seamlessly if the Prime Minister was incapacitated.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Just so I am clear, is my hon. Friend expecting the person who takes over temporarily the responsibility of the Prime Minister to act as though they were the Prime Minister, so they are not thinking with their own brain but being a processor for whoever holds the office of Prime Minister at that moment?

Mr Bone: That is exactly my point. If we take the BBC Licence Fee (Abolition) Bill, for instance, I do not want the new Prime Minister to change the decision on

what the Prime Minister thought about the Bill. I understand my right hon. Friend is absolutely in favour of getting rid of the licence fee and I do not want someone else to come along saying that that is not the case when he is only there temporarily until the Prime Minister comes back. So it is not about a change of policy, it is not about establishing a new Prime Minister who is going to be there all the time; it is only about the period of incapacity. Actually, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have just remembered the blinking point that the only people not covering my BBC Licence Fee (Abolition) Bill are, of course, the BBC. That has little to do with this debate, but I wanted to get it in anyway.

In the past, the argument was always, “It would never happen.” Unfortunately, it did happen. I was so relieved that the Prime Minister recovered, but there was a problem. We did not know the powers that the First Secretary of State had. I know the Government now have a priority list and I am not sure but I think it is published, but I just want to turn it into statute law so we can be certain about what happens. I urge my colleagues on the Government Benches who are opposing the Bill to support Government policy, effectively, and put it into law.

I hope in the few minutes—oh, we do not have a few minutes left. I tell you what, Madam Deputy Speaker, why don’t we come back to this debate at a later stage? By that time, I hope the Prime Minister will be out of isolation and he can come to the House to give his views on the abolition of the BBC licence fee.

Chris Clarkson: I would hate to leave Members on a cliffhanger—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. A cliffhanger we have. [Laughter.]

2.30 pm

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

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 21 January.

Business without Debate

REGULATORY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 January.

FLOODING (PREVENTION AND INSURANCE) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 28 January.

PUBLIC BODIES (REPRESENTATION FROM DEVOLVED NATIONS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

BBC LICENCE FEE (ABOLITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 January.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION (ABOLITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 January.

GENERAL ELECTION (LEADERS' DEBATES) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 January.

HOSPITALS (PARKING CHARGES AND BUSINESS RATES) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 January.

ASYLUM SEEKERS (RETURN TO SAFE COUNTRIES) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 January.

MEDICAL CANNABIS (ACCESS) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (10 December 2021), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 28 January.

CLIMATE CHANGE BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 28 January.

BRITISH GOODS (PUBLIC SECTOR PURCHASING DUTY) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

CONSUMER PRICING BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

BROADCASTING (LISTED SPORTING EVENTS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

PUPPY IMPORT (PROHIBITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

EMPLOYMENT (APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

PUBLIC SECTOR WEBSITE IMPERSONATION BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

HUNTING TROPHY IMPORT (PROHIBITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is there any way in our procedure that we can make it clear to the public outside that this measure—the Government claim they want to see trophy hunting banned and the public overwhelmingly do—has once again, on the instruction of Ministers, been blocked by a Government Whip?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): There is indeed a way. We have run out of time for the Bill today. The right hon. Gentleman and anybody observing our proceedings will note that there were a great many Bills, and obviously there was just not time for all of them. However, the right hon. Gentleman has named Friday 18 March as the day on which the matter will come before the House again, and I hope that anyone watching our proceedings who is interested in this matter will tune in then and hear what he has to say.

ARMENIAN GENOCIDE (RECOGNITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

HOUSE OF LORDS (HEREDITARY PEERS) (ABOLITION OF BY-ELECTIONS) (NO. 2) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

PUBLIC ADVOCATE BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 28 January.

COPYRIGHT (RIGHTS AND REMUNERATION OF MUSICIANS, ETC.) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (3 December 2021), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 28 January.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION (OFFENCES) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 January.

BBC LICENCE FEE NON-PAYMENT (DECRIMINALISATION FOR OVER-75S) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 January.

GREEN BELT (PROTECTION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 January.

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 January.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have just gone through a long list of Bills and dates have been given. Many of the Bills are similar—for instance, the BBC Licence Fee (Abolition) Bill and the BBC Licence Fee Non-Payment (Decriminalisation for Over-75s) Bill. Is there a possibility in future that these Bills could be combined or grouped together so we could debate them together, which would speed things up, and we could actually get to the BBC Licence Fee (Abolition) Bill and to other Bills?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point, but I must say to him that if there were two Bills before the House at approximately the same time that had similar purposes and could be combined into one Bill, the way to do that would be at the outset, when advice could be given by the learned Clerks as to how to formulate a short title of a single Bill that would encapsulate all of the measures in both or all the Bills that the hon. Gentleman or any other hon. Member may have in mind. However, at this stage in the proceedings, when a Bill has started and is continuing its progress and another Bill is fairly similar, there is no reasonable way of combining them, except of course that, if they came into Committee, a Member could submit amendments to Bill No. 1 that would encapsulate Bill No. 2, if that was in order and they really were for the same or very similar purposes. I hope that that has helped the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Bone: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. That is really helpful. So, for instance, if I spoke to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), when my BBC Licence Fee (Abolition) Bill went into Committee, I could incorporate his Bill through amendments. Would that clash with the long title? I am not sure, but it sounds like a very good idea to speed things up.

Madam Deputy Speaker: If it clashed with the long title, an amendment would also have to be submitted to the long title. If it were considered to be in order according to “Erskine May”, which the learned Clerks upstairs are well capable of judging, then it would be quite possible to amend the long title, and thereby bring the Bills together. However, on the matter of timetabling, it would have no effect.

Private Rental Market

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

2.40 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I called for this debate, and was successful thanks to the Speaker's office, following the recent shocking treatment of a group of residents in my constituency by their landlord, which brought insecurities in the private rented sector into sharp focus. In November last year, I was contacted by several residents living in a block of flats in Hornsey and Wood Green. After their building was sold to a new landlord, they received either section 21 notices to evict them or section 13 notices saying that their rent was set to soar by an eye-watering 30% to 40%.

Those tenants included families who had lived there for decades and they were understandably devastated at the thought of losing their homes. Like me, they could not understand how an increase on that scale could ever be justified or how a landlord could kick out reliable long-standing tenants for no reason in the middle of a pandemic.

I am pleased to say that, following weeks of representations by my office to the new owners, the threat of adverse publicity in our local campaigning newspaper and the help of the charity Shelter and local Hornsey Labour councillors, I learned this week that the new owners had rescinded some of those notices and offered tenants new contracts on more favourable terms. Although that is welcome news for most residents, sadly, for some of them, the landlord's change of heart two months after the notices were dispatched has come much too late.

This example highlights the huge power imbalance between private landlords and their tenants, which is currently upheld by existing housing legislation. That is why I am urging the Government to end section 21 notices, as they committed in their 2019 general election manifesto. I am asking the Minister to provide an answer today on when the renters' reform Bill, promised in the Queen's Speech, will be introduced.

In that block of flats in my constituency, seven households were issued with section 21 notices, which enable private landlords to repossess their properties from assured shorthold tenants without having to establish fault on the part of the tenant. Such measures are sometimes informally referred to as no-fault evictions. Many of those householders have lived in their flats for several years, in some cases decades, and are raising their families there.

One family who were issued with a section 21 notice have been renting their flat since 1991. They raised their daughter there and, now in their 60s, cannot afford a mortgage, because in that period, as the Minister will understand, the average price of a property in a place such as Hornsey and Wood Green has sky-rocketed. After the family challenged their landlord over the notice, they were told that their only other option was to accept a 40% rent increase.

Another resident whose family were issued with a section 21 notice after living in their flat for five years explained that his family had been left in an extremely

difficult and precarious situation. To make matters worse, those notices were issued in mid-November, with section 21 notice recipients expected to find a new home and move over the Christmas period in the midst of a global pandemic. When challenged on that, the new managing agent for the block said that there was no good time to serve a section 21 notice. He is right, but there are some very bad times, and that was one of them.

Many other tenants in the blocks were issued with section 13 notices of rent rises of up to 40% with as little as four weeks' notice. One of those residents explained to me that when she moved into her flat as a single parent, she enjoyed the sense of community in the block, which is home to a number of families. The landlord's aggressive move to increase her rent by 30% to £2,000 per calendar month for a two-bedroom flat in Hornsey would have made it impossible for her to pay.

The only recourse available to those who receive section 13 notices is to refer them to a tribunal. However, this process can be lengthy, complex, time-consuming and a waste of public funds, particularly for those struggling to access expert advice. Moreover, there is nothing to stop landlords subsequently issuing a section 21 notice if the tribunal decision does not go in their favour. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, who has worked with tenants and landlords to develop a new and fairer tenancy model—the London model—has called on the Government to reform court processes to make it easier for renters to challenge rent increases and eviction notices. He wholeheartedly supports this Adjournment debate.

Particularly given the Tory household budget crisis, it is an injustice that any landlord should be able to behave in this way. When I contacted Shelter for advice, I was told there is nothing to prevent private owners deciding to take possession on a large scale like this, even during a global pandemic and on the eve of Christmas.

Living with that level of uncertainty can be detrimental to the wellbeing of our community. Shelter's survey of private renters in 2021 found that 39% said their housing problems or worries left them feeling stressed and anxious, and many parents have reported to Shelter that the insecurity of renting makes it harder for their children to settle. Living in homes on short, fixed-term contracts with the threat of eviction or a looming unaffordable rent hike makes planning for the future extremely difficult. Frequent moves are not only expensive but disruptive to employment and children's education.

Living in constant fear of eviction also makes renters less likely to report disrepair problems, which is an issue I see all too frequently in my constituency, where 17,000 households are privately renting. Shockingly, a quarter of privately rented homes do not meet the decent homes standard, with 14% having a category 1 hazard that poses a very significant safety concern.

Although there are some actions the local authority can take to ensure landlords address the most serious disrepair, Citizens Advice found that private renters who make a formal complaint to their local authority have a 46% chance of being served with an eviction notice within six months, which is a severe deterrent to reporting disrepair to the local authority.

Eleven million people, including 1 million children, are now living in rented accommodation. In the past this was just a short-term option before one purchased

a home or before one was able to get on a housing list. Now, with 11 million people living in privately rented accommodation in the UK, this has become an urgent issue. The number is expected to grow in the coming years, with 40% of London's households expected to be living in the private rented sector by 2025. This is no way for the city's inhabitants to live.

The last piece of comprehensive legislation affecting the private rented sector was introduced in 1988, when the number was far lower. With a growing number of people affected across the country, the Government need to act urgently. First, when will the renters' reform Bill be brought to the House? Secondly, when will the Government live up to their promise to build more genuinely affordable homes? By that I mean homes with rent at the level of council rents so that people can afford to save while renting and can get on to the housing ladder if they wish to do so later.

Everyone has the right to a safe and secure home. It is shameful that, three years after promising to end no-fault evictions, renters such as my constituents in Hornsey and Wood Green are still living with the fear of being made homeless by their landlord due to this Government's failure to act. I urge the Minister to address these concerns, which are shared by so many in my constituency, across London and across the UK—11 million people are affected in the UK.

2.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing this important debate on insecurity in the private rental market. In a country as great as ours, it should be a basic human right that people, regardless of whether they are home owners, leaseholders or tenants, feel safe and secure in their own home.

The hon. Lady touched on a number of issues that I am sure are familiar not just to me and my constituents but to Members and constituents across the country. As she rightly pointed out, the private rented sector is the second largest housing tenure in the country—11 million people are housed in that way. In fact, 19% of people in the country live in the private rented sector. It is also housing the most diverse range of people these days. People living in the private rented sector are often older now and families rather than single people.

Although it is the sector that continues to play a central role in providing housing across the country, it is the housing market that has undoubtedly left thousands of tenants feeling insecure and unprotected. However, this does not need to be the case and it should not be the case. We, the Government, want to shift the odds in favour of renters and deliver a better deal for them.

People across the country should be able to expect that, when they are signing up to a rental agreement, they will be protected from wrongdoing. There is still much to do for us to reach that point, but the action that we are taking will improve the lives of people right across the country.

As I stand here today, unfortunately, and as the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, millions of responsible tenants are living in homes in the knowledge that they could be uprooted at a moment's notice and with minimal

justification. That is not peace of mind; that is simply wrong. To give people the confidence they need to be able to plan for the future, we are stepping up with the biggest change in legislation for the private rented sector for a generation by abolishing no-fault evictions—section 21s as they are more formally known. This is the centrepiece of our plans to raise standards across the whole of the private rented sector and reflects our determination to drive out rogue and unscrupulous landlords. Our reforms will deliver a fairer, more effective rental market and, later this year, we will publish the White Paper that sets out the blueprint for the whole sector. I appreciate completely that the hon. Lady is very keen for us to progress, but it is important, given this once-in-a-generation change, that we make sure that we have consulted widely with people from across the sector to ensure that we get it right.

In the meantime, the hon. Lady can be assured that we are not resting on our laurels. We are engaging with the widest possible range of voices, including stakeholders and organisations from across the sector. As much as we sometimes like to pretend, politicians do not always have the answers. Hearing and listening to these views would not only ensure that the White Paper and future legislation actually address the challenges that exist, but help to create a system that works for everyone.

As part of a range of actions to address the urgent and pressing needs of the generational pandemic that has arrived on our shores, we acted to keep renters safe in their homes. We banned bailiff evictions, extended notice periods, and provided unprecedented financial support to people and businesses. These measures worked: fewer households were assessed as homeless; there are fewer rough sleepers today; and fewer possession claims are now being made in the courts. We will make sure that build back better is more than a slogan. As we recover from the pandemic, it is right that we do everything we can to improve the security of tenants in the private rented sector and learn the precious lessons from the interventions that we adopted to make sure that we deliver greater protection for tenants and empower them to hold their landlord to account.

The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of no-fault evictions. Currently, landlords can evict tenants with as little as two months' notice once their fixed-term contract has come to an end without even needing to give a reason. The practical implication of this unjust situation is that the tenant can find themselves living with the worry that they may be evicted at the click of a finger. Other tenants continue to endure poor standards for fear that they will be asked to leave if they complain about the problems in their home, as the hon. Lady pointed out. That is why the Government are committed to abolishing section 21 of the Housing Act 1988. No longer will tenants find that their landlord is evicting them on a whim with no reason given as to why they have to relocate their lives or disrupt their children's education. In the future, landlords will always have to provide a specific reason for ending a tenancy, such as breach of contract or waiting to sell the property. It will also help to end revenge evictions where landlords may evict tenants who rightly complain about poor standards, as raised by the hon. Lady. It will protect tenants from having to make frequent and short-notice moves, and will enable them to put down roots and plan for the future.

[Eddie Hughes]

In 2019, we consulted the public on our proposed reforms to the tenancy framework and how we should take it forward. About 20,000 people gave us their views, and we are listening. While we continue to drive forward work on sector reform, we also recognise that affordability concerns can cause insecurity for renters, and we are committed to tackling that.

It is unfortunate to hear of issues that constituents have raised about rent hikes. Under the existing legislative framework, private sector landlords can increase the rent in two main ways. First, during the fixed-term period any rental increases are set out in the tenancy agreement, allowing landlords and tenants to agree arrangements that suit their circumstances. Secondly, once the fixed-term has ended—and if the agreement transitions to a statutory periodic tenancy—a landlord is able to adjust the rent once a year under section 13 of the Housing Act 1988. The landlord must serve a notice to the tenant informing them of the proposed change. If the tenant does not agree with the landlord's intention, they can refer the matter to the property chamber of the first-tier tribunal for independent adjudication. The tribunal will consider the application and decide what the maximum rent of that property should be if let on the open market, considering, obviously, the conditions of the local housing market. Tenants may also have a rent review clause in their contract.

We are clear about the fact that it is for landlords and tenants to agree the amount of rent that should be charged at the outset of a tenancy, but the Government are keen to avoid any unintended negative consequences related to abolishing section 21. As part of that, we are determined that there should not be any mechanism for landlords to force a tenant to leave a property by including clauses in tenancy agreements which hike up the rent by excessive or unreasonable amounts just before the agreements are due to expire.

While three quarters of private renters found it easy to afford their rent, we understand that affordability may be an issue for some, and that they may require

additional support. For tenants who are unable to afford their rental payments, a range of support is available through the welfare system, alongside the unprecedented financial package helping renters to afford their housing costs during the pandemic. That has meant that, even given associated pressures of covid-19, the vast majority of renters—93%—are up to date with their rent. That shows that the comprehensive package of support provided by the Government is preventing widespread rent arrears as a result of covid-19.

I hope we can all recognise that the Government are steadfast in their commitment to building a private rented sector that works for everyone: a sector that introduces a better deal for renters, and improves the lives of people across the country. Ours is a Government who are pursuing reforms that will ensure that good landlords can flourish and continue to provide the homes that the country needs, but it is also a Government who are protecting tenants from sharp practice and removing criminal landlords from the sector, and are building back better from the pandemic. We are committed to rebalancing the relationship between tenants and landlords to deliver a fairer, more secure and more desirable private rented sector. While that will not happen overnight, it will happen. We get it: we understand the challenges that exist in the sector, and we are open to dealing with them. That is why it is so important that we continue to drive through our reforms to ensure that we deliver on our aims.

We are aware that we need the support of the entire private rented sector if we are to achieve these goals. It is in that spirit that I again thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate, and assure her that I intend to continue to drive through the Government's ambitious agenda of reform in the sector.

Question put and agreed to.

2.59 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 14 January 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley): This statement concerns the application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by NNB Generation Company (SZC) Limited for the construction and operation of the Sizewell C nuclear power station, with associated infrastructure near Leiston in Suffolk.

Under section 98(3) of the Planning Act 2008, the examining authority must submit its report to the Secretary of State by the end of the period of three months beginning with the deadline for completion of its examination of the application, or, if earlier, the end of the day on which it completes the examination, unless the Secretary of State sets a new deadline under section 98(4) of that Act. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it.

A request has been made to the Secretary of State by the planning inspectorate to extend the report writing stage of the examination by six working weeks, from 14 January 2022 to 25 February 2022. The reasons given for this request were that a significant number of change requests were submitted by the applicant during the pre-examination and examination stages of the planning process. These changes require significant additional consideration from the examining authority. The examining authority has also been affected by unexpected health issues which have impacted upon the reporting stage of the process.

Taking these reasons into account and, after careful consideration, the Secretary of State has decided to reset the statutory timescale for the report writing stage, extending the deadline for the examining authority to submit its report to the Secretary of State by six working weeks, from the original deadline of 14 January 2022 to 25 February 2022.

However, mindful of the need to avoid unnecessary delays to the development consent processes, the Secretary of State requests the examining authority make best efforts to complete its report as soon as is reasonably practicable within the extended period.

The decision to set the new deadline for the report writing stage for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS538]

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Friday 14 January 2022

Col. No.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL

STRATEGY 29WS

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects..... 29WS

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