

**Friday
25 February 2022**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Friday 25 February 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House divided: Ayes 0, Noes 48.

Division No. 193]

[9.34 am

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Claire Coutinho and
James Daly**

NOES

Aiken, Nickie
Badenoch, Kemi
Bhatti, Saqib
Bone, Mr Peter
Browne, Anthony
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Caulfield, Maria
Chope, Sir Christopher
Davison, Dehenna
Debbonaire, Thangam
Evans, Dr Luke
Ferrier, Margaret
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hayes, Helen
Heapey, James
Henry, Darren
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Rachel
Huddleston, Nigel
Jenkin, Sir Bernard

Jenkyns, Andrea
Kane, Mike
Kruger, Danny
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Mann, Scott
McMorrin, Anna
Milling, rh Amanda
Mishra, Navendu
Moore, Robbie
Morton, Wendy
Norris, Alex
Opperman, Guy
Pow, Rebecca
Pursglove, Tom
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Smith, Greg
Stewart, Iain
Tami, rh Mark
Twist, Liz
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:

**Gareth Johnson and
Mrs Heather Wheeler**

Question accordingly negated.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I appreciate that there is an urgent question on Ukraine later, but I wonder whether the Government have given any indication that they intend to make a statement on our relations with China, given that China has done nothing to condemn the Ukrainian incursion. Will the Government also make a statement on what is happening in the Balkans? I understand that missiles are arriving in Serbia, ready to destabilise the Dayton agreement and create a new crisis there.

Mr Speaker: I have been given no notification that anything is forthcoming. What I would say is that we have the urgent question; if you are able to catch my eye, you may be able to press the Minister and raise the matter with him. Those important points will have been noted by Government Front Benchers. I am sure that they will take the comments you have just made very seriously and recognise their importance.

Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

9.48 am

Mr Speaker: Before we get to proceedings, I remind Members of the difference between Report and Third Reading. The scope of the debate on Report is the amendments that I have selected; the scope of the Third Reading debate to follow will be the whole Bill as it stands after Report. Members may wish to consider those points and then decide at which stage or stages they want to try to catch my eye.

Clause 2

OFFENCE OF CONDUCT RELATING TO MARRIAGE OF PERSONS UNDER 18

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 11, leave out “(2)” and insert “(3)”

This amendment would insert the subsection which provides for the new offence of carrying out conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage after section 121(3) of the Anti-social Behaviour, Policing and Crime Act 2014 rather than after section 121(2) of that Act.

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

Amendment 2, page 1, line 15, leave out “threats or any other form or coercion” and insert “threats, any other form of coercion or deception, and whether or not it is carried out in England and Wales”.

This amendment would state expressly that for the new offence of carrying out conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage, the conduct may take place in England and Wales or elsewhere and may, but does not have to, involve deception.

Amendment 3, page 1, line 17, leave out subsection (3).

This amendment would remove the cross-reference to the new offence of carrying out conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage.

Amendment 4, page 2, line 3, leave out subsection (6) and insert—

“(6) After subsection (7) insert—

“(7A) A person commits an offence under subsection (3A) only if—

- (a) the conduct is for the purpose of causing the child to enter into a marriage in England or Wales,
- (b) at the time of the conduct, the person or child is habitually resident in England and Wales, or
- (c) at the time of the conduct, the child is a United Kingdom national who—
 - (i) has been habitually resident in England and Wales, and
 - (ii) is not habitually resident or domiciled in Scotland or Northern Ireland.”

This amendment would mean that a person may commit the new offence of carrying out conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage only if the conduct is for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage in England or Wales, or the person or the child has a specified connection to England and Wales.

[Mr Speaker]

Amendment 5, page 2, line 4s, leave out subsection (7).

This amendment would in respect of the new offence of carrying out conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage remove the exception for marriages of 16 and 17 year olds that take place in Scotland or Northern Ireland, so that conduct related to such marriages may amount to an offence.

Mrs Latham: I am pleased to speak to these amendments, which I am confident will make the Bill clearer and cleaner, and provide more effective, targeted and proportionate safeguarding. Before I come to the details of the amendments, I remind hon. Members of the purpose of clause 2, to which all five amendments relate.

Clause 2 will create a new part of the forced marriage offence within the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. Currently, it is only an offence to cause a child to marry if violence, threats or another form of coercion are used, or if the child lacks capacity to consent to marry under the Mental Health Capacity Act 2005. It is not an offence to cause a child to marry if coercion is not used and the child is not covered by that Act. As I set out on Second Reading in November, this is a real loophole. To ensure that all children are protected, the Bill needs to ensure that it is always an offence to cause a child under the age of 18 to enter into a marriage, whatever the methods used.

I propose to start by going through the first three broadly technical amendments, beginning with amendment 3. The existing offence of forced marriage contains a subsidiary offence of deceiving someone into going overseas with the aim of forcing them into marriage there. That is an important addition, because such behaviour is far from uncommon. As it stands, the Bill expressly extends that deception offence to encompass the behaviour entailed in the new offence. However, on reflection, Ministers and I feel that it is not necessary. The new offence that we are adding, of causing a child to marry, refers to

“any conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage before the child’s eighteenth birthday, whether or not the conduct amounts to violence, threats or another form of coercion.”

That would include deceiving a child into going overseas. That means that the provision in the original Bill is unnecessary duplication, and it makes the law less clear than it could and should be. Amendment 3 would remove the express extension of the deception offence to cover the conduct entailed in the new offence of causing a child to marry. I would like to put beyond doubt, on the record, that that new offence does include deceiving a child, be that into going overseas or otherwise.

To reinforce this, amendment 2 adds specific reference to “deception” as one of the types of conduct that it might encompass, as well as specifying that it does not matter whether or not the conduct was carried out in England and Wales. Finally, and purely consequentially, amendment 1 merely moves the new offence of causing a child to marry from before the deception offence to after it, where it more naturally fits.

Amendments 4 and 5 make substantive changes to the nature of the offence, in such a way, I believe, as to improve the Bill. They relate to the jurisdictional scope of the offence—the scenarios that can lead to prosecution,

based on where the parties are, where they live, what their nationalities are, and where the marriage is to take place. Currently, the new offence of causing a child to marry essentially inherits the jurisdictional scope of the existing forced marriage offence. It also required a carve-out provision—clause 2(7) of the original Bill—which removed liability where marriages of 16 and 17-year-olds take place in Scotland or Northern Ireland. Hon. Members will be aware that that was necessary because marriage policy is devolved and the age of marriage is different in those countries.

On reflection with Ministers, that presented two problems. First, those wishing to carry out a child marriage in England or Wales would, in many cases, have been able to get around the offence simply by having the marriage take place in Scotland or Northern Ireland—I refer to that as the “Gretna Green” exception. Secondly, the law as drafted would inadvertently include UK nationals resident in Scotland, and Northern Ireland residents who, perfectly legally under their own law and under the law of another country, wished to marry at 16 or 17 in that third country. That could be seen as a lack of respect for the devolution settlement. It is evidently not appropriate for the law to reach that far, but on the other hand, we would like to close the Gretna Green loophole. I am therefore grateful to Ministers for their help and support in reaching a solution that both respects the devolution settlement and removes that dangerous loophole.

Amendment 5, which is the first part of the solution, removes the current exemption in clause 2(7) for marriages of 16 and 17-year-olds taking place in Scotland and Northern Ireland. That will remove the Gretna Green exception. However, the offence would then cover all UK nationals marrying overseas, which could include those living in or domiciled in Scotland or Northern Ireland, where child marriage is—unfortunately—still legal. Amendment 4 will therefore make the jurisdictional provisions more proportionate and targeted while still ensuring maximum safeguarding. That will provide that a person can be prosecuted in one of three situations.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend, like me, welcome the fact that Northern Ireland is consulting on raising the minimum age of marriage to 18? Will she join me in expressing a desire that the Scottish Government should reflect on that and do the same?

Mrs Latham: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Northern Ireland is consulting, and I think that Scotland is about to do so. That is so important, because, if they do not change, they will not reflect the sustainable development goals that they have signed up to along with us. If they want to abide by those goals, they will have to move forward on that. I look forward to us being one nation all doing the same thing. I thank him for that point.

The first situation is if a marriage is to take place in England or Wales. It can never be right for us to allow the marriage of a child to happen within our borders. The second situation is if the perpetrator or victim is habitually resident—they ordinarily live—in England and Wales. That will ensure that we protect children who live in this country and that those people who live here obey our rules and norms. The final situation is if

the child is a UK national who has been habitually resident in England or Wales and who is neither habitually resident nor domiciled in Scotland or Northern Ireland. Domiciled is a slightly different concept from habitual residence: it means the place that someone regards as their permanent home, even if they are actually living somewhere else. So, all UK nationals who have at some point lived in England or Wales, unless they live in or have their permanent home in Scotland or Northern Ireland, will be covered.

One of the effects of those changes is, as I indicated, to show respect for the devolution settlement in a more effective and meaningful way than the Bill does currently. The offence would no longer encompass situations where a parent arranges for their 16 or 17-year-old UK national child who lives in Scotland or Northern Ireland to marry outside the UK, so it would not stop such Scottish or Northern Irish children from exercising the rights under the laws of those countries.

We did consider removing the UK national criteria of the offence in its entirety, but that would mean that, when it came to marriages happening outside England and Wales, we would have had to rely solely on habitual residence, which is a fluid property that can be lost if a person has sufficiently severed their ties with England and Wales. The Girls Not Brides UK coalition, who are experts in this area, were concerned that that could cause perverse behaviour, namely that parents might keep their children overseas before causing them to marry until such time as they lost their habitual residence and, therefore, the protection of the law.

We have therefore kept the UK national criteria, but only for a child who has been habitually resident in England and Wales at some point in their life, to ensure intervention in matters overseas only if there is a reasonable connection to England and Wales. Out of respect for the devolution settlement, the offence would apply only if the child were not at that time habitually resident or domiciled in Scotland or Northern Ireland.

The amendments will create a more rounded and focused regime. As such, I commend them to the House.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): I am delighted to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), both for her continued steerage of this vital Bill and for tabling these important amendments. It will not be me who responds to the final stage of the Bill, so, if I may, I will put on record my appreciation, and that of the entire House and I think the whole country, for the work she has done over her whole parliamentary career.

10 am

My hon. Friend has been assisted by a number of charities—I believe some are in the Gallery or elsewhere in the House today—and I want to thank them for all the work they have put in. It has been an extremely complex piece of legislation but, together with the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), we have all worked together to navigate through those difficulties. I am also very grateful to Home Office and Ministry of Justice officials, who put in considerable time and effort. We now have a Bill, with the amendments, that will properly protect vulnerable children—very often

girls and mostly young girls—who have, unfortunately, suffered the experience of being coerced into marriage without the use of force. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire, I believe that no child should be in a position to be contracting a marriage under the age of 18.

As my hon. Friend set out in her speech, amendments 1 to 3 are minor and technical, and essentially address a duplication in the Bill as it stands. The new offence, which clause 2(2) introduces, would make it illegal to carry out any conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage. Any conduct includes deceiving a child into going overseas for marriage, so we do not need the separate provision for that which clause 2(3) would make. The amendments would therefore remove that duplication, and are in the interests of making legislation which is as clear as it can be to everyone. They also make it clear that the new offence of causing a child to enter into a marriage does include deceiving the child, whether or not that relates to going overseas, although it does not have to include deception.

Amendments 4 and 5 are more substantive and relate to the jurisdictional impact—the territorial reach, if you like—of that new behaviour of causing a child to marry even if coercion is not used. At the moment the jurisdictional provisions for that behaviour mirror those in the existing forced marriage offence: namely that prosecution may occur when the perpetrator and/or the victim is physically present in England and Wales, or if at least one of them is habitually resident in England and Wales, or if both of them are outside the UK and at least one of them is a UK national. The sole exception is that marriages of 16 and 17-year-olds in Scotland and Northern Ireland would never be covered. Let me agree with my hon. Friend in her hope that we see our United Kingdom coming together as one to abide by our commitments to the sustainable development goals to safeguard more young girls from this frankly abhorrent practice of marrying a child before they are ready to do so.

Amendment 5 would remove that exception relating to marriages of 16 and 17-year-olds in Northern Ireland and Scotland. While we made that provision in recognition of the devolution settlement, we came to judge that the potential impact on enforcement was too great. There are too many circumstances in which a parent could evade the law by taking their child to Scotland or Northern Ireland to marry, even if there were no connection with either of those two countries. My hon. Friend has done an extremely good job in setting out clearly the multiple number of scenarios that could apply. I believe that the Bill, once the amendments are agreed to, will have that targeted and proportionate effect.

We also took the view that there were better and more effective ways of respecting the devolution settlement, and that is where amendment 4 comes in. The amendment would replace existing jurisdictional provisions for the new offence of causing a child to marry with provisions that state that a prosecution may occur if the marriage was to take place in England or Wales, or if at least one of the victim or the perpetrator is habitually resident in England or Wales, or if the victim is a UK national who has at some point been habitually resident in England or Wales and is also neither habitually resident nor domiciled in Scotland or Northern Ireland.

Taken together, this will ensure that the law extends only to those circumstances where there is a proper connection to England or Wales and not to, for example, UK national children who live in Scotland and marry overseas or UK national children who live and have always lived overseas. The amendments would therefore ensure, for example, that a parent who lives in England could not take their 16-year-old child who also lives in England to Scotland for a traditional ceremonial marriage merely to get around the law, but also that, where a 17-year-old child lives in Scotland and the parent does not live in England or Wales, there is no bar to their seeking to arrange for the child to marry outside the UK. Likewise, if a parent who was a UK national but lived, for example, in Austria arranged for their 17-year-old child, who also lived in Austria and was not even a UK national, to marry in, say, Salzburg, they will now not be caught by this law.

All in all, these amendments make for a Bill that is better targeted, provides more effective safeguarding, is more proportionate and ensures that ultimately, as my hon. Friend said, we capture the people who we want to capture and not those who we do not. Before I conclude, may I once again say a tremendous thank you to my hon. Friend? I commend her for this incredible piece of campaigning work, which she has steered through the parliamentary procedures with admirable determination and drive. It is a tribute to her passion for safeguarding and protecting young girls. I am absolutely inspired by the work she has done. These amendments will make for a more effective Bill, and I confirm the Government's wholehearted support for them.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Amendments made: 2, page 1, line 15, leave out “threats or any other form of coercion” and insert “threats, any other form of coercion or deception, and whether or not it is carried out in England and Wales”.

This amendment would state expressly that for the new offence of carrying out conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage, the conduct may take place in England and Wales or elsewhere and may, but does not have to, involve deception.

Amendment 3, page 1, line 17, leave out subsection (3).

This amendment would remove the cross-reference to the new offence of carrying out conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage.

Amendment 4, page 2, line 3, leave out subsection (6) and insert—

“(6) After subsection (7) insert—

“(7A) A person commits an offence under subsection (3A) only if—

- (a) the conduct is for the purpose of causing the child to enter into a marriage in England or Wales,
- (b) at the time of the conduct, the person or child is habitually resident in England and Wales, or
- (c) at the time of the conduct, the child is a United Kingdom national who—
 - (i) has been habitually resident in England and Wales, and
 - (ii) is not habitually resident or domiciled in Scotland or Northern Ireland.”

This amendment would mean that a person may commit the new offence of carrying out conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage only if the conduct is for the purpose of

causing a child to enter into a marriage in England or Wales, or the person or the child has a specified connection to England and Wales.

Amendment 5, page 2, line 4, leave out subsection (7). —(*Mrs Pauline Latham.*)

This amendment would in respect of the new offence of carrying out conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage remove the exception for marriages of 16 and 17 year olds that take place in Scotland or Northern Ireland, so that conduct related to such marriages may amount to an offence.

Third Reading

10.7 am

Mrs Latham: May I begin by thanking the Public Bill Committee, which met on 12 January to consider the Bill in detail? The Committee submitted the Bill to detailed scrutiny, and I am confident that the cross-party spirit that has run throughout this process has made it a much better piece of legislation.

After Second Reading in this House on 19 November last year, I was inundated with media and interview requests to talk about child marriage. Many of the issues and specific cases that hon. and right hon. Members from across the House raised were ones that there is not enough awareness of. Indeed, I am absolutely delighted that two of the incredibly brave survivors of child marriage whose stories I told in November, Payzee Mahmod and Farhana Raval, are here today in the Gallery to witness this historic moment, when the House of Commons will vote to end child marriage in this country.

Child marriage exists as both a legal and a social phenomenon. We in this House can, and I hope that we will, change the legal position by criminalising those who arrange child marriages and refusing to recognise unions involving children. However, the social aspect—raising awareness of child marriage among children, parents, educators, social care professionals and community leaders—is equally important. We must send a message that child marriage is illegal and is unacceptable under any circumstances.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): May I take this opportunity to commend my hon. Friend for her tireless campaigning on this most important of issues? She has shown hon. Members and the public exactly why child marriage is child abuse and why it is absolutely right that we put an end to it.

Mrs Latham: I thank my right hon. Friend for that, and he is absolutely right. I know that he, too, has been passionate about raising awareness about this issue. If it were not for his now being Health Secretary, I would not be doing this today, because he had the private Member's Bill, which I never got, and he generously gave it over to me. He did that because he knew that I had been working with the charities represented in the Public Gallery for many years. So I thank him for the help he has given in my being able to do this.

It is undeniable that changing this law and making it unequivocally clear that it will be illegal to arrange any child marriage, whether for a boy or a girl, in England and Wales, irrespective of alleged consent, coercion or persuasion, is a huge step in the right direction, because many children are brought up to believe that this is the

norm, but it is not the norm in this country to be married as a child. This legislation will send a huge message out and that is the purpose of the Bill. Let me briefly mention the effect of each of its key provisions. First, the Bill will remove the exception that currently allows 16 and 17-year-olds to get married and to enter into a civil partnership with parental or judicial consent in England and Wales. People who are too young to consent for themselves are too young to be married. Getting married is a huge decision, no matter at what age someone decides to marry. The existing law has been in place for more than 70 years and reflects social values from a different time, one in which a school leaving age was 14 and the average age for marriage was just 23. Many girls like my mother left school at 14 and went to work. In that context, a marriage at 16 was not unreasonable. Of course, there were many shotgun weddings before the age of 18 where a pregnancy was involved, because in the eyes of many being pregnant without being married was a sin. This was before contraception and life is completely different now.

Now, the Government have legislated to ensure that all children must be in education or training until 18, providing greater opportunities for academic and professional development for all children. Furthermore, the average age for marriage is now over 30. There are substantially fewer than 200 children utilising this exception every year, which is evidence that as a society we are moving away from this practice. So there is a real need to remove that exception. When I have tried to bring this before the House previously, I have been told by previous Ministers, not the excellent Ministers we have in place today, that it was not relevant, because there were so few cases and it did not really matter.

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend says that it is the children using this exemption, but in Committee, where I supported her, she made the point powerfully that it is not children using the exemption, but their family members, who are seeking to pressurise them into marriage. That entirely shows the point of this piece of legislation.

Mrs Latham: My hon. Friend is right: this is about coercion, persuasion and accepting that this is the norm in a family. It is not the norm, and should not be, in this country. If a child is unable to sign that piece of paper to say that they are getting married, they are too young to have somebody else do it for them, and to persuade them and make them get married at that stage. So this Bill is very, very important. The impact on those children who wish to take advantage of the exception will be minimal. They will only have to wait a maximum of two years to marry; if they are 16 and a half, it will be only 18 months. So we are talking about only a very short time, although I do accept that when someone is 16, two years seems a very long time—in reality, as all know in this Chamber, that is not true. The impact on victims of child marriage around the world of England and Wales setting its legal age of marriage unambiguously at 18 will be enormous.

The second key provision will make it a crime to organise any unregistered marriage involving a child in England and Wales. This is a huge part of the problem we are trying to solve. As I set out on Second Reading, the cases of child marriage in the UK that cause the most concern often do not show up in the statistics. Of

the cases involving potential child marriage reported to the Home Office-commissioned national honour-based abuse helpline, delivered by Karma Nirvana—representatives of which are in the Gallery today—in the year to September 2021, only four related to civil marriages. There are almost 20 times as many cases that involve only a religious ceremony—more than 95% of all cases—and those are the people who go to Karma Nirvana for help, so Members can imagine how many do not do that and are persuaded to be married.

We know from the experiences of Payzee—who is also in the Gallery—among many others that the religious ceremony is the most important part of the marriage in the eyes of the family and the community of the child. They do not need the registered part: they are not interested in that. It is the unregistered part that makes the difference for them, and currently, there is no age limit on an unregistered marriage. The only requirement is that it is not forced, and we know that under the current law, proving a forced marriage where it involves children is extremely difficult. The Girls Not Brides UK coalition, which has done so much in the campaign to end child marriage, has been involved in shocking cases where the child being married was under 10 years old.

Therefore, my second key provision updates forced marriage legislation to create a new offence of arranging the marriage of a child. This offence will be triggered by any conduct that causes a child under 18 to enter into such a marriage, whether civil or religious. Crucially, unlike with forced marriage, there is no need to prove coercion or control. This takes the onus away from the child to show that their marriage was forced, and will make prosecutions easier and the deterrent that much stronger. I should make it absolutely clear that this criminal offence is not about criminalising the child. The child is the victim in every single case; the criminals are the adults who organised these marriages.

A key provision that I would like to highlight is the provision of extraterritoriality. The Girls Not Brides UK coalition, as well as the Government's forced marriage unit, have seen plenty of evidence to suggest that very often children who live in the United Kingdom are being taken abroad, often to a country where extended family live, in order to be married. Sometimes, they are taken abroad for just a few weeks, but sometimes they are taken abroad for many months or years—as in the case of Farhana, who is also in the Gallery today. It is crucial that the offence captures that conduct, because it is just as damaging to the future prospects and life chances of the victims as a marriage that takes place in the United Kingdom. If a child is out of education for months or even years, they will find it much harder to enter the workplace and become economically productive, if they ever do so.

I have been working very hard with the Government since the Committee stage to ensure that the Bill is comprehensive and covers as many situations as possible. My thanks go to the Ministers and the teams of officials who have worked so hard to get it right, resulting in the amendments on Report. I did not want to come back next year or the year after with more amendments; I wanted the Bill to be right from the start, because loopholes need to be closed. Therefore, I am delighted that this Bill will cover not just marriages taking place in England and Wales, but marriages anywhere in the world involving a child or a person who lives in England

[Mrs Latham]

or Wales, as well as those involving UK national children who have at any point lived in England or Wales. That offers a huge amount of protection to all children growing up in this country, and removes any incentive for parents to leave the UK in order to avoid our marriage law.

Having considered the Bill's key provisions, I shall briefly reflect on its importance. Primarily, the Bill is important because it will offer protection from marriage to every single child who grows up in England and Wales, forever. At a stroke, it will stop both registered and unregistered marriages under the age of 18 and ensure that this protection cannot be avoided simply by someone temporarily leaving the country. I often talk about safeguarding futures, because that is what we are doing: safeguarding children's futures so that they can have decent lives.

Child marriage is so harmful to the future prospects of the victims and almost always results in their leaving education, thereby reducing their career prospects and overall life chances. Before I came to this place, my political background was in education, which I firmly believe is the most powerful tool we have to create opportunities for young people. It is an enormous disadvantage if young people are deprived of education—an education that we in this House have determined to provide up until the age of 18—because of child marriage.

It is not an understatement to say that the Bill will protect and affect the lives of literally millions of young boys and girls in this country. It will protect them from child marriage and enable them to have the best chance in life, because they will be able to continue in education until the age of 18. It will also strengthen their ability to say to their parents, “I want to go to university” or get an apprenticeship or a job. It will be much easier, because at 16 a young person is totally dependent on their parents and cannot live independently.

The legislation's implications will be felt not just in the UK. The UK is committed to achieving the UN's sustainable development goals, target 5.3 of which is to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations”

before 2030. This applies specifically both to religious and to non-religious child marriages. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that there should be no legal way for anyone to marry under the age of 18. The Bill will therefore also help the UK to set an example to the rest of the world by prioritising children's futures. The UK will finally be in a position to take a lead on child marriage around the world and on championing children's futures. To be able to persuade other countries of the importance of banning child marriage, we must first ban it ourselves. When we have said to countries, “You need to raise the age of marriage,” they have come back to us and said, “Why should we? You don't—you allow children to marry.”

I have set out the main provisions of my Bill and the enormous impact it will have on children in this country and around the world. Before I conclude, I wish to make an appeal to the Government. I thank the Minister, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Corby, and his colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch, who has also worked closely with us on the Bill, for their

patience and shared determination that the Bill should be as comprehensive and effective as possible. I am sure, though, that it will come as no surprise to the Minister that I have three final asks of the Government.

First, I impress on the Minister the importance of the Bill's swift commencement. Clause 7 confirms that the Bill will come into force on the day appointed by the Secretary of State. However, every day before commencement is another day on which child marriage remains possible in this country. Will the Minister please do everything in his power to arrange for commencement to take place as swiftly as possible? In particular, will the Minister give his view on whether, should the Bill make good progress through the other place and pass into law, a commencement before the summer holidays is possible? So many children are taken abroad in the summer and I fear we will be failing in our duties in this place if we do not offer them the protection this summer that we in this House believe is necessary.

Secondly, as I mentioned at the start of my speech, changing the law is only one part of the solution. Changing attitudes and societal norms is the second stage, and I have already raised that with the Department for Education. Will the Minister please confirm that he will work closely with the Department to ensure that both children and teachers are informed about the change in the law in advance of the summer holidays, so that children who are at risk can be spotted? Not only schools will need updated guidance. Will the Minister also please confirm that updated guidance for the police and for the Crown Prosecution Service will be swiftly produced to help in the investigation and prosecution of crimes under this legislation?

Finally, but no less importantly, I would like to note one final point, which is one I regret. Unfortunately, due to marriage policy being devolved, the protections in this Bill extend only to children in England and Wales, or to children with a specific connection to England and Wales. At the moment, the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive do not have equivalent legislation, so children there will not be safeguarded. They also prevent the UK from completing its international obligations to end child marriage.

However, there are signs of change. The Northern Ireland Executive have launched a consultation on changing their marriage laws, and I hope that the Scottish Government will do the same. Will the Minister join me in a determined lobbying campaign to ensure that our colleagues in the devolved Administrations do the right thing and ban child marriage in their jurisdictions, too? I would be absolutely delighted if, in two years' time, we were once again debating child marriage in this House to celebrate Scotland and Northern Ireland implementing similar pieces of legislation, so that all UK children would be covered and we would then be able to take out those provisions in this Bill.

In conclusion, I urge all hon. and right hon. Members to support my Bill. It will safeguard young people by establishing 18 as the legal age of marriage in this country, with no exceptions, giving a clear message to all that child marriage is totally unacceptable. Secondly, it criminalises anyone who causes a child to enter a marriage, offering protection from child marriage to all children growing up in England and Wales—a protection that applies both in this country and around the world.

Finally, the Bill helps the UK on its way to living up to its international obligations by banning child marriage in all its forms, and encourages the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to follow suit. The Bill has the potential to impact millions of young people, and to prevent untold numbers entering into miserable child marriages. For the sake of children growing up now and yet to come, I commend the Bill to the House.

10.27 am

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak on such an important Bill. I feel proud and privileged to be speaking here this morning and supporting the Bill.

I thank the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for her tireless work in taking this Bill through Parliament. Her passion was evident in her powerful speech this morning. She has been tireless in her fight and deserves praise from all of us. I also want to register my thanks to the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), who is no longer in his place, who began this journey for us before his return to the Cabinet. Indeed, I thank all fellow sponsors of this Bill, and all Members here supporting this important legislation.

Child marriage is not a thing of the past, but it should be. It is something that harms everyone—boys and girls, parents and children. It makes young girls into a commodity to be bought and sold. They are made to be women long before they are anything but children.

Marriage at 16 is a hangover from a different age, and it is right that we now step forward to close this loophole. We do so because it is the right thing to do. We do so because not to act risks consigning thousands more girls to abuse and controlling marriages, and because to act will empower thousands each year to seek education and employment for their own and indeed everyone's good. The single biggest step that we could take today to invigorate the economy around the world is the economic empowerment of women.

Child marriage is outlawed in many countries around the world. It shames us that we lend some tacit approval to its continuation by allowing marriage at 16 here. We can lead by example, and live up to what we say abroad. We can slap down charges of hypocrisy by acting for ourselves and reaffirming our commitment to childhood.

Child marriage is often just another form of coercive control and abuse. Sadly, too often it is perpetrated by parents and siblings to force young women and girls into outdated behaviour owing to a misplaced and frankly heinous sense of so-called honour. The horrific murder of Banaz Mahmood in 2006, and the testimony of those who actually cared about her, including her sister Payzee Mahmood, show that honour and love have nothing to do with so-called honour killings and child marriage.

As a member of Ealing Council, I was proud to support the organisation Southall Black Sisters by providing their first official funding, because the work that they do matters. Sadly, that work is as necessary now as it was then. Not all child marriage is about abuse, and I know that some end in happy marriage, but that choice should be made by an adult for themselves, not forced on a child.

I must now share my personal family experience. My own mother, the late Ram Piary Sharma, married young, at only 14, and had her first child shortly after her 17th birthday. She had already brought one life into the world, and she was still a girl—a child. She was bright, intelligent, interested and driven, but poorly educated. Education was something that she insisted on delivering for her own daughters when life had denied it to her. She took the extraordinary step of starting a small school for girls in our village. While there had for many years been opportunities for boys to study, there was nowhere in my village, Mandhali, for a girl to learn. My mother secured a small room, hired a teacher from the next village to come and teach girls, and Bimla, my sister, was the first pupil. It was a great success, and soon many of our friends and neighbours were sending their girls too. My sister was the first to matriculate, and eventually went into further education, followed by my other three sisters. My mother put such value on learning and education, and it changed so many lives. Bimla trained to become a teacher and came back to Mandhali to teach another generation of girls, to change lives and make a difference, all because of the opportunities that not marrying young gave her.

My other three sisters also went into professional jobs, and none married young—they all married after the age of 22. My mother ensured that they knew the value of their learning and their responsibility to live the best life they could. That is the opportunity banning child marriage offers: the ability to shape lives for the better. Banning child marriage is not a ban on love and it is not state control; it protects the right to childhood, the right to a decent education and the right to a brighter future.

I feel honoured to participate in this debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Very moving.

10.36 am

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for this Bill and for her tireless work and efforts to protect children and end child marriage. It is no surprise that this Bill has received cross-party and Government support, which reflects her thorough and attentive approach, alongside the strong necessity to update this area of law.

As my hon. Friend outlined, the Bill seeks to raise the minimum age of marriage and civil partnerships from 16 to 18 in England and Wales, which will bring an end to provisions allowing for 16 and 17-year-olds to marry or enter a civil partnership with parental or judicial consent. This Bill will also make it illegal for a person to arrange the marriage of another person under the age of 18 in England and Wales in those circumstances where it is not already illegal.

At the age of 16, a person cannot get a tattoo, vote, drive or buy alcohol. Most importantly, they are defined as a child under both the UN convention on the rights of the child and the Children Act 1989. A marriage or civil partnership is a lifelong commitment with significant legal and financial implications, and this Bill will allow girls and boys more time to grow, to be educated and to mature before making this serious commitment so that they can decide their own future.

[Mr Louie French]

At the grand old age of 34, I am still young enough to remember some of the mistakes I made at the age of 16 and 17, and they were not limited to my choice of clothes or haircut—some might argue that neither has improved. I could not fathom entering a marriage at the age of 16 or 17, nor having the maturity to make such a major decision when my experience of the world was so limited.

In discussing marriage today, this is certainly not the first time I have reflected on my life journey compared with that of my parents and grandparents. When I look at old family photos, often hiding in a dusty cupboard rather than in the cloud or on Facebook, I am always amazed at how young they look in their wedding photos. That is a reflection of how much times have changed even within my generation and my parents' generation, let alone since these laws were originally made back in 1929.

I welcome the comprehensiveness of the Bill in closing the loopholes on child marriage and removing the significant barriers to protection and safeguarding in child marriage cases. The existing law covers cases where a parent or other third party uses violence, threats or another form of coercion to cause a child to enter into a marriage, and my understanding is that this does not cover situations where a child is caused to enter into a marriage where coercion is not used. This Bill closes that loophole by making it an offence to cause an under-18 to enter into marriage in any circumstances.

I also welcome that the Bill not only removes the parental consent exception but covers both civil and unregistered religious ceremonies, which are often the main source of child marriages, as we have heard. This helps to fulfil the safeguarding aim of the Bill, as the life-changing consequences of marriage are derived not only from the legal procedure but from the traditional or religious aspects, which are regarded as just as much as marriage by the parties, their families and their communities.

Again, I thank my hon. Friend and all the charities involved for shining a spotlight on this issue. It is also so important and significant that this Bill includes marriages that do not take place in this country as long as the child is a UK national and resident in England or Wales. Far too often, we see in the media extreme examples of outdated cultural practices of children being married to fully grown adults in foreign countries, and this Bill helps to protect children in both England and Wales. I hope—it is my sincere hope—that Scotland and Northern Ireland follow suit and we can protect all UK children.

I commend the holistic coverage of this Bill in closing those loopholes. I believe this to be a reflection of my hon. Friend's years of focused work on the Bill and of the thorough manner with which she has steered it through the House, including by working closely with charities, Ministers and schools on its intent and provisions, which really get to the crux of the issue.

One of the main reasons I entered politics was to ensure that children are given the best chance in life, particularly through education and better opportunities. That is why I fully support the Bill. Throughout the pandemic, we have seen that the classroom really is the best place for our children—not only for learning, but

for their safeguarding, mental health and wellbeing. The teachers and schools of Old Bexley and Sidcup do a remarkable job of giving local children the best life chances, and they rightly remain a source of local pride.

I am pleased that the Bill strengthens the safeguarding of children, because too often teachers spot the signs of child marriage, but unfortunately the police are unable to take any further action due to the parental consent given, the marriage not being legally binding or its not taking place in England or Wales. This is the perfect example of how the Bill gets to the heart of the issue and tackles all forms of child marriage.

I welcome the fact that evidence has shown that the number of people marrying at 16 and 17 in England and Wales has been in decline over the years. In 2016, there were 153 marriages involving 16 and 17-year-olds, which went down to 125 in 2019. Despite that decline, more needs to be done because every single child matters and deserves such protection, particularly as, unfortunately, child marriage is often a mechanism for abuse, as we have heard. Marriages under 18 often lead to a lack of education and job opportunities, physical and mental health problems, a loss of independence and an increased risk of domestic abuse.

While child marriage can impact on both girls and boys, the issue overwhelmingly affects girls, with 80% of those who married as children in 2019 being girls. I am proud that this Government are leading the way in protecting girls and women globally, including by making international commitments to end child marriage. This Bill will ensure that our country leads by example to eradicate the practice worldwide. As part of the UK's world-leading efforts in tackling violence against women and girls—an agenda to which I am fully committed—the UK Government have announced £18 million of new UK funding to end child marriage, through partners at UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund, and to benefit women and girls in 12 countries, including Sierra Leone, Uganda, Ethiopia, Bangladesh and Yemen.

As a nation we must continue to champion and promote girls' education around the world, and I believe that this Bill complements that aim for the reasons outlined earlier, including, unfortunately, that one of the main consequences of child marriage is a lack of education. I therefore welcome the fact that this Bill will align our domestic and foreign policy, and help us in our goal to end child marriage and promote girls' education around the world.

I fully support this Bill and herald it as a landmark piece of legislation that delivers significant social reform, provides a huge step forward in preventing child abuse, and allows the UK to continue to lead by example in protecting children, particularly girls, and women globally as well as here in the UK. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has campaigned with such tenacity on this important issue and worked so hard to ensure that the Bill satisfies the overarching policy objectives so well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Mr Speaker will come in just before 11 am for the urgent question. Whoever is on their feet at 11 am will be asked to resume their seat for the urgent question, and afterwards they can continue their speech, so do not be surprised by that if you are on your feet at that time.

10.44 am

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for introducing the Bill and allowing me to be part of this debate. The Bill seeks to bring laws on marriage into the 21st century. As my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) pointed out, this is an issue that overwhelmingly affects women and girls, with 80% of under-age marriages in 2018 being undertaken by girls. It should be made clear that the introduction of the Bill is not about removing choice: it is about essential protections for children.

The Bill seeks not only to make marriage illegal for under-18-year-olds, but to create an offence for anyone to arrange the marriage of a person under the age of 18. The commitment of a marriage or civil partnership is not one that anyone should enter into lightly or without full knowledge and consent. Child marriage happens across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. It happens all around the world, but in this debate it is essential that we address the fact that many such marriages are created out of coercion.

Forced marriages are illegal in the UK, however when a person under the age of 18 is pressured to get married, research has shown that it is often by a family member. Reports show that young people in those situations do not merely lack the resources to report coercion but are often put in the impossible position of having to report on a parent or loved one. That can leave young girls of 16 faced with a choice between sending a parent to prison and being forced to marry. Other repercussions reported by survivors include being ostracised by their families and even communities. No child should be put in that position, and the Bill will take us one step closer to ensuring that no child will have to make that choice.

Child marriage has also been shown to be strongly linked to female genital mutilation, the practice of the cutting or removal of some or all of the external female genitalia. Female genital mutilation is growing every year in this country and we must be clear that it is not a cultural practice and has nothing to do with ethnicity or religion. As mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who is no longer in his place, it is a form of child abuse, and it should not be treated as anything less. Social stigma is often the reason the practice continues, and that must be tackled in our schools and local communities.

UNICEF estimates that 720 million women alive today were married when they were children. Research by Girls Not Brides has shown that every year 12 million girls are married before the age of 18. That amounts to 23 girls every minute, or one nearly every three seconds. The UK should rightly be proud of our record in supporting and championing the rights of women and girls at home and abroad. For years we have fought to end child marriage in other countries, and in fact the UK has signed two international human rights conventions demanding that child marriage be ended in signatories' jurisdictions. However, how can we continue to advocate so passionately for the end of the practice when we still have loopholes in our own law that allow under-18-year-olds to marry? It is vital that we demonstrate that a child marriage is not accepted in the UK, and we will do so through the Bill.

Studies are clear: under-age marriage has been shown to lead to lower education and employment opportunities, an increase in mental health problems and a higher incidence of domestic violence. During the covid-19 pandemic, it was reported that cases of child marriage were on the rise. Children were not in school and therefore were less able to access support, which meant that it was far harder for schools and communities to provide that support. We have a duty of care in this country to protect our children. As a father, I cannot imagine how I would feel if a child of mine were in a situation in which they were made to marry.

If we can pass the Bill and ensure that fewer children are put into that position, we must do so. As child marriage does not have one cause, it does not have one solution. Ending the practice of child marriage will take the efforts of many communities, individuals and Governments, but the Bill will continue the process of its eradication. We have a duty, as Members of Parliament, to ensure that no more children enter into marriage, which is why I must support the Bill today.

10.50 am

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I welcome the Bill, which is to:

"Make provision about the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership, and for connected purposes."

When I was researching the Bill to write this speech, I came across an American news channel reporting that the minimum age for marriage in Carolina was going to be raised from 14 years old to 16 years old, that the teen's spouse would be required to be no more than four years older, and that the teen's written parental consent would be required to marry. I have to admit that I was rather flabbergasted. A 14-year-old is a child. A 16-year-old is a child.

Time and again, as with the trauma of the poor Russian skater, Kamila Valieva—who is a child at 15—at the recent winter Olympics that I am sure many hon. Members witnessed, we see situations where adults are not making the right or best decisions for children. Children are children until they reach adulthood at 18 years old. It is absolutely right that the Bill has been brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), and I welcome the fact that it and the amendments discussed earlier today have been supported by hon. Members on both sides of the House and by the Government.

Children need to be children, to be permitted to be children, and to enjoy all the joy and freedom without adult responsibilities. Child rights are fundamental freedoms and must be inherent in all children under the age of 18, irrespective of race, religion, sex or any other status. Children are not the property of their parents. They are human beings and they have rights.

The convention on the rights of the child sets out the rights that must be realised for children to develop their full potential. It offers a vision of the child as an individual and as a member of the family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development. In recognising children's rights in that way, it firmly sets the focus on the whole child.

All children should have and deserve to have access to opportunities. Children are innocent. They are full of hope and joy, and they are trusting. Rather than be

[Sally-Ann Hart]

thrown or forced into an adult life, they should be allowed to mature gradually through new experiences that are age appropriate. It is a travesty that for far too many children, the reality of their childhood is all too different. Throughout history, children have been abused and exploited by adults, whether through slave labour, hunger, homelessness, limited education opportunities and so on.

Childhood must be protected and children should be allowed and encouraged to develop in their own time. Marriage or a civil partnership is an adult decision and requires thought. A party to a marriage should not take a passive approach. It is not something for someone to go along with or have done to them—it requires mature thought. Marriage is an important part of building healthy and protected relationships, families and societies.

Marriage should not cause harm to either party. Early and forced marriages often take place in communities where there is a wider social context that denies women's and children's rights. Currently, in England and Wales the minimum age for marriage or civil partnership without parental or other third-party consent, or judicial consent, is 18. A person who is 16 or 17 may marry or form a civil partnership only with consent—with some very rare exceptions, in which a 16 or 17-year-old is a widow or widower, or a surviving civil partner. A marriage or civil partnership is void if either of the parties is under the age of 16.

The Bill would raise to 18 the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership in England and Wales. That might affect marriages and civil partnerships that take place outside England and Wales. A change in the common law will also mean that any marriages involving under-18s that take place overseas, or in Scotland or Northern Ireland, will not be legally recognised in England and Wales if one of the parties is domiciled in England or Wales. That change to recognition will also apply to civil partnerships. I acknowledge the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire about issues to do with Scotland and Northern Ireland; I, too, encourage Scotland and Northern Ireland to take the Bill on board.

The Bill will also make it illegal for a person to arrange the marriage of a person under the age of 18 in England and Wales in circumstances where that is not already illegal. In 2018, the most recent year for which data is available, 147 16 to 17-year-olds entered into a

legally binding marriage with a person of the opposite sex, representing a very small proportion—0.06%—of all marriages that took place in England and Wales in 2018. Marriages of same-sex couples or civil partnerships are not reported with a detailed age breakdown. The issue is about not the small number, but each of those individuals who have had something done to or for them over which they have had no control.

The majority of 16 to 17-year-olds who marry are female. In 2018, 119 of the 16 to 17-year-olds getting married were female, while 28 were male. Over the past five years, an average of 79% of all 16 to 17-year-olds getting married have been female. UNICEF considers that child marriage is a violation of human rights, regardless of sex, but has emphasised that child marriage often compromises a girl's development by resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, interrupting her schooling, limiting her opportunities for career and vocational advancement, and placing her at increased risk of domestic violence. Although the impact on child grooms has not been extensively studied, marriage may similarly place boys in an adult role for which they are unprepared and may place economic pressures on them and curtail their opportunities for further education or career advancement.

Gender equality and ending the exploitation of women and girls are vital. One of the United Nations sustainable development goals agreed by world leaders is to eliminate all harmful practices such as child early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that there should be no legal way for anyone to marry before they turn 18, even if there is parental consent.

The Bill would also expand the existing criminal law on forced marriage to make it illegal for a person to arrange the marriage of a person under 18 in England and Wales. In 2020, the forced marriage unit gave advice or support in 759 cases related to a possible forced marriage and/or possible female genital mutilation. A significant majority related to forced marriage, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire has already pointed out. The forced marriage unit notes that the overall case number represents a 44% decrease on the average number of cases received annually between 2011 and 2019, which was 1,359. The decrease is thought to be attributable to the pandemic, owing to restrictions on weddings and overseas travel.

Proceedings interrupted (Standing Order No. 11(4)).

Ukraine

11 am

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the military situation in Ukraine.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey): Yesterday morning saw the launching of the largest combined arms offensive operations seen in the European theatre since 1945. From land, sea and air, a massive Russian offensive commenced from forward positions in Belarus, all around Ukraine's northern and eastern borders, from the Crimea and from ships in the Black sea. As leaders around the free world have said, this is an outrage against international law that violates Ukrainian sovereignty and brings a profound change to the security landscape of the Euro-Atlantic.

The Ukrainian armed forces have stood their ground heroically, forcing fierce fighting around several Ukrainian cities. The Antonov-2 airfield north of Kyiv was taken by Russian airborne forces as part of the initial assault yesterday morning but was reportedly retaken by the Ukrainian forces overnight.

As the world has now seen, the intelligence available to the British and American Governments over recent weeks has proven to be entirely accurate. That allows us to assess that the Russians have failed to achieve any of their planned objectives for the first day of combat operations. The Ukrainian armed forces claim to have shot down six fixed-wing aircraft and seven helicopters. They report that 137 Ukrainian service personnel have been killed in action as well as 57 civilians; hundreds more have been injured. The Ukrainian Government report that 450 Russian service personnel have been killed in action. As a former soldier with the vivid experience of death on the battlefield seared forever in my mind, I take no satisfaction in reporting those numbers to the House, and nor do I propose that we keep a score every day. These are the lives of innocent civilians and the lives of the bravest and best Russians and Ukrainians.

As we gorge on the live footage of a peer-on-peer war broadcast from a European capital just two-and-a-half hours' flying time from London, we should remember that behind those pictures is incredible fear and misery. That is why I pay tribute to those in Moscow, St Petersburg and other Russian cities who protested last night against this pointless loss of Russian life. President Putin and the kleptocrats who surround him have miscalculated badly. Young Russian men and women are needlessly losing their lives. The responsibility sits entirely with the Kremlin.

Yesterday, British Royal Air Force Typhoon jets took part in NATO air policing from their base in RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, from which they patrol over the Black sea and south-eastern Europe. HMS Trent is already part of a NATO standing maritime group and further Royal Navy ships are being deployed to other NATO standing groups in both the Baltic and the eastern Mediterranean. In addition to the Royal Tank Regiment battlegroup that has been in place in Estonia for the last six months, the Royal Welsh battlegroup will be arriving in Estonia earlier than planned to double up our force levels. Those doubled-up force levels will

remain indefinitely and will be augmented by the headquarters of 12 Mechanised Brigade, meaning that the United Kingdom will have an armoured brigade in Estonia, reassuring one of our closest NATO allies.

Mr Speaker, as you have heard from the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and others in recent days, we will explore all that we can do to support the Ukrainians in the next few days. All hon. Members in this House must be clear that British and NATO troops should not—must not—play an active role in Ukraine. We must all be clear what the risks of miscalculation could be and how existential the situation could quickly become if people do miscalculate and things escalate unnecessarily.

The Government do not feel that they can share with the House the detail of the support that the UK will provide to the Ukrainians at this sensitive point in operations. We apologise for that. We will do our best to give the House as much as we can, but hon. Members will appreciate that the detail is operationally sensitive. I hope that is acceptable to you, Mr Speaker.

Finally, Mr Speaker, you and Front-Bench spokespeople from across the House have had briefings from Defence Intelligence. We will make sure that continues to happen, so that, on Privy Council terms, briefings can be received by those who need to have them. Colleagues were also given a briefing last night by Defence Intelligence, which I know colleagues from across the House have found useful. We intend to keep up those briefings for as long as we feel there are kinetic combat operations that warrant a daily update. Beyond that, a number of cross-party briefings have been given by the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary, the next of which will take place this afternoon, when I will be joining the Foreign Secretary and a representative of the intelligence community to brief colleagues further.

Mr Speaker: I have allowed this to run over, as it is such an important matter and, as is right, I wanted to hear the Minister in full; of course, the same will be extended to the Opposition and Scottish National party spokespeople.

Mr Bone: I start by thanking the Minister for the Armed Forces for his detailed update. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on his leadership during this appalling crisis. Yesterday, President Putin, the Russian dictator, ordered a full-scale invasion of an independent, democratic state in the heart of Europe. At this very time, the people of Ukraine are fighting for hope for their homeland against a monstrous aggressor. We are seeing history repeat itself, as a powerful country headed by a madman is extending its territorial boundaries, first by annexing regions of sovereign countries and then by invading those countries. That is, of course, what happened in the 1930s and led to world war.

I have four questions for the Minister, which are in support of our Ukrainian friends and of our western democratic values. First, Ukraine's ambassador to the UK has asked for us and our allies to institute a no-fly zone over Ukraine. As the ambassador said,

"people are dying as we speak".

This action would be a significant and real help for the people of Ukraine. Yesterday, when I asked the Prime Minister about this request, he indicated that it was not ruled out. Will the Minister update the House on that request for help?

[Mr Bone]

Secondly, will the Minister say, as far as he is able, what additional military hardware we are providing as a practical support to the people of Ukraine? Thirdly, what steps are being taken by NATO to reinforce its eastern flank? Fourthly, given that we are now in a situation worse than the cold war, will we be increasing our spending on defence to reflect that reality? Mr Speaker, may the prayers and thoughts of this House be with the people of Ukraine.

James Heappey: First, I join my hon. Friend in sending prayers to the people of Ukraine. Last night, I was watching some of the footage that was emerging, particularly from Kharkiv, of the artillery barrage. It just looked like hell on earth and it was pretty hard not to say a prayer before going to sleep. Thank God for the safety in which we were all sleeping last night compared with those in that city.

As Members will appreciate, a no-fly zone is somewhat difficult to implement in a hostile airspace against a peer adversary. We need to have our eyes wide open to the reality that in such an event NATO jets would, not just possibly but most certainly probably, come into a combat situation with Russian jets, and the risk of miscalculation, escalation and the triggering of article 5 could not be understated in those circumstances. As Members will appreciate, in the air domain the risk of miscalculation is greater, because things are happening at Mach 2 and there is no time for political calibration; it is in the hands of pilots who are flying at well over the speed of sound. No-fly zones come with all sorts of problems. I understand exactly why the Ukrainian ambassador is asking for this, but we need to be clear that it could well trigger an article 5 moment and we need to be clear-eyed about that reality in considering it.

I said in my answer to the original question that I do not propose to provide a commentary on the additional hardware that we will supply to the Ukrainian armed forces, nor the routes by which we would do so, if indeed we will. The Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister are clear about this in terms of the requirement. We know that other European countries are keen to do likewise, but obviously this has to be provided at a pace and through routes that the Ukrainian armed forces are able to absorb, in order to minimise the risk of the cache simply being destroyed or overwhelmed by advancing Russian forces.

NATO is taking huge measures to reinforce its eastern flank. I have outlined in my initial response what the UK has done. That effort has been more than matched by our best friends in the world in the United States, and other NATO countries are also rallying to the flag. For the past 10 years or so, NATO has had a network of enhanced forward presence battlegroups—the UK's is in Estonia. Those are all being reinforced, and new forward presence battlegroups are being put in place. If the aim of what is going on right now is not just territorial gain in Ukraine, but to push NATO away from Russia, President Putin is achieving precisely the opposite, because NATO is drawing the line around NATO countries ever thicker and ever stronger.

It will not surprise my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough one bit to know that in the MOD we are quickly considering whether the threat has changed and whether more money is required—no Defence Minister

would ever say that it is not, but that is a conversation that needs to happen within Government. I think my hon. Friend would agree that this is not a retail moment of politics, where an issue arises and a solution is offered within the news cycle, and then everybody moves on to the next thing. This is something that will define our role in the world for the next 20 years, and we have got time to make the right decisions.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The whole House appreciates your willingness to allow this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and the manner in which the Minister is briefing the House and the way in which his colleagues are prepared to keep the House informed during this very rapidly developing crisis.

Yesterday, President Putin launched a war in Europe. He is invading and killing people in a sovereign country that Russia itself guaranteed to respect. His attack on Ukraine is an attack on democracy and a grave violation of international law and the United Nations charter. Putin will not stop at Ukraine; he wants to divide and weaken the west, and to re-establish Russian control over neighbouring countries. These are the actions of an imperialist and a dictator, and Britain has a long tradition of standing up to such tyrants. We believe in freedom, democracy, the rule of law and the right of a country to decide its own future, and those are the very values that Ukrainians are fighting for now in their country. We must support their brave resistance in any way we can, and our thoughts are with the comrades and families of those on both sides who have been killed in these first hours of fighting.

On Wednesday, the Prime Minister told the House that the UK would shortly be providing a further package of military support to Ukraine. We understand the Minister's comments about detail, but has that further military assistance been provided? The Minister knows that he has Labour's full support for doing so, and he also knows that what was announced and delivered before—the UK's short-range, hand-held anti-tank missiles—are working well. He knows that the Ukrainians need more of those missiles urgently in order to defend Kyiv and their other cities, so can he confirm that he is willing to go that bit further? The Minister has just said that Russia has failed to take any of its day one objectives. Which are the major objectives that it has failed to meet, and what is the Government's assessment of why it has failed?

Finally, NATO leaders meet today. Does Britain support NATO's response force now being activated in full? What further contribution will the UK make to reinforcing NATO allies on the eastern flank, and when will the 1,000 UK troops on stand-by to help with humanitarian assistance be deployed? The Minister also mentioned the doubling up of British forces in Estonia. When will those be deployed and in place?

Since the end of the cold war, we have taken peace and security in Europe for granted. We can no longer do so, and I fear that we will be dealing with the consequences of this Russian invasion for years to come.

James Heappey: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question and the way that he and his Front-Bench Labour colleagues have engaged with the Government throughout all of this. It just goes to show that at times of national emergency this House is at its very best.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that NLA—*the next generation light anti-tank weapon*—has already proven to be invaluable. They are unsubstantiated reports, but none the less we are aware of a number of circumstances in which they have been used to defeat Russian armour. We are therefore very aware of their utility, both in open battle, during the initial phase of the conflict, but also in the urban domain, in any resistance or insurgency that might follow. It will not surprise the right hon. Gentleman to know that NLA, among other systems that have similar dual utility in both open battle and whatever may come next, is high on our list of things that we are looking to supply.

I can sense the right hon. Gentleman's frustration, and I know that the House would like to hear the full detail. Suffice to say that the Secretary of State has instructed military officers in Defence to look across the full UK inventory for everything that we have right now that might be usable in the circumstances and to look at whether that could be sent forward and absorbed by the Ukrainians. However, one has to be clear that most systems require some degree of training, so it is not just the logistics of moving them to the country, nor indeed the challenges of the export of systems, in that we would need all the countries that have intellectual property or that operate the system to give their permission for it to be donated. It is also the ability to train up Ukrainian forces to use it thereafter. However, we are leaving no stone unturned, and the right hon. Gentleman should be assured that we want to see as much British kit in the hands of the Ukrainians as we can manage.

The right hon. Gentleman asked which objectives were not taken. He will forgive me if, while clearly we indulge in a bit of information manoeuvre from the Dispatch Box to remind the Russian public that President Putin may well have bitten off more than he can chew, we are not going to compromise the intelligence that we have got altogether. Suffice to say, we are pretty certain that in the Kremlin last night there will have been some pretty urgent reflections on the speed of the advance compared with what they anticipated. The Russian people should be calling President Putin and the kleptocracy that surrounds him out on that, because young Russian men and women are being sacrificed in the name of President Putin's hubris.

As for the NATO response force, further contributions are under consideration. The UK is already the second largest contributor in terms of the surge forces that have come forward, second only to the United States, but we are clear that we may need to provide more in land, sea and air, and we will do so if other NATO allies are unable to respond at the pace that we could. The 1,000 troops that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned who are on standby for humanitarian support in the countries immediately adjoining Ukraine will be deployed as and when those countries ask for them, but thus far no request has come. They remain at high readiness, forward present at a camp very close to RAF Brize Norton, so that they can be deployed at hours' notice, but at the moment Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Poland have not yet asked for that support.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about when the enhanced forward presence battlegroups will have been doubled up and when the brigade headquarters will be in place. I encourage all colleagues to follow the excellent Twitter feed of the 3rd (United Kingdom) Division, the

Iron Division as they call themselves. There were some fantastic pictures yesterday of Challenger 2 tanks being loaded on to low loader trucks to be driven north through Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, and into Estonia. That is an extraordinary effort for a battlegroup that was not supposed to be deploying for three more months and was in the middle of a training routine in Germany. It has turned that around very quickly. It is a testament not only to the Royal Welsh battlegroup but to the brigade headquarters, 3rd Division and the Field Army that that work has been completed so quickly; we expect them to be complete in Tapa by 1 March.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What reassurance can my hon. Friend give to the Ukrainian community in Derby and Derbyshire, who will have family members over there, that we are doing all we can to support the everyday, ordinary Ukrainian families who are having to put up with this incursion by Putin? I would like my hon. Friend to give an assurance that we are doing whatever we can.

James Heap: Last night the Secretary of State and I had to leave during the Prime Minister's statement to return to the MOD for another briefing. To the surprise of the Prime Minister's protection officers, we decided to walk back through the protest that was happening on Whitehall. I was struck not by the anger and the screaming and shouting that normally accompany protests in Westminster, but by the incredible sombreness and resolve, but also the fearfulness, shown by so many in that protest. They, as my hon. Friend said, will have family and friends back home in Ukraine. These were not people protesting over a political cause; these were people protesting for help with the safety of their loved ones.

The United Kingdom is not regarded by Ukraine as one of its best friends in the world by accident. For the last 10 years we have been training the Ukrainian armed forces through Operation Orbital. We were one of the first movers in providing lethal aid, and we sent troops to Ukraine only two or three weeks ago, when the build-up of Russian troops was well under way, to deliver the training that was required to allow those highly successful anti-tank weapons to be employed in battle, as they have now been. We will continue to do all that we possibly can, and I know that the excellent Minister for Europe and North America, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), is driving hard to ensure that all the necessary consular support is in place so that people who have connections with Ukrainians who are still in Ukraine can be supported through the excellent work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am grateful to the Minister, and indeed to his colleague in the Foreign Office, for the work that they are doing and the updates that they have been ensuring Opposition Members have. Like the Minister and other Members, I wish only to heap praise on the Ukrainian armed forces, who ensured that Russia did not get the opening gambit that it thought it would. But, as the Minister says, we are seeing Russian men being sent to die for one man's hubris—and my goodness, what courage was shown on

[*Stewart Malcolm McDonald*]

the streets of Russia last night by people protesting against the aggression from the Kremlin, and we commend them for it.

The Minister rightly spoke of supporting Ukraine with military equipment, and we back the Government in that. It is obviously, in some cases, easier said than done—it requires training, logistics and all the rest—but the Ukraine Government need it. I am not going to ask the Minister for an assurance that he has already given, but I want to press him in saying that we on these Benches want to see Ukraine get all the equipment it needs. I know that the Minister does not want to go into specific areas of equipment, but satellite phones are badly needed. That issue has arisen quite often during the various conversations that I have had with Government and parliamentary officials in Ukraine, and even came up at the protest outside Downing Street last night.

May I ask whether consideration has been given by the Government, and by G7 allies, to cyber-support, particularly cyber-offensive support? I can see the expression on the Minister's face, but would that constitute an article 5 scenario or not? What do the Government understand it to be? May I also ask the Government to ensure that they provide the appropriate level of humanitarian and medical equipment support that the Ukraine Government need?

Finally—I hope the Minister will forgive me, but I have not heard him mention this yet; it is not necessarily an MOD issue—may I ask for an update on where we are with SWIFT? Members had hoped that progress would have been made with that by now. I know that the Foreign Office has been pressing hard on it, but an update would be useful.

James Heappey: Everything that the hon. Gentleman said about lethal aid has been well heard. We are working on it at our best pace, and we will do as much as we physically can at this stage, as will the United States and other allies. We are just looking at how it would be practically done.

The hon. Gentleman was right to refer to a range of items, most obviously satellite phones, that provide resilience for the functioning of the Ukrainian Government—military and perhaps, in time, for resistance purposes—when they are operating in an electronically denied environment, and with all the probability of cyber-attacks and everything else that will make their functioning ever harder. We are very aware of that requirement, and of the requirement for medical supplies and other things that we are working on. The hon. Gentleman saw me wince; I am afraid that the Government's legal position on cyber-operations is very much a matter for the Attorney General and the Prime Minister, and is not something on which I will comment at the Dispatch Box.

The hon. Gentleman asked about removing Russia from the SWIFT system. He will perhaps have heard my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary on the news this morning saying that Her Majesty's Government are keen that that sanction is imposed. It is not in our gift to do that unilaterally, or even multilaterally among the countries that have thus far agreed to do it. Our colleagues in the Foreign Office are hard at work on that, and I hope we can win the argument. It feels like a sanction that Russia would properly sit up and take notice of.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Much is rightly made of Russia's role in this, but Belarus is playing a part as a staging post. What sanctions and steps are we taking to ensure that Belarus feels the pain for what it is doing? The Minister talks about “miscalculations”. What assessment has he made about accidental fire potentially going into other countries? It is a big concern to my constituents that we inadvertently find ourselves on a war footing without meaning to be.

James Heappey: The Belarussian ambassador has been summoned to the Foreign Office today to have the views of Her Majesty's Government shared with them, and Belarus has also been included in the sanctions regime. We are acutely aware of the grave risk of miscalculation. As I said in response to the initial question about a no-fly zone, when things are happening at Mach 2, and where border incursions can last for just seconds, often it is not heads of Government who get to make the decision about whether a trigger on an anti-aircraft missile system is pulled. We are working hard within NATO to ensure that all those risks are clearly understood, and that the risk of miscalculation is minimised. But we must be clear: there is absolutely no way in a situation as kinetic and dynamic as this, that that risk can be removed altogether, and I am afraid that I am certain that there will be moments of miscalculation. Yesterday, a Turkish ship was apparently hit by one side or the other as it was leaving Odesa, and cool heads will be required if any such event were to happen.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his update, and I place on record the thoughts and prayers of everyone in my constituency for the people of Ukraine. Like Members across the House, I have already been contacted by worried constituents who have friends and family in Ukraine who are desperate to access safe routes out of the country. I reiterate the question posed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey): will the 1,000 UK troops that the Minister has placed on standby to help with the humanitarian crisis now urgently be deployed?

James Heappey: I do not want to do the hon. Lady a disservice, but I understood her question to be whether the 1,000 troops will go into Ukraine, as they went into Kabul in the summer, to facilitate the egress of Ukrainians. I am afraid she will be disappointed, as that is simply not something that could be realistically done. This is a highly kinetic combat situation, and the probability of NATO troops being caught up in combat with Russian armed forces is far too high and would lead to huge escalation. The 1,000 troops who are on standby are there to support Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Poland with the expected humanitarian challenges they will face as people make their way out of Ukraine. They are at very high readiness, and we will get them forward as quickly as we can. As we warned when we changed the travel advice—my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and I were on TV pulling no punches about the gravity of the situation, and we were telling people to leave urgently, precisely because there would be no opportunity to do as we did in Kabul in the summer.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I thank the Minister and the whole Government for the leadership they are showing at an international level. In

winter 2015 I went to Ukraine with the former Defence Secretary, as a special adviser, to see Operation Orbital as it was being deployed. As part of that, we laid wreaths for the fallen Ukrainian soldiers. As a special adviser I was given a single carnation to put down, but I felt slightly embarrassed in doing so as I did not feel that we were doing as much as we possibly could to help the Ukrainians. That is because although we were giving lots of support and lots of sanctions, we were also hamstrung by the fact that we could not get agreement by as many of our European allies as we wanted, for everything that we wanted to bring to bear.

Reports in *The New York Times* yesterday suggested that Germany, Austria and Italy were refusing to co-operate on SWIFT payments, that Belgium was trying to get an opt-out for its diamond markets, and that Italy was trying to get an opt-out from European Union sanctions on luxury handbags. Will the Minister ensure that all our diplomatic efforts are brought to bear on our European allies to ensure that they are not dragging their feet? We in this House, and our American allies, are really pushing forward to try to do everything possible to help the people of Ukraine.

James Heappey: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. First of all, all diplomatic effort is being focused on this issue. It is definitely Her Majesty's Government's top foreign policy priority. I would argue that it is probably the top priority across Government full stop at the moment, in order to make sure that the response is completely cross-Whitehall and robust enough to have an impact on President Putin. I am sure my hon. Friend will appreciate, however, that this is not a moment to think that a response must be provided within 24 hours, by the weekend or even by the end of next month.

This is about making sure that the western alliance does not fracture, that we bring the whole of the free world with us in its condemnation of Russia, and that Russia, as a consequence, is completely isolated. That is the way the cost is imposed on Putin over time, sufficient to ensure not only that he fails in his ambitions to take and hold Ukraine, but that he fails in his ability to remain as Russian President and to anoint a successor of his choosing when the time comes. It is absolutely essential that the diplomatic effort, even if it requires a bit of patience, brings with us the whole of the western alliance, because if Putin wants one thing more than the territorial gains in Ukraine, it is to see NATO fracture and article 5 no longer mean anything.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The US ambassador addressed the UN a few days ago to say that up to 5 million refugees may be coming out of Ukraine and into the rest of Europe. We are already witnessing on our television screens heartbreaking images of Ukrainians fleeing their homes desperately trying to escape conflict. Given that the refugee exodus will be on a scale we have not seen since 2015, how will the Ministry of Defence, alongside its European partners, contribute to the creation of humanitarian corridors to ensure that refugees can be safely evacuated from the conflict zone? Can we now finally end the ridiculous Nationality and Borders Bill that is in the House of Lords, which will actually limit our opportunity quite rightly to welcome refugees to these shores?

James Heappey: To the point on the Nationality and Borders Bill first, I am not sure I share the hon. Gentleman's analysis. I think I answered the question earlier about what active role we can play within Ukraine's borders to facilitate the egress of Ukrainian people. I am afraid that there is remarkably little that the international community can do there without the profound risk of it ending up as a NATO versus Russia fight, with all the escalation that that would cause.

The Minister for Europe and North America, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) spoke yesterday to all the neighbouring countries' Governments to make sure that they are aware of the support that the United Kingdom is able and ready to deliver, militarily in terms of troops on the ground, to help process, marshal, facilitate and secure refugees as they arrive in those countries. However, the MOD is just carrying baggage and facilitating; it is our great development and aid experts in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office who will do the really impressive stuff when and if those requests come from neighbouring Governments. We will make sure that we are supporting the FCDO in all its endeavours.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): The tyrant Putin is getting what he said he feared: a thicker and thicker line of defence around the NATO alliance. I am very pleased that we are doubling our commitment to Estonia, principally through the Royal Welsh battlegroup. I am proud that many of those units are based in my constituency, including the Royal Artillery, the Royal Engineers and the Royal Tank regiment. Will my hon. Friend join me in honouring those troops and their families for the sacrifice they are making?

James Heappey: My hon. Friend, his constituents and the service people who live in his constituency should be enormously proud of what the members of 12th Brigade, headquartered in Bulford and with many living in Tidworth, are doing in Estonia today. I paid tribute earlier to the speed at which the Royal Welsh has gone from a training cycle in Germany to driving north into Estonia. I include, too, the many families of the Royal Tank Regiment who will have been expecting their loved ones home in the next couple weeks and now do not know when they will be coming home because the extension of the tour is indefinite. That, too, is worthy of praise. They are fortunate to have such a fantastic advocate in the House of Commons.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Reports indicate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. Can the Minister expand on how that is being tracked so that those who perpetrate these crimes and those who compel them to do so will be held to account?

James Heappey: Absolutely. Yesterday, many Members of the House will have seen reported in the news the summoning not only of the Russian ambassador to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, where the top lines of Her Majesty's Government were delivered, but of the defence attaché to the Ministry of Defence. In the MOD, the discussion was very much around how we are recording the violations of international humanitarian law and the Geneva convention that we have reported, our expectations that Russia will operate under those conventions, and our intent to make sure that it is held to account wherever it does not.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Can my hon. Friend confirm that the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers will today decide to expel Russia from the Council of Europe?

James Heappey: That is somewhat out of my lane, but I have just been told that there are discussions ongoing.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): We know that the attacks on the area surrounding Kyiv originated in Belarus, making Lukashenko complicit in this aggression. I am pleased that Belarus will not go unpunished, and I hope that that is a signal to anyone else thinking of supporting Putin's actions. Given that we have already placed sanctions on Belarus for its appalling human rights record, can the Minister update the House on what these new sanctions are designed to do and how they will be targeted on Belarus?

James Heappey: Mr Deputy Speaker, if you will allow, I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman is written to.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for securing this urgent question. Though we sit safely some 2,000 miles away, the power of media and social media means that we are able to witness the atrocities that Putin's regime is enacting on Ukraine. As we witness them, we witness them in real time, and seeing the advancement take place in such a quick timescale is concerning for us all. Yesterday, in a conversation with some Ukrainian MPs, they were talking about how the next few days in particular will be absolutely critical. I greatly welcome the really strong sanctions that have been put in place so far that the Prime Minister announced yesterday, but one way that we could strike at the economic heart of the Putin regime is by cutting out Russia from the international SWIFT banking system. Although I welcome the Minister's comments so far, can he just confirm once again that this is action that the UK Government support, and will he outline what steps are being taken to encourage our international partners to join us in calling for it?

James Heappey: There are many discussions ongoing over SWIFT. I have said in earlier answers that the view of the Government is clear, but, obviously, it is not something that we can do unilaterally, or even multilaterally with those who agree thus far. It needs to be something that everyone agrees with before that action is taken.

May I pick up on a point that my hon. Friend made about the importance of information manoeuvre? All of us in this House and all the journalists who report on our work have a role in that. Colleagues will I hope reflect on the fact that it is never helpful to share and promote anything that appears to show Ukrainian force movements. Similarly, there is huge power in our hands as western legislators to communicate to the Russian public our values and our belief that brave men and women from Russia are being sacrificed in the name of Putin's hubris.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): My thoughts and prayers of those of the constituents of Rutherglen and Hamilton West are with all those in Ukraine today. What assessment has the Government

made of the risk level posed by Russia to UK interests should Putin attempt to retaliate against sanctions, and what form would those risks take?

James Heappey: The hon. Lady will not be surprised to know that everybody in the Government is acutely aware of the risk of escalation through miscalculation. The risks of retaliation to sanction measures are probably likely to be financial. We have seen today that there is a tit for tat going on—as we have banned Aeroflot so, too, has Russia sought to ban British Airways and Virgin. An epoch change in Euro-Atlantic security has happened over the past 48 hours. Our entire perception of the threat under which we now live is completely different to the one that we were living under just six weeks ago. We should give ourselves some time as a House, as a Government and as a United Kingdom to consider what that means.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): As I said goodbye to my children this morning and wished them a good day at school, my thoughts turned to the mums in Ukraine who now fear for the futures of their children. I was taken by the photos in the *Daily Mail* today of primary schoolchildren in bomb shelters. President Putin has failed to listen to the major international diplomatic efforts and to NATO, the UN and the Ukrainian people; does my hon. Friend think he might listen to the Russian mothers of the soldiers who are now undertaking his aggression?

James Heappey: I hope so, but I fear he is not that sort of man, which is why we need to do everything we can to empower those people with all the information we can get to them about President Putin's complete disregard for the lives of their boys and girls. I was enormously struck by the information we were able to release to the media yesterday about the Russian use of mobile crematoria following its frontlines. I sent a number of friends and colleagues back from Iraq and Afghanistan in flag-draped coffins to be buried with full military honours. Nothing could give their families back the lives of their loved ones, but at least the nation marked that sacrifice. Putin just sends round a mobile crematorium and burns them.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. Like him, when I walked up Whitehall last night, although I of course heard concerns from the demonstrators there, I also saw courage and resilience. It was really quite powerful.

Cyber-attacks, falsehoods and disinformation are President Putin's tools of trade; how can we support Ukrainians to deal with Putin's propaganda?

James Heappey: We are doing everything we can. We need to dust off an awful lot from the playbook of the '70s and '80s. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), has rightly highlighted the important work that the BBC did to promote the voice of freedom during the cold war. We need to give the Ukrainian public hope and to remind them of what they are fighting for—that freedom matters. We take it too much for granted in the west but this is a timely reminder that it is not free. The more we can embolden the Ukrainian public to stand their ground and fight, the better. The

more we can help Russians to understand that there is a better way of living than under President Putin, the better.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I first visited Ukraine when it was part of the authoritarian communist dictatorship of the Soviet Union and I completely understand why the Ukrainians want to breathe free. I revisited and met civil society groups that were trying to rebuild democracy in Ukraine after it left the Soviet Union. I met the then President Viktor Yushchenko shortly after he was poisoned by Putin for the crime of wanting what we in western Europe take for granted. I am glad Putin's military progress is going more slowly than he wished, but it is clearly going to be a long and bloody battle. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that we should be in this for the long haul and that our support for the Ukrainian people and their quest for democracy should not stop when the fighting stops?

James Heappey: Absolutely. This is no time for gotcha-style comments such as, "You said you'd do this on Monday and you've not done it by Wednesday"; this is about making the right decisions to restore Ukrainian sovereignty as quickly as possible while ensuring that President Putin fails and the kleptocracy around him fails. This is behaviour that cannot be tolerated. As the Prime Minister has rightly said, this is behaviour that will be watched with great interest by other authoritarian regimes around the world. It is right that the west pauses and makes good, sound, strategic decisions as the western alliance and does the right thing to draw a line in the sand, saying we still believe in a rules-based international system and liberal, free democracies.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his update this morning. I wish to express the solidarity of the people of Hull with the people of Ukraine at this appalling time, and the utter condemnation of the dictator Putin and his imperialist actions. I want to press the Minister a little more on war crimes. I am pleased to hear that they are being recorded and monitored. In particular, can he say something about the use of sexual violence in warfare and how the Government will record that? What exactly will happen next, so that I understand what the process will be?

James Heappey: I thank the hon. Lady for her important question. It is no consolation to the people of Ukraine, but the British armed forces have given a huge amount of thought to how we must operate in future conflicts, being mindful of women, peace and security, and the challenges that far too many women and children face in conflict broadly pursued between men. I am not sure that much regard is being given to that by the Russians, but I will come back to her if I receive any information to the contrary.

We told the Russian defence attaché yesterday about the work that has been done so far. We will continue to speak to him to make clear our expectations that all parts of humanitarian law and the Geneva convention should be adhered to. We will monitor that as best we can. As the hon. Lady will see from all of the open-source intelligence that is available on social media, this is a very different type of war from even Gulf war one and

two. This is a social media age war, and the outrages are often there. Unfortunately, we cannot always believe what we see, so we are giving much thought to how we properly report and verify, and then make sure that people are held to account in due course.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I want to voice condemnation of Mr Putin on behalf of the residents of Hastings and Rye, and their support of and prayers for the Ukrainians. Ukraine President Zelensky gave a powerful and stirring speech yesterday that called on the Russian people to stand up to President Putin over his illegal invasion, and we have already seen extensive protests across Russia. Can my hon. Friend join President Zelensky in calling on Russian citizens, who have never experienced a real democracy, to stand up against the Kremlin regime and its unprovoked aggression?

James Heappey: I absolutely can. As the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and party leaders across the House have all been clear, our fight is not with the Russian people. In fact, they have our most profound sympathies for the way that they are being disregarded at the moment. I hope that they will see that there is a better way to live in their country, and I hope that they will stand up to President Putin and the kleptocracy that surrounds him. I hope that what the international community does diplomatically, economically, militarily and culturally—so much of the cold war was a competition of values promoted through rival cultures—means that President Putin quickly comes to see that he has miscalculated badly and that, soon enough, his days will be numbered.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): Russia and the Kremlin's efforts in Ukraine are supported not just by a state apparatus, but by a shadowy network of black, grey and opaque interests in terms of finance and supply of arms, not just in Ukraine but elsewhere. Could I commend to the Minister and the wider Treasury Bench an excellent article today on conservativehome.com—not my usual reading—by Dr Kate Ferguson from Protection Approaches? The article has a lot of good, concrete suggestions, because it is important to target not just state support for the actions of the Kremlin in Ukraine, but the wider networks that support the Kremlin's malfeasance elsewhere—I am thinking particularly of Republika Srpska—because tackling those networks of finance and arms support would be a really useful thing for us to do.

James Heappey: I will repay the bipartisan bonhomie by saying that I found an article on the geopolitical situation in Ukraine in the *New Statesman* particularly useful the other day—[*Interruption.*] Not my usual reading. Nor is Con Home, to be fair. The hon. Gentleman is right. This is not just about a military exchange, nor is it about a headline set of sanctions. This is about bringing to bear a whole of Government response that unpicks criminal networks and shell companies across a number of countries, some within multilateral forums in which we can have leverage and others that sit entirely outwith. This will be a complicated business, but unpick it we must because that is how we bring Russia to a place of complete isolation and therefore failure.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I, too, offer my prayers and support for the people of Ukraine on behalf of my Ynys Môn constituents. This outrage against international law is happening just two and a half flying hours from here. I welcome the economic sanctions that have already been put in place. The Minister has mentioned SWIFT, which shows how important that is, but can he confirm to the House that the Prime Minister has stressed to our international partners the importance of cutting Russia off from SWIFT?

James Heappey: The Prime Minister absolutely has, but we have to be clear—I make no apology for showing this understanding, because I think it is important for the House that we do—that the burden of sanctions will fall unequally. The sanctions will be completely meaningless if the regime collapses within six months because people start to fracture away. President Putin wants not just territorial gain, but the fracture of the western alliance and for NATO and article 5 to become meaningless. It is really important that we do the diplomacy urgently, that we succeed and that we bring the international community with us. I do not think it is particularly helpful if people, from the Dispatch Box or anywhere else, give too much opprobrium to countries that clearly have a lot to consider before they sign up to this, as much as I think that they should.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), Sky News is reporting that over 1,000 brave souls—Russian souls—were arrested last night across 54 cities while protesting against the shedding of both young Russian and Ukrainian blood, as the Minister has pointed out. Will the Minister join me in sending solidarity to that protest movement, and will he reiterate to the House that our quarrel is not with the Russian people, but with Putin, and that he has committed a very grave error?

James Heappey: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and may those protests grow, may they flourish and may their voice be impossible to ignore.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I very much welcome the Minister's remarks and those of the shadow Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the

Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey). The Minister has rightly made much of the need to maintain the unity of the western alliance, but can I ask him what efforts have been made to reach out beyond that alliance, in particular to China, to try to discourage China from offering any active or indeed implicit support for what Putin has done?

James Heappey: First, the work of Her Majesty's Government and NATO Governments to reach out beyond the Euro-Atlantic to the rest of the world has been going on at pace, and a number of countries have already joined European and north Atlantic countries in imposing sanctions of their own. The hon. Member is absolutely right that this is a moment of real decision for China. If China wants to be a world leader, it needs to show that it stands for a rules-based international system. Her Majesty's Government will encourage it to take a stand to do so, and I think there is an opportunity this evening in New York for China to show that that is where it stands. If it does not, it will have set out its stall all too clearly, but let us hope that it can be persuaded otherwise.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Yesterday, the European Union imposed sanctions on the Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, and a number of other Russian military officials. Do the UK Government have any plans to do similar?

James Heappey: It is the policy of the Government not to talk about future sanctions, I suspect for fear that that becomes part of the calculation in the Kremlin about what to do or not to do next in a way that may not be entirely helpful. I accept that there is a counter-argument—it could be a deterrent—but I think that, on balance, it is probably right to keep people guessing about what else may be up our sleeve if things do not stop soon.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I would like to thank Mr Bone for his urgent question and the Minister for responding to questions for just under an hour. I would also like to thank all Members for coming, at short notice, to ask the Minister the questions that they have asked today. As has been said, the thoughts and prayers of the British Parliament, and indeed of the British people, are with the people of Ukraine today.

Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill

Proceedings resumed.

11.54 am

Sally-Ann Hart: To go back to the forced marriage unit, it set out additional information on the cases it dealt with in 2020. Of the cases that it provided advice or support to in 2020, 26% involved victims below 18 years of age, 37% involved victims aged 18 to 25 and 9% involved victims with mental capacity concerns, while 79% involved female victims and 21% involved male victims.

Last year, the Government published their tackling violence against women and girls strategy, which sets out a range of actions aimed at tackling acts of violence or abuse that disproportionately affect women and girls, and forced marriage is identified as one such issue. The strategy states that

“the Government remains committed to the goal of ending child marriage in this country. We also recognise the need to signal to other countries that child marriage is something which needs to be tackled.”

The strategy also states:

“Child marriage and having children too early in life can deprive children of important life chances, which is why the Government will support raising the age of marriage and civil partnership in England and Wales from 16 to 18, when an appropriate legislative vehicle becomes available, to help stamp out marriage of minors. The age of 18 is widely recognised as the age at which one becomes an adult, and at which full citizenship rights should be gained.” This Bill is the legislative vehicle to stamp out the marriage of minors, and I wholeheartedly support it and the amendments agreed to today.

11.56 am

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I express my very sincere congratulations to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), who got the ball rolling on this, but principally to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on her heroic work in getting the Bill to this point. My congratulations go to her family in the Gallery—she married at a respectable age—and most of all to the campaigners. It is a tremendous thing that they have done, and I am very much in awe of their campaigning and their work, so many thanks and congratulations.

As my hon. Friend says, if someone is too young to consent to marriage, they are too young to marry. That is an absolutely inviolable point. I am glad that we are honouring the declarations of various international bodies, such as UNICEF, which says that child marriage is a violation of human rights; our own commitments to the sustainable development goals, which committed this country to eliminate child, early and forced marriage; and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which says that there should be no legal way to marry before 18, even with parental consent.

I understand that in 2018, the last year for which data has been collected, there were only 147 marriages of people aged 16 or 17, of whom 80% were female—girls—which tells a tale. Of course, our real concern is about the marriages of children that take place abroad and

can then be recognised here in the UK. I echo the point made by my hon. Friend and many other hon. Members that the legislation is not about criminalising the actions of children; it is about seeking to stop adults organising child marriage.

I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), who spoke so well, passionately and with enormous sincerity about his own mother and the work she did, having been a child bride herself, to found a school in her village to educate girls. What an inspiration she must have been both to her own daughters, who grew up to have professional careers, and to the hon. Member himself. I am grateful to have heard that story.

I applaud the commitment in this legislation to remove what my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire calls the Gretna Green exceptions. I am very pleased to hear that Northern Ireland is consulting on raising the age of marriage, and I hope that Scotland does so, too. I am sure that they will want to align with the sustainable development goals as soon as possible.

I think I speak accurately when I say that I am sure my hon. Friend is not being anti-marriage with this legislation; I know that she has the opposite attitude. We need more marriage in this country. I recognise what the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall said about the life-limiting effects of early marriage, but we can overcompensate as, to a degree, we have in this country. I was dismayed and concerned to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire say that the average age of marriage in this country is now over 30. We have organised the economic and social rewards in our society to put off marriage and children until very late, which I regret. The decline of marriage in our society should be a cause of great regret, as it is a cause of much distress to adults.

We are talking about the rights of children, and the greatest right a child has is to a secure home. We know that marriage is the best means of ensuring this. There are many economic pressures on families in our society, and we have the smallest houses and the longest commutes in Europe. What does that do to family life? We have steadily removed the fiscal support for marriage over the past two generations, and there is a cultural or ideological attack on marriage and the family. There is an assumption that marriage is a patriarchal institution that is inherently abusive and unequal. We have heard stories today of where that can be the case, so we need to remove the danger of fulfilling that false stereotype of marriage.

Marriage is a public act for a reason, and in the Anglican service we are asked to give any just cause or impediment for why a couple should not be married. This Bill removes the possibility of abuse and the opportunity for child marriage. Marriage is fundamentally about the responsibilities of adulthood, and it is the foundation of our society. This Bill restores the integrity of the institution, and I am very proud to support it.

12.1 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on introducing this important Bill, which I support.

[*Virginia Crosbie*]

This is an incredibly complex Bill, and it has been a real team effort. I thank the Ministers and officials, and I pay particular tribute to those in the Public Gallery and other tireless campaigners for raising awareness of this child abuse.

Many of us are parents, and we have all been 16, albeit for some of us it is a distant memory. When I was 16, I thought I would marry David Cassidy. I thought we would have kids called Kylie and Jason and a dog called Freeway. We know how grown-up and responsible we felt at 16, but we also realise just how much we still had to learn and experience at that young age.

In the UK, the average age of marriage is now 30. The fact that official figures for the marriage of 16 and 17-year-olds in the UK continue to fall is evidence that, in general, our society recognises that marriage before the age of 18 is not necessarily the great idea it might seem at that age. It is widely recognised, however, that the official UK data does not reflect the full picture. It does not take account of child marriages enacted through religious and customary ceremonies that are not legally recognised, and there is, of course, currently no way of monitoring the misuse of the loophole that permits parents in the UK to use parental consent to force their children into matrimony.

My hon. Friend's Bill expands existing criminal law on forced marriage to make it illegal for a person to arrange the marriage of anyone under the age of 18 in England and Wales. Importantly, the offence will apply to any religious or civil ceremony of marriage, whether or not it is deemed legally binding in the UK and whether or not coercion is used.

The amendments debated today add further weight to the Bill, making it more targeted and offering more protection to young girls by removing significant loopholes in the current legislation, including deception, in England, Wales and elsewhere. Elsewhere is important, as marriage is devolved and a child can be taken to Northern Ireland or Scotland to marry. I was pleased to support amendment 4, and I state for the record that Northern Ireland is consulting on the age of marriage. I hope Scotland will do the same, as it is important to remove this dangerous loophole so that all children in the UK are covered.

These changes align with the Government's tackling violence against women and girls strategy and will provide unequivocal protection to young women in the UK.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the need to raise the age of marriage. Does she agree that if somebody is judged too young to buy an alcoholic drink in a bar, drive a car or buy a firework, and too young to be trusted to vote in an election or to consent to a marriage, they must be too young to marry?

Virginia Crosbie: I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful words. He makes a powerful statement with which I wholeheartedly agree.

The UN estimates that 110 million girls will marry before their 18th birthday in the next decade. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that there should be no legal way for anyone to marry before they turn 18, even if there is parental consent. In 2016, it made the recommendation that the UK

"raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 years across all devolved administrations, overseas territories and Crown dependencies."

The UN sustainable development goals require all countries to eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation by 2030. It is a duty of the UK Government to take a lead and clearly demonstrate that they take the matter seriously and that child marriage, under any circumstances, is wrong. In doing so, the Bill will not just serve the girls of the UK but help to tackle child marriage globally.

It is a privilege to be the Member of Parliament for Ynys Môn. I entered politics to try to make tomorrow a better day for as many as possible and to try to be a voice for those who have no voice, particularly children. We now have a Bill to protect some of the most vulnerable in this country and around the world, and I am proud to give it my support.

12.6 pm

Mr Holden: I am honoured to be able to speak today and I was delighted to serve on the Committee with my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) in the earlier stages of the Bill. It is great to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), for Devizes (Danny Kruger) and for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) and others who have made great speeches.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire knows, the Bill will have to go through the other place as well, so it is great to see Baroness Sugg in the Gallery, who has been great in supporting me in some of the legislation that I have been pushing for on banning hymenoplasty and virginity testing. I know that my hon. Friend has also been working with Payzee, Karma Nirvana and others who are also in the Gallery, who have been supportive in pushing this legislation forwards and in pushing for rights for women and girls in many other areas.

We need to concentrate on the small number of people who are using the exemption at the moment. They are not the children themselves, but their parents and other adults who are pushing them into it. The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), in his superb speech, mentioned the importance of education and how people should be pursuing objectives in their lives before making big decisions such as marriage. It was a powerful speech and it is great that the Bill has fantastic cross-party support.

I am also delighted that the amendments have been made to the Bill, especially on the issue of deceiving a child, and it is great that progress has been made to tighten up the amendments relating to judicial scope. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire referred to, the Gretna Green amendment, which relates to domiciliary versus habitual residency, is important and plays into what hon. Members have spoken about relating to Scotland and Northern Ireland. I hope that those devolved nations look at the recommendations of

the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child and at the superb letter from the Joint Committee on Human Rights by the Mother of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who emphasised the points that were made and how they support the actions taken in the Bill.

As hon. Members have mentioned, changing the law is one thing but changing attitudes is another. As with my amendments to the Health and Care Bill about virginity testing and hymenoplasty, I hope making this change to the law will actually drive real cultural changes. We are showing leadership by changing the law in this House, but only by embedding those cultural changes will we see changes not only in this country but across the rest of the world.

This is one of the many measures from Back Benchers that this Government have been supporting. I hope that they will do more on women's rights, which are often one of those things where battles feel that they may have already been won, but that is definitely not the case. As we have seen with various private Members' Bills and amendments to other Bills over the past year or two, there is still further to go. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire on doing what she has done and thank Members from across the House for their support for her. I hope that we can all continue to push forward on some of these issues, because these battles are still to be won.

12.10 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Let me start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) for his speech and, in particular, what he said about his mother. I was struck by how heartfelt it was and by the opportunity that she gave. My biggest concern was for those who are not so fortunate as to have such an opportunity, which is why this legislation is so important. That leads me on to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), whom I congratulate on her strength and ability to bring the technical aspects forward and on having the courage of her conviction to stand up and make the statement, "This is wrong." I wholeheartedly support her.

I got married recently, in 2019. It took me seven years to pop the question and 18 months to organise the wedding.

Mr Virendra Sharma: Was this at 16 years or older than that?

Dr Evans: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind compliments. I am the tender age of 39, so there is still a bit of time to go there. Time does pass fast for those who need to wait two years, although my wife may have wished the seven years had passed more quickly.

To me, there are three parts to becoming married: the legal aspect; the religious aspect; and the declaration to one's friends and family. I am not religious, and I had a legal wedding held in a registry office, with a celebration with my friends and family two weeks later. When I went into that legal office, I was struck by the interviews and questions, with me and my partner being separated in order to find out what was going on, how we were stepping into this and what thought process we had

gone through. This was done to see whether there was any coercion. That is what brought my attention to this Bill, because it struck me that it is so important to do that. I thought, "If this is happening to adults, what must happen to children at this point?" The fact that the legislation was not there to protect people was a huge concern for me.

So I am so pleased to see this legislation being brought forward, especially with the extension to the age of 18. Other Members have made the point that we are coalescing around the age of 18 for education, tobacco, tattoos, alcohol and indeed voting. So this seems sensible to me, because that is where we are defining the end of childhood and moving on to later life.

Mr Holden: In the past year or so, we have also increased the age at which people can buy a lottery ticket to 18. So we are moving in this direction right across the piece, and that recognition of adulthood at 18 is at the core of all my hon. Friend is saying and of the Bill.

Dr Evans: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend on that. There is a debate as to whether joining the armed forces should move from 16 to 18 as well, in order to join it all up, from voting to tobacco, alcohol and gambling. Eighteen seems a sensible place to call it, and the House should be able to agree on that.

When I came to look at the Bill, there were concerns about it: would we just drive the practice further underground? How will it actually be tackled? And how will it be enforced? I am so pleased to hear that the provision is being extended to cover anyone who has ever lived in the UK, because that is really important in order to cut out that loophole. I was also pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire so eloquently make the point about the importance of education on this in schools. I would go one step further, because, as a GP, I know it is really important that social services and healthcare workers, who will often see people at their most vulnerable and have the opportunity to pick up on these things, are aware that this is still a problem. We may be talking only about 150 or so cases, but that still means 150 or so lives that could in theory be ruined. Medical professionals and social services should be able to pick up on that and to have the training to be able to do so. There is a concern about whether this is a chicken and egg situation, but we have to start somewhere. I am pleased that the legislation will lead into changing the culture that my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) has so honestly talked about.

Having a Minister sat in front of me when it comes to talking about the issue of marriage, it would be remiss of me not to lead on to a couple of further points. Here I wish to draw some parallel with what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), who talked about the institution of marriage. I entirely agree with him that we should be encouraging more people to get married.

The pandemic put a spotlight on marriage and the way in which we do it—how we relaxed the legislation on where it can happen and what it can look like. That is a really important thing, because the culture around marriage is changing, as we have heard in this debate. Going forward, there is an argument for recognising

[Dr Luke Evans]

humanist marriages in our current culture, and I was very grateful that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), replied to a letter I wrote about humanist marriages, to say:

“As I expressed during the recent Westminster Hall debate on humanist marriage in England and Wales, marriage will always be one of our most important institutions, and we have a duty to consider the implications of any changes to the law in this area very carefully.

The Government remains committed to considering the case for more comprehensive and enduring reform to marriage law once the Law Commission has completed its fundamental review of the law in this area. The Law Commission will present options for reforms to modernise marriage law, including how marriage by humanist and other non-religious belief organisations could be incorporated into a revised or new scheme that is simple, fair and consistent for all groups. The Government will carefully consider the Law Commission’s recommendations when the final report is published.”

I wholeheartedly agree with that statement, because there is an opportunity here to address some of the religious and cultural aspects of marriage as one of those three pillars that I mentioned. To me, the fundamental part was the declaration in front of my friends and family. That may well be a religious aspect for other people, but we have a chance to create a framework that incorporates all the good work of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire into a wider set of legislation. I hope the Government are listening, because there is a real opportunity to give people the opportunity to enter into marriage and provide that stability for their family, their children, and of course their community. I wholeheartedly support the Bill.

12.16 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on having brought forward this Bill. She has campaigned tirelessly on this issue for many years, and I commend her for stepping into the breach and expertly guiding this legislation through Committee to today’s Third Reading. I was privileged to support her in serving on the Bill Committee, and I am pleased to be here to support her today. I know from my own experience that bringing forward a private Member’s Bill is a hugely rewarding process, particularly when it stands a real chance of becoming law, but it can also be a challenging one, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on reaching this stage. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) for the work that he has done, not just in support of the Bill but on child protection more generally. It was good to see him in his place earlier.

The most important thing to note about this Bill is that it is not an attack on the institution of marriage; it offers marriage significant respect, aiming to ensure that those who enter into a marriage are fully able to judge whether it is the right choice for them. The age of 18 is an appropriate point at which to set a benchmark for such a lifelong commitment, and not before. While statistics show that child marriage primarily affects girls, it must be remembered that this issue can affect boys, too. The Bill is essential to protecting all children, no matter their sex.

Child marriage can have a devastating impact on vulnerable children, denying them the opportunity to fully participate in society. We know that children who are subject to child marriage have significantly worse opportunities and life chances, including a lack of education and job opportunities; the removal of independence; serious physical and mental health problems; and developmental difficulties for children born to young mothers, alongside an increased risk of domestic abuse and divorce. Effectively, the experience for many who are coerced into child marriage is the entrenchment of poverty and being limited to a life of low education. Banning child marriage, which this Bill effectively does, will give those who would have been vulnerable to it a greater chance to fully engage in our society, safeguarding their future so that from the age of 18 they will not have been denied the same opportunities afforded to others.

In 2022, education or vocational training is compulsory up to the age of 18, and the average age of marriage—as we have heard—is now 30. It seems entirely outdated that provision for marriage at 16 remains on our statute books, allowing children to enter into a lifelong commitment as significant as marriage before they have even completed their schooling. However, it is not surprising that the system is not fit for the modern age, given that our current laws date back to 1929.

It is essential that we ensure that children have enough time to grow and mature before entering marriage or civil partnership, which is potentially a lifelong commitment with significant legal and financial consequences. I am delighted that the Bill seeks to close loopholes and address the practice of child marriage in England and Wales while modernising legislation so that it reflects today’s society.

I have already mentioned non-registered religious and cultural marriages that take place in the UK. Indeed, laws on marriage apply only to registered marriage ceremonies; the only requirement on religious marriages is that they are not forced marriages. However, that in itself poses a problem. To prove a forced marriage, the courts must find that there has been coercion or that undue pressure has been exerted on someone to enter into the marriage. That means that, in effect, in the case of child marriages, the child would need to give evidence that may condemn their parents, but children aged 16 are unlikely to go against their parents who look after and bring them up. In effect, they cannot act independently, so the child forced into a marriage will, more likely than not, say that they consented to the child marriage.

I am pleased that the Bill rightly covers those unregistered religious marriages. It will make arrangements so that any marriage, be it religious or civil, that involves a person under the age of 18 will automatically be categorised as a forced marriage. That categorisation will remove the ability of someone to claim that consent was given. We should be mindful of that get-out in the coming months as we consider legislation covering a ban on conversion therapy.

The Bill will ensure that those who facilitate or encourage child marriage will be committing an offence and rightly face criminal charges. I am delighted that it will ensure that those who attempt to coerce children into marriage will face the consequences of their actions. They will face prison time, including a maximum sentence of 12 months in prison, or a fine—or both—in the magistrates court, or up to seven years in prison in the Crown court.

The Bill also tackles child marriages that take place abroad. All too often, a child can be taken abroad to be forced into a marriage that they are in no way old enough to consent to. Under our current legislation, we would be unable to punish those who take a child abroad for marriage unless the child was willing to testify that they had been forced into it. The Bill will close that loophole. Under its provisions, all marriages of under-18s that take place abroad will not be legally recognised in England and Wales if either party is domiciled here. That will not only act as a further obstacle to those seeking a child abroad to marry, but make it clear to professionals such as teachers and social workers that they should report children travelling abroad to marry if they are made aware of it.

I am proud that the UK is committed to achieving by 2030 the UN sustainable development goals, one of which requires all countries to eliminate the practice of child, early and forced marriages. We cannot criticise child marriage around the world and encourage other nations to stamp out that harmful practice until we have stamped it out in our country. The Bill will rightly allow us to live up to our international obligations.

I am delighted to be here to support my hon. Friend's Bill. It will bring our legislation into the 21st century and ensure that we afford vulnerable children the protection that they deserve from forced and damaging child marriages. I hope that it will pass its Third Reading today and secure its place on the statute book.

12.23 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for her outstanding commitment to this issue. I am grateful to be here to respond to this important debate on behalf of the Opposition. It has been good to see significant cross-party co-operation and consensus throughout the Bill's stages. I support the comments made by hon. Members and the amendments that will ensure that the law cannot be bypassed and that the police will have the powers to prosecute despite lack of evidence of coercion or violence. I hope that the right guidance and training will follow for both the police and the CPS.

I, too, commend the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). It was an incredibly powerful and passionate speech about a very personal issue involving his mother and about why we must ban child marriage. In 2018, fewer than 150 fifteen and sixteen-year-olds entered marriage, out of a total of 235,000 marriages in England and Wales. But these figures understate the issue. Allowing marriage as young as 16 encourages those who support child marriage at even younger ages and has the potential to set a very dangerous precedent. Raising the age to 18 draws a clear line between child and adult. This Bill ensures that there are no circumstances under which a child can be legally married or enter a civil partnership under the age of 18—something that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child asked for back in 2016.

Barnardo's, the children's charity, has raised concerns that marriage for children aged 16 or 17 can result in their experiencing domestic violence and sexual abuse, and missing out on important educational opportunities. The purpose of the Bill is to address those concerns and the concern that marriage at such a young age can leave

vulnerable young people open to coercion and forced marriage. Sixteen and 17-year-olds make up over 10% of forced marriages. These vulnerable children need our protection, and I am grateful to be here on behalf of the Opposition to support the Bill.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights defines child marriage as

"any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age."

It defines forced marriage as

"a marriage in which one and/or both parties have not personally expressed their full and free consent to the union."

The high commissioner's view is that all child marriages equate to forced marriages, as a child cannot give full, free and informed consent.

This issue overwhelmingly impacts women and girls. An astonishing 80% of those who married as children in 2018 were girls. As shadow Minister for victims, I have heard at first hand the devastating impact that forced marriages have on young women. I spoke to one young woman recently who bravely shared her story with me. She was terrified, fleeing from her forced marriage—forced to flee her family home, forced to hide from her parents and forced now to remain in hiding. Luckily, she is supported by a wonderful organisation, which I will not name for security reasons.

There are many great organisations out there helping young women like that, but what about the women and girls who are not supported by anyone—the ones who are all alone, trapped in these marriages? I hope that the Government's forthcoming victims Bill can help to address those issues, too, and increase the protection of these vulnerable individuals by consolidating their rights in statute, as the Opposition outlined in our response to the Government's consultation. If victims are made aware of their rights, it will allow those who wish to leave marriages that they have been forced into to be supported.

There is also the issue of individuals who do not report forced marriage. Specially trained staff in schools are absolutely vital in looking out for the signs of forced marriage, but there is a concerning lack of similar training for registry office staff, as has been mentioned. Only about a fifth of reports to the forced marriage unit in 2019 were from the victims themselves. Most reports—64%—were from professionals, such as those in education, social services, and the legal and health sectors, which makes training and support for those sectors much more important.

I am pleased that the Government are supporting the Bill, but they have the opportunity to go further and support victims of forced marriages in the forthcoming victims Bill. The current law is outdated, and family life has moved on significantly since its inception. The fact that a young person must remain in education until he or she is 18 but can marry at 16 is bewildering, and has no place in the 21st century. The Bill is a crucial and substantial step forward in correcting that situation and, on behalf of the Opposition, I wish it well in its remaining stages.

12.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Tom Pursglove): Let me begin by again offering my wholehearted support to my hon.

[Tom Pursglove]

Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), who has been a persistent and tireless campaigner on this issue for many years. She has run an exemplary campaign, which Members throughout the House will no doubt want to study and monitor for their own purposes in the years ahead when introducing their own private Members' legislation.

I pay tribute to colleagues on both sides of the House for their contributions, not just today but throughout the Bill's passage, and for the constructive spirit in which these matters have been approached. We have seen the House at its very best. I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) for the way in which he talked about his own personal experiences and those of his mother. What an inspirational story that is for all of us, and one on which we will all no doubt reflect in the days ahead: it was very much a forerunner of this Bill. I think it important also to place on record that my hon. Friend's campaign has been so persistent and so successful that she has also had brilliant backing from both the Home Secretary and the Deputy Prime Minister in getting the Bill to this stage.

Having the privilege of being the Minister responsible for marriage and divorce, I am particularly aware of how necessary these provisions are. Many people are surprised when I inform them that child marriage is still legal in this country. As our society changes for the better, it is important that our laws are kept up to date. The Bill ensures that children can no longer legally enter into a marriage or civil partnership in England and Wales. It also tackles unregistered marriage ceremonies by expanding the offence of forced marriage to make it illegal to arrange for a child to enter marriage where coercion is not used. The Bill is taking positive action to protect children. Our objective throughout has been to protect as many children as possible from this harm.

The changes to the legal age of marriage only impact individuals who wish to marry aged 16 or 17 on a temporary basis; as soon as they turn 18, they can get married if they choose. In the meantime, they can focus more fully on tasks such as completing their education, which will help to maximise their future potential and life chances. The Bill also promotes equal opportunities. We know that girls are more likely to marry as children, and therefore more likely to be impacted by the adverse effects of child marriage that my hon. Friend helpfully set out.

The Children's Commissioner recently carried out "The Big Ask", a national survey of England's children. When asked about their worries, some children reported their fear of being pressurised into a marriage that they did not want. No child should have to face the horror of forced marriage. As my hon. Friend said, it is not the norm. Pressurising a child in this way is abhorrent and we should call it out for what it is. Through the Bill, of course, we are taking action not just to call it out, but to have in place a strong legal framework to deal with that abuse.

A marriage or civil partnership should only be formed if both parties freely consent and are properly able to make that choice. A family not formed on that basis is unlikely to bring benefits to its members or to society, and may be more likely to lead to issues such as domestic abuse and emotional distress. Increasing the age of

marriage to 18 is also likely to reduce the risk of relationship breakdown owing to the increased age and maturity of the parties involved. Marriage is an important institution that we want to protect and strengthen as much as possible, as was so eloquently set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans).

I will now turn to the specific asks of Government made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire. I agree with her that it is vital we commence these changes as soon as possible and I know that officials are working on implementation plans. However, as much as I would like to, I cannot make a commitment that the Bill will be ready to be commenced by the school summer holidays. I am keen, however, to expedite as far as feasibly possible the work we need to do to implement the Bill.

The changes made by the Bill require a set of implementation activities, including updating the General Register Office's IT systems and amending secondary legislation. Forced marriage changes will impact multiple agencies, requiring updates to guidance, systems and processes. Those would most likely affect the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, the courts, the Prison Service and the probation service. We also need to make sure that the public are given plenty of notice that the law is changing and to be mindful of those who may be planning weddings which were perfectly legal at the time that notice was given.

As the Bill would not reach Royal Assent until later this Session, the ask would therefore be commencement within a few months, and I fear that that is too steep a mountain to climb. Much implementation activity cannot happen until Royal Assent, because until then we cannot be certain that the Bill will become law or what its exact shape will be. Like my hon. Friend, however, I have every confidence in Baroness Sugg, who I know will shepherd the Bill effectively through the other place to make sure no time is wasted at that end in getting the legislation into law. At our end, I give my hon. Friend my assurance that we will commence as soon as we possibly can, but just as it is important that this law starts protecting children as soon as possible, it is also important that it does not come in until the relevant statutory agencies are properly set up to deal with it, because there would be nothing worse than a case which was mishandled through lack of knowledge or gaps in the underlying systems. She knows I always like to drive a hard bargain. I am mindful of timeliness and I can assure her there will be no needless or unnecessary delay.

I can also reassure my hon. Friend that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and I will both work with the Department for Education to ensure that we raise awareness in schools about the changes in the law. I understand that next week she will be meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), the Minister for children and families, to discuss that very issue. As with so many changes in the realm of hidden harms such as forced marriage, changes in the law are a necessary but by no means sufficient condition to achieve change on the ground. I can also tell her, by way of an update, that I recently had a meeting with the Children's Commissioner where I raised this very issue. It is fair to say that my hon. Friend would be pushing at

an open door in terms of engaging with her, because she has been exceptionally supportive of the Bill and is keen to help on awareness. I am grateful to the Children's Commissioner for her support for this work.

Mr Virendra Sharma: This is an historic move in British history and it will be remembered for many years to come, so can the Minister look at naming the Bill the Pauline Latham Bill?

Tom Pursglove: The hon. Gentleman is one of the most decent and incredibly kind Members of this House. I have to say, however, that I do not think that that is a decision I will have to make, as it is highly likely that the Bill will regularly be referred to as the Pauline Latham Bill and rightly so. All of us in this House are incredibly proud of her for the work she has done in advancing this cause. I think that decision may be taken out of our hands, because that will just be the term by which the legislation will be referred to. We are grateful to her—we really are.

I can confirm that the multi-agency guidance which the Home Office produces on forced marriage will be updated to take account of the changes to the law. That contains chapters for different professions, including the police, teachers and social workers, and we will update all of them to reflect the amendments in the law. I am sure that, as they always do, the College of Policing will update operational guidance for the police in line with the changes to our guidance. While it is not for me to promise changes to the CPS guidance, as the CPS is independent, it will always make necessary changes to its guidance to reflect changes in the law, and I see no reason why it would not do so in this case, too. By way of trying to be constructive, I will undertake to ensure awareness among my ministerial colleagues in different parts of Government, so that the conversations they have with those various agencies in the months ahead touch on this issue, and underline the importance we place on it and the need to get these things right.

Mr Holden: One issue we are trying to address today is the cultural issue. Will the Minister commit to at least examining having a proper awareness campaign when the law changes, with a good round of media interviews from Ministers, and reaching out into communities where we know this issue is more prevalent than in others? It is important that we ram home the message from this united House not just that there is a change in the law, but that we are trying to drive a broader cultural change in society.

Tom Pursglove: Having been his Whip, I know my hon. Friend is always brimming with ideas about initiatives that the Government can take forward. He makes a rather good suggestion and it is certainly something I am mindful of and want to take away and consider. Throughout the passage of the Bill, we have heard extremely difficult testimony from individuals who have suffered the pain and trauma of these sorts of marriages. They have talked bravely about the impact that that has had on them, their families and their lives. It is important that we help them to share their stories in a way that they are comfortable with, to ensure that we drive awareness of these changes. I am always keen to do media interviews about positive announcements, as he will appreciate, but often hearing directly from survivors

of this sort of unacceptable abuse is the most powerful testimony and will be inspirational in generating that greater awareness, ensuring that people know exactly the signs to spot and articulating the measures that we are taking to clamp down on this.

On the Scotland and Northern Ireland plea, I must respect that the devolved Administrations are independent. Indeed, we have taken great care to respect the devolution settlement, hence the amendments made today, ensuring that the law covers only those situations where there is a clear link to England and Wales. We in England and Wales are levelling up, tackling the awful practice of child marriage. I have put on the record in the House, and will repeat now, my wholehearted hope that Scotland and Northern Ireland will follow our lead. Colleagues in Edinburgh and Belfast cannot fail to have heard the unanimous backing for these vital measures in the House. We have all committed to eliminating child marriage by 2030 under the UN sustainable development goals. Setting a strong example at home will also help to tackle the issue globally. Leadership by example is crucial in that regard.

I have no doubt that the passionate campaign that we have seen in Westminster will now focus its energies on Edinburgh and Belfast with great vigour. I hope that Scottish and Northern Irish colleagues in this House, from all parties, will want to take this forward and champion the agenda in the devolved areas. That is important advocacy. They ought to consider taking up that baton to help the campaign in any way they can.

In closing, I reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire for introducing this important Bill. I also reiterate, wholeheartedly, the Government's support for it. It is an enormous privilege to be the victims Minister. One reason for that is that I come across exceptional people who have been through so much and show great courage, despite the trauma, distress, sadness, hurt and upset that they feel. Often, they put others first to ensure that the harm, suffering and distress that they feel does not happen to others. A remarkable group of people have been involved in this work and I wish briefly to pay tribute to and thank them. Naomi, Natasha, Farhana, Sara, Payzee, Charlotte, Lubna and Nana—thank you for the work you have done on this issue. Your advocacy has been extraordinary. I have no doubt that the work that you have done, the courage that you have shown and the effort that you have put in will change the lives of thousands of young people in our country for the better.

I am delighted that we are joined in the House today by the Lathams. I thank Derek, Tracey, Poppy and Harry for your superb support for wife, for mum, for grandma who has done something very special. We are hugely grateful to her and incredibly proud of her, and I know that you will be as well. We just all join in that tribute.

This may not be a long Bill, but the impact is far-reaching, and many lives will be changed for the better because of it. On what is a dark day in our world, this is a chink of light and one that all of us in this House and across the country can welcome. With that, I thank my officials for the work that they have done to bring this forward: the Bill manager, Alice Harrison; Andrew Lewis; Rachel Stark; Nicola Henderson; and Joanna Norris as well as those in my private office, particularly Tomos Macdonald, and Minister Maclean's private office as well. Everybody

[Tom Pursglove]

who has been involved in the Bill can be incredibly proud of it. I wish it a speedy passage through the House of Lords and I commend it to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): It is now my pleasure to call my friend who apparently is going to give her name to an Act—perhaps.

11.46 am

Mrs Latham: With the leave of the House, I would like to say a few words of thanks. It has been a strange day. I cannot remember any time when a Bill has been interrupted by an urgent question and then continued, so it has been a little strange today. I thank those who came to support me for sitting through not just the Bill, which has been exceptionally long, but the urgent question, too.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members in this House who have contributed to today's debate, and also to other debates that we have had through the passage of this Bill. It has been a pleasure to hear the resounding support to end child marriage from every corner of the House. As many people know, I have campaigned on this issue for many years—I think it is five years, but it might be six or even four; I forget. The Bill has been supported every step of the way by the charities that make up the Girls Not Brides UK coalition—Karma Nirvana, the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation, the Independent Yemen Group, the Foundation of Women's Health Research and Development and others. They have been tireless in their support. I am delighted that they can be here to witness this House vote to end child marriage. Like the Minister, I thank them for all their hard work, without which we would not be at this stage today. They have been tireless and they have kept us focused to make sure that this is the best Bill that we could possibly have.

I particularly want to thank two of our amazing ambassadors: Payzee Mahmood and Farhana Raval. They have been incredibly brave telling their stories and inspirational for many of us who have gone on this journey. They have shone a light on the terrible consequences of child marriage. I thank Payzee and Farhana for their support.

On the legal side, I must pay tribute to two superb barristers who work with the group: Naomi Wiseman and Dr Charlotte Proudman. We also have two little ones up in the Public Gallery who have also sat through pretty much most of this today. They will not be allowed to get married when they get to 16; they will have to wait until they are 18. The support of Naomi Wiseman and Dr Charlotte Proudman in drafting and their technological knowledge was instrumental in getting the wording of the Bill exactly right.

I have already mentioned the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon.

Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). Without their advocacy within Government, their incredible support and their willingness to listen time and again to my representations—they must have thought, "Oh, she's at it again"—we could not have got this Bill to the excellent stage in which it now finds itself. Their officials have also been tenacious, hard-working and supportive, and I thank them for engaging with me and the team of experts at Girls Not Brides UK.

The Clerk of the private Members' Bills has been incredibly helpful, indeed probably more so than even he realises and I am grateful to him and all the House staff, including those in the Library and the Public Bill Office, who have enabled the progress so far of this piece of legislation. Without Government support, this Bill would have gone nowhere; private Members' Bills get nowhere without Government support. When I went to see the Prime Minister, he suddenly got what I was trying to do, understood it, supported it, and made sure that Ministers supported it, so I am very grateful to him for his incredible support. I have even had a note from him congratulating me on getting to this stage, so he watches what is going on. I am also grateful to those on the Opposition Front Bench. The shadow Minister gave a very supportive speech on Second Reading in November and demonstrated solidarity with this important cause.

From the start of this process, as a ten-minute rule Bill in the Session before last, via Second Reading and Committee, there have been simply too many parliamentary supporters for me to name individually, but I wish to thank my colleagues on the International Development Committee, including the Chair, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). She cannot be here today, but she has been a passionate advocate for the cause throughout the process. I also wish to thank, along with many others, the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), who has been a constant source of support. He never hesitated when I asked, "Will you support this?" He said, "Yes" immediately. Like many of the best achievements in the House, this has truly been a cross-party effort.

Finally, I wish to place on record once again my gratitude to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid). As Members will know, he was drawn in the ballot for the private Members' Bills. I have never been drawn in the ballot, but he was on his first time of entering. I was so delighted when he was appointed to the Government as then he could not take up his place, and he graciously gave up his slot to me rather than turn down the job. Without that gesture, the Bill might not have got here today. It only remains for me to say thank you and good luck to Baroness Sugg, who has watched from the Gallery throughout today and will steer the Bill through the other place. I can think of no more appropriate champion for it and I am delighted to place it in her capable hands. Let us put a stop to child marriage once and for all.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Pension Schemes (Conversion of Guaranteed Minimum Pensions) Bill

Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered.

Third Reading

12.53 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

As I said on Second Reading, the Bill will help occupational pension schemes correct a basic issue of men and women being treated differently in contracted-out defined benefit occupational pension schemes because of the impact of having a guaranteed minimum pension, or GMP. It will help pension schemes to meet their legal obligations and ensure that people do not receive less pension income than they would have done had they been the opposite sex. In other words, it will help schemes to correct a situation that is fundamentally unfair.

I am proud to have brought the Bill before the House. I was delighted to hear the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) announce on Second Reading that the Government would support it. The support that the Bill has attracted from across the House is testament to both its importance and its essential simplicity. It makes a few changes to pensions legislation that will help occupational pension schemes to resolve a long-term issue of unequal treatment.

The pensions industry has itself been asking for the measures in this Bill, and as a result of those measures, schemes will be better able to use the GMP conversion process to correct for the differences in pension outcomes for men and women that have arisen as a result of GMPs. It is very pleasing that hon. Members from across the House have recognised and responded to this need.

For the benefit of those who were not present for the previous stages of this Bill, I will give a short recap of its background and purpose. GMPs are the minimum pension that certain occupational pension schemes must provide to their members. Occupational pension schemes that were contracted out of the additional state pension on a salary-related basis between April 1978 and April 1997 are required to pay their members GMPs as a floor that the occupational pension cannot fall below. The intention was that when reaching the age at which GMPs become payable, the amount of GMP that a member of a contracted-out scheme would have accrued would be broadly similar in value to the additional state pension they would have received if they had not been contracted out. Rather than paying a higher rate of national insurance contributions to build up rights to additional state pension, members of salary-related contracted-out schemes built up rights to a GMP.

However, the way that GMPs were accrued by people means that they differ for men and women, due to historical differences of treatment in the pensions system based on people's sex. People with the same employment history can therefore have different amounts of GMP depending on whether they are a man or a woman, even if they do exactly the same job for the same length of time at the same salary. Both men and women can lose

out on pension income in retirement as a result of their sex: it is not as simple as one sex losing out consistently over the other. I have discussed this issue in this House several times now, and I still find it difficult to believe that people can lose out on even a small amount of pension income purely because of these differences.

Fortunately, successive UK Governments have made clear for over three decades that occupational pension schemes need to equalise pensions accrued since then to correct for these effects of GMPs. The High Court confirmed in 2018 that occupational pension schemes must equalise pensions accrued since 17 May 1990 to address the effects of those differences. Occupational pension schemes are therefore required to undertake a process known as GMP equalisation, correcting people's overall pensions to ensure that they are not lower than they would have been had the person been of the opposite sex. That is why the Department for Work and Pensions published a suggested methodology based on the overall value of the pension, which relies on the process of converting GMPs to normal scheme benefits. It is elements of this process that the Bill before us addresses.

Unfortunately, correcting people's pensions in this way is proving a very slow process. There are a number of ways in which the task of GMP equalisation could be approached. One way, for example, would be to look at the pension in each year and compare what a man and a woman would have received, and pay the higher of the two. The problem with this approach is that it would result in members getting more overall than either a man or a woman would have received before the equalisation process. This would have been prohibitively expensive for schemes, and would in itself be unfair.

The DWP, working with the pensions industry, proposed a methodology based on the overall value of the pension, set out in guidance for pension schemes to use. This methodology involved converting the GMP into normal scheme benefits using the existing legislative framework. The industry agrees with that approach, but is worried that the current legislation that supports the conversion process has some gaps that the industry believes will leave it exposed to legal risk or potential accusations that it has not equalised correctly.

For example, we need to clarify the way in which survivor benefits are treated in the conversion legislation. The industry has pointed out that the legal requirements for survivor benefits when GMPs are converted are not clear enough. Survivor benefits are the benefits paid out to a scheme member's widow, widower, or surviving civil partner when the member dies. Schemes need legal certainty and a clear framework before they can move forward with this process. This Bill seeks to provide that essential certainty to schemes.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): In the last 10 years since it was introduced, the automatic enrolment scheme has enabled 4,000 of my constituents on Ynys Môn to establish a pension. I congratulate the hon. Member on this important Bill. Does she agree that it addresses uncertainties in the current legislation and removes the risk of misapplication?

Margaret Ferrier: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention and I absolutely agree. This Bill is set to remove those uncertainties so that these occupational

[Margaret Ferrier]

schemes can get on with the equalisation process that they have always known they should be carrying out anyway.

The Bill removes the text in the Pension Schemes Act 1993 that sets out what survivor benefits following GMP conversion must look like, and replaces it with a power to set out those conditions in regulations. When this provision was discussed in Committee, I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) to confirm that the Government would consult on the content of those regulations. I am pleased to say that he agreed to that.

Before converting GMPs, pension schemes are required to get the consent of the sponsoring employer that funds the scheme, which might look to be reasonable, considering that the sponsoring employer has invested a lot of money to ensure that scheme members receive a decent retirement income. Unfortunately, it is not that straightforward, because current legislation does not account for all possible situations, such as where the original sponsoring employer is no longer in business. Again, the Bill removes the requirement for employer consent in the Pension Schemes Act 1993 and replaces it with a power to set out in regulations the details of the relevant persons who must consent to the conversion. I am again pleased to say that the Minister confirmed in Committee that the Government would also consult on the content of those regulations.

Finally, the Bill removes the requirement that pension schemes have to notify Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs when they carry out a GMP conversion exercise. In Committee, the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) very reasonably asked what checks would be in place if HMRC no longer had to be notified that people's GMPs have been converted into other scheme benefits. I would like to reassure the hon. Member that the removal of the requirement that a scheme must notify HMRC if it converts GMP rights into other rights was requested by HMRC. The notification requirement was not a check by HMRC on whether an individual scheme had carried out a GMP conversion correctly. Responsibility for the accuracy of the conversion lies with the pension scheme's trustees, and they must take advice on certain matters from the scheme actuary.

The requirement to notify HMRC if a conversion has been carried out is simply a legacy of the time when members of occupational pension schemes paid a lower rate of national insurance if they were contracted out. Because both the employer and the scheme members were paying lower national insurance contributions, HMRC used to need to keep detailed records of all contracted-out schemes. However, when contracting out ended for all occupational pension schemes in April 2016, with the introduction of the new state pension, employers and members no longer paid a lower level of national insurance. HMRC therefore no longer needs to be notified.

As this information is no longer required by HMRC, from 2019 it has said to schemes that it no longer requires them to notify it if GMP conversion has been carried out. However, because it is still a requirement of the Pension Schemes Act 1993, schemes should normally still submit such information to HMRC, despite its

having no use or need for it. As I said, it costs schemes time and money to notify HMRC, it costs HMRC time and money to process the notifications, and there is no need beyond the current requirement in the 1993 Act for any of this time and money to be spent.

I reiterate to the House that the Bill does not impose any new costs or requirements on occupational pension schemes or their sponsoring employers. As I said, affected schemes have known that they need to equalise pensions for the effect of GMP for many years, and they should have been planning for equalisation. The Bill will simply help pension schemes that decide to use GMP conversion to do what they need to do to ensure payments are fair. I have engaged positively with representatives from the pensions industry, who have long called for these changes and welcome the Bill's provisions. I am extremely pleased and proud that my Bill will help schemes that want to use GMP conversion to correct for the effects of this issue, and I am delighted by the cross-party support I have received so far and again today.

1.5 pm

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on bringing forward this Bill and I thank her for allowing me to participate in her debate.

Pensions are integral to our society; they are a means whereby individuals can reap the benefits of their hard work throughout their life, in old age. When someone reaches an age where they are no longer earning, they need an income to survive, and this is where a pension kicks in. It is a payment that, we hope, allows a retired individual to have economic freedom. It is a point in our lives we should all be looking forward to. People often fall into the trap of thinking that they are able to save enough money to comfortably live when they are no longer earning. Unfortunately, a lot of the time they do not save enough to enjoy the standard of living they hoped for in retirement.

A state pension is a great starting point but if, like me, they want to enjoy the luxuries of old age, they would need to think about investing in a pension scheme. It is a long-term savings plan with additional benefits. There are many benefits of pension schemes such as tax relief, contributions made by the employer and tax-free lump sums when the person retires. If they pay contributions into a pension scheme, some of the money that they would have had to pay the Government in tax is in fact paid into the pension instead. The employer may match or pay more than the person contributes to the pension scheme. That is money that they would not have gained had they put their money into a savings account. Finally, they will usually be able to take up to a quarter of their pension savings as a tax-free sum.

Having expressed the importance of pensions, it is integral that both men and women can benefit from them equally. That is why I am very pleased that hon. Lady has brought this Bill to the House. It is recognised that there were disparities between pensions on the basis of sex, as a result of differences in retirement age. As she mentioned, a GMP is a pension that a workplace normally provides, and it applies only to people who contracted out of the additional state pension scheme. A GMP is usually the same, if not more, than the additional state pension had the person not contracted

out of it. Previous legislation required GMPs to be determined on an unequal basis. A woman's GMP is normally accrued at a greater rate than that of a man, to ensure that there is recognition of a woman's working life being five years shorter than that of a man.

It is important to understand the terms "revaluation" and "indexation". Revaluation is an increase in the value of someone's pension before they start drawing it, whereas indexation is the rise in value of their pension while they draw it. The Government have set a rate of revaluation that schemes can use at 3.5% and there is a minimum indexation rate of 3%. Therefore, some pension schemes' revaluation rate is higher than their indexation rate. Women used to have an earlier retirement age, and therefore they were getting indexation while men were receiving revaluation. In this instance, a woman would usually get a higher pension rate until they started claiming their pension, which would remove their revaluation rise and replace it with an indexation rise, whereas a male would be entitled to a revaluation rate for a further five years until their rate, too, was switched to an indexation rate.

Schemes are required to remedy that through equalisation, but it has never been clear how to go about that. The Bill seeks to clarify that. The current situation is the perfect example of de facto change but not necessarily de jure change. The Bill clarifies that the legislation is to remedy the disparity as it applies to survivors as well as earners. That is important, because the sad reality is that it is common for individuals to become widowed and it is vital that the surviving spouse can claim the disparity for which the deceased spouse was eligible.

The Bill provides a power to set out in regulations the conditions that must be met in relation to the survivor's benefits, making it clearer and easier for survivors to claim the remedy. It provides for a power to set out in regulations detail about who must consent to the conversion, giving further clarification on what is needed to claim the remedy. Finally, it will remove the requirement to notify HMRC. I am told that HMRC needs to be notified but may not be doing anything with that information. It therefore makes sense to remove that bit of red tape which, in practice, makes no material difference.

My constituents in Broxtowe will benefit from the Bill, which will allow them remedy on the disparity to which they are entitled. That will be achieved by removing red tape around pension regulation and providing further clarity. Through that, we will ensure that more individuals understand the logistics of their pensions. It should not be necessary to be an expert in finance to understand the rights and responsibilities that come with pensions, and I hope that these changes will go some way towards beginning to make that happen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on introducing the Bill.

1.11 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): This is the second time in a week that we have seen important changes to regulation in insurance and pensions that will have a meaningful impact on the country. Last week, we reformed Solvency II, which will unlock billions of pounds of investment, and now we have this Bill, which is a long-overdue step towards equality between

the sexes in occupational pensions. I firmly congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and my good friend the indomitable pensions Minister on this smart and thoughtful Bill.

1.12 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on successfully bringing forward this well-considered Bill and for so excellently and comprehensively explaining why we need it.

When the Equal Pay Act gained Royal Assent on 29 May 1970, the House took an all-important step towards ensuring the equal treatment of the sexes in the workplace. It also sent a broader message about the United Kingdom's societal values. Since the Act's commencement in 1975, even greater strides have been taken towards ensuring gender equality. However, as I am sure colleagues agree, much work remains to be done to that end.

As lawmakers, we in this House all have a responsibility to strive continuously towards the goal of gender equality through legislation, whether modest, substantial or otherwise, and the Bill can rightly be seen as a means of doing that. Specifically, it will right a historical oversight by making crucial clarifications in relation to guaranteed minimum pensions equalisation and pension schemes.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you can see that I am holding a wonderful speech that I have criss-crossed out because I do not think I need to go through all of that detail—we also have other people who wish to speak and other Bills to consider. However, proposals and methodology brought in during 2016 and 2017 should be secured in relevant regulations, including the positive impact that they would have on the equality of outcome for the sexes. These concerns must be properly addressed in legislation, and that is what the Bill rightly seeks to do. It has also been welcomed by leaders across industry as covering key areas where clarification is most needed, which will make the important process of equalising benefits using GMP conversion easier.

Bearing that positive reception from industry in mind, and given the broader message that it sends about the importance of the equality of the sexes in legislative matters both significant and modest, I strongly welcome the Bill and offer it my wholehearted support.

1.15 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart).

Let me begin by congratulating my friend the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). I know only too well what a privilege it is to be successful in the ballot, and I congratulate her on guiding this Bill through its legislative journey. It is commendable that it deals with such an important issue, and I am pleased to be able to speak about it today.

I am also delighted that the Bill extends to England, Wales and Scotland, and that Northern Ireland has asked to be covered by it as well. That is another great benefit for our United Kingdom. There were, at the final count in 2015, about 8 million people across the United Kingdom with contracted-out memberships, and

[*Peter Gibson*]

the Bill has the potential to benefit those 8 million people. I cannot imagine a reason why anyone in the House would not be in favour of that.

The Bill relates specifically to the issue of guaranteed minimum pensions, but pensions have been on the agenda in the House on a number of occasions in recent weeks. I was pleased to speak in a recent Westminster Hall debate hosted by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) is leading a sterling campaign to extend auto-enrolment to many more people, which would be a fantastic way to level up throughout our United Kingdom and ensure that trillions more go into our pension pots, thus ensuring that the poorest in society have a more secure future. I would welcome the Minister's comments on that, as I know he is a champion for pensioners. I also know that he would like an opportunity, when he winds up the debate, to highlight the £1.8 billion-worth of unclaimed pension credit pots out there, which could serve as vital assistance to pensioners in our constituencies. But let me return to the specific issue of the Bill, as opposed to wider pension benefits.

This Bill will make the process of equalising with the use of guaranteed minimum pensions easier, and it is worthy of the support of all of us in the House. I look forward to seeing it pass its Third Reading today, and congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West once again on her efforts.

1.18 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): I will keep my remarks brief, because I know that there are many good speeches still to come. Let me first refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a practising chartered accountant, and also the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on small and micro business.

I thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for introducing an excellent Bill which will achieve a great deal. As a practising accountant who had to live through the introduction of auto-enrolment, I have a love-hate relationship with it, and with pensions, although of course I see the fantastic benefit that they bring. Recent figures show that in my constituency alone, more than 22,000 employees in 1,830 businesses across Meriden have automatically enrolled. That scheme is a great achievement, providing security and a pot of money for people to rely on when they retire. Hopefully they will look back at us for many decades to come, and thank us for taking the measures that we have taken.

Speaking as the chair of the APPG, I hope the Minister will assure me that, as pension changes occur—I am sure he has already envisaged them—there will be consultation with businesses, because small and micro businesses often feel that they are not part of the conversation. That said, when auto-enrolment was introduced, the SME sector was quite relieved by the consultations that took place. That also showed that the Government can introduce good legislation with good IT systems behind it, as we have also seen recently with the furlough scheme, in respect of which I was involved in getting my clients on with real-time information.

The Bill is excellent and is what I call an equaliser Bill, quite rightly bringing women on a par with men. There are many other things to achieve on that journey but I wholeheartedly support this legislation. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West on her cross-party thinking. As we have seen in recent week, great things can be achieved when the House comes together in unity. I thank her and the Minister for all their work.

1.20 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on introducing the Bill, which the Opposition are pleased to support, as we were at previous stages. As the hon. Lady and others have said, it will help occupational pension schemes to correct the basic issue of men and women being treated differently in those schemes because of the impact of a guaranteed minimum pension. It will also help pension schemes to ensure that people do not receive less pension income than they would have received had they been of the opposite sex. As the hon. Lady and others have said, the legislation has been welcomed throughout the industry and there is broad consensus that it is the right thing to do.

We should do all we can to help the pensions industry to fulfil what is now its legal duty to deliver guaranteed minimum pension equalisation, which includes supporting the Bill. In Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) made clear our support for the Bill while making some general points and asking questions about the Government's approach to communications in respect of this legislation and pensions more generally. He gently pointed out that the Government do not have an unsullied record when it comes to communication and he wanted to know a bit more about the Minister's plans in that regard. I think the Minister was going to write to him but am not sure whether that has happened; perhaps the Minister could say a couple of words about the Government's plans to ensure the effective communication of the message.

I reinforce our view that there must be a commitment in the Bill to a full and timely consultation with experts, the industry and others before the introduction of regulations. That consultation should address the conditions that must be met in respect of survivors' benefits and the details about who must consent to the conversion. We asked in Committee what kind of instrument will be used to introduce the regulations and sought reassurance that parliamentarians will be able adequately to scrutinise the changes. We also asked about the requirement to notify HMRC, about which we have now heard more, which has helpfully clarified that point.

On the wider issues of gender inequality, GMP equalisation is only one way in which imbalances between men's and women's pensions need to be addressed. We need reassurance that the Government will commit to continuing to ensure that all aspects of gender inequality in pensions are looked at, because we know that the pensions gender gap is around double the pay gap and that small changes at the early stages of somebody's pension career can have large repercussions.

In summary, we support the efforts in the Bill to tidy the legislation and make it easier for schemes to convert guaranteed minimum pension rights into ordinary scheme

benefits. The Minister may wish to address the few important issues to be resolved, but they certainly do not distract from the Bill's overall value and we look forward to it passing swiftly through its final stages.

1.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Government propose to transform United Kingdom pensions. We are making them safer, better and greener and the Bill is a further way forward. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for introducing the Bill and for the support of the official Opposition and other political parties.

Let me briefly address the three points raised by the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition. I assure her that there will be full consultation on the legislation. There will also be broad communication, but I will write to her on that point and place a copy of the letter in the Commons Library and the House of Lords Library so that all peers and Members can see it.

In respect of gender inequality, the hon. Lady will be aware that successive Governments have concluded that the way ahead on that is automatic enrolment—that is the greatest change. There is no doubt that automatic enrolment has transformed saving in this country. For example, in terms of workplace pensions, women were at less than 40% in 2012 and are now at more than 80%, and young people aged between 22 and 29 were at less than 40% and are now at 80%.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I agree with the Minister and welcome the Bill from the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). It is a great Bill and part of the reforms to pensions that the Government are making. As the Minister mentioned auto-enrolment, can he enlighten me on the Government's position on my Bill, which is scheduled for later today, on expanding auto-enrolment to under-22s and part-time workers, particularly women as he just mentioned?

Guy Opperman: I will deal with that point, because it is relevant to this Bill and to the consideration of the House later. As my hon. Friend will understand, we are in the latter part of this parliamentary Session. It is the end of February and the Queen's Speech will come, in all probability—obviously I cannot commit, but it is usually—on the second Wednesday in May, so the House has a relatively limited period of time.

The hon. Lady's Bill had its Second Reading in November. It required a Committee stage in the House of Commons, then it had to come back for Report and Third Reading. It has not even gone to the other place for consideration. It will only just get under the line, although I am sure that the other place will be keen to accept it. The reality is that there is no real way for my hon. Friend's Bill to get through this House and the House of Lords in the time allowed, and that is the requirement of private Members' Bills of the nature of his and all others, to be fair.

I can confirm, however, that the Government remain committed to the 2017 automatic enrolment review. It remains the case that we will, in the fullness of time, bring forward or support legislation to take the matter forward. My hon. Friend will have to bear with me. He and I have had ample conversations. I am so pleased that he is my neighbour—a great improvement on the previous one. He is a doughty campaigner for his constituents and he is right to make this particular case.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), for Broxtowe (Darren Henry), for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), for Darlington (Peter Gibson) and for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti) who all supported the Bill and spoke extremely well and eloquently about these matters. I will not repeat my entire Second Reading speech, which lasted for, I think, nearly an hour, and of which I know all hon. Members enjoyed every word.

The greatest hits of pensions are often underrated in my experience, but the points that I made then should be repeated as if I were to speak for the next hour. We are correcting a simplification that was brought in by the last days of Mr Callaghan's Labour Government in 1978. It is an utterly vital piece of legislation that addresses everything from survivor benefits to reforms in relation to HMRC and the need to get proper equalisation. To be utterly clear, all parties will benefit from this and there is no loser by reason of the Bill.

It is absolutely to the credit of the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West that she has successfully brought the Bill forward on a cross-party basis and navigated its passage. She should be very proud of her work. I am delighted to restate that the Government support the Bill. We continue to support it in this House and will support it in the House of Lords. I wish it every success as it travels on to another place.

1.29 pm

Margaret Ferrier: With the leave of the House, I thank the Minister for his support today and throughout each stage of the Bill. I also thank all hon. Members who have spoken and who have intervened on Third Reading including the hon. Members for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), for Broxtowe (Darren Henry), for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), for Darlington (Peter Gibson) and for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti).

I also take the opportunity to thank the team at the DWP for all their assistance throughout to get to this stage and for their expertise in helping me to understand more of what I was talking about. It has been a privilege to have the opportunity to take a private Member's Bill through the House, and I encourage all hon. Members to enter the ballot when it comes round again. A private Member's Bill slot is highly sought after, and it has been a great experience. I look forward to watching the Bill pass through the other place and into law, and I greatly look forward to seeing some of my constituents, and constituents across the UK, finally receive the equalised pension income to which they have been entitled for service since 1990.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

[Margaret Ferrier]

Local Authority Boundaries (Referendums) Bill

Second Reading

1.30 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Local representation matters. People need to have trust in their local authority, which is charged with acting in their best interest, regardless of which political party may be in charge at local level. Residents need to be reassured that the framework, the model, the structure and the geographical area represented mean that the local authority has the capacity and the capability of acting in their best interest.

My Local Authority Boundaries (Referendums) Bill aims to re-empower communities that feel completely disenfranchised and forgotten about, and that feel their local authority, by the very nature of its structure and the geographical area it represents, is incapable of acting in their best interest. The Bill would give communities the option to have their say in refocusing local councils on being local.

Let us not forget that local authorities perhaps have more important powers on an individual or family's day-to-day life than any other level of government, whether it be highways, potholes, speeding cameras, housing, planning, schools, children's services, adult services, bin collection, regeneration, driving economic growth, leisure centres or libraries—the list goes on.

I represent perhaps the best part of the United Kingdom. Keighley, Ilkley, Silsden, Steeton, Riddlesden, East Morton, Worth Valley and my wider constituency are full of passionate people who, quite rightly, are extremely proud of where they live. We have some fantastic businesses, large and small, from manufacturing, engineering and tech businesses to brilliant independent retail businesses, breweries and fantastic tourist attractions, all of which are keen to grow and expand their offering. For far too long the area I represent has felt completely unrepresented and not listened to by our local authority. This Bill aims to change that.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): My hon. Friend will agree that democracy is a process, not a state, and it evolves. Winston Churchill said:

“democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time”.—[*Official Report*, 11 November 1947; Vol. 444, c. 207.]

Does my hon. Friend agree with that, and does he agree that local democracy protects the interests of local residents, promotes equality, prevents the abuse of power and creates stability? Does he agree that these are all vital parts of the democracy for which he is fighting?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I appreciate that the hon. Lady is intervening on the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), but she should be addressing the Chair.

Sally-Ann Hart: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Robbie Moore: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, because this Bill aims to reinstall local councils' power

to represent local people and to make sure that the area they represent feels represented so that delivery can happen at a local level. This Bill aims to address those points by creating our very own local council that can be more representative, more engaged and, most importantly, more focused on delivering for our area.

The mechanics of my Bill are simple: it aims to make provision to enable referendums to be held within parliamentary constituency areas to form new local authorities. It places a requirement on the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to lay regulations that would enable two or more parliamentary constituency areas in England to form a new local authority if, when combined, they form a continuous area. A petitioning system will be created to enable local government electors in any constituency area to indicate their support for a referendum to be held on the creation of a new local authority. If 10% or more of the people in those constituency areas give their support for a referendum via the petitioning system, a referendum will be able to be held among all electors within those constituency areas, proposing to form a new local authority area. Of course, once the referendum is held, if a majority of people have signalled that they want a new council to better represent them, the mechanics of setting up a new local authority should be enabled.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): In County Durham, several years ago, we had referendums on whether to abolish our local district councils and move to a unitary council system. One of the issues that we faced was that, despite referendums in which the overwhelming majority of the general public decided to back maintaining district councils, the greater local authority overruled them. Does my hon. Friend's Bill have enough teeth in it at the moment, or will this be something to consider in Committee in order to ensure that those referendum results are respected by larger local authorities?

Robbie Moore: If I recall, 76% of people across the County Durham area voted in favour of making sure that the local councils were kept. I think the turnout was only 40%—considerably low—but those electors were not listened to. This Bill provides the weight and the teeth necessary to ensure that local electors are listened to and their voice is heard.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Can I give my hon. Friend another example? In Christchurch there was a turnout more equivalent to that at a general election, and its people voted 84% in favour of retaining their independence, but were nevertheless run roughshod over by the Government.

Robbie Moore: That is exactly what this Bill hopes to achieve: to instil local democracy in constituency areas that feel unrepresented by a much larger unitary authority, to enable them to have their say, and so that a local council can reflect their views and deliver for them locally, to ensure we can get better services delivered at a local level.

This has been a long-suffering campaign—in fact, I suspect it started before I was even born, probably on the very day on which the borough of Keighley and the urban districts of Baildon, Bingley, Cullingworth,

Denholme, Ilkley, Shipley and Silsden were all brought under the control of Bradford. In 1974, the City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council was created to administer the newly formed metropolitan borough instigated by the Local Government Act 1972. Ever since that year, when our area's decision-making powers were stripped and our assets simply handed over to Bradford City Hall, things have never been the same.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I compliment my hon. Friend on the way in which he is presenting his Bill and seeking to deliver for his constituents. Does he agree that it is only right that places such as his constituency have the opportunity to catch up and change those abominable local government structures of the 1970s, as Darlington has been able to enjoy with a unitary authority specifically focused on its own local community?

Robbie Moore: Of course, Darlington is now one of the thriving towns of the north. Keighley absolutely wants to be one, too, but we are stifled by the system we have locally, under which we are completely forgotten about. In my view, Bradford Council disregards the voice of Keighley and Ilkley and we must be heard.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, I fully support him in this and I want my constituency to join his in this new local authority. Does he agree that there is nothing in the Bill that anybody should disagree with, because if Bradford Council is doing such a wonderful job representing his constituents and mine, presumably they will vote against setting up a new local authority when the referendum takes place? It is presumably because Bradford Council knows how badly it is representing our constituents that it is so frightened of this legislation.

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend and neighbour makes a very important point. No one should live in fear of the Bill because it triggers better democracy. Local voices will be heard, so we can ensure that services are delivered better at a local level. I will come on to why this issue is so passionately considered by many of my constituents due to the ongoing failings of Bradford Council.

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way, but I have to disagree with him on one point. Is not the entire point of his Bill that some people should live in fear of his legislation: failing local authorities that are not delivering for local people? That is exactly what he is trying to address for his constituents.

Robbie Moore: I suspect that some will live in fear, but they should not fear the Bill because it is all about ensuring that services are delivered better and that local residents are represented much more efficiently by the people who should be serving them.

Anyone opposed to the Bill will say that bigger is better, but I beg to differ. I am yet to see consistent and guaranteed evidence that the creation of much larger unitary authorities will always provide better representation, better democracy, better deliverability of services, better effectiveness and performance, or indeed better accountability. When it comes to the efficiency, effectiveness and performance of a local council, size is not the driving factor. In fact, if the population and geographical area a local authority represents is too large or covers

geographical areas that have little or nothing in common, there is a much greater risk of failure.

Peter Gibson: My hon. Friend is making an important point about size. I would be grateful if he could address the point that size—the total number of people a local authority covers or its geographic size—may not necessarily be the problem; it could be its actual make-up. What assessment has he made of the innovative changes taking place in North Yorkshire just to the north of his constituency, where local government reorganisation is taking place? Does he feel that his constituency probably has a greater affinity to the new North Yorkshire council than it does to Bradford?

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend makes some important points. North Yorkshire is of course within miles of my two principal towns and I sometimes feel there is more allegiance to the areas of North Yorkshire. But we have some passionate people who are dedicated to making sure that services are delivered and local decisions are made as locally as they can be. I am working on a strong campaign with my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). We believe our two constituencies will be able to form our own unitary authority, so that we can make sure that decision making happens in our area and is not linked to Bradford Council.

When it comes to local democracy and local representation, which drives the local decision-making process, policy ideas and deliverability of services at a local level, size does matter and matters actually much more. That is why, in my view, there should be no set size for a unitary authority. It should be driven by the geographical area it wants to represent. If the population area is too large or people do not feel fully connected to the area which the local authority wholly represents, the negative implications can be disastrous for driving forward positive change for an area.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. May I refer him to the case of Greater Manchester, a completely artificial political construct? Within each individual borough of Greater Manchester, a 493 square mile clean air charging zone is being inflicted on people by Andy Burnham. This is an example of how, if decision making is taken away from the local population, the Bill will answer that. The people of Bury do not want to be part of Greater Manchester.

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend describes the similarities. A clean air zone is being imposed on hard-working people in my constituency—taxi drivers and construction workers, who are having to pay up to £50 a day to enter Bradford city. It is a completely outrageous tax on hard-working people, and I urge Bradford's Labour-run council to rethink the proposals and perhaps take a leaf out of Andy Burnham's book, delay the implementation and consider that. In my view, the strategy will not work in its current format.

When there is disenfranchisement and disengagement, with a council area being too large, the consequences can be devastating. Public trust in councillors and council officers is eroded. Levels of uniform engagement across the whole area become weaker and levels of identification

[Robbie Moore]

or affinity between the electorate and the council officers become weaker again. Of course, across Bradford district, we see exactly that.

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech and he is being generous in giving way so often. Does he agree that one of the big drivers he and I see in seats such as ours is the levelling-up agenda, which we really want to get on with? Does he share my concern that some local authorities are not interested in delivering that agenda, as he and I are, and that we need local authorities that will work with us, as local MPs, to deliver for our constituents?

Robbie Moore: I totally agree and I will definitely come on to that.

A root cause of so many of these problems is that my constituents feel that they are being used as a cash cow for Bradford, with very little coming back in return. Council tax and business rates are all sent from my constituency to Bradford city hall, with nowhere near the equivalent of those funds coming back to be reinvested in our area. The Keighley and Shipley constituencies generate the highest revenue of tax to Bradford Council through our council tax and business rate payments. Data released by the council finds that such wards as Ilkley, Wharfedale and Craven pay the highest proportion of what is billed, while other wards within Bradford city centre itself pay the least, yet get the highest investment. Even though our constituencies are the largest contributors, we undoubtedly benefit the least, with cash being funnelled into Bradford city centre projects by my constituents, who get no benefit whatsoever. Let us be in no doubt that in Keighley we have some huge problems and some huge deprived areas, and we need more local support from our local authority.

Let me come on the point that my hon. Friend made, which is absolutely to do with levelling up. Clearly, parts of my constituency have been forgotten about at a local level and left behind, particularly by my local authority, which should have given much more attention to them over the years. It has taken this Conservative Government to step in and, through the towns fund, from which we are gaining £33.6 million—it is going to be invested in some great projects—to drive and kick-start that economic regeneration.

It has to be noted that, despite the £33.6 million coming in to support Keighley-based projects, our Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities gave every local authority the opportunity to apply for a levelling-up fund—up to £20 million. That would have provided a greater boost; it would have been in addition to the £33.6 million that this Conservative Government had already put down for my constituency. But what did Bradford's Labour-run council do in terms of that application process? It failed even to apply for up to £20 million to come into my town of Keighley. That is a disgrace and it is exactly why this Bill is so important. It will finally give my residents the opportunity to have a say in driving forward economic prosperity for our area.

Let us consider a very local project: the Silsden to Steeton bridge, which connects those places and goes over a very busy dual carriageway. My predecessor, Kris

Hopkins, when he was the MP, secured £700,000 from the Conservative Government to carry out an economic feasibility study. That money was granted way back in 2015, but it took until the beginning of last year for that study to be completed by Bradford council and the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and to produce a cost to build the bridge of £3.6 million. That increased to £5.5 million, and at the beginning of this year Bradford Council came out with an estimate of more than £10 million to deliver the bridge. I only hope that this is not Bradford's Labour-run council kicking the project into the long grass so that my constituents do not benefit from a pedestrian bridge connecting Silsden and Steeton.

Then we come to the challenges with the planning process. Many of my constituents are extremely frustrated at the time it takes for planning to proceed through the system. I shall use one example. Many hard-working businesses in Keighley want to drive economic growth and build light industrial units. I reference one fairly small project. Back in 2018, a planning application went in for just off the Hard Ings roundabout, to build, I think, eight light industrial units. The application was submitted in 2018, but it took until the year of the pandemic for the application to be approved. During the year of the pandemic, my constituent was successful in gaining planning consent, cracked on, got them built and let the units so that hard-working businesses could crack on and thrive. Had Bradford Council cracked on with that planning application, those business units could have been built and those businesses could have got in and thrived much quicker. Labour-run Bradford Council continued to fail on all levels to support my constituents and hard-working businesses. This Bill gives my constituents the opportunity to have their say.

It does not stop there. Throughout the pandemic, the Government have supported many hard-working independent businesses right across my constituency. Take the example of the additional restrictions grant: a discretionary grant given to local authorities so that they could make the best decision on how to support businesses. Equilibrium, a beauty business in Silsden—this is just one example—struggled time and again to get hold of additional funding; the business had been impacted by the pandemic. The owner then found out that her counterparts in the beauty sector in other local authorities had managed to get hold of the additional restrictions grant. Her business, however, was denied the possibility of even submitting an application, until I pressed the case time and again with the chief executive and leader of Bradford Council.

Some people argue that smaller local authorities are much less efficient at delivering Government support. I do not agree at all. Craven District Council, just next to me, covers a population of about 70,000 to 80,000. It delivered its business grants during the covid pandemic far quicker than Bradford Council. Calderdale, on the other side of my constituency, with a population of around 200,000, delivered its business grants far quicker than Bradford Council. It would be far better to form a new local authority that was much more unified with the area it represents.

I turn to housing. Like all local authorities, our local authority has been charged with putting together a new local plan, which relates to the housing strategy for the next 15 years from 2023. Bradford Council's proposals see up to 3,000 new houses being built across my local

area on greenfield land. Up to 75 houses were proposed in Addingham's neighbourhood development plan, which it has just completed after long consultations with Bradford Council. Now Bradford Council wants to build 181 houses there. Some 314 houses are proposed for Ilkley, mostly on greenbelt land. There is a proposal for 191 new houses in Riddlesden, mostly on greenbelt land. The Worth valley: 343 new houses, mostly on greenbelt land. In Silsden, 580 new houses are proposed—again, mostly on greenfield and greenbelt land. That will all have a huge impact on local services, schools, health services and road networks. Most of those businesses, schools and GP services have not even been consulted as part of the local plan.

These are not the only instances in which my residents are being ignored. About two years ago, many residents along Moss Carr Road in Long Lee submitted a village green application to try to protect a key greenfield site just outside Long Lee. Bradford Council did not even progress the application, blaming that on its having got lost within its system. Now we find that the housing strategy in Bradford Council's local plan has identified that very field for house building.

One of the most haunting issues that has had an impact on my constituency is child sexual exploitation. Children's services are in a dire state in Bradford. Across the district, there are exceptional problems that mark my area out from the rest of the country. Children's services are perhaps the most important services that a local authority can provide, but Bradford Council's children's services have failed vulnerable children for far too long. Only last month, we had a damning Government report on Bradford Council's children's services, which only went to show what we have all known for a long time—children in our district are not protected by those with a responsibility for doing so, and that has led to tragic circumstances throughout our area. The council has not acted on problems that have been going on for far too long.

Only in July last year, a limited 50-page review was released, which identified five children who had been sexually abused within the Bradford district over the last 20 years. It confirmed that children remain at risk in Bradford and an unknown number of perpetrators remain unchallenged. Perhaps more damningly, the report concluded that failures had been identified within Bradford Council's social services and children's services department.

I am pleased to say that, earlier this year, the Conservative Government stepped in and stripped Bradford Council of its children's services so that a new trust structure could be set up. My constituents are deeply concerned by the lack of trust in public organisations that should be there to protect them. I am pleased that the Government have stepped in to try to provide some reassurance, so that vulnerable children in my constituency can be looked after, and that is before I start talking about one of the darker issues of child sexual exploitation and my campaign to trigger a full Rotherham-style inquiry into child sexual exploitation across the district. I only hope that the leader of Bradford Council is listening to this debate and that our new Mayor, Tracy Brabin, is also listening, so that they get behind my calls for a full inquiry. If we continue to um and ah around this issue and fail to take action, issues will only get worse.

What are the likely next steps for the Bill? It would give my constituents a chance of a new start with a new

local authority. Currently, powers are limited, in that the Government are unable to make changes to local authorities unless they are recommended to do so by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. While measures remain in place for a council to request the commission to undertake a boundary review, there is nothing to allow our constituents to make the decision for themselves. The Bill would provide that option. Importantly, it would do it in a way that ensures that any newly formed local authority would be financially viable and would leave the original local authority also viable.

The Bill would put new measures in place to ensure that local people have a say on who represents them, the very nature of the council and the geographical area in which its services can be delivered more efficiently. It is only right that, if a majority of people in specific constituencies are in favour of forming a new unitary authority, they have the opportunity to do so. Not only would that benefit my constituents in Keighley and Ilkley, but it would be welcomed—according to comments we have heard across the House—by many other people.

My Bill aims to re-empower communities who feel disenfranchised, forgotten and that their local authority, by its very nature, structure and the geographical area it represents, is incapable of acting in their interests. It is high time that we let people have their say on this very issue, and I will not stop fighting until my constituents can have a better local authority that is better engaged on their priorities and able to deliver for them, because my constituents deserve much better than what they currently get from Labour-run Bradford Council.

2 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore). As he knows, I fully support him on this Bill, and I thought he set out the case fantastically well. I should say that the people of Keighley and Ilkley are very lucky to have him representing them. He is a fantastic Member of Parliament both in this place and locally, and I very much trust he will be for many years to come.

Both my hon. Friend and I stood at the last election on a promise that we would endeavour to break our constituencies away from Bradford Council. He set out many of the reasons why Bradford Council is failing. Actually, it is failing not just our constituents, but the people of Bradford. However, they have their own Members of Parliament to represent them, and it is our duty to represent our constituents. It is not just that Bradford Council is failing and incompetent, although it is. It is worse than that, as far as I am concerned: it is actually that it does not care about our constituents; it just cares about its Bradford heartlands. If you do not mind, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will give a couple of examples to illustrate why that is the case, should anybody deny it. There are many examples I could give, but I am going to give two that I think set out the case quite clearly.

Bradford Council is of course always strapped for cash, if we listen to it, and my hon. Friend made a very good point about council tax income, which I will come on to a bit later. It announced a few years ago that it was going to close the swimming pool in Bingley in my

[Philip Davies]

constituency, which was a very popular and well-used facility that was used by lots of the schoolchildren we are trying to encourage to do more sport. Of course, Bradford Council's reason is always that it has not got enough money, and some people may have some sympathy with that. Unfortunately, at the same time as it made the announcement about closing Bingley swimming pool, it announced that it was going to build five brand-new swimming pools in other parts of the Bradford district—so much for lack of resources being the issue. It was quite blatantly because it wanted to put them in its Labour heartlands, and it did not really care about people in Bingley.

However, I have a better, ongoing example. One thing in Bradford Council's Airedale masterplan from years ago—from about the time I became the local MP, if not before—to introduce a Shipley eastern bypass. It was recommended by the consultants Arup, who were paid by Bradford Council to come up with this masterplan. It recommended a Shipley eastern bypass, which I wholly agree with and have been campaigning for ever since. After the then Secretary of State for Transport came to see with his own eyes the issues that would be resolved by a Shipley eastern bypass, in early 2019 the Government gave Bradford Council hundreds of thousands of pounds to conduct a feasibility study of this proposal—to see how much it would cost, where it would go and all the rest of it.

Bradford Council was given this money, and it agreed that it would produce the feasibility study by the autumn of 2019. The autumn of 2019 came and went, and no feasibility study was produced by Bradford Council. Then it was going to be the spring of 2020, but that came and went, and there was no feasibility study. We are now almost in March 2022, and Bradford Council still has not completed the feasibility study into the Shipley eastern bypass, and then it has the brass neck to complain that it does not get infrastructure investment into the Bradford district. The Government are trying to facilitate this, and it cannot even do the small bit of the jigsaw that it has to put in place. If that does not demonstrate beyond any doubt that Bradford Council does not care about infrastructure in my constituency, I do not know what would. It would not surprise me if it had barely started it. It clearly does not want to do the project because it would largely benefit the people of my constituency, so it is of zero interest. I think that is pretty shocking, to be perfectly honest.

Bradford Council has not completed a feasibility study, which is either because it is wholly incompetent or because it does not care about my constituents. Those are the only two explanations that anyone can offer. I am happy for it to explain which one it is—it can choose. It can make a public statement about that. I do not care which one it is, but it is clearly one or the other. That proves beyond any doubt in my mind that it really does not care about my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley rightly feels the same about his constituency.

The Bradford area is not suited to being so big—it is too big. I will give a simple explanation of why it does not work. People and the local media often ask me what I am doing for Bradford. As it happens, I do quite a lot, including helping to secure millions of pounds to help the old Odeon in Bradford become a live music venue—

without that Government support, that project would not have been viable—and, along with colleagues in Bradford, helping to save the National Media Museum, which was threatened with closure. But, the thing is, no one ever asks Bradford MPs what they are doing for Shipley or Keighley—it is always a one-way street. That goes to show how this area does not work for anybody. We are thrown in as if we are part of Bradford when we have our own needs—and frankly, for my constituents, decision making in Bradford is just as remote as decision making in Whitehall.

My hon. Friend gave some good examples of Bradford Council's failures. He mentioned child sexual exploitation and how we need a Rotherham-style inquiry to get to the bottom of that, but it continually refuses to agree to that because it is more concerned with trying to protect its reputation than with those children who have been put in a terrible situation. He also mentioned how the Government took children's services away from the council because it had been failing so badly. We have had some terrible cases. The awful murder of Star Hobson, which happened in my hon. Friend's constituency, uncovered huge failings by Bradford Council, which had been made well aware of the case.

I agree with my hon. Friend that one of the worst aspects of Bradford Council for my constituents relates to building on the green belt, which affects his constituents just as it does mine. That also goes to show how useless the council is. It is always banging on about regenerating Bradford and how important that is for the district—it does not talk much about regenerating Keighley or Shipley—and then it builds hundreds of houses on the green belt in Wharfedale in my constituency. Of course, people in Wharfedale do not shop in Bradford because it is not easy for them to get to Bradford; they get on the train and go to Leeds. Bradford Council's housing policy is actually regenerating Leeds rather than Bradford.

Bradford Council does not build houses in places where people would want to work and shop in Bradford. It does not have a joined-up policy to help itself; it is just a numbers exercise for the council, with it wanting to build as many houses as it can in desirable areas of our constituencies to tick a box without any thought about our constituents or even how Bradford might be helped. I am almost certain that a local authority made up only of our two constituencies would not have agreed to some of the housing developments that Bradford Council has imposed on my constituents against their wishes. It will not rest until it has concreted over every last bit of green-belt land in my constituency, which is something that I try to stop.

My hon. Friend mentioned how his constituency has been excluded from the levelling-up fund. I have the same story to tell. We might think that a council that has been griping for years that it has not had enough money to do anything would have had lots of projects ready to go—those that it had wanted to do for years and years. Bingley is the second largest place in my constituency. I have asked Bradford Council to develop a levelling-up fund bid for Bingley. Given how many years Bingley has been under the control of Bradford Council, one would have thought it would have something on the shelf—“If we got £20 million for Bingley, this is what we'd do.” The Government announced a levelling-up fund—“Put your bids in.” Bradford Council said, “Can we have one for Bingley?” and it was “Oh no. We haven't

got anything ready for that. We can't. We'll have to start working on it." Start working on it! They had not even thought about how they might regenerate Bingley.

Indeed, they had thought about it so little that they were not even in a position to put in a bid when the Government are handing out money. They are having to start working out what they might do to regenerate Bingley. We missed the first round of bidding, putting at risk whether we may or may not get anything from a future bid. But do not worry, Madam Deputy Speaker, a bid for Bradford West was ready to go in the first round, and I am sure my constituents were hugely reassured by that.

Robbie Moore: Does my hon. Friend agree it is shocking that when this Conservative Government come along and say, "You can apply for up to £20 million for the Shipley constituency and £20 million for the Keighley constituency", there was not even an application for up to £40 million that could have come in to revitalise the Aire valley corridor? It was not even applied for.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is frustrating for those of us who are trying to do the best for our local area to have a local authority that has all the power in the area but does not do its bit. It is telling that the biggest investments we have had recently in the towns fund for Shipley and Keighley have both come from the Government, and not from the Labour council that has had years to try to regenerate the town centres but has not done anything about it. That is why the Bill is so important to me and my constituents, and they will welcome it.

Time is against us, and I accept that the Minister may not be able to accept the Bill today. I hope, however, that she will commit to holding further discussions with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley to see how we can progress the grave injustice that our constituents are facing, and see what can be done to ensure they are properly represented at local level. Surely local government should be all about being local—indeed, as local as possible. What on earth is the point of it if it is so big in area that people feel no affinity to the local government area that is governing them? It is completely pointless. We must make local government much more local again.

The Bill is a perfect way of going about that. It would mean that our two constituencies would be able to petition to set up a new local authority. If the majority of my constituents, and those of my hon. Friend, wanted that to happen, it would happen. Who can be against that form of local democracy and ensuring that we have a local authority that our constituents want? Does any political party want to oppose that principle? I cannot think they would want to face their electorate by saying that they are opposed to that principle, but we will be delighted to hear what the Labour party says about whether it favours that kind of local democracy. My constituents do not want to be part of Bradford Council, and neither do those of my hon. Friend.

I am prepared to be more generous than my hon. Friend, and I hope the Minister will also take this into consideration. Under the Bill—I think my hon. Friend is right to do this in principle—if a majority of voters in those two constituencies wanted to break away and set up their own local authority, the Government would implement that. I am prepared to make a generous offer

to go further. I am happy to have a referendum in the whole Bradford district about whether we should break away from Bradford Council. It would mean that the Bradford part of that district would have the majority of people in it, but I am happy to take my chances on that. People might say, "Well of course if you break away that will affect Bradford", but I am happy for everyone to have a vote in that referendum. Let's go for it. I will make that generous offer. Who could possibly disagree with that? I hope that the Government will look at what can be done to ensure that local government is genuinely local, so that my constituents are no longer short-changed by the appalling Bradford Council, which is not only incompetent but does not really care about my constituents or those of my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley.

I commend my hon. Friend for keeping to his promise at the last election to do whatever he could to ensure that our constituencies break away from the horror of Bradford Council and set up our own local authority. This would be a viable local authority—it would be exactly the same size as neighbouring Calderdale Council, so nobody could say that it was not viable. I therefore hope the Government will take steps to ensure that my constituents and his can be properly looked after and feel represented at a local democracy level, because they are certainly not at the moment. It is an absolute pleasure to be the parliamentary neighbour of my hon. Friend, who is a superb representative of his constituents. I stand shoulder to shoulder with him on this Bill, and we will not give in. We will keep up this fight until we get justice for our constituents.

2.16 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak for the third time. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) on bringing this Bill forward for its Second Reading today. He has been a passionate campaigner on this issue since his election in 2019 and has found common cause with my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who has long called for the separation of the Shipley constituency from Bradford Metropolitan District Council. Both constituencies continue to suffer from the misery of the 1970s local government reorganisation.

I was delighted to learn that my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley did not secure his place for a private Member's Bill in the usual way through the ballot; nor indeed did he present a ten-minute rule Bill. Rather, he used the very rare method of camping out on a certain date outside the Table Office—a lesson to us all in commitment to the cause. He is a true champion for Keighley and Ilkley, fighting hard to improve the lives of his constituents. I could draw the House's attention to his many local campaigns and successes, such as the rebuilding of Airedale Hospital, protecting green space on North Street in Keighley or the town deal that he helped to secure for Keighley. However, I think that his campaign to keep Haworth post office open has been particularly moving, to the extent that I felt compelled to sign up myself.

This Bill is further testament to my hon. Friend's commitment to campaigning and his drive and energy to champion his constituency, stand up for the needs of his constituents and ensure that their concerns are heard here. I commend him for that. He has set out a

[Peter Gibson]

positive and robust argument in favour of his Bill and his desire for the Keighley and Shipley constituencies to break away from the horrors of Bradford Metropolitan District Council. I understand that the Keighley and Shipley constituencies generate the highest revenues for Bradford Council through their council tax payments. However, from what we have heard today, it is clear that Bradford Council is not delivering for the people of these two constituencies. My hon. Friend has also made a strong and compelling case, setting out the failings of Bradford Council.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. My constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) provide by far the highest amount of council tax income for Bradford Council, but it is not just that; it is the fact that we actually pay our council tax in our areas. In Wharfedale, 99.2% of council tax income is collected, whereas the last year's figures that I have available show that City ward collected only 79% of its council tax. Indeed, £12 million of council tax income goes uncollected each year by Bradford Council, despite its pleading poverty.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful for that intervention, which gives a shining example of the horrors of Bradford Council and many others across the country in failing to collect council tax, which is shameful behaviour.

We have all been horrified by the stories that my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley shared about children and young people's services in Bradford Council. In my view, the Government were absolutely right to strip the council of control over its children's services department this year. No vulnerable child or young adult should be failed by those whose role is to protect them, and I sincerely hope that childhood services in Bradford can turn a corner.

In my constituency, many residents will no doubt be sympathetic to my hon. Friends' desire for Keighley and Shipley to break away from Bradford District Council. Darlington was a non-metropolitan district of Durham County Council until, on 1 April 1997, the borough of Darlington absorbed the powers of the county council to become a unitary authority, the third smallest in the country, and Darlington Borough Council was formed. Darlington residents felt forgotten and abandoned by Durham County Council, and, given what we have heard today, I have no doubt that that is exactly how the residents of Keighley and Shipley feel about Bradford Council. In Darlington, we also know a lot about how ineffective Labour-run administrations can be, especially when they rest on their laurels and take our communities for granted.

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. The problem is not just that these local authorities are not delivering, but that they are not listening. In my constituency, the Government, through the towns fund, has delivered money for a new health and wellbeing hub, which we want to support because we need a health and wellbeing hub in the centre of Keighley. However, the local authority is determined to build it on a green space in the centre, in North Street, despite the voice of Keighley not wanting it to be built there.

This should not be an either/or choice; it should be possible to deliver a health and wellbeing hub while also keeping the green space. That example illustrates that the failure of some of these Labour-run authorities is not listening to what local people want.

Peter Gibson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Be it the non-collection of council tax or the failure to listen to communities, we see the failings of Labour-led local authorities up and down the country. Darlington Borough Council now works hard to improve the lives of my constituents, and I want to take this opportunity to praise that Conservative-led council for the hard work it has done since we wrested power from the ineffective Labour administration in 2019. It is hugely important for people to feel that they are being properly represented by their local councils, and there is clearly a demand and need for that in Keighley and Shipley.

However, my hon. Friend's Bill leaves a number of questions about how the process that it sets out would actually work. As I understand it, the Bill would allow two or more parliamentary constituencies to form a new authority following a referendum, but what would be the impact of the current parliamentary boundary changes if Keighley and Shipley were to do that? Those constituencies could potentially take in more of the other parts of Bradford than they are leaving behind, subject to a boundary commission. What would happen to the respective police and crime commissioner positions? What would happen to the respective police and ambulance services?

Let us take the example of Darlington. I do not represent all the borough council wards in Parliament; my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) also represents a number of wards. Why should a new local authority form around two or more constituencies when we know that those constituency boundaries could potentially change following a boundary commission review?

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley will no doubt have noted the recent changes to local government just to the north of my constituency in North Yorkshire, with the election of a new unitary council to replace the eight councils that were established there in the 1970s. There is also the prospect of a combined authority to cover York and North Yorkshire.

Philip Davies: I am sure my hon. Friend accepts that parliamentary boundaries change on a regular basis, and that that does not necessitate a change in local authority boundaries. In many cases, Members of Parliament have to represent constituencies that cover different local authorities. The fact that parliamentary boundaries may or may not change in the future will have absolutely no bearing on the authority once it has been established.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I simply raised the point for consideration in the discussion of this Bill.

As I have already mentioned, the new unitary authority that is being established in North Yorkshire already contains many historic parts of the old west riding of Yorkshire, such as Skipton, Settle, Selby, Harrogate and Ripon, and I can see no reason why the great West Yorkshire towns of Ilkley, Shipley and Keighley could

not explore a move into the new North Yorkshire council area, with which they could have much more affinity.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley for the intentions of his Bill. He continues to stand up for the interests of his constituents, and that cannot be faulted. Unfortunately, though, I have concluded that I will not be supporting his Bill today. Bradford Metropolitan District Council clearly needs to listen more closely to the needs of residents of the Keighley and Shipley constituencies, and I hope that this debate today will make that clear to the council and it gets the message that it needs to represent fully all residents of the council area.

I cannot support this Bill today, but I wish my hon. Friends the Members for Keighley and for Shipley every success in holding Bradford Metropolitan District Council to account for the dreadful horrors and in ensuring that the concerns and needs of their constituents are properly heard, so that the council no longer ignores places such as Shipley, Keighley and Ilkley.

2.26 pm

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) on securing a place in the ballot for this private Member's Bill on introducing referendums into the process of local government boundary reviews. He, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) have both raised, very passionately, a number of serious issues around the service that they are receiving from Bradford Council. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) for his contribution.

The Government remain committed to their policy that local government reorganisation, whether it involves boundary or unitary changes, should be locally led. I commit to working with my hon. Friends the Members for Shipley and for Keighley as requested on the various issues that they have raised.

The Bill makes provision for certain processes to be followed where boundary changes are being sought, particularly where the boundary change would result in an area being taken out of an existing local government area and the creation of a wholly new area with a wholly new council.

Philip Davies: I absolutely understand why the Government would not wish to interfere in bringing forward a top-down reorganisation of local authorities; that would be inappropriate, and I understand why they would be reluctant to do that. Does the Minister accept though that the beauty of my hon. Friend's Bill is that, in the Government's stated position of changes being locally led, nothing indicates something more locally led than a local referendum, where all the people have a chance to vote to say where they want to be represented? Does she agree that this Bill fulfils that Government policy of locally led changes?

Kemi Badenoch: Absolutely; it does meet that locally led test, but that is not the only test that we would be applying.

The processes that Parliament has established for changing a local government boundary are centred on

the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, so that is another step that would be required. We all know that a boundary change can be effected only if it is recommended by that commission. The issue at the moment, which is why we cannot accept this Bill in the way that it has been drafted, is that it would cut across those processes.

The long title of the Bill is:

"A Bill to make provision to enable parliamentary constituency areas to form new unitary local authority areas if agreed by referendum; to make provision for such referendums; and for connected purposes."

The Bill would be very sweeping indeed. We would be concerned about a number of aspects of this approach.

First, parliamentary constituencies may not be a sound basis for establishing the right level of service delivery—that must be a consideration. We also need to make sure that the boundaries can be established only where there is a safeguard against anything that might lose the confidence of the local democracy. That is definitely not the case here, but a referendum could be promoted by some politicians of a particular party and lead to the creation of councils primarily on a party political basis. As the Bill is drafted, there is no prevention mechanism to stop something like that from happening.

Philip Davies: I appreciate that time is running out, so may I take this opportunity to thank the Minister for agreeing to meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley to discuss how we might bring forward a Bill that satisfies our requirements and those of the Government? That will be very helpful and I am grateful to the Minister for indicating that she is prepared to do that.

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend. He and I will be able to work together on this issue with our hon. Friend the Member for Keighley—

2.30 pm

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

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 18 March.

Business without Debate

HUMAN TRAFFICKING (SENTENCING) 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.

DIGITALLY ALTERED BODY IMAGES 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.

PRISONS (VIOLENCE) 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.

PLANNING AND LOCAL REPRESENTATION 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.

PEDICABS (LONDON) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (19 November), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

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

ABUSE OF PUBLIC-FACING WORKERS (OFFENCES) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 18 March.

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS (ESSENTIAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND OPENING DURING EMERGENCIES) 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.

MEDICAL CANNABIS (ACCESS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

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

PRIME MINISTER (ACCOUNTABILITY TO HOUSE OF COMMONS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING (CHILD 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 4 March.

PRIME MINISTER (TEMPORARY REPLACEMENT) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (14 January), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

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

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE COMMISSION 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 18 March.

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 18 March.

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 18 March.

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 18 March.

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 18 March.

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE CO-FUNDING AND CO-PAYMENT BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (4 February), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 18 March.

PLASTICS (WET WIPES) 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.

**MOBILE HOMES ACT 1983
(AMENDMENT) 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.

**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 18 March.

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 18 March.

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

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 18 March.

**NHS ENGLAND (ALTERNATIVE
TREATMENT) 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 HEALTH (CONTROL OF DISEASE)
ACT 1984 (AMENDMENT) 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.

CARAVAN SITES 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 EXIT PAYMENTS
(LIMITATION) 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.

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 18 March.

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 18 March.

**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 18 March.

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 18 March.

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 18 March.

Housing Disrepair

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

2.39 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I will speak this afternoon about the truly terrible housing conditions that have been endured for too long by the residents of Evelyn Court on Amherst Road in my constituency. This block is run and managed by the Industrial Dwellings Society housing association. One can see that it would have once been a very nice estate and a pleasant place to live, but when I visited it several times recently and residents kindly invited me into their flats, I was shocked by what I saw. Let me say straightaway that the tenants of all the flats I visited had made every effort to keep them nicely, which made it even more heartbreaking that their flats were disfigured by chronic disrepair problems that were not in their power to deal with and about which the Industrial Dwellings Society housing association had let them down time after time when it had promised to fix things.

I saw dreadful mould covering walls, damp, water leaking in and dampness rising from the floor. In addition, tenants told me about blockages in their drainage system and insect infestations. Among the insects that they had had to deal with in large numbers were ants, spiders and slugs. Worst of all were the health problems that the tenants and their children were enduring because of the damp and mould. I was told about nausea, coughs, colds and chronic asthma. The conditions in Evelyn Court are completely unacceptable and the Industrial Dwellings Society should be ashamed of itself for leaving its tenants in that state.

The Industrial Dwellings Society was set up in 1885 by a group of Jewish philanthropists and businessmen who wanted to relieve overcrowding in the east end of London. If they could see the dreadful conditions that, in 2022, their organisation is housing eastenders in, they would be shocked. Those problems are not confined to Evelyn Court, however: the private sector as a whole has the worst housing disrepair and more than 1.1 million homes in the sector—fully one quarter—do not meet the decent homes standard.

I also deal with terrible housing disrepair problems elsewhere in the public sector. Among the cases that I am currently dealing with is an L&Q housing association tenant who is suffering from a leaking roof, rising damp, slugs, an infestation of drain flies, continually blocked drains, sewage spilling out into the garden and emerging from the sink, and a shower that has been broken for three years. Another L&Q tenant who I and my staff are trying to help is living in a flat with no working toilet, no gas, a leaking roof and an insect infestation.

We are also trying to help a Hackney Council tenant who has been without gas and hot water since 15 December and whose bathroom is in a state of disrepair. A further Hackney Council tenant is in a property with severe mould and raw sewage outside her flat from a drain that has been blocked for six months. That is just a sample of the scores of new housing disrepair cases that I deal with every month.

The Minister must be wondering why housing disrepair is so endemic. There are several reasons. There is a lack of funding from the Government generally and they,

quite correctly, put the responsibility for fire safety and net zero carbon emissions on to housing associations. I support those policies and that is the right thing to do, but they fail to fund those issues properly. It would take £15 billion to deal with fire safety issues in London alone.

Another issue is that housing associations—many of them, such as the Industrial Dwellings Society, set up more than a century ago with every intention of helping local people—no longer have a strong local presence. Tenants who need repairs often have to contact call centres situated far away in cities such as Birmingham and Liverpool. The people in these call centres do not know the estate or the individuals, and they often cannot grasp the problems they are trying to explain.

The regulators, including the Regulator of Social Housing and the housing ombudsman, are the Government's responsibility, but they do not have sufficient powers. They can only deal with the process, not individual cases, and they are not able to impose fines big enough to be a real deterrent.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities promised a White Paper on this sector in autumn 2021, and it has still not appeared—it is now promised for 2022. Will the Minister commit the Government to producing the White Paper on this important sector in 2022?

The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 requires private sector landlords to ensure that their properties are fit for human habitation at the beginning of a tenancy and throughout. Bearing in mind that 1.1 million homes in the private sector do not meet the decent homes standard, how many cases have been brought under this Act? How many of those cases have been successful? Finally, how much money has been allocated to local authorities to enforce the decent homes standards?

I would not like to conclude this speech without applauding the London Renters Union, which has given so much support to the tenants of Evelyn Court. Furthermore, the London Renters Union, across London, has not only helped tenants but empowered them. The tenants of Evelyn Court are not asking for the world. They want the Industrial Dwellings Society to keep its promise of a 24-hour call out, they want it to communicate with them properly and, above all, they want it to do something permanent about the terrible disrepair in Evelyn Court.

As a Member of Parliament for more than 30 years, one of the biggest parts of my case load is housing and housing disrepair. I cannot stress enough to Ministers the misery, depression and anxiety that long-running housing disrepair causes to tenants. The Government have a role to play in ensuring that tenants have disrepair addressed according to existing legislation and according to the needs of tenants. If the Government cannot meet the needs of tenants in these dreadful conditions, how much do they really care about tenants?

I ask the Minister to look into the issues I have raised and to take action for the tenants of Evelyn Court.

2.48 pm

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) on securing this debate, and I thank her for raising this

subject on behalf of her constituents. She is absolutely right to raise the issue of housing disrepair at Evelyn Court on Amhurst Road, and the conditions she describes are unacceptable.

The Government are committed to creating a fair and just housing system that works for everyone, and nowhere is the need to improve quality more urgent than in housing. The right hon. Lady asked several questions that I will address in my response. I do not have figures to hand on the number of cases brought under legislation, but I am sure officials can write to her with an answer.

Good-quality housing can help to improve a wide range of outcomes, including better health, quality of life, educational attainment, community cohesion, labour mobility and carbon emissions. There are significant societal impacts of poor-quality homes—we know that the Building Research Establishment recently estimated that poor-quality homes cost the NHS £1.4 billion a year and research funded by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities estimates that the total annual cost to society is £18.6 billion.

We have made considerable progress on housing quality. It has improved significantly since 2009. Then, 30% or 6.7 million homes were non-decent. In 2020, that had fallen to 4 million or 16%. Despite that progress, we recognise there is still more to do. Poor-quality housing is not spread evenly by tenure or region. Some 13% of social rented sector homes are currently non-decent. The highest rates of non-decent social housing are in the south-west, at a rate of 16.9%, and the situation is worse in the private rented sector, which has a 21% rate of non-decent homes, with Yorkshire and the Humber having the highest percentage of non-decency at 33.7%.

The Government want to take action and I will let the right hon. Lady know what we are doing. The levelling-up White Paper outlined a set of ambitious missions to level up the country and support communities. The Government set the ambition to halve the number of non-decent rented homes by 2030, with the biggest improvements in the lowest-performing areas. That means we will bring about 800,000 homes up to a decent standard across both the private and social rented sectors, and that will support the most vulnerable in society.

We recognise the issues that the right hon. Lady raised. She talked about the White Paper. That is why we are implementing the commitments in the social housing White Paper, which will drive up the quality of housing stock and housing services, and improve the lives of social housing residents in England. That work is critical to meeting our ambition to halve the number of non-decent rented homes by 2030, with the biggest improvements in the lowest-performing areas as part of our levelling-up agenda.

The social housing White Paper measures will transform social housing regulation and redress, creating proactive consumer regulation and rebalancing the relationship between landlord and tenant. We will introduce legislation to give the regulator of social housing stronger powers to drive up consumer standards, with regular inspections of the largest landlords. We will give the regulator greater

enforcement powers to tackle failing landlords, including unlimited fines for the worst offenders and powers to complete emergency repairs where needed. Landlords will be required to report on new tenant satisfaction measures that tenants and the regulator will be able to use to see how a landlord is performing.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the housing ombudsman. We have already strengthened the housing ombudsman's powers to ensure that when residents make a complaint, landlords take quick and effective action to put things right. In October last year, the housing ombudsman published its "Spotlight on: Damp and Mould" report, which made 26 recommendations on how landlords can improve services for residents based on learning from hundreds of investigations across 142 landlords and more than 500 responses to its call for evidence. In February and March 2021, the Department delivered on its commitment in the White Paper to run a campaign to raise awareness of, and confidence in, the social housing complaint-making process. To build on the success of that campaign, we are running a second four-to-six week campaign, which commenced this week on 21 February. The campaign consists of adverts on social media and radio, which guide residents on how to make things right.

We will publish a White Paper in the spring, setting out how we will support those in the private rented sector, including ending section 21 evictions and giving all tenants a strong right to redress. The White Paper will explore new standards for rented homes, introducing a national landlord register and taking tough action against rogue landlords. We will also review the decent homes standard to make sure it is fit for the present day and applies across all rented tenures.

We will also address poor energy efficiency by targeting retrofit funding at the worst performing homes and those least able to pay. The £2.2 billion funding through the home upgrade grant, social housing decarbonisation fund and boiler upgrade scheme will help to improve energy efficiency and lower energy bills. The future homes standard and future building standards will also ensure that new homes and buildings reach much higher energy efficiency standards. Through the Building Safety Bill, we will also legislate for the new homes ombudsman to support the purchases of new build homes when things go wrong.

I close by thanking the right hon. Lady again for securing today's debate and speaking so passionately on behalf of her constituents. I hope the residents of Evelyn Court know that we really do care about this issue. I reiterate that we are committed to ensuring that housing works for everyone. The Government understand the scale of the challenge that we face, which is why the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has set those ambitious missions to halve the number of rented homes that fail to meet the decent homes standard across both the social rented and private sectors.

Question put and agreed to.

2.55 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 25 February 2022

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Online Safety

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): The Government recognise the impact that online abuse, including anonymous abuse, has on people and their online experience. Too many people experience online abuse and protecting users is a priority for this Government.

The Online Safety Bill introduces vital new protections from online abuse. The legislation will require all companies in scope to manage the risk of criminal abuse effectively, including anonymous abuse, on user-to-user services. Companies will need to assess the functionality of anonymous and pseudonymous profiles and the role they play in allowing illegal abuse and mitigate the risk associated with such functionality.

All services likely to be accessed by children will also have to put in place appropriate measures to protect children from cyber-bullying and other forms of abuse, whether anonymous or not.

Category 1 companies—those which are high risk and high reach—will also have to set out clearly what abusive content they accept on their platform for adults and have effective systems in place to enforce their terms and conditions.

The Government recognise concerns that have been raised by the Joint Committee during pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill, alongside the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the Petitions Committee and others regarding the impact of online abuse and ensuring users have more control over whom they interact with online, while protecting the right of individuals to be anonymous if they choose. We thank the committees and campaigners for their scrutiny of the Online Safety Bill.

As a result, I am pleased to announce that we will strengthen the duties in the Online Safety Bill by adding two new additional duties on category 1 companies to provide adults with optional user verification and user empowerment tools.

The user verification duty will require category 1 companies to provide their adult users with an option to verify their identity. Ofcom will set out in guidance how companies can fulfil this new duty and the verification options companies could use. In developing this guidance, Ofcom must ensure that the possible verification measures are accessible to vulnerable users and consult the Information Commissioner, as well as vulnerable adult users and technical experts.

The user empowerment tools duty will require category 1 companies to provide tools to give adults more control over whom they interact with and the legal content they see. Under the proposed new duty, for harmful content that category 1 companies do allow, they would have to provide users with the tools to control what types of harmful content they see. This could include, for example, content on the discussion of self-harm recovery which may be tolerated on a category 1 service but which a particular user may not want to see.

In addition to the existing provisions in the Bill, the new duties will help provide robust protections for adults, including vulnerable adults, while protecting freedom of expression online.

[HCWS640]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UN Negotiations: Ocean Biodiversity

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): My noble Friend the Minister for the Pacific and the International Environment (Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park) has made the following written ministerial statement:

The fourth intergovernmental conference to negotiate an international legally binding instrument under the UN convention on the law of the sea (UNCLOS) on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction—known in short as the BBNJ agreement—takes place at the UN in New York from 7 to 18 March 2022.

The BBNJ agreement will be an important step forward in ocean governance, building on existing obligations in UNCLOS to protect the marine environment. Formal negotiations on a draft agreement have been underway since 2018. This conference, originally scheduled for March 2020, had to be postponed due to covid restrictions. It will be a key moment for delegations to regroup in person to make progress. This will be challenging in the time available. In a lengthy draft text of more than 70 articles, with many square bracketed options, plus more than 400 pages of alternative text proposals from delegations, there are still a number of key points of divergence in positions.

The mandate for negotiations is set out in UN General Assembly Resolution 72/249 of 24 December 2017. The resolution mandates the negotiations to address the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction. The elements of the package to be negotiated are: marine genetic resources, including questions on the sharing of benefits; area-based management tools, including marine protected areas (MPA); environmental impact assessments and capacity-building; and the transfer of marine technology. The resolution also reaffirms that the work of the conference and the agreement should be fully consistent with the provisions of UNCLOS and should not undermine the work of the existing ocean governance bodies. The conference is the final round of negotiations envisaged in the resolution.

The UK is keen to see an ambitious agreement concluded in 2022. Of particular importance are provisions that would enable the establishment of MPAs in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

This is important to help to achieve the target to protect at least 30% of the ocean by 2030, championed by the UK-led Global Ocean Alliance ahead of the upcoming 15th conference of parties to the convention on biological diversity. We also recognise the need to give better effect to UNCLOS commitments on capacity building for, and technology transfer to, developing countries. We understand the need to share the benefits of research into marine genetic resources and are keen to see greater international collaboration and the open sharing of scientific knowledge. The agreement must respect the freedom in UNCLOS for all states to conduct marine scientific research on the high seas, and should not create barriers to such research.

Negotiations will take place at senior official level and the UK delegation is led by the FCDO, working closely with DEFRA, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the National Oceanography Centre, the Department for Transport, the Ministry of Defence and the Natural History Museum. In the last two years of informal intersessional work, the UK has

participated in online dialogues organised by the IGC President, Ambassador Rena Lee of Singapore, and in high seas dialogues organised by Belgium, Costa Rica, Monaco and the High Seas Alliance, and has also co-hosted a number of other workshops to build understanding.

The Prime Minister announced the UK's membership of the High Ambition Coalition on BBNJ at the One Ocean summit organised by France on 11 February. We hope that the coalition will give political impetus to the negotiations and will press coalition members to deliver on their commitments.

[HCWS639]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Singapore Negotiations

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I have today signed a ground-breaking digital trade agreement with Singapore.

The DEA represents the most ambitious package of provisions on digital trade we have agreed to date. It will serve as a model for such agreements in future, cementing the UK's place as a world leader in digital trade.

The nature of digital trade and the digital economy means that the DEA is about far more than tech firms, valuable as the contribution they make to the UK economy undoubtedly is. Whether it is through opening digital markets, promoting the free flow of trusted data, or slashing red tape through overhauling outdated paper-based processes, digital trade has the potential to turbocharge UK exports and deliver benefits to businesses and consumers across the whole UK economy, from offices in Dundee to living rooms in Derbyshire and factory floors in Devon.

More detail will be set out in the explanatory memorandum that will accompany the laying of the text before Parliament, but key benefits of the deal include:

Supporting UK businesses to access Singapore's digital markets. Digitally-delivered services made up around 70% of UK-Singapore services trade in 2019, and this deal will help grow our trade in this area.

Cutting red tape by supporting the overhaul of outdated, paper-based trading systems. For example, the agreement contains specific commitments around maintaining legal frameworks that enable the digitisation of trade documents.

Keeping our country and citizens safe through deepening our partnership with Singapore in areas such as cybersecurity, as well as promoting the importance of online consumer protection and personal data protection.

The DEA will also support our bid to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), joining Singapore and 10 other vibrant trading nations. Membership would mean access to a £8.4 trillion free trade area with some of the biggest and fastest-growing markets in the world.

Following signature of the agreement today, it will shortly be laid before Parliament, in line with usual practice, after which it will also be published online. I

expect the agreement to come into force later this year once both the UK and Singapore have completed our respective domestic procedures.

[HCWS642]

TRANSPORT

Transport

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):

Further to my statement to the House on 21 February 2022, I am updating the House on a new extraordinary funding settlement between Transport for London and the Government which expires on 25 February. I have agreed with the Mayor of London a new settlement to 24 June 2022.

This new settlement demonstrates the Government's ongoing commitment to supporting the capital, while balancing the interests of the national taxpayer. It provides Transport for London with £200 million of emergency funding as it recovers from the pandemic and continues to work towards financial sustainability. It also continues the Government's commitment to cover fare revenues lost due to the pandemic. Together, this takes the Government's overall contribution to close to £5 billion, on top of an ongoing annual capital commitment of just over £1 billion through the spending review, in line with previous levels of funding.

Furthermore, the Government recognise the need for certainty and stability in Transport for London's capital investment programme. The Government are therefore willing to consider a longer-term capital settlement for Transport for London, which we intend to agree before the start of the next financial year. This will be on the condition that Transport for London co-operates fully and openly with the Government and provides sufficient information and data about its capital investment plans.

Transport for London needs to ensure that it is both financially sustainable in the short to medium term and in good financial health in the long term, ensuring good value for money for the UK taxpayer. Within this next funding period the Mayor has agreed to: prepare a plan setting out options to realise operating cost savings, up to and including £400 million in 2022-2023; progress with consultation on the options he has identified to raise between £0.5 billion and 1 billion per annum of additional revenue from 2023; deliver against TfL's accelerated modernisation plan and make significant progress in moving the pension fund into a financially sustainable position.

Transport is devolved to the Mayor of London. It is therefore for him alone to take responsibility for the decisions needed to return TfL to financial sustainability. The Government will continue to work with the Mayor and TfL to ensure London's transport system delivers for local citizens and businesses and contributes to the country's economic recovery. At all times the Government will continue to balance our obligations to the national transport network as a whole and to provide value for money for the taxpayer.

[HCWS641]

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