

**Friday
18 March 2022**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Friday 18 March 2022

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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 40.

Division No. 216]

[9.34 am

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:
Virginia Crosbie and

Siobhan Baillie

NOES

Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Baynes, Simon
Butler, Rob
Cadbury, Ruth
Cartledge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Cleverly, rh James
Davies, Gareth
Docherty, Leo
Elmore, Chris
Foster, Kevin
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gwynne, Andrew
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kearns, Alicia
Kendall, Liz
Loder, Chris

Lopez, Julia
Mak, Alan
Mayhew, Jerome
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Morton, Wendy
O'Brien, Neil
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Pow, Rebecca
Richards, Nicola
Scully, Paul
Sunderland, James
Tami, rh Mark
Tomlinson, Michael
Walker, Mr Robin
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Williams, Craig
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Gareth Johnson and
David T. C. Davies

Question accordingly negated.

Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Disabled Persons) Bill

*Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered.
Third Reading*

9.48 am

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

I begin by thanking all Members—some of whom, I am pleased to say, are present this morning—who have been involved in the development of the Bill during its earlier stages. I am also delighted to see in the Chamber both Front Benchers—the Minister and the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), who speaks for the official Opposition—who have been involved throughout. I appreciate that some who are present this morning have not followed the Bill throughout in detail, so it might be helpful if I explain what it is intended to achieve.

It is no easy task to create legislation that is intended for millions of people. The Equality Act 2010 made very significant progress in very many areas, but it was not perfect, and I do not suppose that anybody involved in its drafting or implementation would claim as much. We as legislators should always be prepared to look again at our work and consider whether it can be improved on. At present, the taxi and private hire vehicle sections of that Act do not work well enough for all the 13.7 million disabled people in Great Britain.

The fundamental intention of the Bill is to ensure the protections envisaged in that Act work effectively and comprehensively when a disabled person uses a taxi or a private hire vehicle, so that any disabled person has reasonable rights and protections enabling them to book, access and travel in a taxi or private hire vehicle at no additional charge.

As it stands, only wheelchair and assistance dog users have specific rights and protections under the Equality Act in relation to taxis and private hire vehicles. The existing Equality Act taxi and private hire vehicle measures do not, for example, provide clearly expressed rights for a wheelchair user intending to transfer from their wheelchair into the passenger seat of a non-designated taxi or private hire vehicle. They do not provide a visually impaired person with a right to guaranteed assistance to find and locate a booked private hire vehicle. Indeed, current measures fail to sufficiently protect disabled people who do not use wheelchairs or assistance dogs from discriminatory treatment at all.

Currently, section 165 of the Equality Act places duties on drivers to carry a wheelchair user

“in safety and reasonable comfort”;

to carry their wheelchair if they sit in the passenger seat; to provide reasonable mobility assistance; and, of course, to not charge extra for doing all of that. However, in order for those duties to apply, the vehicle must be on a local licensing authority’s designated list of wheelchair-accessible vehicles, and crucially, there is no requirement to maintain such a list; it is a local licensing authority’s choice. As such, if a wheelchair user intends to use two wheelchair-accessible taxis on the same day in different locations, and the first is on a local licensing authority’s list but the second is not, that wheelchair user will have specific rights and protections in their first journey but will not in their second, even if the vehicles and journeys

[Jeremy Wright]

are identical in all other respects. This Bill would rectify that by amending section 167 of the Equality Act to require that all local licensing authorities maintain and publish a list of wheelchair-accessible vehicles.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is making an important addition to the safeguards in this area. Would he note, though, that back in 2018, Professor Mohammed Abdel-Haq made 34 recommendations on the wider set of issues, of which this was one? Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that it is time for the Government to bring forward a more comprehensive package of measures to deal with the taxi and private hire trade?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who I know has shadow ministerial experience in this area. He is right: there is more to be done in relation to the taxis and private hire vehicles that we all use, not just those of us with disabilities. However, the Government have already taken steps in this area. I hope and expect that the Government will support this Bill, and I think there is more to come. I hope, for example, that my hon. Friend the Minister will say something about the training that taxi and private hire vehicle drivers ought to receive in order to ensure they have basic disability awareness that will help to reinforce some of the duties that this Bill seeks to set out. I do not think the hon. Gentleman should take our advocacy for this Bill as an indication that we believe this is all that needs to be done. Clearly, more does need to be done.

As I have already said, the duties in section 165 of the Equality Act only apply if a passenger is a wheelchair user and is accessing a designated wheelchair-accessible taxi or private hire vehicle. Those are two specific criteria that exclude many. This Bill would level the playing field for disabled people by creating new duties at section 164A for drivers to carry and reasonably assist any disabled person without charging extra. It would also place duties on drivers to carry a disabled person's wheelchair and mobility aids and provide reasonable assistance. Those duties would therefore apply to a wheelchair user who intends to transfer to a passenger seat of a non-wheelchair-accessible vehicle and, beyond that, to any disabled person who is not a wheelchair user who wishes to access any taxi or private hire vehicle.

The objectives of this Bill would, of course, be diminished if a disabled person were prevented in practice from accessing the vehicle because they could not easily find it when it arrived. Therefore, the Bill would create new duties at section 165A for drivers to assist a disabled person to find and identify a hired vehicle. That would apply to any taxi or private hire vehicle and to any disabled person, provided that the driver is aware that the person requires assistance to identify or find the vehicle.

This Bill would also create new duties for private hire vehicle operators at proposed new section 167A of the Equality Act 2010 by creating offences for refusing or failing to accept a booking from a disabled person.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I very much commend the content of my right hon. and learned Friend's Bill. For balance, does he agree that, while this

Bill is vital, a great many people running taxi and private hire vehicles actually go out of their way to help disabled people? What we are doing is building on the generosity and kindness of that sector to further improve the service provided to disabled people across the country.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who made that point with great force and clarity during the Bill's previous proceedings, for which I am grateful. He is absolutely right: it is necessary to recognise that a huge amount of good work is already being done by taxi and private hire vehicle drivers. No part of this Bill's provisions is designed to suggest otherwise but, as he will recognise, a minority of drivers and operators do not yet comply with the expectations that we would all have as legislators and, frankly, that the good taxi and private hire vehicle drivers he talks about would also expect as a basic provision for their disabled passengers and clients. It is no reflection on those who do a good job, particularly those who moved people around over the pandemic when they would otherwise have been unable to be moved. I hope my hon. Friend will be reassured that we are seeking to strike that important balance, and I will come on to talk about that.

Before I do, I will finish my earlier point about sections 165A and 167A, which provide rights and protections to ensure that disabled people are not, by default, prevented from benefiting from the rights and protections provided in sections 164A and 165. To reiterate an earlier point, the fundamental intention of this Bill is to ensure that the Equality Act 2010 works more comprehensively for the millions of disabled people in this country.

To come back to my hon. Friend's point, the Bill must also work for taxi and private hire vehicle drivers, many of whom already do what this Bill will require of them. The Bill simply would not work if it did not consider the range of people and situations that it could have an impact on, from both a passenger and a provider perspective. I believe that the duties, offences, defences, and exemptions in this Bill effectively balance the rights and protections for disabled people with the reasonable duties on drivers, operators, and local licencing authorities.

For a driver to assist a disabled person to identify or find their vehicle, the driver must be made aware before the start of the passenger's journey that the passenger requires assistance to identify or find that vehicle. In order to carry a passenger in safety and reasonable comfort, the driver must reasonably have known that the passenger was disabled. For a driver to carry a disabled person's wheelchair or mobility aid, it must be possible and reasonable for the wheelchair or mobility aid to be carried in the vehicle. The House can be satisfied that where a driver has a genuine reason why they could not fulfil the duties specified in this Bill, the defences provided would be adequate to avoid their being penalised unfairly.

This Bill would also amend driver exemptions from duties under the Equality Act. Currently, drivers can apply for an exemption on medical grounds or grounds related to their physical condition, which exempt them from all the duties in section 165. This Bill would ensure drivers are exempt from the appropriate sections by expanding the exemptions to cover some of the duties that would also be applied in proposed new section 164A.

It would also amend the driver exemptions so that they apply only to the mobility assistance duties in proposed new sections 164A and 165, thereby directly closing a loophole that enables a driver issued with an exemption because they cannot provide mobility assistance, to accept the carriage of a wheelchair user none the less, but to then, in theory at least, charge them more than they would other passengers. That cannot be right or the purpose of the exemption.

It is, as I said, a daunting task to create legislation that impacts millions of people, but the provisions in this Bill intend to do just that, ensuring disabled people have rights and protections when accessing taxis or private hire vehicles that work practically and across a multitude of scenarios. The Bill has been developed with disabled people's step-by-step use of taxis and private hire vehicles at its core, from the booking stage, to finding the vehicle, to accessing and travelling in that vehicle.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend has clearly worked incredibly carefully with disabled groups throughout the development of the Bill. The issue comes into my inbox and I hear from constituents facing these types of problem. Was it a personal issue in his own constituency that first raised his awareness of the issue?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and she is right. I have spoken to a number of different disability campaign groups, advocacy groups and charities, and I am pleased to say they are all supportive of the Bill's intention. As she represents a rural constituency, she will recognise, along with those others of us who represent rural areas, that taxis and private hire vehicles may be the only way for people with disabilities to get around. They are an important lifeline, so the provisions of the Bill will have effect particularly in rural areas, such as the ones that she and I represent.

I have come across, as she will have done, constituents who rely on that vital lifeline, not just during the covid pandemic but all the time. They will want to know that they have these rights, that drivers are aware that they have these rights and that they can be carried without additional charge and with the basic consideration that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) mentioned earlier, good drivers already provide, but that all drivers should.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend raises an important point about availability and accessibility of vehicles for disabled people. In my very urban constituency, availability of wheelchair-accessible taxis is a continuing concern for people who want to be able to get out and about. Will he comment on the idea of a national database—a central record—of where these vehicles are, so that our disabled communities can easily access information about where they can get such vehicles?

Jeremy Wright: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend because I know he is in the process of taking through other important legislation in relation to taxis and private hire vehicles, which will contribute to the better environment that the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) referred to earlier.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) is right that this is a problem in urban as well as rural areas, and that one thing we can get better at is giving people with disabilities, particularly those who need wheelchair-accessible taxis and private hire vehicles, better information on where to find them. That is why in this Bill the expectation that local authorities maintain a list of such designated vehicles will change from being optional to being a requirement. That will be more consistent across the country so that wherever people live—in urban or rural areas, wherever they are in the country—they will be able to get that information more clearly and easily, to help them move around. I agree with my hon. Friend that that will make a significant difference.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I commend my right hon. and learned Friend for his excellent Bill. Does he have any messages for members of the industry who already fulfil these requirements? I believe we have to give credit to those who are already pushing ahead in this fantastic way. May I ask his advice on how the Bill might not be seen as a blunt tool by those who are already carrying out these requirements?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend makes a good point. In addition to speaking to charities that advocate on behalf of people with disabilities, I have taken the trouble to speak to those who operate in the taxi trade. I have tried to make it clear to them that we do not seek to penalise the drivers that my hon. Friend refers to, and that my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South mentioned earlier, who are doing all they possibly can to facilitate the travel of people with disabilities, and to whom we owe thanks and commendation. Rather, we want to ensure that the provisions of the Bill will bite for those who are not doing so. The Bill will, frankly, make no difference whatsoever to the drivers that my hon. Friends spoke about, who already do what the Bill will require of them.

The Bill will not simply make requirements of drivers; it will also require local licensing authorities to maintain and publish a list of wheelchair-accessible vehicles to ensure consistency across the country. The Bill will prevent private hire vehicle operators from refusing or failing to take a booking from a disabled person because that person is disabled, subject only to a limited defence where there is a lack of suitable vehicles. The Bill will place reasonable duties on drivers to carry and assist disabled people without, crucially, charging extra. This Bill will change lives for the better, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Gill Furniss.

10.6 am

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Once again, I commend the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) and all other Members involved in taking forward this Bill. Its aims are laudable and have the Opposition's support. I also pay tribute to the hundreds and thousands of taxi and private hire vehicle drivers across the country. During the covid-19 pandemic, they went above and beyond to ensure they provided safe travel for those who needed it.

[Gill Furniss]

Taxi drivers still face unacceptable working standards. The Government must tackle head-on the low pay, poor job security and lack of workers' rights associated with the gig economy. I am pleased to hear that future legislation is in the pipeline, and I know the Opposition will be happy to co-operate on that in Committee. I welcome the agreement between Uber and the GMB, which will provide a vital boost for Uber drivers, but we all know there is much more left to do. Labour would implement much-needed reforms to taxi and private hire services. That would include a review of licensing authorities' jurisdiction, setting national minimum standards for safety and accessibility and updating regulations to keep pace with technological change.

The barriers that disabled people continue to face on transport are downright scandalous. According to a 2019 survey of disabled people for Scope, 30% said that difficulties with public transport had reduced their independence, and as many as four in five said that they felt stressed or anxious when planning or carrying out such a journey. Those figures sadly come as no surprise when we look at what has happened on the Government's watch. The costs of public transport have continued to rocket upwards ahead of wages, and services have become less and less reliable. The failed privatised model means that bus fares are projected to be 60% higher by 2024 than they were in 2010. Not only that, but bus routes are projected to fall by more than 5,000. That has led to a reduction of nearly 26% in the number of elderly and disabled passengers. The stark shortfalls in public transport mean that for many disabled people, a taxi is their only option when they go about their everyday lives. Disabled people make, on average, twice the number of taxi journeys each year compared with people without disabilities.

This Bill will give people with disabilities more rights when travelling by taxi and private hire vehicles. We welcome those ambitions, so we will support this Bill today, but the proof is well and truly in the pudding. We must ensure that new rights on the statute book are matched by tangible improvement in the experience of disabled people. For instance, I support making it mandatory for local authorities to make and maintain a list of wheelchair-accessible taxis. However, a decade of cut after cut to our local authorities means that some may struggle to maintain their lists. In my constituency, Sheffield City Council has seen its spending power cut by £215 million since 2010—almost a third of its total budget. If the lists are not regularly updated, disabled people will be unable to rely on them.

For this legislation to successfully meet its aims, it is imperative that the Government work with taxi and private hire drivers to ensure that they are fully aware of their responsibilities. For instance, training on how to assist people with a range of disabilities before, during and after their journeys could help to ensure that drivers have the confidence to provide safe and comfortable transport for all their passengers. We must also ensure that disabled people are fully aware of their rights. Although for many years wheelchair users and those with guide dogs have been protected under law from being denied a taxi service or charged extra, sadly, instances of this do still occur.

Many charities and organisations do excellent work on this, but the Government must ensure that these new changes are given the publicity they deserve. Unfortunately, the Department for Transport seems to have a track record of taking a back seat when it comes to publicity campaigns. The highway code fiasco makes this abundantly clear.

We support this legislation today, which we hope will make a real difference to the lives of disabled people, but there is still so much left to be done by Government to combat the lack of accessibility in our transport network.

10.10 am

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I rise today to speak in support of the important Bill promoted by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright). Too often, pockets of our society do not have true equality, or true access, and the Bill will fundamentally change that. Some people may think that this is just a small change, but for disabled people in my constituency and beyond, this will make an enormous, life-changing difference.

We talked earlier about rural areas in particular and how they will benefit from this Bill. Rutland and Melton is an incredible constituency of 462 square miles. I have almost 140 villages and just three towns, so taxis make a fundamental difference to the lives of disabled people living in our communities, but I can attest that we do not have enough taxis. On a Friday, should a surgery run over and I do not have a car, I have sometimes had to wait up to three hours to get a taxi. On a Friday evening, I will be sleeping in my office; I will not be getting home to my family because there is insufficient taxi access. That is how it is for me, as an able-bodied individual. For my disabled constituents, things are made all the more difficult.

At this point, I will talk briefly about how, in future considerations by the Government, this Bill could go further and support women and men who are parents. All too often, I have had a taxi turn up to pick me up and the driver has seen that I am a mum with two children and a pram and they have turned and run—I would like to think that they do this because of the children and not because they have seen my face—and refused to take me. I do not know whether my colleagues have had similar experiences, but the fact is it does happen. I point out, however, that such drivers are a small minority; the vast majority of taxi drivers want to do everything they can to support those whom they carry. However, some are happy to turn around and leave a mother in the rain with two small children under three. That has happened at least four or five times in my lifetime and my children are only three now, so perhaps we could look at this in future revisions of the Equality Act.

Peter Gibson: My hon. Friend is making an important speech. I am very concerned to hear that she has been left by taxi drivers. When my private Member's Bill, the Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Bill, was passing through the other place, Baroness Brinton gave a very moving speech about how she, as a disabled wheelchair user, had been turned away by a taxi and had had to use her motorised wheelchair in the rain, and how the battery had run out a short distance from her home. Clearly, this is not acceptable.

Alicia Kearns: It is absolutely not acceptable. The fact is that this Bill is being introduced because we have disabled people in our country being charged extra for the liberty, for the joy, for the privilege of being carried, and that is absolutely shameful.

We are very fortunate in Rutland and Melton, because we have two specific companies that are expert at providing support for the disabled. I pay tribute to Claire's Taxis and Elaine's Taxis, both in Melton, that do a great deal to support our disabled community. They are truly wonderful. This matter is important, as it affects so many people, not least in rural areas, because of the absence of bus services. In both Rutland and in Melton, Centrebus has put up the costs for its buses, so we will now lose the only bus service—the No.19 bus—between Melton and Nottingham. That bus is so important because it carries people between two major centres of work, it carries people for healthcare needs and it ensures that anyone who supports Nottingham Forest or Notts County football clubs and wants to get to Trent Bridge is able to get there—something everyone should have the right to do, including our disabled friends and family.

It is really important that this Bill will help those who are now suffering from an absence of bus services, although I make clear that I will be fighting for the No. 19 bus service and fighting for the buses within Rutland, and Centrebus will be hearing from me. I put this on the record, and I hope their lobbyists and public relations team are listening: Centrebus, I will be in touch, because it is unacceptable that you are stripping 460 square miles of decent bus services.

The Bill is also important to me for a reason that many of us in the Chamber will have experienced. I, too, have a loved one who has recently become reliant on the use of a wheelchair. She means everything to me, and she is currently suffering from cancer that has riddled the entirety of her body, particularly her bones, meaning that she is unable to stand or to do much travel.

This Monday, I hope for the first time in two and a half years to take my loved one somewhere that is not the hospital. I hope to take her to the British Museum to see the Stonehenge exhibition, but I have been ringing around trying to get a taxi to take her there. It is not far—it is only about a half-hour journey—yet every taxi firm I ring says, “Oh, sorry, we don't have much disabled provision,” or, “We can't promise you there's going to be a disabled-friendly vehicle.” I say, “Do we need to bring a foldable wheelchair? Do we need to use an electric wheelchair? What do I need to do to make this happen?” I want to get her out of the house and to the British Museum for the first time since she had this appalling diagnosis, given the effects it will have on her in the long term.

Not a single taxi company that I have rung so far, in London of all places—it is not rural Rutland and Melton—has been unable to promise me that they will help me to get my loved one just a half-hour's journey. This Bill will make a difference for all of us caring for loved ones who unfortunately have life-limiting or other conditions.

Jeremy Wright: I am very grateful for my hon. Friend's support. She will know that this Bill will come into effect two months after it is passed by this House and

the other place and receives Royal Assent. Does she agree that it is not necessary for any taxi driver or private hire vehicle driver to wait for this legislation to be passed to offer the kind of service she describes? They can do that now, and many already do. I hope that this Bill will change the atmosphere, so that more and more drivers are prepared to offer the kind of services she describes.

Alicia Kearns: Absolutely. That is why the Bill is so important. As Conservatives, we do not want to have to pass legislation to require service providers to provide services to all people. People should not have to sit there and think, “When will Jeremy Wright come and save us all and ensure we can get the access we deserve?”

My right hon. and learned Friend is right; I am sure we will all be speaking in support of this important legislation, and the message should go out from this place today: step forward now. You have a choice, and you can ensure that anyone who is disabled, or partially sighted, or has any other needs is able to get to where they need to. It is welcome news that in two months' time that will be a requirement, and perhaps I will not be struggling so much to provide basic access and equality of rights to those whom I love so greatly.

During the pandemic, many of our taxi drivers did great things, and I recognise that they have probably become more disabled-friendly as a result of that work. I am grateful for that. It is also important that my right hon. and learned Friend has sensibly included a clause that if a driver can argue that they could not have reasonably known a passenger was disabled, it will not be held against them, because we do not want to see that held against good, hard-working taxi drivers if they did not mean to do it.

Ultimately, however, the point stands that this is an important Bill for rural areas, to give equality of access to all disabled people and those of us who care so much about ensuring that companies step up and do what is right and do their duty. I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for all his work on this Bill.

It is sad that it has taken so long to get here and sad that it has required legislation, but it is absolutely the right thing to do. For my loved ones, I thank my right hon. and learned Friend. Let us hope we can look at what more we can do to ensure that, as I mentioned earlier, no mother or father is ever left in the rain with their children with a taxi driver driving away from them.

10.19 am

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): It gives me great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who spoke with great eloquence, and to speak in this debate in support of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) and his Bill, which I supported in Committee on 9 February.

My right hon. and learned Friend made the point that there has been significant consultation on the Bill—not least by him, in person—and I think that adds great authority to what he has said and what we are considering today. He observed that the Bill will come into effect two months after it is passed, which is an exciting prospect: we are not talking about some Act of Parliament in the distant future, but about an imminent change. Therefore, it is all the more to be welcomed.

[Simon Baynes]

I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) for her remarks and her support for the Bill. It is always much appreciated when there is consensus across the House for such a measure—albeit with a few reservations on her part, which is to be expected and is quite understood—and I am pleased that we can all unify in support of the excellent measures in the Bill.

I am keen, in expressing my support for the Bill, to highlight and recognise the fantastic service that many taxi and private hire vehicle drivers have provided. I covered this point in my intervention on my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam, but it is nowhere more applicable than in my constituency of Clwyd South, particularly in the rural areas. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton spoke forcefully about rural areas, and I strongly support her point. My constituency contains urban areas but also a lot of rural areas, so I have seen for myself how important it is to have a taxi and private hire vehicle service to provide help to people, often in remote areas.

Taxis and private hire vehicles have been a lifeline for many disabled and vulnerable people, not least during the covid crisis. Despite that, the Bill is very necessary, and I am proud to support it. In practice, many operators of taxis and private hire vehicles in Clwyd South and elsewhere in the UK already go out of their way to facilitate travel for disabled people, so I suspect that implementing the Bill in full will not be as difficult as some might expect.

We have talked about some of the statistics already, but let me reiterate one or two of them. In 2019-20, 14 million people in the UK—around 22% of the overall population—were reported as having a disability. It is very important to bear that statistic in mind. Around 1.2 million people who are disabled use vehicles in the UK. Another point that has been made already but needs emphasising is that disabled people make twice as many journeys as non-disabled people by taxi and private hire vehicle each year.

Despite that, some disabled people continue to face discriminatory behaviour from a minority of drivers, including outright refusal of service, overcharging, and failure to provide assistance to enable them to board and travel in vehicles in reasonable comfort and safety. Clearly, that cannot be allowed to continue. While the Equality Act 2010 provides disabled people with some protection, it applies inconsistently and only with respect to certain disabilities.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): The point has been made very succinctly that we do not have to wait for the Bill to come in before some of these changes can be made. Does my hon. Friend agree that one thing that taxi companies can do is to improve the communication with their drivers when people book taxis—especially in advance—when there are additional needs to be catered for, to ensure that they can provide the service?

Simon Baynes: I thank my hon. Friend for making that very valid point. I strongly support what he says. We have heard already that the communication between

taxis and private hire vehicle operators and their customers is vital. It is extremely important that disabled people know what services they can obtain from taxi companies so that there is not a tragic misunderstanding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton, in a slightly different context, has alluded to how dispiriting and upsetting it is for someone to expect a taxi journey and then have it taken from them at the last minute because the taxi driver deems them not to be the kind of client they want to pick up at that time. That level of distress is something that we should go out of our way to avoid, as she rightly said.

The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who is no longer in his place, made an important point about the holistic approach to travel. The Government have said that by 2030 they want to support the creation of an inclusive transport network that enables disabled people to travel to work or for leisure easily, confidently and without additional cost. That is part of the Government's broader efforts to close the 30% gap between the employment of working-age disabled and non-disabled people. It is really important that we see the Bill in that broader context. It is not just about ensuring that taxi drivers perform in the way we are talking about: it is also the broader subject of how we ensure that disabled people can play as full a part in the life of this country, especially in the workplace, as other members of the population. It is that equality that lies at the heart of this.

As a former member of the licensing committee of Powys County Council, I am particularly interested in the measures in the Bill. One of the many reasons I support it is that it aims to reduce discrimination against disabled people and to address the barriers they face in accessing services. We have talked about the Equality Act, and it is good that the Bill will amend the sections of the Act that relate to the carriage of disabled people by taxi and private hire vehicles. As a Welsh Member, I welcome the fact that that will apply to both England and Wales. It also aims to address the inconsistencies in current legislation and expand the protections currently afforded to wheelchair and assistant dog users to all disabled people, regardless of the vehicle in which they travel. It will create a new duty to ensure that drivers of taxis and private hire vehicles do not refuse carriage to a disabled person, and a new duty will also be created for drivers to assist disabled passengers to identify and find the vehicle they have booked, without making any additional charge for doing so. In a sense, that is related to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) has just made, which is that that will be on the condition that the driver is made aware before the start of the journey that the passenger requires assistance to identify or find the vehicle.

That leads on to another point that I am keen to make, which comes from my experience in my constituency: that taxi drivers become friends to people, especially the disabled, the lonely and the elderly, because they play an incredibly important part in their lives. Many such drivers do a fantastic job already, as we have heard, and they have a close relationship with the people they help, particularly in rural areas.

The point about communication and ensuring that expectations are met, so that people have the service that they require, is vital, and lies at the heart of the Bill.

It is one of the key reasons I support it. I would also expect that the provision will be especially helpful for visually impaired passengers and those with learning disabilities or cognitive impairments.

In conclusion, I fully back the Bill and will support it in the remaining stages, as it will safeguard disabled and vulnerable persons from unfair discrimination and will properly address the barriers they currently face in accessing taxi and private hire vehicles. I have great praise for the sector, as others have already said, especially in rural areas, and the Bill will enable us to create an even better service for people. I warmly congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam on his worthy Bill.

10.29 am

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate. I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) for bringing the Bill forward. I hope that it will make progress and become law. I am delighted that the Opposition are supporting it.

The Bill makes some important changes and improvements to the Equality Act 2010. Those who are wheelchair-dependent or who have assistance dogs have expressed rights in that Act, but others who are in need do not. I am delighted that the Bill will look to address that point. There is currently no requirement for a local licensing list to register and only 70% of local authorities have registered lists. That is a cause of concern for me so I am also delighted that the Bill will make progress to fix that.

Specifically, I draw the House's attention to proposed new section 167A of the 2010 Act, which brings forward new offences where drivers fail or refuse to accept a booking from a disabled person because of a disability, which is important. I listened intently to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) and the experiences that she shared. Many hon. Members have also had those experiences shared with them by constituents. It is important that we look to address that and put it right. I cannot commend my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam enough for addressing that.

A theme that has come through so far in the debate is the effect that the Bill will have on those living in rural areas, where taxi drivers have a considerable impact. In many cases, it is regrettable that there is such a high dependency on taxis. It is incumbent on the Government to take note of the fact that bus services in rural areas have not been the highest priority for a while. I hope that that will be fixed through the recently announced White Paper and the work that the Government are doing. When the Minister responds, I hope that she will update us on that, particularly on the effect on disabled access and those needing it.

The debate is about taxi access, however, and I pay tribute to my local taxi firm Beaver Cabs in Sherborne, which does a wonderful job. Those taxi drivers do much more than just drive someone from A to B: they have a relationship and they are often one of the few people that a resident will interact with over a period of time.

Many hon. Members have large rural constituencies. I listened to some statistics from hon. Friends earlier about the size of constituencies and I know that

Conservative Members like to have a bit of a competition, but West Dorset is a constituency of 400 square miles and 132 parishes—it is vast and it has 84,000 electors. It is a considerable rural constituency and there are very high levels of dependency on taxi use. Of course, there are also many hidden needs, some of which my right hon. and learned Friend covers in the Bill.

It is key to build on the generosity and kindness of taxi drivers. We have to take care not to portray all taxi drivers in the same way as the few who are perhaps less kind and less generous with their assistance and help. The majority of taxi drivers already do many things. The good thing about the Bill is that it will legislate to ensure that those who do not do these things as standard will have to do so.

In West Dorset, there is a particular difficulty with disabled access by car and taxi to and from railway stations. There are seven stations in my constituency, only two of which are accessible. The other stations that serve the wider area are not accessible either.

Alicia Kearns: My hon. Friend has great expertise when it comes to all things choo-choo, I believe. Why does he think those stations have not been given the facilities that they need for accessibility? We have the same problem in my rural constituency.

Chris Loder: As in most cases, I entirely agree with my hon. Friend.

I have been actively pursuing this matter at Dorchester West station. Dorchester is the county town of Dorset. Dorchester West is now fully accessible, as a result of one of my many campaigns. However, it has taken far too long. Dorchester South, the county town station from which trains go to London, is not fully accessible. If a taxi for a disabled person pulls up at that station and the train is arriving from London Waterloo, the disabled passenger cannot access the taxi. Yeovil Junction, which is not in my constituency but serves the vast majority of the rural north of it, is not staffed all the time. A disabled person who gets off a train and cannot manage the steps will be stranded. That is unacceptable, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will give due consideration to it—along with many other issues that I must share with her and her colleagues in this context.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): My hon. Friend has great expertise and experience in this field, so I hope he will forgive me if I ask him to acknowledge, at least, that the Government are making investments in our railway network and stations to improve accessibility through the Access for All programme, which will result in £350 million of investment between 2019 and 2024. Perhaps his constituency has not yet benefited from that investment, but he should certainly seek it.

Chris Loder: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind intervention. I entirely agree with him: I think that the Government's work in this field is excellent. Regrettably, however, it is not excellent in West Dorset yet. When a county town station is not fully accessible and the second town of Somerset, on the border, is served by a station at which someone who is disabled and arrives after 8 pm will be stranded, that is completely unacceptable. However, I wholly support what the Government are

[Chris Loder]

doing through Access for All, and would warmly welcome more of that investment in West Dorset to address this issue.

Peter Gibson: While we are on the issue of railways, on which my hon. Friend is an expert and speaks eloquently, and as we are talking about access to them for disabled persons, may I draw his attention to my campaign for the installation of tactile paving, an essential means of ensuring safety for disabled persons, at Darlington's Bank Top station? May I also be the first to wish the Minister well with the GB Railways headquarters? We learned today that 42 possible locations had been named; I just want to put Darlington's bid on record, and to wish the Minister well with that.

Chris Loder: I would welcome investment in the tactile paving that my hon. Friend will be receiving at Darlington. I understand that it is part of a £100 million scheme to develop the whole station. That is major investment for a wonderful part of the world, but West Dorset is equally wonderful, and I cannot remember the last time we saw major investment in one of our railway stations in rural Dorset. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to make this point. Access for disabled people who need to travel in taxis to and from trains, especially in the absence of rural bus services, is incredibly important, and we often do not pay attention to it.

You may be interested to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that in three areas in rural Dorset one has to put one's hand out for the train driver to stop. Those train stations have only steps, and they are completely inaccessible to disabled people arriving by car. I hope the DfT and my hon. Friend the Minister will pursue a wider piece of work to develop connectivity for disabled people who travel by car and taxi to get on a train.

Gareth Davies: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Does he take comfort from the fact that Great British Railways will have a statutory duty to make train stations more accessible? And will he support Grantham's bid to host the headquarters of Great British Railways?

Chris Loder: I am open to being lobbied to support bids. I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me for not declaring at this moment which bid I will support. We need to be careful not to stray from the point.

My hon. Friend makes a valid point about the future of GBR. He asks whether I take comfort from the fact that GBR will also have the ability to make progress. Yes, I do take comfort, but I do not take comfort from having to wait for it. There is no reason to wait for this to happen to address the very difficult disabled access issues we have today. Many of us, particularly in rural areas, have already had to wait for decades and we should not continually have to wait. I welcome the GBR initiative, which will do great things for the railways of this country. I warmly commend my hon. Friend the Minister and her colleagues for their work.

I am conscious that we are straying into trains and railways. I am delighted to take interventions and questions from my hon. Friends, but I am conscious that I am not at the Dispatch Box. I hope they will bear that in mind.

The absence of rural bus services means that disabled people are much more dependent on taxis. We have to bear in mind the cost to disabled people. It is sad that disabled people, particularly in rural areas, have to pay more to be connected and to go to places because of the nature of their disability. That is something we should note. I am delighted that the Bill looks to address many of those matters.

Alicia Kearns: If we are to reduce the reliance on taxis in the most rural areas, perhaps the Government need to consider improving the local government finance settlement and the funding to rural authorities. Otherwise we will have an increased reliance on taxi services, which sometimes struggle to operate in rural areas. We need that funding to ensure that there are adequate buses. The Government should be stepping forward to provide fairer funding to rural areas.

Chris Loder: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I looked through the revenue support grant list, but I cannot recall how her constituency benefited or not. Dorset did not benefit at all from the revenue support grant—it was zero. That compounds the difficulties we experience, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for meeting my Dorset colleagues and I to look to address that.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton that this is a matter of real concern to many of us in rural constituencies. It is important that the balance is now readjusted, as rural areas are important. We have taken them for granted, particularly on disabled access and disabled transport, for too long. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam is making good progress on that in this Bill, and I am sure the Department will take it further.

I am conscious of the time and I am very grateful for the time afforded to me, but I will just conclude by saying that the dependence on taxis, because of the absence of rural bus services, particularly for disabled people, is an ongoing concern. For the past two and a half years, or just under, since I was elected, we have seen a considerable reduction in rural bus services. That has put undue pressure on those who do not have their own car, particularly those who are disabled, who need to get to the hospital, who need to go to the doctors and the dentists, who need to go shopping—the most basic of things. I look forward to progress on that in due course.

Finally, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam has done a sterling job with the Bill, which will make a huge impact and be of huge benefit to many people who maybe do not even realise that we are talking about it today. I am sorry not to see more Members on the Opposition Benches. This House has talked a lot about the issue of accessibility and equality over many years, and I am very sorry that the Opposition Benches are so free and empty. I just say to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) that that is not meant to be a political point, but we have talked about this matter a lot in this House. It is important that today we can demonstrate, as the House of Commons of the United Kingdom, that we are making real progress on a matter that will affect a lot of people. I pay tribute, once again, to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam.

10.46 am

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I rise in support of the Bill and I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) for this important piece of legislation which will widen access and improve the Equality Act 2010. I very much welcome that it has support from the Opposition.

As we have heard today, connectivity is a huge issue in rural areas. I do not want to get into Top Trumps on the sizes of rural constituencies, but Penrith and the Border is the largest and most sparsely populated constituency in England. It can sometimes take up to two hours to get from one end of the constituency to the other by car. Having said that I did not want to indulge in Top Trumps, I just have.

Chris Loder: We cannot not respond to such points made in the House. West Dorset is 400 square miles and has 132 parishes. I cannot quite remember the statistics for the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), but I think hers is slightly larger than mine. Is the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) more beautiful than West Dorset? I am not quite sure on that point.

Dr Hudson: Yes, it is more beautiful. [*Laughter.*] Let us put the Top Trumps to one side now and get to the heart of this very important Bill.

My colleagues in rural constituencies, and also those in urban constituencies, have highlighted the importance of my right hon. and learned Friend's Bill in connecting people, in getting them from A to B, in equality of access for all people who need it, and in ensuring that disabled people have equality of access. That is so, so important.

Points were made about there being many, many good taxi drivers and private hire vehicle drivers who are doing the right thing. Again, I want to thank those drivers for doing the right thing. The Bill will set the balance and get that to be uniform. For too long, unfortunately, disabled people have been facing behaviour that makes their lives very, very difficult. When there is outright refusal of service, it is incredibly distressing. I welcome the Government's intention to go further and move towards disability training as part of the standards for licensing. I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend the Minister on that point.

I also echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) on the importance of having a database, so that people hiring vehicles know exactly where and when they can access them. That is a very important point and I look forward to movement on that.

I welcome the important tenet of the Bill to refrain from charging disabled people extra. It is so important to get that on to the statute book.

I very much welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's work on the Bill. Notably, he has consulted widely with disability groups as well as transport groups, and inserted practical safeguard balances into the Bill so that people providing services will not be penalised. It is well-balanced legislation that will move us forward positively.

As the Bill comes on to the statute book—as my right hon. and learned Friend said, that will be a couple of months after Royal Assent—it will be beholden on licensing authorities to become involved, but as has been mentioned, there are many pressures on local authorities. In Cumbria, we face radical local government restructuring to create two new unitary authorities. I have said many times that I am passionately against the restructuring, which is the last thing that a huge county such as Cumbria needs, and it is the worst possible time to be changing everything as we come out of a pandemic. That said, we are where we are and we need to make it work, but there will be pressures on the Cumbrian system to institute such changes.

I have been concerned about how the restructuring in Cumbria is leading to paralysis and inertia in decision making and in acting on legislation that may come through. To illustrate that, the local Liberal Democrat-led Eden District Council is delaying decisions on waste collections, so some villages in my constituency do not get green waste picked up while others do. The Liberal Democrat administration is blaming the previous Conservative administration and local government reform, and it is blaming central Government for the restructuring, which it cannot do anything about. That is not good enough. We cannot have delays in decision making because of such restructurings.

It is so important that we have connections across my constituency, so taxi drivers and private hire vehicle drivers are really important in that. It is also important, as colleagues have said, to have connectivity to other services. Rural buses have been highlighted often, and we have many fantastic local services for which volunteers have stepped up, such as the Fellrunner bus and the Border Rambler bus. Unfortunately, over the years we have seen increasing pressure on the rural bus network, so we have lost services.

Sadly, in 2014, Cumbria County Council took the retrograde decision to stop using central Government moneys to subsidise rural bus routes and, accordingly, some routes had to close as they were not financially viable. I urge local and central Government to ensure connectivity by working hard together and using moneys sensibly. In rural areas such as mine, people depend on the bus network, taxis and private hire vehicles.

Trains have also segued into the debate and, in my part of the world, I very much believe that we must improve train services. I have been campaigning for the reopening of Gilsland station and for the extension of the Borders railway from the borders down through Longtown in my constituency and on to Carlisle. We need joined-up thinking. The Bill is so important in improving equality of access to private hire vehicles and taxis, but I urge the Government to work with local government to ensure that our rural bus network is improved, bolstered and supported and that the train network is supported as well.

I raised many of those issues a couple of weeks ago in an Adjournment debate on support for levelling up rural communities. Bills such as this are very much about levelling up society, are they not? It is so important that such Bills come together, but we also need joined up-government to ensure connectivity across all walks of life. I firmly believe that this is an important Bill, which highlights the need to join up people in our communities, whether they are urban or rural.

[Dr Hudson]

We have highlighted some of the pressures in rural communities. Last night, I chaired a roundtable of rural stakeholders in my constituency. The pressures faced by such people, including farmers, due to the cost of living crisis include increasing fuel and diesel costs and increasing fertiliser costs. People in rural communities also have the cost of putting oil into their heating systems. I urge the Government to listen to those concerns and hope that, in the coming days, the Chancellor will try to mitigate some of the pressures that face our rural society.

In conclusion, I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam on the Bill, to which I give my full support.

10.55 am

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. This Bill is a no-brainer, and it is nice to speak in support of a Bill where the issue is not contentious. I commend my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) for all his hard work in getting it this far.

I will be short and sweet. In the UK, 14.1 million people are reported to have a disability, which represents about 20% of the population. Of those, about 1.2 million people use wheelchairs. With disabled people making twice as many journeys by taxi and private hire vehicle each year compared with non-disabled people, discrimination against them appears to be utterly counter-intuitive. The Bill will create a new duty to ensure that drivers of taxis and PHVs do not refuse carriage to a disabled person who could reasonably travel in that vehicle, with no extra charge, and make every effort to ensure that that person feels comfortable and safe while travelling.

Local licensing authorities may currently maintain a list of wheelchair-accessible taxis and PHVs, but only 70% of them have chosen to do so. To address that anomaly, the Bill will require LLAs to maintain and publish such a list. It is also expected that the cost of the changes will be minimal, so what is not to like?

The Bill will mean that licensing authorities can enforce and remove licences from operators who do not comply with the law, and rightly so. In Bracknell, we have a thriving taxi and PHV industry. We have airport runs, the M3, the M4 and runs into London. Taxis and PHVs in Bracknell are busy. However, let us also commend the fantastic work that bus companies and aviation companies are doing in upholding the requirements of the Equality Act and looking after people who are not able-bodied. My thanks goes to all those in my constituency who operate in the transport sector.

I believe that the Bill will enforce the already excellent practices adopted by most operators in the UK, so let us hope that the Opposition and the Government now formally support it.

10.58 am

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak about this Bill today and I commend my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) for bringing it to the

House. It will make a huge difference to the lives of a number of people. As we have stated, let us hope that many of the companies start to take action before the legislation comes into effect. This country prides itself on treating people equally. Although there will always be instances where we do not get it right or could do better, we can nevertheless be incredibly positive about that, and there are many great examples that we can point to.

I am glad that we are getting the opportunity this morning to discuss equal treatment for those with disabilities. When the underground was again grinding to a halt the other week because of strikes, despite the Mayor's past assurances, we all appreciated the fact that we had alternative forms of transport. When buses are not available, as many are not in rural communities such as Bassetlaw, a taxi or private hire vehicle can be essential. It needs to be recognised that access to those services is sometimes not available perhaps as equally as it should be. As has been mentioned many times, disabled people make twice as many taxi and private hire vehicle journeys each year as others, and the Bill seeks to remedy this and put further protections in place. To do so we need to amend the sections of the Equality Act 2010 relating to the carriage of disabled people by taxi and PHV. There are currently some inconsistencies in the legislation and it is worth bearing in mind that we are not simply speaking about wheelchair users; there are other needs to consider such as those of people using assistance dogs. Nobody should be refused carriage because of their disability when reasonable steps can be taken to ensure they are able to travel, and they have a right to feel comfortable and safe when travelling and should not incur any extra charges. It is reasonable to expect this while also recognising that in some cases transportation in certain vehicles may not be possible.

As has been mentioned, 14.1 million people are reported as having a disability, making up 22% of the population, and it is disappointing that many disabled people continue to report facing discriminatory behaviour from drivers, including outright refusal of service, overcharging and failure to provide assistance to enable them to board and travel in vehicles in reasonable comfort and safety. This should not happen, regardless of the proportion of disabled people in the country of course, as one person being treated unfairly is one too many.

I fully support the Government's pledge to create an inclusive transport network by 2030 and their broader efforts to close the 30% gap between the employment of working age disabled and non-disabled people. Many found it reassuring that this Government's existing inclusive transport strategy has highlighted the inconsistent application of the Equality Act in terms of the duties it places on taxi and PHV drivers, and that is why I fully support this excellent Bill. The Government's 2021 national disability strategy also committed to take forward legislation to strengthen the law on the carriage of disabled people in taxis and PHVs so that they are protected from some of the issues highlighted today. It is disappointing that section 167 of the Equality Act provides only that local licensing authorities "may maintain a list" of wheelchair-accessible taxis and PHVs and that only 70% of LLAs are doing so. Drivers in areas without a list should not be able to continue discriminating against disabled passengers even if their vehicle is technically wheelchair accessible, and this Bill will fix that.

Currently, sections 168 and 170 of the Equality Act create offences for taxi drivers and PHV operators and drivers who refuse to carry, or make additional charges for carrying, a disabled person travelling with an assistance dog, and proposed new section 167A creates new offences where PHV operators fail or refuse to accept a booking from a disabled person because of their disability or charge extra for fulfilling any of the disability-related duties in proposed new sections 164A and 165A and section 165 of the Act.

In conclusion, the Bill will help reduce discrimination against disabled people and help further tackle the barriers they have to face in accessing these essential services by amending the Equality Act 2010. It is important to be balanced, too, which is why I am pleased that the Bill includes defences for where drivers could not reasonably have known the passenger was disabled and/or the passenger required mobility assistance. It is of course helpful for drivers to be made aware before the start of a journey that the passenger requires assistance—as I mentioned earlier, there is a communication issue there as much as anything else—so that they can identify and find a vehicle that is suitable for the passenger's needs, because then everybody will be a lot happier. This will be particularly helpful for visually impaired passengers and those with learning disabilities or cognitive impairments; this is something they have raised on a number of occasions and I am delighted it is being reflected in this well thought-out Bill. This excellent, well-intentioned Bill will contribute to making taxi and PHV access fairer for all.

11.4 am

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) on producing this Bill and all the work he has put in; the diligence with which it is crafted shows he cares passionately about the subject. Before I get to the content of today's Bill, let me put on record my admiration for all the taxi firms across Grantham and Stamford that keep us moving across what is a very rural constituency, whether that is ABC Taxis in Stamford, Grantham Taxis, Smart Cabs in Bourne, Starline Taxis in Stamford, or Excellent Cabs—who are indeed excellent—in Grantham. I thank every one of those firms.

We know the importance of today's debate, because this is about fairness. It is about ensuring a level playing field for everyone who lives in this country, no matter where they come from, what has happened to them in life, how they are born or where they are born. This is about treating everybody fairly and equally. We have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) and for Bracknell (James Sunderland) some very interesting statistics that caught my attention, so let me repeat them for additional emphasis: some 14 million people in this country live with some kind of disability—22% of our population in total—and 1.2 million use a wheelchair. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw pointed out, a disabled person is twice as likely to need and use a taxi or private hire vehicle than a non-disabled person.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about a couple of other statistics that arose from some research carried out by the disability charity Scope? It reported in 2019 that two thirds of

disabled people had experienced problems using public transport in the previous year, and that four fifths of disabled people felt anxious on public transport. That, I suggest, underlines the reasons why disabled people need to have access to taxis and private hire vehicles. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Gareth Davies: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point; no matter the mode of transport, we should make it as accessible as possible. As I mentioned in an intervention previously, this Government are investing in making our public transport network more accessible, whether that is through the £350 million investment in improved accessibility on our train network or the national bus strategy, which has resulted in 99% of buses being acceptably accessible. However, my hon. Friend is right: we should not ignore the fact that people still feel uncomfortable, and there are still modes of transportation that are not accessible. One of the reasons why disabled people use taxis and private hire vehicles is the level of private car ownership, a point that I will come on to in a moment.

We should also acknowledge that when it comes to transportation for disabled people, some improvements are happening in this country. A recent Department for Transport survey showed that 75% of disabled people are satisfied with taxi services, but that figure needs to be 100%, which is the point of today's Bill. Taxi driver awareness training is also increasing, but as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam pointed out, we can and should do more. We should never stop pushing for that.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): A week ago, when I was coming back from Parliament, I got a taxi from Stonehouse station with Apollo Cars, and my driver talked about this Bill. He was very much in favour of it. He has five or six regular clients—a group of Down's syndrome lads—who he takes to college, and he spoke so favourably about this Bill. As we have heard from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) and a number of other colleagues, it is so important that we are supportive of taxi drivers. I think I interrupted my hon. Friend before he could go on to that point, but so many taxi drivers provide an excellent service and really enjoy those trips as well.

Gareth Davies: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I pay tribute to Apollo Taxis, just as I did at the beginning to all those taxi firms in Grantham and Stamford constituency.

I also welcome the national disability strategy, which has already been referred to by one of my hon. Friends and is the first cross-Government effort to improve the everyday lives of disabled people. Again, I praise this Government for the efforts they are making, particularly the disability Minister, who has taken to her brief with great passion and motivation. However, there is clearly an issue, which this Bill is seeking to address. Many disabled people face discrimination when it comes to taxi services, whether that is outright refusal of service, over-charging of passengers, or a failure to provide assistance. None of that should be happening; it is completely and utterly unacceptable. To the point of my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler), only 58% of taxis and 2% of private hire vehicles are

[Gareth Davies]

wheelchair-accessible, which is in stark contrast to buses of which, thanks to the national bus strategy, 99% are accessible to disabled people, so that gap needs need to be filled.

As mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw, the Government's 2018 inclusive transport strategy aimed to support the creation of an inclusive transport network and highlights the inconsistent application of the Equality Act 2010 to taxis. I am delighted that this Bill seeks to address that inconsistency by preventing taxi drivers from refusing a journey, by requiring drivers to assist disabled people, and by requiring local licensing authorities to maintain and publish a list of wheelchair-accessible taxis. The point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), backed up my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam, about transparency and having a register is important, and I hope the Minister is listening.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for sharing those statistics. Just 58% of taxis being accessible to disabled users masks the fact that such vehicles are not evenly spread throughout the country. I imagine that many of them are based in here in London, and constituencies such as ours, some distance from London, do not have the requisite number of accessible vehicles. I also thank my hon. Friend for mentioning the register, which I raised earlier.

Gareth Davies: Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is worth highlighting my second statistic: 2% of private hire vehicles are wheelchair-accessible. In a rural area such as Lincolnshire, where I am from, we do not have that many taxis—London has the bulk of them, as my hon. Friend points out—so 2% is an astonishing and, frankly, disturbing figure. That highlights why it is so important that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam has brought this Bill to the Chamber today.

This Bill, this initiative and, indeed, this debate with its many contributions from Conservative Members will be met with great appreciation in my constituency. I pay tribute to the Grantham Disabled Children's Society, run by the incredible Darryl Blair and his team of volunteers, who do so much for disabled children in Grantham. I have spent a lot of time with the organisation, and Darryl in particular, and it does fantastic work to make the lives of disabled children across Lincolnshire a lot easier. He will welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's efforts today.

If the House will indulge me, based on conversations with Darryl and the Grantham Disabled Children's Society I will touch on two important related issues facing disabled people in Grantham and Stamford that are close to my heart. First, while we are talking about taxis today, some disabled people—about 4.2% of the population according to statistics I have read—hold a blue badge pass, but many report growing issues with non-passholders incorrectly using disabled parking spaces at petrol stations, supermarkets and other venues or, unbelievably, just abusing them, which I have seen happen on countless occasions. Of course, I appreciate that not

all disabilities are visible, but Government statistics show that blue badge theft and misuse is a real problem. In 2021, 4,396 badges were stolen, and the most common reason for prosecution for the misuse of blue badges was when someone uses somebody else's badge following some undetermined action.

Even if disabled people can get around, my second point is that when they get somewhere, there are insufficient places for changing and bathroom facilities. I have spent a lot of time looking at changing places, and I was shocked to learn that in my constituency and across Lincolnshire we have very few changing place facilities for disabled people. I support our local district council in its wish, and the bid it has put in to the Government, to put in place a changing place facility in each of the three towns I represent, Grantham, Bourne and Stamford.

It is right that we debate this subject and that we put on record our thanks to our taxi drivers across our constituencies, while also recognising that much more needs to be done to level the playing field for disabled people. This is an incredibly important Bill, which has my full support and, I am pleased to say, the support of many across the House. The Government have an important role to play in levelling the playing field; I appreciate all the efforts they have made, but we should never be complacent.

11.15 am

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) on successfully bringing his Bill to this stage. Having been through the same process recently with my Approved Premises (Substance Testing) Bill, I know how much work is required, and I think my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) can attest to that with the successful passage of his Bill too.

It takes a great deal of effort to turn a good idea into good law. With a private Member's Bill, it can only be done with a lot of help from officials of the House, from all Front Benches and from Back-Bench colleagues across the House, whose support is so important, particularly at Committee stage. Persuading hon. Members with whom we normally disagree of the merits of our Bills is not always the easiest of tasks, but it ensures that the ultimate legislation has been thoroughly considered and, if necessary, improved to address needs that have been identified across the House.

I must admit I had not quite realised some of the tactics that would be needed to ensure that all the procedural niceties were met. I rather suspect the Government Whips were a little jittery when they saw me lurking near the Opposition Lobby more than once in order to get Labour Members to sign the document agreeing that they would serve on the Bill Committee, but it all worked out in the end. I never walked through the wrong Lobby, they supported me in the Bill Committee and I pay tribute to all of them for their support of my Bill. I also pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam for the endeavours he has had to make to bring this Bill back before us today.

Moving on to the substance of the debate, it is fair to say that not only do taxis and private hire vehicles provide a convenient mode of transport, but they can be a lifeline for many of our constituents. Never has

that been more apparent than during the pandemic, when cab drivers were tremendously important in my constituency. At a time when so many were working from home, drivers helped to ensure that people could get to urgent appointments, helped to deliver essential goods and prescriptions, and were an absolutely vital link for vulnerable residents. On behalf of all the people of Aylesbury, I thank our local drivers for all the hard work they have put in in what has been a challenging two years.

As we have heard at length in this debate, taxis are especially important for those members of our local community who are disabled. Having a convenient, door-to-door service helps to give them the freedom to travel locally, enriching their lives and helping to combat loneliness and isolation—in short, it lets them do what everyone else does without thinking about it.

That is even more the case for people living in rural areas. Despite my constituency being called Aylesbury, in honour of the proud and beautiful county town of Buckinghamshire, the seat is in fact quite rural. Almost two thirds of my constituency is nestled in villages and hamlets, and for many elderly and disabled residents in those more rural communities taxis are not just convenient but essential.

Furthermore, many of the taxi firms in Aylesbury provide school transport for children with special educational needs and disabilities, helping them to access the provision they need so they can receive the best education possible, including at the Chiltern Way Academy. I visited the school last week and, as I was leaving, there was a fleet of taxis lined up to take the children home—children who loved being at that school and who were benefiting in a way they would not necessarily have done elsewhere, but who could only get that benefit because of the taxis taking them there every day. Those taxis, of course, needed to be fit for the children they were transporting, and that is a prime example of why my right hon. and learned Friend's Bill is so important.

When I intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), I highlighted worrying figures from the disability charity Scope: two thirds of disabled people experiencing problems using public transport and four fifths of disabled people feeling anxious on public transport. Those figures again underline the significance of taxis for disabled people, yet sadly we still hear of instances in which they face discrimination from drivers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) mentioned earlier.

It is shocking that there are drivers or cab companies that refuse to transport people because they are disabled, say they will take them but then overcharge, or will not help somebody get in and out of a car. That seems astonishing in 2022. Although the Equality Act 2010 provides disabled people with some protection, it is applied inconsistently, so this Bill is absolutely essential.

I was surprised to learn that there is no duty on the driver of any taxi or private hire vehicle to carry a passenger who could transfer from a wheelchair into the vehicle. People who want to show a degree of self-sufficiency where they are able to do so are not being helped by those who could help them, which is quite astonishing. It is absolutely the right time to put that right.

Finally, I want to mention the role of local licensing authorities, because they too can play an important role in helping passengers who need a wheelchair-accessible vehicle to find one. The Equality Act provides that licensing authorities “may maintain a list” of wheelchair-accessible taxis and private hire vehicles, but it does not oblige them to do so. I am pleased that Buckinghamshire Council does indeed maintain a list of taxis and private hire vehicles that are fully wheelchair accessible and currently operating within the county. I looked at the list yesterday and it is helpfully divided into sections according to the local areas and districts within the county, and includes useful information on available vehicles so that anyone who is disabled and needs to get around can do so with confidence and full information.

The legislation being introduced by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam is important, necessary and overdue. Taxis and private hire vehicles are convenient, but we must ensure that they are also accessible to the people who rely on them. This Bill will do exactly that. It will amend the Equality Act 2010 so that inconsistencies in current legislation are eliminated, and it will expand the protection that currently benefits only disabled people in wheelchairs or using assistance dogs, specifically and importantly creating the new duties we have heard about, making sure that every effort is made to ensure disabled passengers feel comfortable and safe while travelling. It sounds so simple; it is right that it is now going to happen.

This Bill represents an important step towards the fully inclusive transport network that I, the Government, the Opposition and surely all Members of the House want to see created.

11.23 am

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler). I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) on bringing forward this Bill. I commend him for expertly guiding this legislation through Committee stage to today's Third Reading.

The topic of the Bill is close to my heart. I was privileged to guide through the House my own private Member's Bill on taxi and private hire vehicles during this Session, and it is a privilege to be able to be here today to assist my right hon. and learned Friend with his Bill in its final stages. From my own experience, I know what a hugely rewarding process a private Member's Bill can be, particularly when it stands a real chance of becoming law, but it is also a challenging experience and I congratulate him on reaching this stage.

It would be remiss of me not to mention my noble Friend Lord Borwick, who is ably guiding my Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Bill as it continues its legislative journey. Throughout his career, Lord Borwick has done extensive work to make taxis accessible to disabled people. In his time as the chief executive and a shareholder in Manganese Bronze Holdings plc, the company manufactured, distributed and financed the traditional London taxi and developed the first mobile phone hailing system in the world, which went on to become the first wheelchair-accessible public transport system. He went on to be chairman of the company that adopted the Mercedes Vito to make a wheelchair-accessible London taxi, which

[Peter Gibson]

was undoubtedly a significant contribution to making taxis and private hire vehicles accessible to disabled people.

It would also be remiss of me not to mention the good work of the all-party parliamentary group on taxis. We have heard in this debate from the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who has done extensive work in respect of taxis. I welcome the APPG's engagement with me on my Bill, and I am sure that it has been assisting my right hon. and learned Friend with his.

There are more than 14 million people in the UK with a disability. For many of them, taxi and private hire vehicles are a vital and sometimes the only means of transport, allowing them to access the daily freedoms that many of us take for granted. Indeed, I understand that research has been carried out by the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, which found that the households of 60% of disabled people had no car, compared with 27% for the overall population. Moreover, 50% of respondents said that inaccessible transport had restricted their choice of jobs, rising to 62% for wheelchair users and 86% for those with a visual impairment.

As a society, we should not accept such figures. It is hugely important that drivers of taxi and private hire vehicles are willing to offer the extra help required to make a disabled person's journey manageable and ensure that they are not denied opportunities because of something that is entirely outside their control. That reality has been impressed on me by Gordon Pybus, who is the chair of Darlington Association on Disability, an organisation in my constituency that is led by disabled people who are taking a leading role in changing the negative attitudes that prevent disabled people from participating fully as equal citizens. I know that he and the association warmly welcome this Bill as an important step forward for disabled people.

In proceedings on my own Bill in the other place, moving speeches were made by Baroness Brinton, as I mentioned in an earlier intervention, and Lord Holmes of Richmond about their difficulties as disabled people using taxis. I am pleased that the Bill will address some of the issues that they raised. We have a proud history in this country of legislating to put in place protections for disabled people. The Equality Act 2010 was undoubtedly a huge step forward, providing specific protections for those who use wheelchairs and those with assistance dogs.

We can always do more, however. The overwhelming majority of our taxi and private hire vehicle drivers are good, decent, hard-working people, and they would go out of their way to support their disabled passengers, but a small minority still refuse to carry disabled passengers, refuse to take their bookings or do not make available the assistance that disabled people need to use their services. I welcome the fact that the Bill seeks to right this wrong and broaden the measures in the Equality Act to address the discrimination that many disabled passengers still face.

The Bill will achieve that by amending the Equality Act, specifically the sections relating to the carriage of disabled persons by taxi and private hire vehicles. The Bill is designed to address the inconsistencies in the Act

while expanding the protections afforded to wheelchair and assistance dog users to cover all disabled people, no matter the vehicle in which they travel.

The Act rightly requires the driver of designated wheelchair-accessible vehicles and private hire vehicles to carry wheelchair-using passengers at no extra charge. That duty does not, however, currently extend to carrying passengers who could transfer from a wheelchair into a non-wheelchair-accessible vehicle while their wheelchair is folded and stored for the journey. It also excludes from any protection when travelling in a taxi or private hire vehicle all other disabled passengers who do not use a wheelchair.

I am pleased that the Bill will right that oversight to ensure that drivers of taxis and private hire vehicles do not refuse carriage to a disabled person who could reasonably travel in that vehicle with no extra charge, and that drivers make every effort to make sure the disabled person feels comfortable and safe while travelling, among other related duties. Those are very reasonable and simple requests to make of drivers of taxis and private hire vehicles. We would not expect a taxi driver to refuse to transport a mother and child with a pushchair, but sadly, as we heard from my hon Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), that does happen. That is simply not acceptable in 21st-century Britain.

The Bill will require drivers to carry more than one wheelchair on any one journey except under certain circumstances. It will also ensure that there are protections for drivers who could not reasonably have known that the passenger was disabled and/or required mobility assistance. The vast majority of taxis and private hire vehicles already seek to ensure that disabled customers are able to travel in comfort and have the support they need. It is likely that many already abide by those measures, but I am pleased that the Bill will ensure that those basic expectations are set out in law and will better protect our disabled citizens.

It is right that offences arising from failure to comply with the duties the Bill establishes will be punishable by fines comparable to those for offences already in law under the Equality Act. The Bill puts in place clear deterrents for those who would seek to discriminate against disabled persons.

The Bill also deals with another issue, arising from pre-booked journeys. It is currently an offence to refuse to carry, or to make additional charges for a disabled person travelling with an assistance dog, but not to refuse bookings. The Bill rightly creates new offences where an operator fails or refuses to accept a booking from a disabled person because of their disability, or charges extra for fulfilling any of the duties placed on it to facilitate a disabled person's journey.

We must not forget that some taxi and private hire vehicle drivers face disabilities or impairments themselves. It is right that the Equality Act provides for exemption certificates for such drivers from duties under the Act. However, the current exemption provisions are very broad, even exempting drivers with such a certificate from the measures preventing drivers from making additional charges. I am pleased that the Bill amends the operation of those certificates so that a driver with a certificate will be exempt only from mobility assistance

duties; other duties, such as to carry the passenger and not to propose additional charges, will still apply to exempted drivers.

My own Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Bill seeks to resolve a number of issues with licensing. I am pleased that this Bill will complement mine, and that it seeks to right another issue with the licensing system. Current legislation provides only that local licensing authorities may maintain a list of wheelchair-accessible taxis and private hire vehicles, and only 70% of licensing authorities do so. Only drivers designated on those lists are subject to the provisions of the Equality Act, meaning that drivers in areas without a list have been able to continue to discriminate against disabled passengers, even if their vehicle is wheelchair accessible. That is not acceptable, and I am pleased that the Bill will build on other reforms to the licensing system to require all local licensing authorities to maintain and publish such a list.

In the light of my own Bill, I ask the Minister if the Government have considered whether a central database of wheelchair-accessible vehicles might be a prudent move. In Darlington, we face a shortage of available taxis, in large part due to a shortage of drivers, but wheelchair-accessible vehicles for our disabled community are even more scarce. Ensuring the availability of accessible vehicles for disabled people in Darlington remains a problem.

For the last 10 years of her life, my mother was wheelchair bound as a result of a massive stroke that rendered her unable to walk and dependent on the care of others for the most basic needs. On a number of occasions, it was necessary for mum to rely on taxi transport. I am pleased to report that in every one of those instances, mum received the care and attention entirely appropriate for her situation. To my mind, it passed the “mum test”—that is, it was good enough for my own mother. I believe that the measures in this Bill promoted by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam will help to enshrine the mum test in law for all of our disabled constituents.

11.33 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): Let me start by saying a huge thank you to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) for so expertly steering the Bill through the House. As a Back Bencher, I successfully steered two private Members’ Bills through this place, so I absolutely understand the huge amount of work that he is undertaking.

It is really good to see Members in the Chamber today. I appreciate that Friday is a constituency day, so the fact that Members are here supporting the Bill makes me understand even more how important it is and the amount of support that it has. Members have made it very clear that the Bill will make a big difference to their constituents.

As I have watched the Bill make progress, one key point has stayed with me, which is that disabled people make twice as many journeys by taxi and private hire vehicle as non-disabled people. We were reminded of that by my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes). Across all transport modes, just 69% of disabled people surveyed by the Government’s inclusive

transport strategy baseline study were confident travelling, compared to 90% of non-disabled people. For many disabled people, travelling is often accompanied by fear, anxiety and stress. The Bill would directly address that disparity between disabled and non-disabled people when using a vital form of transport. It would provide rights and protections for any disabled person intending on travelling by taxi or private hire vehicle. It would place duties on drivers to provide reasonable assistance to any disabled person, and prevent them from charging extra for doing so. It would support the Government’s ambition for disabled people to have the same access to transport as everyone else. Those are the reasons why, I am pleased to say, the Government fully support the Bill. I also welcome the Opposition’s support for it.

Currently, if a passenger uses a walking frame to access a taxi or private hire vehicle, there is no specific duty on the driver to assist them in stowing their frame in the boot of the vehicle. Right now, if a prospective passenger has notified an operator or driver at the booking stage that they have dementia and may not be able to identify or find the vehicle when it arrives, there is no specific duty to assist them. At this time, if an assistance dog user books a private hire vehicle, the operator will not automatically break the law if they decide, simply because the person is disabled, to not send a driver. If a wheelchair user wants to use a taxi or private hire vehicle which is registered to a local licensing authority that does not maintain a list of designated wheelchair accessible vehicles, there is no specific duty on the driver or operator to carry them, either in their wheelchair or in the passenger seat. Those are just a few of the real life scenarios that disabled people up and down the country experience today—hon. Members have given other examples in this debate—and the Equality Act 2010 does not currently provide rights for or protections against them. The Bill would rectify that, ensuring all disabled people have rights and protections to access a taxi or private hire vehicle service, no matter where they are in Great Britain.

The Bill would create new responsibilities and amend existing ones for taxi and private hire vehicle drivers, private hire vehicle operators, and local licensing authorities. In particular, it would place reasonable duties on drivers to assist and carry any disabled person and, if applicable, their wheelchair or mobility aids, ensuring that no driver can make, or propose to make, any additional charge for complying with such duties. It would also require local licensing authorities to maintain a list of designated wheelchair accessible vehicles, thereby ensuring that the duties in section 165 apply to drivers of wheelchair accessible vehicles across the country—a point that several hon. Members have made today.

Additionally, the Bill would make it an offence for a private hire vehicle operator to refuse a booking simply because the intended passenger is disabled, or to prevent a driver from being subject to the duties under the Equality Act 2010. That will provide protections for disabled people, ensuring they are not refused a service before the vehicle has even been assigned. However, the duties simply would not work without the defences and exemptions in the Bill. As has already been highlighted by Members on both sides of the House throughout the Bill’s passage—rightly, I have to say—the majority of taxi and private hire vehicle drivers in this country provide a first-class service. That has been reiterated

[Wendy Morton]

today. I was struck by the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) about his “mum” test, which was a poignant point, but one that actually resonates with all of us, as we always want the best for our own families and loved ones.

The professionalism and dedication of taxi and private-hire vehicle providers to transporting essential workers during the height of the pandemic ensured that the country could continue to function. The Bill is not intended to penalise or put undue burdens on those drivers who already provide reasonable assistance to disabled people. In fact, those drivers would be unlikely to notice any difference at all in how they operate should the Bill pass. Instead, the Bill is intended to ensure that all drivers provide the level of service that the majority already provide.

Indeed, the Bill would not just benefit disabled people; it is also important to consider the wider benefits that it would bring, too. In economic terms, the disability charity Scope estimated that, based on household, below-average income figures, the spending power of disabled people and their households is £274 billion a year, with businesses calculated to lose £2 billion every month by not meeting the needs of disabled people.

The first barrier to people’s access to society—to work, to leisure, to shops, to cafes and restaurants—is transport. If a person decides not to leave the house because they cannot guarantee that the driver will assist them with stowing their walking frame in the boot of the vehicle, then we all, as a society, lose.

There are a couple of extra points that I want to cover in my comments, because these were raised today in the Chamber. The first one was around disability awareness training. The number of authorities requiring disability awareness training for taxi drivers has increased from 44% in 2019 to 49% in 2021. The number of authorities requiring disability awareness training for private hire vehicle drivers has increased from 41% to 46%. The Bill will not overcome all the barriers that disabled passengers face when using taxis and private hire vehicles, nor should it, because this is an important part of a much bigger picture. Requiring drivers to provide appropriate assistance and to prevent them from charging disabled people more than non-disabled people will only be effective if drivers understand the rights and expectations of disabled passengers and feel confident about providing the help that they need. That is why the Government will continue to encourage local authorities to require drivers to complete disability awareness training. We have also committed, as soon as legislative time allows, to require taxi and private-hire vehicle drivers to complete disability awareness training through new national minimum standards for taxi and private hire vehicle licensing. To support the sector in this, in 2020, the Government published their real disability equality training programme to improve the transport sector’s confidence and skills in delivering inclusive journeys for disabled passengers. This training package is underpinned by two really important values: respect and empathy. It also promotes two important actions: ask and listen. It has been developed with the engagement of transport sector professionals and people with lived experience of disability and it is freely available to any

taxi or private-hire vehicle driver or operator wishing to improve their understanding and confidence when assisting disabled people.

The other couple of points that I want to touch on are around the broader issue of accessibility, but it is linked in with this debate, although there was quite a focus on railway stations—perhaps that is because I am the Rail Minister. In terms of access for all, I just wanted to say that this programme was launched in 2006, and, since then, £900 million has been released, about 212 stations have been made fully accessible, and smaller scale improvements have been made at more than 1,500 stations. The programme was extended until 2024 and will deliver more than 100 step-free routes and other important improvements at another 124 stations. I am grateful to Members for raising that issue and reminding us of the importance of accessibility. As ever, there is always more that we can do.

The issue of tactiles is also important. Network Rail estimates that 60% of British mainline station platforms have tactile surfaces. We are committed to making that 100%. It has received an initial £10 million to fit tactile surfaces at priority stations; further funding will be announced in due course. That is all important because it is about making improvements to the overall accessibility for those people who need assistance and a bit of support.

We have had an excellent debate. We have covered the differences between rural and urban constituencies, although many face similar challenges around accessibility. There has also been mention of Great British Railways and its HQ competition. I know that several hon. Members present have bids in for that; I will not name them but they know who they are—I think you are one, Madam Deputy Speaker. There were 42 bids and we await the outcome of the competition but there has been some healthy engagement.

The Government fully support the Bill. It will not only level the playing field of services that drivers provide for disabled people, but make a direct contribution to delivering a fully inclusive transport network. I again congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam on driving the Bill so far and I look forward to following its continued progress.

11.46 am

Jeremy Wright: I have no wish to hold up the excellent British Sign Language Bill of the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), which I wish every success, but with the leave of the House, I will simply offer a few words of thanks.

I thank my hon. Friend the Minister and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), for their support for the Bill throughout, which is much appreciated. I also thank my hon. Friends and the Opposition Members who have spoken at every stage of its progress through the House with great wisdom and common sense. I am grateful to them all, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), who has helped to prove that we wait ages for a Bill on taxis and then two come along at once.

I also thank the officials at the Department for Transport, who have helped tremendously in the Bill’s development, and the officials of the House, who have helped to steer

it and me through the processes so far. Finally, I thank those who have contributed to the Bill's development by offering their thoughts on it, including those who work in the charity sector as advocates for people with disabilities, those who represent drivers and vehicle operators, and those who work in local authorities to whom I have also spoken about the aspects of the Bill that will affect those authorities.

I very much hope that the House will give the Bill a fair wind through to the other place where it will be in the capable hands of a former Transport Secretary and where I hope it will get a little further scrutiny and much more support so that we can improve the lives of our disabled constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

British Sign Language Bill

*Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered.
Third Reading*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Before I call the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) to move the Third Reading of her Bill, I would like to point out that a British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

11.48 am

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This is a momentous day for the deaf community. Exactly 19 years ago to the day, British Sign Language was first recognised in a ministerial statement. Sadly for the deaf community, not a lot has changed, so today we have the chance to finally commit that recognition to statute.

Members of the deaf community have been fighting their whole lives for this moment, and many of them are currently in Trafalgar Square watching the debate on a huge display. I realise that the fact that we have got this far is quite astonishing. I have many people to thank for guiding the way and providing useful insights, case studies and reports that have been invaluable in developing the Bill. This has by no means been a solo effort—far from it. I have had help from very many people. Locally, it has been all hands on deck. My specific thanks go to the politics lab group at Edge Hill University in my West Lancashire constituency, who have been helping out by conducting interviews, gathering data and creating a briefing to aid the campaign.

I also want to thank Janice Connolly and everyone at the Merseyside Society for Deaf People. They could not travel here—they could not get coaches to be here—but they are watching this debate at the Deaf Centre in Liverpool. I grew up in that community, running around there, and I owe so much to them all. They have been a huge part of my life. As a child, it was the Friday evening ritual that deaf adults would meet at the Deaf Centre. In those days, it was at Park Way in Princes Park. While the adults socialised, their children, both deaf and hearing, would play together, able to communicate easily and without effort. Being a CODA, a child of deaf adults, gives me a unique position, straddling two worlds with equal access to both. I hope the Bill will bring the hearing and deaf communities together as never before.

I remain incredibly thankful to the Members who have been so supportive of the Bill, both here in the House and in promoting it elsewhere. I echo the words I used on Second Reading in January when I said how fantastic it is that this Chamber is speaking with one voice and that we are doing the right thing.

To come back to this momentous day—one I hope deaf people will celebrate for many years—the recognition of BSL is a landmark acceptance of a language that for far too long as been overlooked and misunderstood. The Bill is a testament to the perseverance of all deaf people and a celebration of deaf culture. We, all of us today, stand on the shoulders of every deaf campaigner who has fought so hard to get us here. Better historians than me can tell that story, but it really is a remarkable

[*Rosie Cooper*]

one. Every single campaigner who came before or who is still fighting now deserves to be recognised by us today.

In honouring them, I will focus on one campaigner who meant the most to me. That was, of course, my dad. He fought to be treated as an equal human being: to be appreciated and heard based on merit not on deafness. On Second Reading, I spoke of his life experiences and how hard it was for him to show his value and, once he did, how prized and needed his skills were. From that, he was able to provide for his family and enjoy a fulfilled and happy life, which nonetheless, every day, had its communication challenges. He fought for better education for deaf children, and for deaf teachers to teach deaf children. One of my great friends, Mabel Davis, was a very successful deaf headteacher at a school for deaf children. My dad believed that education enabled you to live your best life. He campaigned to make television accessible by using subtitles—what a hard journey that continues to be. On Second Reading, I made reference to Ofcom. It obviously does not read *Hansard*, because programme subtitles are still dreadful and it is not doing anything about it. Inaccurate rubbish is how I would describe them. I have two hearing aids, so more often than not I prefer to watch TV with subtitles.

To come back to BSL, people assume that BSL is simply sign-supported English and that all deaf people have to do is learn to master the English language. Nothing could be further from the truth. My dad used to say to me, “You can learn a new language; I can’t learn not to be deaf, nor to be hearing.” His words sum up the problem that every deaf campaigner struggles to get across to hearing people who just do not understand the real issue.

That is why this Bill is focused on improving BSL provision. Too often, hearing people have made decisions for deaf people that rely on their conforming to the hearing-centric ways of accessing services. That is just so wrong. Developing guidance for deaf people, integrating BSL into those services, is very important.

There is also a lack of cultural understanding of deaf people and of sign language, which has prevented this change for so long. We are seeing a BSL revolution before our eyes. Deaf people cannot learn not to be deaf, but hearing people can learn BSL, and they are learning. Huge numbers of people are signing up to BSL courses. People at secondary schools and universities are asking to do it, and I am delighted to say that so are Members of this House. Well done.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this Bill to Parliament. Last week I went to a school in Putney where I found out the sign for Putney. [*In British Sign Language: “Putney”.*] There is a deaf teacher teaching the hearing pupils British Sign Language. The pupils love those classes, and now they are opening up the ability to communicate throughout our community. It is fantastic to see. I have seen the revolution for myself in Putney, and it is great to see it going on across the country as well.

Rosie Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. BSL is such a rich, vibrant, brilliant language, which relies not only on signing but on body language

and facial expression. It is great fun. When I was Lord Mayor of Liverpool I got the children to finger-spell 26 letters of the alphabet for sponsorship. The money they raised in sponsorship was used to buy minicomps for deaf people—although mobile phones would soon replace those; none the less in those days that too was a revolution.

Where are we today? Deaf representation in the media is at an all-time high. Just in the last year we have seen a deaf superhero using American Sign Language; Troy Kotsur, a deaf actor, is nominated for an Oscar and last week won a BAFTA, and Rose Ayling-Ellis won “Strictly Come Dancing”. In 1987, all those years ago, Marlee Matlin won the Best Actress Oscar for “Children of a Lesser God”, but it took another 35 years for Troy to become the second person nominated for his role in “CODA”, which stands for “child of deaf adults”—I know, I am one, but sadly I will not be getting an Oscar.

Since 1987, other movies have been roundly criticised for using hearing actors to play deaf roles. A sign of the times is that “CODA” actually cast deaf actors in deaf roles—what recognition! That is magnificent. The times they are a-changing. The country is supporting deaf people, and we cannot let Parliament fall behind. I believe we must capitalise on this revolution by passing the Bill and taking every step we can to push it as far as possible.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend started her speech on Third Reading by paying tribute to all those campaigners who went before her and the magnificent landmark changes that they fought for over the years. It would be remiss of us not to get on the record our thanks to her for bringing this Bill to Parliament and getting it through to Third Reading today, and to wish it Godspeed in the other place.

Rosie Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments. My dad would be really pleased with himself today—not necessarily with me, but with himself.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing such an important Bill before this House, and pay personal tribute to her. I am very moved by what she is saying, especially her comments about her parents.

During the debate on taxis, my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) talked about Bills passing the “mum test”, and the hon. Lady has been making very powerful comments about her dad. In the last years of his life, my dad was profoundly disabled with a debilitating neurodegenerative disease, so he really relied on the support of people, taxis and so on. I humbly suggest to my colleagues that when we talk about the Bills we are considering today, we need to talk about them passing both the mum and the dad test.

Rosie Cooper: Absolutely; I will come on to my mum very soon. As with all those things that happened in the ’60s and ’70s, my dad took pole position; my mum took care of home affairs. As Members will see, she played just as much of a role in me being here today as my dad did, but he was more vocal. People would say that I am my dad’s daughter. He did not care; he would just bowl on and try to get what he needed. My mum would be

more diplomatic—go it slowly and get there eventually. Sadly, I got too much of the former and a lot less of the latter, but we are who we are.

Before I discuss the incredibly positive things that I believe this Bill will do, I want to address what could not be included in it. Some campaigners have made the fair point that this Bill does not give specific legal rights to deaf people, or feel it does not go quite far enough. To be absolutely clear, this Bill is not a silver bullet for the deaf community that will cure overnight all the injustices they face. As Members of this House will appreciate, this is a private Member's Bill, one that has been brought forward by an Opposition MP and was drawn 20th out of 20 in the ballot. There are limitations on private Members' Bills that have to be accepted, but I am pleased to say that working together with the Minister for Disabled People, we have pushed for this Bill to be as strong as it can be. I am proud of the Bill and proud of the work we did. It is going to make such a difference to the lives of deaf people, and they will be proud of it too. They might want it all today, but they can have nearly all of it soon.

Deaf people have long felt that the one-size-fits-all disability legislation that should have given their language the protection it needs is inadequate and disregards deaf culture and heritage. In bringing forward this Bill, I knew that we could not rewrite or replace legislation; instead, we are opening the door for deaf people to have their voices heard and their language protected. With this Bill, we are planting our feet firmly in an open doorway. There are those in the deaf community who used another analogy—they said, "It's like being in a lift. We've gone in the lift on the ground floor; the only way is up." I really quite like that analogy, too.

The requirements on the Government to produce guidance created by clause 3 of the Bill will be carried out in direct consultation with a non-statutory advisory board. This will be an essential mechanism for deaf people to say, "This isn't working. This is what would help. This is what needs to change"—and we all accept that a lot needs to change. Since introducing the Bill, I have been contacted by hundreds of deaf people from all over the country, telling me about situations in which a public service has failed them, and I have shared some horrific stories with the Minister. Those stories are truly unbelievable, yet a significant portion of the population faces those issues every day. These are issues that have shaped deaf culture and consequently, I totally admit, make me the person I am today.

Deaf culture is important because it allows individuals to be who they are and live in a way that is unique to them. People who have not been exposed to deaf culture may not know what I mean by that. A simplistic way of starting to talk about it is to say, for example, that deaf people look at each other when they are communicating, but in our hearing culture it is common to look away—to break eye contact. Try keeping up with that if you are trying to lip read! It is impossible. In deaf culture, it is absolutely acceptable to tap another person to gain their attention; it is marked by physical proximity, directness, even thumping on tables and floors—I am not going to go on about that because I will start to recognise my own behaviour. Deaf culture is all about challenging injustices—fighting to be heard and understood through whatever means necessary.

People on the edge of the deaf community sometimes think deaf people are demanding and unreasonable, and sometimes they are, but they need to be—they have to be; they have to challenge in order to be heard. As we know in this place, it is the people who challenge the system who change things, and I am proud to come from a community that does not sit back and complain, but that gets up and challenges perceived injustices again and again and again until they are rectified. That shows why the BSL Bill will be so powerful: if we remove the barriers restricting the potential of deaf people it will be truly amazing to see how much they can and will achieve.

Many years ago my four-year-old niece explained to her young friends, who had never seen people sign before, that her grandparents were actually just the same as them except their ears did not work. When we accept that some people are deaf and accommodate that, rather than just trying to ignore it, deaf people will be able to make so much more of a difference; but before they can make that difference, we must tackle the precise details of the problems deaf people face, and we will tackle that in the guidance accompanying this Bill.

One important matter the guidance must address is the lack of forward planning for BSL use. We must not continually have a system that creates a service for hearing people and then retrospectively and half-heartedly attempts to add the provision of BSL. BSL needs to be a consideration when services are being designed, not an afterthought. This will cut out huge amounts of wasted time and money, because public services have had to scramble to throw some sort of BSL provision together, or, even worse, many do not bother at all. Through this guidance we will start to see the Government becoming proactive in considering deaf people and the need for BSL, specifically with increased and improved interpretation and a wider understanding of BSL as a language.

In every aspect of public service there are failings; I have so many examples to draw on from my own life growing up with my parents, from years of doing casework for my constituents, and from the hundreds of letters I have been sent since introducing this Bill, and, sadly, a lot of these problems are things that a hearing person would never have considered.

In prisons, for instance, frighteningly little is done for deaf people. The isolation a deaf prisoner might experience from not having any other BSL users to talk to, and not being able to watch subtitled TV or make telephone calls, is absolutely terrifying. I have read reports of deaf prisoners committing suicide because they simply could not bear the isolation. This cannot be allowed to happen again and we need to do all we can to stop it. Mental health provision in prisons is already an area of great concern to me; if we add to that the difficulties a deaf person in prison would experience this could be considered a crisis.

As I have said, these are problems that a hearing person would not consider, but a BSL advisory board would be able to draw on its members' own life experiences to ensure the guidance the Secretary of State issues is much more than just a vague commitment to do more—and it has to be. It will target problem areas and say how they need to be addressed and what needs to be done differently.

[*Rosie Cooper*]

I know that a huge focus of the guidance will have to be on education. When I speak to deaf people about what they feel needs to be prioritised, education is more often than not the first thing they mention. Deaf people currently have little faith in the education system. On Second Reading, I explained how my mum would give her three children lessons every day at home, before we were even pre-school age. She would explain, “Because we’re deaf, they’ll think you’re daft.” We had to do those lessons. We had to learn to read and write and to do our sums, and we had to be absolutely proficient before we got to school.

A tale is told that, having had the bit drummed into me that people would think we were not capable because my parents were deaf, when I got to school and found that my classmates could not read and write or do sums as quickly as I could, I came home and expressed, “And they thought we were daft?” I genuinely do not remember that, but the tale is that, when I got home, I could not wait to tell my parents, “It’s not us.” There it goes.

My mum did not trust the system to treat hearing children of deaf parents as capable. I think that, sadly, at the time, she would have thought that deaf children would have even less of a chance than us. That was so very wrong. Of course, that was a long time ago, but while things have improved, many challenges remain. People will simply assume that a deaf student is learning more slowly or struggling when most of the time that is not the case.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is making a powerful contribution. The nub of what she is saying is that this is a battle for equality: equality of opportunity for children and young people going through education; equality of treatment for deaf people, ensuring that they are treated with respect; equality of access to public services, with deaf people treated like everyone else; and equality of language through communication. Alongside English—the spoken word—British Sign Language is how deaf people communicate. Is it not all about equality?

Rosie Cooper: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That runs right through the Bill and through my comments. Given an equal opportunity, deaf people can achieve so much. This will make my hon. Friend’s case: I was told about a deaf student whose class was visited by a specialist interpreter. At the end of the day, the teacher told the interpreter that he was amazed, because he had never seen the student talk so much. When the specialist interpreter asked the student why that was, he found that the so-called communicator whom the school employed had only the most basic BSL qualification, so he could not do the job. He could not transmit to the deaf student what the teacher was saying; ergo, the student had the ability but no chance to prove it.

We take simple things like that for granted, but deaf people have to battle that day in, day out. It would be outrageous to think of a hearing person being taught history by someone who had taken only the most basic English lessons, so why do we accept that for deaf people? Why are we allowing deaf students to receive information from their teachers through people who know the bare minimum of BSL and who are not qualified interpreters? We are wasting both taxpayers’ money and the untapped potential of that student.

In the past year alone, we have seen a seismic shift in understanding and acceptance of deaf people and BSL. Continuing to fail them over and over is just not right, and it cannot be ignored any more. It never was right, but at least now people are starting to understand the situation.

With social understanding of the need for BSL inclusion, we must address some shameful and frustratingly obvious oversights.

Throughout the covid pandemic, deaf people have been met with a constant reminder that we are not treating them as equals. Every statement made to the nation, every change in lockdown policy, and every announcement of a support scheme was done without a BSL interpreter on many channels. In fact, interpretation was available on one channel only. We had a simple way to include a sizeable proportion of the population and to prevent people from being left behind, but we failed to do so and must ask ourselves why.

Clause 2 requires the Secretary of State to publish a report on what each Department has done to promote or facilitate the use of BSL in its communications with the public. Any public announcement made without an interpreter or any White Paper released without BSL translation will be reported to the Secretary of State, and that failure will be published for everyone to see. That will be another powerful tool by which each Department will be held to account. Deaf campaigners will be able to compare the guidance from the Secretary of State directly with the published reports. Hiring a registered qualified interpreter for a briefing or to create a BSL translation is an easy commitment with such a minimal cost, so we will soon see Departments make their services and announcements accessible.

That aim is the Bill’s central point: the complete and total inclusion of deaf people. They should be able to watch and understand a national address by the Prime Minister. They should be able to go to a meeting at the jobcentre and talk freely with their adviser. They should be able to have a fully trained and registered qualified interpreter available for them at medical appointments. I have talked at length and could go on and on, but I will not. We are failing at all those things on daily basis, but with the support of Members here today and Members in the other place later, we can start along the road towards fixing such injustices once and for all.

As a nation, we cannot afford to waste the talents of our deaf population. When this Bill becomes law, as I hope it will, I say to the deaf community, and to all those watching at home or in Trafalgar Square or wherever, “Now it is over to you to achieve your potential and to live your best possible lives. That will enrich us all.” I thank the Minister for everything she has done to get Bill legislation through, and I hope that we will agree to give it its Third Reading today, and that it whizzes through the other place. I hope that today will mark the end of the campaign to recognise sign language as a language and the start of the campaign to liberate the potential of every deaf person in this country.

12.18 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a privilege to be here on a Friday to listen to a fantastic speech from my friend the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). This place, as you know Madam Deputy Speaker, can be quite confrontational

at times, but at other times we come together to right a wrong, and that is what this House has been doing over the past few weeks and today. As a former Disabilities Minister, I congratulate the Minister, because we tried to make this change several times. Promises were made in 2003, and we got things partly in writing, but did it go anywhere? Not really. The Equality Act 2010 did not even mention BSL. When I was Minister, people were worried about costs and this and that, but at the end of the day we are finally here today.

I say to the campaigners in Trafalgar Square, around the country and, indeed, around the world—what we are doing here today will set a precedent for other countries—that disabled people who are deaf or hard of hearing have dreams and aspirations just like anyone else, but those have been held back because we did not understand their language, but expected them to understand ours. No one who is deaf or hard of hearing wants to be deaf or hard of hearing, although I fully understand the community spirit among those people: it has made them what they are today. It has certainly made my friend the hon. Member for West Lancashire who she is today, thanks to mum and dad, I suggest.

We are lucky: we are the ones who can do something about this. As we talk about the different ways in which the Bill will help and will bring BSL more into the open, I have to say not just how amazing it is that in 18 years I have entered every private Member's Bill ballot and never got anywhere—some would say “Thank goodness for that”, perhaps not least the Front Benchers—but how astonishing it is for a Member to come 20th in the ballot and to bring a Bill that has been tried before, indeed tried by Ministers before, to this point. That has happened because Members on both sides of the House and on the Treasury Bench have worked to make it happen. I have been on the receiving end of some of the lobbying that has suggested that we could have gone further, but we have gone further than I ever dreamt we could go in a private Member's Bill. We are right on the line between what we can get and what we could not get, and this has been achieved because our efforts have been co-operative.

Perhaps at this stage there is a message for the other House, because the Bill will clearly proceed to the other House. That message should be “Do not delay it, do not try to amend it, do not play party politics with it—just get the damn thing through so it can be given Royal Assent”—a subtle hint from, probably, every Member in this House.

Those who are watching the debate here today may be wondering, “Where is everybody?” This is a day for private Member's Bills, and this Bill will go through today. Many Members had to be in their constituencies for important events to which they were committed, and I fully understand that: indeed, I shall have to disappear to my own constituency after the debate. The fact that not many Members are here does not mean that other Members are not interested. This Bill is going to go, thank goodness, to the other House, and I say again, subtly, “Hurry up, get this Bill through, because we do not want to lose it.”

I want to say a little about why the Bill is so important. My friend the hon. Member for West Lancashire touched on education. Like the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), I have spoken to young people in colleges. They want to learn BSL. When I asked some of them

whether, if I came back in two years, they would like me to find that they had taken an O-level or an A-level in the subject, they answered yes, to a man and to a woman. Why has it taken so long for this place, and the education system, to acknowledge the existence of a whole group out there who want to communicate with deaf people? We are not talking about a one-way street.

We all know the figures. About 80,000 people who are deaf or hard of hearing use BSL, and a total of about 180,000 people use it, but for many more people it could open up many new experiences, and the ability to communicate with a community that they may not really understand at present. They could start with basic BSL, and then progress further. As MPs, we can communicate with our constituents in that way. I sent a message out on Facebook the other day. I had an interpreter for my—half a minute? Five minutes? Who knows? It probably seemed a lifetime to anyone who was watching it. The feedback from people who were not from that community was fascinating. They did not understand why people were not lipreading, for instance, or they asked, “Why do people not look at you more carefully?” or “Why do you not speak more slowly?” The answer to that is “Because they are deaf.”

I have spoken before, on Second Reading, about the military community. Sadly, back in the days when I was in the service, hearing defenders were almost unheard of, which is probably why one of my ears is defective—it was affected by all the explosions that went off when I was in the armed forces. The community has said, “We want to learn”, but they have been prevented from doing so. They could not take up the subject, because there was nothing in the curriculum that allowed them to do so—hint, hint to the Education Department, which, I am sure, will be listening.

As the hon. Member for West Lancashire mentioned, we have also gone through covid. When covid hit this country and the world, deaf people not only could not understand what the Prime Minister was saying, depending on what channel they were on, but had to go for their vaccinations. I was lucky enough to be able to volunteer at my local vaccination centre, and several people who were deaf came in. Some of them had interpreters with them—normally family—but others were completely lost in a service that was theirs, free at the point of delivery. They were being vaccinated to protect them, and they were just petrified because no one had taken the time to think whether they needed that extra bit of support. I do not think of it as an extra bit of support—I have banged on about this for years and years, perhaps not quite as much as the hon. Lady, but I have banged on about it, and it is great that we have got to where we are today.

I am due to go to an out-patient's appointment next week. No one has asked me whether I am deaf or visually impaired. These things are not asked of people. I find it astonishing that we are, quite rightly, offering services to people, whether it be in education, in the jobcentre or in any other Government-run service—forget about the private sector—and we are just missing the target.

Rosie Cooper: I just want to endorse the comments of my friend, the right hon. Gentleman, by making a very quick point. My father, who is profoundly deaf—born deaf and with no hearing whatsoever—was in hospital and was seen by a senior registrar, who said, “Mr Cooper.”

[Rosie Cooper]

The lady who was visiting my dad said, “He’s deaf”. The registrar raised their voice and said, “Mr Cooper!” The lady said, “He’s deaf”. The doctor walked right up to his ear, leaned in and said loudly, “Mr Cooper!” Now, if medical professionals themselves are not joining the dots, we have an awful lot of work to do.

Sir Mike Penning: My hon. Friend has touched on a very good point. This Bill is not the silver bullet; it is a method of getting somewhere. The hard work will start once the other place gets its finger out. I will, if I may, come back to that story in a second.

We are concentrating on Government Departments, but there is a whole private sector out there, on which the hon. Lady touched, that is missing out on some profits and on people enjoying their services. Clearly, that consultant was not dim, which is what I was described as when I was at school, because I am dyslexic—apparently if you were dyslexic back in the early ‘60s and ‘70, you were dim. He was not dim, but he is ignorant—ignorant of what the condition is all about. Clearly, by the sound of it, he was not an ear, nose and throat specialist. I think the House will understand where I am coming from when I say that it is not a lack of intelligence, but a lack of understanding and compassion. “Compassion” sounds like an old-fashioned word, but I thought that was what the health service was supposed to be about. Interestingly, my mother, who was a nurse for some 40 years, would tell me that, in many cases, compassion was the best healer, compared with some of the other methodologies.

As we look at the Bill, we should say to ourselves, “We must draw a line in the sand.” That is quite important and it should have happened years ago. We can talk about the 2003 Act, and about leaving BSL out of the 2010 Act, which I have already done, but, as I have said, we need to draw a line in the sand now. Some of the stars of stage and screen have needed to help us increase public awareness, because, sadly, that is the sort of society in which we live. As everyone here can see, I am an expert in ballroom dancing—I think not! But even I watched “Strictly Come Dancing” towards the end because it sent out such a fantastic message to society that we all have the same dreams and aspirations, which I alluded to earlier.

The hard work starts now—I am sorry, Minister, that I am no longer on the Front Bench; I truly wish that I was sitting there now to support the Bill as it goes through. The Minister and I have had many a conversation about the Bill and, as I have said, this is where the hard work starts. The expectation from the deaf community, which will cheer you to the rafters when you go to the rally later today—sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, not you, although I am sure they will be cheering you to the rafters. I have only been here for five minutes so you will have to let me off. The deaf community will cheer the Minister to the rafters later, but they will not cheer us if we do not deliver. It does not matter who is in Government; this is a long process. It has taken us this long to get here, but they expect us and the panel to deliver.

Let me touch on the membership of the panel, which is massively important because it will be the voice of the deaf community. I said, I think in Committee or perhaps on Second Reading, that this process should not be

completely one-sided. It is absolutely right that the deaf community expect to be on the panel so that we can hear from them, but we have to try to get the balance right so that expectations can be measured and so that we can try to fix this when it goes wrong, although we will not be able to do so there and then. The membership of the panel is very important and should include not just the Minister and members of the different charities and the deaf community.

In conclusion, I am as proud as punch that the Bill will pass through this House today—I am somehow convinced that it will. It has taken a while and the expectation will be high, but let us meet that expectation and allow these people to live their dreams.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister.

12.31 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) on all her work in this area. We heard her speak so eloquently today, on Second Reading and in the Bill Committee about her deeply personal connection with British Sign Language. As I said in Committee, she should be proud of the Bill and the progress that has been made in this area, which will support many young people who shoulder responsibilities well beyond their years.

I also place on record my thanks to the BSL Act Now! campaign and the many disabled people, disabled people’s organisations and charities involved for their tireless work and commitment to this campaign. We all know that getting a private Member’s Bill through Parliament, let alone after being No. 20 on the list, takes resourcefulness, dedication, passion and perhaps some table-thumping sometimes. We can all agree that those qualities have all been shown by my hon. Friend and all those involved. She said that she will not get an Oscar soon, but many people would say that she deserves one.

As we all know, British Sign Language is a primary form of communication for approximately 90,000 UK residents, with around 150,000 users in total. Its vocabulary and syntax do not replicate spoken English and many deaf citizens have a much lower reading age than the general population. Sadly, too many deaf people in the UK continue to face barriers to communication, which affect employment, education and access to healthcare. The Bill will begin to tackle some of those significant issues.

If the Bill becomes law, it will achieve legal status for British Sign Language as a primary language of the deaf community in the United Kingdom. Achieving legal recognition of BSL through an Act of Parliament would be a huge step forward in improving deaf people’s quality of life, their inclusion and autonomy in British society, educational and professional opportunities and even their health outcomes.

I strongly welcome the fact that the Bill also contains provisions for Government Departments and certain public service providers to publish and adhere to guidance, setting out the steps that need to be taken to meet the needs of BSL users. I believe this guidance will include the delivery of many public services and help BSL users overcome the current limitations of the Equality Act that

sadly mean that many providers do not know how to make “reasonable adjustments” for them, as so eloquently put by my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire.

As I said, while I welcome the positive strides that this Bill makes, I know many of my colleagues will, like me, see it as something to build on. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire said, it is not a silver bullet for everything, so I want to retouch on a few crucial areas that I hope we can explore further in the future. I would appreciate it if the Minister outlined whether she agrees with them.

The first issue is around data. As it stands, the Government do not capture sufficient data to give us a clear picture of the deaf community. Current statistics capture people based on terms such as “difficulty in hearing” and “hearing impairment”. The use of the word “impairment” is itself unhelpful and outdated and may impact negatively on how BSL users respond. In short, the Government need to know how many deaf people use BSL. This is concerning as the Government use this data as their evidence base for making decisions about how to support BSL users—a group of people who we all know face some of the biggest barriers in society, whether in employment, education, health, wellbeing or other areas.

Secondly, I wish to focus on the non-statutory board of British Sign Language users and associated persons that will advise the Secretary of State. While I warmly welcome the commitment to consult deaf people, why is the body advising on such an important issue a non-statutory board? Does that mean Ministers do not have to listen to or act upon its recommendations? Ministers also need to be clear about how the body will be recruited. It is my sincere hope that it should be made up largely of disabled people and disabled people’s organisations. I cannot stress enough that the experts by experience must have a clear line to the Secretary of State. It is also vital that that body is fully transparent and that it communicates clearly with the deaf community. Will the minutes and recommendations of the body be made public?

Finally, I hope to see improvements in strengthening the interaction a future BSL Act will have with other legislation and Government strategies. Hon. Members will know the Government’s national disability strategy was recently found to be unlawful by the High Court, as the consultation process failed to engage correctly. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire said, we had no BSL interpretation at important press conferences, as I raised with the Prime Minister on several occasions. Sadly, at times the Government have a poor record when it comes to doing the right thing by disabled people, so it would be remiss of us not to consider strengthening Bills with adequate checks and balances.

As I have said before, when I read the draft Bill I noted with concern that clause 1(2) states:

“Subsection (1) does not affect the operation of any enactment or rule of law.”

Trust in this Government is low among disabled people and provisions such as this will not fill the deaf community with hope. Future improvements must strengthen the Act and give it more power.

In conclusion, I once again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire and the BSL Act Now! campaign on the progression of the Bill. It is a good start, but I hope the Minister will agree that we can and should go further in the future.

12.39 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. I too wish to pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). It is great to sit in this Chamber and learn about things from someone with such enormous experience and expertise. I very much enjoyed listening to her speech introducing this Third Reading debate.

This Bill is important because BSL is important. It is the primary language for up to 90,000 of our fellow citizens and residents of this country and it has up to 150,000 users. It is important to re-emphasise the point that has been made a couple of times today: BSL is not a direct translation of English; it is its own language. We cannot assume that BSL users have equivalent comprehension in English, or in fact any other language. If we ask whether BSL users should have the same right of access to Government services as everyone else, the obvious answer is yes. If we can support access to Government services for BSL users, we should and for that reason, I wholeheartedly welcome the Bill.

The impact of the Bill will be to encourage increased work to promote and facilitate the use of BSL across Government Departments. The heavy lifting is undertaken by clause 2(1) and (2), which place a duty on the Secretary of State to report what progress has been made by the 20 Departments named in the schedule to facilitate and promote the use of BSL.

At first glance, that seems a rather odd way to achieve the desired result, but from my previous career as a businessman, I know full well that we get what we measure. The requirement to measure and thereafter to report every three years as a minimum on the progress that those Government Departments are making will, in effect, be a very good prod to encourage further work. I note in passing that it is a GB-wide Bill. By focusing on GB as opposed to the United Kingdom, it takes account of the sensitivities of communities in Northern Ireland, which is sensible.

Clause 3 requires the Secretary of State to provide guidance to the Departments on how best to promote and facilitate BSL. Every bit as important as that statutory duty is the creation of the non-statutory advisory body, which will provide a voice for BSL users and people with real expertise on how the language is being used in our community. It will give them access to the heart of Government decision making and will give the right kind of advice to the Secretary of State and, by extension, the 20 named Departments.

Dr Hudson: I rise to congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) on this fantastic Bill about equality of access. It is such an important Bill and I wish it well in the other place. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) that this House is at its best when it unites to right a wrong. That is important. On the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) was making about the requirement for Government Departments to have that guidance given to them, does he agree that the fact that the guidance in the Bill goes across Government will provide equality of access?

Jerome Mayhew: I agree with my hon. Friend. The large scope of Departments affected by the Bill—all 20 named in the schedule—shows that its intention, and

[Jerome Mayhew]

I hope effect, is to provide the promotion and facilitation of BSL use across the arms of Government.

We need to consider the Bill's impact on the taxpayer. The assessment is that the financial impact will be almost negligible, because it works on the attitude and focus in Government. It does not require a large expenditure of money; it requires effective use of the approach that Departments take to BSL use. As the hon. Member for West Lancashire made clear in her opening remarks, it is about not thinking of BSL as an also-ran or an afterthought, but applying forethought to every announcement and all the work of Government. It is about taking BSL into account as part of business as usual, not as a secondary consideration.

It is 19 years since BSL was recognised as a language, and I want to take this opportunity to celebrate this further small, but important, step in support for BSL users. David Buxton, British Deaf Association chair, has said:

"Deaf people in Britain never gave up hope that their language would one day be not only recognised in law, but also protected and promoted so that deaf people are finally able to access information and services and achieve their potential on an equal basis with their fellow hearing citizens."

I am very proud to support the Bill.

12.45 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I am privileged to have a second bite at the cherry, because I was extremely proud to support the Bill on Second Reading. I again congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) on her Bill. She used the word "momentous" and I think it is. I also congratulate the campaigners that she mentioned. After Second Reading, I saw all the campaigners in Parliament Square, and it was joyous to behold them, feeling as they did that tangible progress had been made. I hope that those in Trafalgar Square today feel that further progress has been made today and that, with this Bill, we are taking one of the final steps on this journey.

The Bill has wider implications. Many tens of thousands of people in this country use BSL as their preferred language, and that has a wider implication for society at large. The hon. Member for West Lancashire mentioned equality, and it is of course an issue of equality. It will have an impact on up to 12 million people in this country who suffer from some kind of hearing loss, 50,000 of whom are children. As we have a greater life expectancy—I think it is now up to 82 in the UK—we can expect millions more people to experience some hearing difficulty or loss in the next decades. The hon. Lady movingly mentioned her father, and on Second Reading I mentioned my father, who suffers from hearing loss. The lines between the hearing community and the deaf community are increasingly blurred by people like my father, who uses subtitles and hearing aids. That attitudinal shift to "We are all one people and we can suffer from various degrees of hearing loss at any time, and it could affect anyone" helps to unite and give us that equality of opportunity and experience.

I have joined in a campaign run by a constituent of mine called Turn on the Subtitles. It is interesting to realise that we can learn from the experiences of people with hearing difficulties—the campaign recommends

turning on subtitles to help children with their literacy, especially as we come out of the pandemic. It is another example of the symbiosis between our different communities.

By legally recognising BSL as an official language, it will become part of our institutions and a normal part of our society. That is a really good thing to do today. Improving education for children is also important. We invest in this initiative for children with hearing difficulties and hearing loss, and that inclusion will last a lifetime. I could not be more proud to be part of that process. As humans, we should always remember that we do not just communicate in one way. We communicate in many different ways; our gestures and body language have much more of an impact than we realise on a day-to-day basis. As human beings, we can communicate in a variety of ways—we can give thumbs up, thumbs down or the peace sign, for example—and they are all an intrinsic part of our communication. What we are doing today brings BSL and some of those other ways of communicating into the mainstream, and I repeat that it is part of the fundamental imperative for people in this place and outside it to strive for equality—equality of access, equality of opportunity—at every possible opportunity.

Protected language status has already been granted to six languages in our country—Welsh, Scots, Ulster Scots, Scottish, Irish Gaelic and Cornish. Amazing as they are, more people currently use BSL than any of those British languages that already have legal recognition. As has been mentioned, 87,000 people have BSL as their preferred daily language, but on any given day up to 250,000 people could be using it. It is a very important part of our culture and our cultural heritage.

It is also worth mentioning one of the longer-term impacts that the Bill might have. A study by Johns Hopkins University in America found that even mild hearing loss can double a person's risk of developing dementia. The risk is expected to increase fivefold as people experience more and more severe forms of hearing loss, particularly with our ageing population. That is because hearing loss contributes to social isolation, which is a major factor in the development of some of the most heart-wrenching and difficult illnesses, such as dementia. Reducing social isolation may help us to limit some of those wider impacts.

I mentioned on Second Reading that we have two formidable women driving the Bill—the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), and the hon. Member for West Lancashire. I know that they are both committed to taking it forward, but also to going further. I congratulate them both—and if this is the revolution, then up the revolution! I am proud to be part of it.

12.52 pm

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I jump on with the revolution. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson)—[*Interruption.*] I see the Minister getting a bit excitable, so perhaps I will tone it down a touch.

It is a real pleasure to contribute to the debate, as it was to take part in the Bill Committee, and to see such great consensus. I say to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper): more power to your elbow!

She came 20th out of 20 in the ballot, yet by the looks of it she has pipped most people to the post in getting her Bill through to the other place.

I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning)—he has long championed this issue, from both the Treasury Bench and the Back Benches—and to the Minister. I echo the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead: I hope that those in the other place hear this House loud and clear today, and that when this important Bill arrives on their desk—hopefully soon—they ease it through at pace and we do not lose it.

We went into much detail in Committee. Although the hon. Member for West Lancashire—she is my hon. Friend on this occasion—made the point that it is not a panacea or a silver bullet, it is a landmark, and we should be celebrating this significant step forward. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford alluded to the six indigenous languages. Of course, Welsh is one of them, and I am sure that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, will allow me a quick “da iawn”—“very good”. This is a good step forward. We will have to pick up the figures that my hon. Friend mentioned in the Tea Room later, because the Welsh language is quite significant, but today is about British Sign Language and getting it legal status.

In Committee and in our wider debates, it has been clear that those on the Treasury Bench—in particular the Minister—and the hon. Member for West Lancashire have absolutely worked together. I welcome the non-statutory measures that the Government are introducing at the same time. Significant steps are being taken today, and it is a real pleasure to be in the Chamber. There are no party divides on this Bill, and both statutory and non-statutory measures are going through—it is incredibly significant.

I have to declare my interest. I have not got my hearing aid in my left ear because I have run out of batteries—it is the hearing aid that has run out of batteries, Mr Deputy Speaker, not me—so I find myself part of the 12 million people, or 1.2 million people with a particular level of hearing loss; I am not quite sure of the decibel level of loss in my left ear. The work that the RNID and the British Deaf Association have done to champion day-to-day rights, accessibility, education and skills, and to champion this Bill with the hon. Lady, is terrific. I pay particular tribute to the RNID, because I see through my constituency casework and my engagement with the organisation the very real difference it makes.

Sir Mike Penning: I concur with my hon. Friend’s congratulations to the RNID. I should have declared an interest, in that I am a patron of the Hertfordshire hearing advisory service, which also does a fantastic job.

Craig Williams: I had no doubt that my doughty champion on this issue would have such an illustrious position, and I pay tribute to the Hertfordshire hearing advisory service.

I know that there are other Bills, and that other Members want to speak in this debate, so I conclude by paying tribute to the Bill. We have gone into the details and our additional asks of the Government. I echo what my right hon. Friend has said: we wish this Bill well when it reaches the Lords. We wish for speed and very little amendment, and I look forward to Royal Assent.

12.56 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): This Bill matters, and the discussion that we are having matters, so I thank the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) for introducing the Bill. I suspect that too often, our deaf and hard of hearing constituents wonder how often we in this place think of them, and how often we consider the challenges they face and the opportunities, which we perhaps do not appreciate, in their communities. It matters that we can stand here today and say that we are listening, talking and learning, and that we want to do so.

I really enjoyed listening to the hon. Lady, and I think that this is such a tribute to her parents. I hope that they are still with us; if they are, I am sure that they are incredibly proud. If not, what an amazing tribute. The hon. Lady should be congratulated for bringing forward this private Member’s Bill. As many of us have said, it is very difficult to do so and to get one to this stage. I do not think that has happened since 1999, and it is testament to her hard work.

I thank the Government for their work, because the legislation would not be making progress if the Government had not given it their full support. I thank all our constituents, and particularly those in Rutland and Melton who have written to me to give their full-hearted support and to ask me to speak in support of the Bill.

There is another reason why I thank the hon. Lady for introducing the Bill. We in this place can sometimes feel quite helpless, because we cannot pretend to be experts on all issues and we cannot always make a difference when we want to. That is particularly true in the context of what is happening in Ukraine, when so many of us are sitting here wishing we could do something meaningful to make a difference and protect lives. I am grateful to her for enabling us to give recognition to such a big community by doing something that shows them we are listening and we will make a difference to their lives. I thank her for giving us this moment of hope.

Recognising British Sign Language as a language is so important. I cannot believe that we are only just having this conversation, or that until the start of this campaign, I spent my entire lifetime not knowing that that was not the case. It is great that the hon. Lady’s work will result in Government being held to account, and that the 15,000 people who use this language every day will know that she has championed their cause and the Government are supporting them.

The hon. Lady spoke beautifully about deaf culture. A number of times in my lifetime, I have found myself captivated watching a beautiful conversation between two, three or four deaf people. The first time was when I was about nine years old, in an airport in Sweden. I had never seen such a conversation before, and it was beautiful to watch, and mesmerising in its own way.

Although the hon. Lady has rightly said that this is not a silver bullet and more can be done—I am sure there will be attempts to do so—I would like to see British Sign Language taught in all schools. It makes me sad that off the top of my head, the only piece of BSL I know is how to say thank you. [*In British Sign Language: “Thank you.”*] At least I know something, but I would love to know more. We should be teaching it in all our schools. I am sure that the Minister, my hon.

[Alicia Kearns]

Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), wants that, too, because she has been taking lessons in British Sign Language. It is also important to look at how we create an opportunity for children in our schools to experience a day in the life of a deaf person. How can they truly understand if they have not had the opportunity to do that? As an MP I, like many of my colleagues, have been blindfolded for the day and we have spent a day being blind. Let us look doing the same for our kids in our schools.

I also look back to when my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) gave an address from the Dispatch Box solely in British Sign Language and how important that moment was. I know my hon. Friend the Minister has also done videos solely in British Sign Language.

I make one further plea, having already set the context of Ukraine: this country does a lot well for deaf people. There is much more we can do, as we have said, but I urge the Minister to reach out to the Home Office and Foreign Office to see what we can do to support deaf individuals and families in Ukraine. For them, this will be an incredibly difficult moment. Perhaps we can provide support for the Ukrainian Government on how to ensure that the alarms, alerts and sirens going out hourly across the country are able to reach those who are hard of hearing and deaf, because they are the most vulnerable at this time.

Today does matter. I hope it says to the deaf community that we are listening and they are heard, and that today will make a monumental difference. I finish by thanking the hon. Member for West Lancashire again for her campaigning and for giving us the opportunity to do something meaningful in the darkest of times.

1.1 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I start, as all my colleagues have, by congratulating the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) on introducing this Bill and for her powerful, passionate and personal speech explaining everything that has led to our being here today. I wholeheartedly support declaring British Sign Language an official language of the United Kingdom and, from that, providing the improved guidance to public services and Departments on its use.

Effective communication is surely essential to building a more inclusive society. We have heard that in the UK there are 12 million adults with at least mild hearing loss, according to the RNID, equivalent to one in five adults. For those with more profound hearing loss, BSL plays a key role. I suggest it is no exaggeration to say it offers a lifeline to those who rely on it, and as many as 250,000 British people use it on any given day.

The current lack of legal protection for BSL means that people who rely on the language do not have access to the vital information and services that are available to hearing people, and that we just take for granted. As I understand it, the only place someone is guaranteed a qualified interpreter is in the courts, so by contrast I was very concerned to hear the hon. Lady's comments about the additional difficulties that deaf people face in prison.

I speak as a former non-executive director of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, and I wonder whether the hon. Lady would be interested in meeting

me and perhaps even my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), who is a parliamentary private secretary in the Ministry of Justice, to see whether together we might be able to do some work at the MOJ or with HMPPS to make it more straightforward for those who have hearing impairments and are in prison. She raises an important issue of which I was not aware, despite having spent 15 or 16 years involved in the criminal justice service.

BSL users are, after all, equal citizens who deserve an even playing field and access to the same quality of services as everyone else. They should be able to be heard and to speak and be understood in the language of their choice. As the RNID has pointed out, deaf people possess a wealth of talent that they can and do bring to society, yet so often there are obstacles for BSL users that mean their talent is left locked up, preventing them from fulfilling their potential. I am pleased that this Bill will mean that that can start to change, at least in part.

I pay tribute to Mr Speaker and the staff of the House of Commons for launching a BSL interpreting pilot scheme, which has been in place for Prime Minister's questions since February 2020. It is also entirely appropriate that, for this particular debate, BSL interpretation is being provided.

It is also good that there has been progress in schools in providing BSL users with greater means to communicate with one another. Many teachers now learn the language, and schools sometimes offer sign language in their curriculum. I am delighted that in my own constituency, Stoke Mandeville Combined School, a primary school, has special facilities for hearing-impaired pupils, but, crucially, they are an integral part of the school community. I have been to assemblies there and joined in with them as they take part fully in the songs and everything that is going on, using BSL. There is even a BSL choir at the school. It is incredibly moving to take part; to see how those children play a full part in the life of their school and, more importantly, that all the other children who are not hearing impaired recognise that this is just a normal part of life—a different way to communicate with different people who have different needs but, ultimately, are all exactly the same as they are. I am also pleased to say that there are other support services for BSL across my constituency of Aylesbury. Buckinghamshire Integrated Sensory Service, run by the council in partnership with Action for Hearing Loss, offers a range of services to support people with hearing, sight or dual sensory loss. That includes access to a specialist staff team of BSL speakers, and there are other special services across the county offering courses in BSL.

I will take this opportunity to highlight another fantastic charity in my constituency that helps people who are hearing impaired. That is the charity Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, which has its headquarters and training centre in Saunderton. It does amazing work, training dogs to alert deaf people to life-saving sounds that they would otherwise miss, sounds that many of us take for granted—things like a doorbell—or danger signals such as a fire alarm. Those dogs make a real difference to deaf people's lives, helping them to regain confidence in everyday life. That is what we are talking about today, because that is what BSL does, too. It is therefore absolutely right that it gains the legal status that we are all confident it will gain after it completes its passage through this House and the other place.

To conclude, I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire on introducing this incredibly important Bill, which has the potential to do so much.

1.6 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) on bringing forward this hugely important Bill. I know only too well what a privilege it is to come out of the ballot, and I commend her on expertly guiding this piece of legislation through the House. It is a hugely commendable Bill that deals with an important issue for many people across the country; I thank her for promoting it, and am proud to be here today to support her. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), not since 1999 has a Member who drew No. 20 in the ballot got to this stage in the legislative process. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her efforts.

I also know that this Bill relates to an issue that is very personal to the hon. Lady. At all stages of this Bill's passage, she has delivered powerful and heartfelt speeches, and today was no different; the fact that her speech drew on her personal story has only made her words more moving. I also pay tribute to the contributions made on this issue over many years by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning). *[Interruption.]* It seems that my right hon. Friend has crossed the Floor. I think that demonstrates the commitment in this House to cross-party working, particularly on Fridays.

In an earlier debate, I mentioned Darlington Association on Disability, which was established in 1986 as a voluntary and charitable organisation led by disabled people. I know they will warmly welcome this Bill, just as they will welcome the Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Disabled Persons) Bill. The steps taken to legally recognise British sign language as a language will be welcomed by them.

Alicia Kearns: I recognise that I am taking liberties on a Friday, but I am essentially going to direct my question to Mr Deputy Speaker via my good and hon. Friend. Do we provide BSL tours of Parliament, and if we do not, is that something we could do? It is wonderful to see people in the Chamber today signing to one another, and it would be wonderful if we could ensure we had a BSL tour capability that could be provided to all schools around our country. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Peter Gibson: Having just looked up to the Gallery and cast a wave, I can see that many in the Gallery are waving back. It is fascinating that a Friday debate is receiving so much attention, and my hon. Friend's point is important; if we were able to introduce that capability, it would be of benefit to deaf people across the country. I am sure Mr Speaker will take that point up.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the Head of Steam museum in Darlington. You may wonder why that is Mr Deputy Speaker, but only yesterday it announced a whole new series of British Sign Language films to illustrate our heritage in Darlington. As we see investment going into our rail heritage quarter, I hope that we will see more of that so that people who are deaf who visit Head of Steam can get that help to see the history and heritage of Darlington—we hope to be the home of

Great British Railways, subject to the current competition—and see those films. That is truly tremendous, and I am grateful to Darlington Borough Council for ensuring that that happened before this debate.

For many people, British sign language is a vital lifeline that ensures that they are not isolated from society and can reach their full potential. British Sign Language has been used for hundreds of years. It has adapted over time, and up to 250,000 people are using it at any one time on any day. We have already heard about how the vocabulary and syntax of British Sign Language does not exactly replicate spoken English and that, for individuals who have been deaf from birth or early childhood, subtitles or written English are not an adequate alternative as it is not simply a signed version of written or spoken English. The Bill will help to ensure that deaf people in the UK can lead fulfilling and independent lives.

The UK Government already give protected status to six indigenous UK languages: Welsh, Scots, Ulster Scots, Scottish, Irish Gaelic and Cornish. However, despite being recognised as an official language by the UK Government since 2003, British Sign Language—another indigenous language—has not yet been accorded that same legal protection and status. The Bill will mean that British Sign Language receives the same legal status and protection as our other six languages.

Today, we are making clear to deaf people up and down the country that they are equal members of society and that their language will get the status that its long history and usage in the UK deserves. I commend my friend the hon. Member for West Lancashire once again for her efforts and wish the Bill well.

1.12 pm

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I join everyone in thanking the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) for bringing the Bill to the House. A great many people feel very passionately about it. It touches on many people's lives, and it is the start of a process that will hopefully lead to real change. As we not only look at the Gallery but think of the other people watching our proceedings, we see how that reflects the importance of the Bill and how thankful the wider public are to her for it.

I will re-emphasise the point that, of course, being deaf is not a choice and, at times, there is a lack of empathy and understanding about what is involved—it is not as simple as learning other languages. I will come to personal experiences in my life and from my family in a moment. Of course, we in the UK are not renowned for being great at learning other languages. I am a fairly well travelled person, and my linguistic skills are appalling. In school, we did not have much of a choice. We learnt French, and I am generally limited to telling people about the weather—they would say, “Il fait beau?” and I would say, “Non, il pleut”, because that is generally how our weather is—or basic things such as asking someone how to get to the bank or how many brothers or sisters they have. I never really saw the use in that, and I really struggled to get motivated. It would have been fantastic to have had the option of something such as BSL back then.

My travels have taken me to various places. When I lived in Sweden, I pretty much gave up at the difference between “ö” and “å”. I could not tell, but apparently

[Brendan Clarke-Smith]

there is a subtle difference there. I would have a conversation with somebody thinking that I had just about nailed it, but I normally got the response, “So, where in England do you come from?” I tried the same with Norwegian, which sounded like a bubblier version, but again I did not really get anywhere. At the moment, I have been trying to learn a bit more Romanian, as my wife is Romanian. She speaks about four or five languages and puts me to shame. My little boy thinks it is hilarious how bad I am at that.

Continuing on the theme of family and why today is particularly important for me from a personal perspective, my aunt is deaf and I have an uncle who is deaf, too. Interacting with that has been a big part of my family's life—we have seen a great deal of changes over the years, and I really hope things will get better in terms of the support available and how society includes people. They grew up in the '60s and '70s in inner-city Nottingham with all the challenges of life, but on top of that having those communication difficulties with the rest of society and trying to be included. It is a great regret for me that I have not really learned BSL and been able to have that level of communication with my aunt and uncle, but I will be looking at developing it now. My mother learned BSL and is a qualified signer, so she has been teaching me a little bit and I am kind of just about getting there. I must admit that the first thing I asked was, “What rude words can you teach me?” I tend to learn those a little bit quicker, as I do in other languages.

We really need to recognise BSL in particular, as has been mentioned, when we have 87,000 people in this country using BSL as their language of choice. That recognition is there, but until it has legal status it is maybe not quite the recognition it has deserved. That, for me, is the crucial point. The Bill puts the wheels in motion and a lot more will come of it afterwards.

As I mentioned, I am from a schools background. I have been a teacher and a headteacher, and was teaching right up until I was elected to Parliament. There are many people with hearing impairment in mainstream education, and I would like to see that factored into teacher training more, along with more workshops with those people. With dyslexia, we would sometimes only get a day's worth of training and the support was not really in place, so I would like to see that support in future.

Schools can choose to offer sign language as part of their extra-curricular activities or put it into the actual curriculum. What is missing, however, is an actual qualification. I mentioned that doing French was not an option—I was forced to do it—but if I had been given a set of options and seen BSL on there as a GCSE, or even been able to take it further as an A-level, I would have been absolutely delighted to do it. The Minister for School Standards, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), is nodding on the Front Bench. I know the Department for Education is working to introduce that—with Ofqual, I believe—and personally I very much endorse it. It would be a fantastic option that would hopefully get more people to learn BSL, not necessarily because they have family members who are deaf but because it is a fantastic skill to have and it enables us to communicate with more people in society. I wholeheartedly endorse it.

Finally, I once again thank the hon. Member for West Lancashire for bringing the Bill to the House. It is so important and it means so much to all the people watching who currently use BSL and their families. I wish the Bill the very best and thank her again. I will very much support it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Just before I call Simon Baynes, I would like to say that I have been informed that BSL tours of Parliament are available if people want them. That is great news.

1.19 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): It gives me great pleasure to speak in this debate in support of the Third Reading of the important private Member's Bill of the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). Like other colleagues on both sides of the House, I was profoundly moved by her speech, particularly as it was the testimony of the child of deaf parents; it was a revelation for me to learn more not only about her personal voyage but about the general situation pertaining to people who are deaf in this country, and I thank her very much for that.

I am also very pleased that the Government have supported the Bill ever since Second Reading and that the Minister has engaged with the hon. Member for West Lancashire and stakeholders including the RNID and the British Deaf Association. Such a degree of co-operation across the House is, I am learning as a relatively new Member, a welcome feature of private Member's Bills, and today's debate and the way in which it has been approached shows Parliament at its very best. The House has looked for consensus rather than division, and discussed in a temperate and knowledgeable way issues that are profoundly important to many in the House, in the Public Gallery and watching within the House and outside. I cannot thank the hon. Lady enough for that.

I too have had experience of this issue in my family from my grandmother's deafness; we were brought up with that and it has affected my view of the issue and made me much more aware of it. Indeed, I too have been for hearing tests and now have to wear a hearing aid, although I am not wearing it today as I find the audibility to be very good in the Chamber. So I too have had experience of learning about how deafness comes to us, in my case with maturity of years.

Sir Mike Penning: My hon. Friend makes an important point that perhaps I did not stress fully enough in my contribution. There are two groups of people in the deaf community: those born profoundly deaf, and those, like my hon. Friend and myself, who have developed hearing loss during the course of our lives. That is understood in the community but is not fully understood outside it, and this Bill will help tremendously in that.

Simon Baynes: I thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution and for that observation, which he has made far more eloquently than I was struggling to just now. That is absolutely right, and I will address another point he made shortly, because I was struck by his contribution to the debate.

In my constituency there are many organisations that help people who are deaf, such as the Wrexham and Denbighshire Deaf Children's Society, AVOW—the

Association of Voluntary Organisations in Wrexham—and the Rainbow Foundation. I pay tribute to them, and want also to quote the British Deaf Association:

“This Bill has been 19 years in the making. Deaf people in Britain never gave up hope that their language would one day be not only recognised in law, but also protected and promoted so that deaf people are finally able to access information and services and achieve their potential on an equal basis with their fellow hearing citizens.”

Indeed, equality has been an important theme of the debate, and I perhaps did not fully appreciate its importance when I was preparing my speech. It is strikingly clear from everything everybody has said that this is not only about helping people who are deaf, but about ensuring equality among all our citizens. The provisions for users of BSL accessing services are covered by equalities legislation and the public sector equality duty.

The Bill seeks to recognise British Sign Language as a language of England, Wales and Scotland. I make that point as a Member of Parliament with a Welsh constituency because for me, it is important that it is a GB-wide initiative. It also requires the Secretary of State to report on the promotion and facilitation of the use of British Sign Language by Government Departments, which, again, is a crucial point that has already been made in the debate.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for outlining that BSL tours are available in Parliament. It is all very well for the Government to have new responsibilities with regard to BSL, but will my hon. Friend allude to how helpful it would be for the deaf community if Members of Parliament had BSL training and BSL interpretation in our surgeries to provide services to our constituents?

Simon Baynes: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I fully endorse training of that nature. I was struck by what my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) said about the educational process, and I was pleased that the Minister for School Standards was nodding in assent to what he said about putting it in the curriculum. We need to set an example here, so my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) is correct that we need to set an example in what we do in our constituencies to help people in that regard.

The Bill will also ensure that the guidance is created in direct consultation with deaf BSL users to ensure that it truly reflects the needs of the deaf community. In the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), I was struck by the fact that he has been working towards that for many years and by his point about methodology, which is incredibly important.

It strikes me that the Bill is part of a process—a point that was movingly made by the hon. Member for West Lancashire when she talked about the experience of her father in hospital. With no disrespect to the consultant she mentioned and so on, it is shocking that that took place and it illustrates how the Bill is important not only for ensuring that British Sign Language is widely used and has an important place in the structure of our government and the way we do things, but for changing people's minds, views and behaviour. The point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead about methodology is profoundly important in conjunction with the Bill.

The Bill also introduces a suite of non-statutory measures, which have already been commented on, so I will not go into detail on them. I have touched on the issue of education, which was mentioned by many hon. Members, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) and for Bassetlaw. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford made the point that it is important for British Sign Language to become a part of children's lives. We all know that if we start with children, they have no preconceived ideas and they can see that it will help with their own deaf friends, which is the way to change things in the long term. I strongly support that.

I have made the point that the Bill has a GB-wide impact on BSL users. As a Welsh MP, I cannot stress strongly enough how much I support that. I fully back the Bill because I am committed, as are the Government, to supporting all people with a disability, including deaf people, to lead fulfilled and independent lives.

I end with what Rose Ayling-Ellis, the winner of “Strictly Come Dancing”, who has already been referred to, said of the Bill:

“I'm backing it because this is my language. The fact that my country doesn't see it that way is really sad and means we don't get the respect we deserve and the language deserves. BSL is not an official language, legally, in this country. Which is outrageous. Because it is such a beautiful, rich language with its own structure, its own grammar, its own slang. It's even got accents.”

I thought that that very vividly made the point. Hopefully, the outrageous element, which is rightly alluded to, will come to be something of the past when this Bill is passed in this House and in the other place.

I end by warmly congratulating the hon. Member for West Lancashire on her private Member's Bill, which is indeed inspirational and vital for everybody in this country.

1.30 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith): May I again congratulate my new friend, the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), on bringing forward this important Bill, and on the commitment and dedication that she has shown, and that she has role-modelled to us all, in championing British Sign Language? I want to emphasise that the Government are not only committed to this Bill, but proud to support it.

Today, Trafalgar Square is filled with BSL signers and members of the deaf community. They have gathered together to celebrate Sign Language Week and mark the 19th anniversary of the recognition of BSL as a language in its own right by the UK Government and in joyful anticipation of the Bill reaching its successful final stage in this House. They want to be part of the symphony.

Earlier this week, I had the pleasure of seeing a rehearsal from Deafinitely Theatre, the first deaf-launched and deaf-led professional theatre company in the UK, producing bilingual theatre in both BSL and spoken English. It was so inspiring to meet the directors and the cast and to see the welcoming space that they have created for deaf people and the bold space that they are challenging audiences with.

Last weekend, we saw sign language elevated again at the BAFTAs, with the film “CODA” winning two awards; the first film with a predominantly deaf cast to win an

[Chloe Smith]

award, including the first BAFTA, as we have discussed, to go to a deaf actor. That film portrays some of the very challenges that we have been discussing during the passage of this Bill, including children stepping into an adult world to interpret for a parent. It also puts deaf people at the heart of a story about family and community.

Such moments are important. They raise awareness of the challenges faced not only by deaf people and the deaf community, but by deaf workers, in the form of actors, as well as by the sign language interpreters consulting for the film. Cast members learning sign language provide role models for young deaf people throughout our society. Recognising deaf culture in this way sends an important message to the deaf community: we see the challenges you face; we care about what you have to say; and you are a valued part of our society.

The theme for this year's Sign Language Week is "BSL Bring Us Together" and it certainly does. I am delighted to see how Members across this House have come together to put the recognition of this rich and vibrant language into law and to pass a number of measures that, hopefully, will see an increase in the use of BSL across society.

I wish to place on record that the explanatory notes of the Bill will be updated to extend this recognition to tactile sign language, which is used and understood by some deafblind people, and to reflect the importance of BSL in deaf culture and community. We are all bound together by shared languages and that is especially so for BSL signers.

I wish to thank right hon. and hon. Members for the further issues that they have powerfully raised today, including, for example, that of prisoners and also some points very ably made about the current humanitarian crisis by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns).

Alongside the Bill, we are also developing a suite of non-statutory measures that will help promote and facilitate the use of BSL. These include: establishing a non-statutory advisory board of British Sign Language signers to advise the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on matters relating to BSL; examining how we might increase the number of BSL interpreters; reviewing how we might work in DWP to ensure the Access to Work fund better helps BSL signers; and considering how the Government can further facilitate and promote BSL usage.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) mentioned, I am also working with colleagues at the Department for Education to see what more can be done to accelerate the introduction of a BSL GCSE. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), an absolute stalwart supporter of this work, said, this Bill is a means of doing more, and he is so right in that.

I would like to take a moment to deal with the four points put by the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). To begin with, she asked about data: what do we know about BSL signers.

The Government collect a variety of data on disabled people who have difficulty hearing, and their outcomes, drawing on the definition of disability as understood in the Equality Act and impairment type as collected in

available data. The Office for National Statistics announced that it aims to publish the first results of the 2021 census this summer, which will have updated figures on BSL use. In addition, the Government have set out a comprehensive approach to improving its evidence on disabled people, including the BSL signing population. That encompasses: improving administrative and survey data across Government to ensure they reflect disabled people's needs and the barriers they experience; an annual survey to collect robust information on disabled people's lived experience; monitoring of public perceptions towards disabled people; and building expertise on disability related evidence.

Moving on to the hon. Lady's point about the board being non-statutory, that was covered in Committee, but I am happy to reiterate it here. As the hon. Member for West Lancashire made clear in Committee, a private Member's Bill cannot create new public expenditure, so it is not possible for this Bill to create a statutory board, yet she and I agree wholeheartedly that BSL signers have a key role to play in advising the Government on how we can support them to lead fulfilling, independent lives. That is why, in spite of the constraint, I have pledged to create a new non-statutory board of BSL signers to make sure their views are central to progressing practical improvements—there I go, Mr Speaker, banging on the Dispatch Box as the hon. Lady has told us to do.

The new board will advise the Government on matters relating to BSL and of particular pertinence to deaf BSL signers, which will include helping to formulate the guidance under clause 3. I have instructed officials to consider the composition and remit of the board and will confirm the details by summer this year, when I hope to be able to seek nominations for members, who will be appointed by the Secretary of State for the Department for Work and Pensions. We are yet to determine the board's terms of reference for the board, which might include publishing minutes and recommendations and we will involve the board of BSL signers in that process.

The third point of the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford touched on interpretation at covid press conferences. To be clear for the record, a judicial review on the matter found that the Government were meeting their obligations under the Equality Act for the covid briefings and have complied with the public sector equality duty. The court ruled that our policy of using on-screen BSL interpreters was lawful during the pandemic. There have been over 175 covid briefings to date, and only two were questioned because BSL was not provided on screen. The judge ruled that it is not a legal requirement to provide an in-person BSL interpreter, but we will continue to ensure provision of an on-screen interpreter. Our priority, like everyone's in this Chamber, was to reach the largest-possible audience with important public information, and we will continue to ensure that BSL is made available in that regard.

The hon. Lady's final point was about the particular wording of clause 1(2). I am a little disappointed that this matter has been brought up again on Third Reading as though it had not been dealt with in Committee and, indeed, on page 6 of the explanatory notes. It is important to get it on the record today—in case we have to do this again—that we do not want to upset the balance of provisions in the Equality Act. I caution the hon. Lady about inciting anybody to tear down the Equality Act. Of

course, I do not think that that is her intention, but that is where that line of logic could lead were she to use it again.

We must remember what a private Member's Bill can achieve. The scope is limited, but none the less this is what such a Bill can achieve, and I do not think that someone would seek to tear down the Equality Act with a private Member's Bill. Through the hon. Lady, I emphasise to Members of the other place who may be considering amendments that, at this stage in the Session, there is no time for amendments before Royal Assent. Without Royal Assent, there will be nothing, and I think our common aim is to pass this Bill and achieve something really important.

Sir Mike Penning: Perhaps I can say something on behalf of the House. It is not just those on the Treasury Bench who are saying to the other House, "Please do not table amendments—they will wreck the Bill"; it is this House that is saying that. We want this Bill on the statute book. If we delay it, it will not get on to the statute book, and that would be criminal.

Chloe Smith: I entirely endorse the point that my right hon. Friend has just underlined, which was made very clearly by the hon. Member for West Lancashire. It took an enormous amount of hard work, passion and perseverance to get us to this point, and we want to finish the job.

I am grateful for the constructive spirit in which everyone in the Chamber has worked to build cross-party consensus for the Bill. It will make real improvements to the communication options, and the lives, of deaf people. As has been said, however, even harder work is ahead of us. At this point I should thank my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) for reminding us that there is a head of steam behind the Bill.

Finally, let me thank all the campaigners—including those involved in the BSL Act Now! Campaign—who have worked tirelessly to get us to this point, alongside the hon. Member for West Lancashire, and thank Members on both sides of the House for their support. I hope we can all agree that today has been a victory for everyone involved, and also that there is more work to be done. I am proud of what we have achieved together with this Bill. We wish it well in the other place, and we look forward to the change that it will bring.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I put the Question, I am sure that we would like to hear once more from Rosie Cooper.

1.41 pm

Rosie Cooper: With the leave of the House, I should like to make a few very short remarks.

A Bill similar to mine failed in 2014. Deaf people have waited for this for so long. We are on the point of delivering a huge difference for each and every one of them. For goodness sake, I can almost feel deaf people across the country, and in Trafalgar Square saying, "We are here, we are at the point, stop nitpicking and move on! Please, House of Lords, no amendments—there is no time for them! Give us our voice! for God's sake, please stop it—just move on!" This is not quite British Sign Language, but it is very simple. On behalf of all those deaf people, all those organisations for the deaf, all the individuals who have helped this House and, please God, the other place—thank you. [*In British Sign Language: "Thank you."*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Congratulations, Rosie. You rightly have your place in history for providing a brighter future for many generations to come.

Mental Health Provision (Children and Young People) Bill

Second Reading

1.43 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a privilege to speak on my first ever private Member's Bill. Let me start by thanking the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which has been working with me on the content of this Bill over the past two years; it was initially an amendment to the NHS Funding Bill, back in January 2020. I also thank Young Minds for its support and input. Together, we are united in wanting to shine a light on children and young people's mental health services in respect of spending and waiting times up and down the country as part of our collective efforts to improve services.

The Bill would put into statute an annual report to Parliament on the provision of mental health services, with data included on both local spending and waiting times. It would enable young people, their parents and their carers to see clearly and easily the actual investment in children's and young people's mental health services in their own areas, and enable them to have a true picture of the waiting times for treatment. Only by having that transparency can we really hold ministers to account for their promises.

The issue of children's and young people's mental health is very close to my heart, and I have been campaigning for better investment in services since the moment I was elected. Each week, I hear heartbreaking stories of young people in my constituency unable to access the help they need in a timely manner, and I have been recounting a number of those stories in this place for over two years.

The mental health crisis among children and young people was a problem prior to the pandemic. We all know that it is worse today as a result of the various covid lockdowns, which led to social isolation, anxiety about the future, bereavement and, for some young people, having to live in very challenging conditions, due to either lack of physical space or difficult personal circumstances. In December 2021, the number of children and young people accessing mental health services was 15.7% higher than two years earlier.

With one in six children now having a diagnosable mental health condition, additional investment in services at all levels, from preventive measures in schools and community settings right through to acute and crisis services in the NHS, is urgent. While NHS England spending on children's mental health has increased over the past four years, in far too many areas the money is not necessarily reaching the frontline, resulting in a postcode lottery in funding across the country.

Figures analysed by the Children's Commissioner showed that in 2020-21, while spending was approximately £165.20 per child in the Isle of Wight, it was less than a tenth of that in Halton, at only £15.90 per child. Despite a specific commitment to children's mental health spending growing as a proportion of local NHS spending, in the last financial year, the Morecambe Bay NHS saw a drop of over 15% in child and adolescent mental health services spending, and the Buckinghamshire NHS a drop of 11.6%.

Waiting lists are still wholly unacceptable in far too many areas. Just recently, I was contacted by the mother of a seven-year-old—seven, Mr Deputy Speaker; that is the same age as my own daughter. She is a little girl who should be enjoying school, playdates, parties and playgrounds. Her mother said to me, “She isn't really living—just existing.” She has been waiting since November 2020 for a CAMHS assessment. That is 16 months.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some really important points, particularly about CAMHS. The delay in getting people assessed is a significant issue in my constituency; it impacts my case load, and it delays access to services for young people in my constituency. However, I know from engaging with my local mental health trust that the problem is not so much funding but recruitment. Will the hon. Lady comment on what we can do to recruit the necessary people to help with the backlogs?

Munira Wilson: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Even if there were 1,000% more funding tomorrow, the workforce is not there, as we know it is not in so many parts of the NHS. Interestingly, we know from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, for example, that there are many counsellors who are trained to counsel young people who want to do more work, but I agree that recruitment is a problem in trying to get timely assessments. The story I was part of the way through telling goes on to explain how long that poor seven-year-old girl has been waiting just for an assessment, let alone for treatment. That is why the Bill refers to waiting times to treatment; there is often a long waiting time to assessment and then another long waiting time to treatment. But I agree with the hon. Gentleman: we need to do a lot more on recruiting the right workforce as well as putting the funding in, because we cannot do very much without the right people.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The hon. Lady will recall from a conversation that the two of us had the importance and effectiveness of counselling in the school environment for nipping potential mental health issues in the bud—particularly those associated with the first and second covid lockdowns. Every Member will have experienced in their patch increased anxiety among teenagers, particularly at secondary school—perhaps not so much in primary school. Does the hon. Lady agree that the focus on counselling in the school environment is particularly important?

Munira Wilson: I agree completely. We need that preventive intervention at school and community level, as well as investment in acute services right across the way. There is a huge need, from low-level intervention right through to acute services, and if we do more at an early stage we will prevent waiting lists from growing at later stages. I absolutely think that we should have a professional, trained counsellor in every school. It is the No. 1 issue that every secondary headteacher in my constituency brings up with me, and although the hon. Gentleman says it is less significant in primary schools, it is still a pretty high priority for my primary headteachers. I have witnessed some pretty scary episodes when I have been in primary schools, so it is a problem across both.

Back to my story about the seven-year-old. Her mother told me that she is not really living, just existing. She has been waiting since November 2020 for a CAMHS assessment, which is 16 months. Recently, her mother was told that she may need to wait a further year still. Since her initial referral in November 2020 she was also recommended for arts therapy while she waits for assessment, but that has not materialised either, with local service providers suggesting it may come through in the next couple of months. My caseload suggests this case is not unusual, sadly. Quite apart from the anguish and stress for the whole family, the child's condition often deteriorates while they wait for assessment and they then need more extensive intervention. Even worse, they can end up at the back of the queue for a new assessment because by the time they are seen they are on the wrong track or the wrong tier for the level of support they need. Indeed, a few weeks ago I shared the story of a 15-year-old girl to whom that had happened.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady is giving an excellent account of the problem, and I know we all share her thoughts on it. Does she agree that one reason this is so important is that generations have had their life chances held back because they did not get support when they were children that would have allowed them to develop? If we let children down now, we will be letting another generation suffer a problem that we know we can solve.

Munira Wilson: I could not agree more. If children are not happy and well in themselves they will not thrive. There is plenty of data and research to show that children who are unwell mentally do not do as well in their GCSEs and A-levels, as well as in their social lives, so it is key.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. Over the last two and a half years it has been devastating to see the impact of the pandemic on children's health. We should never again lock our children out of their schools and we must ensure that we protect them against the appalling pandemic of abuse that we have seen in our households. I recognise that we need to do more for children and their mental health, and I see that in my local secondary schools. I apologise, however, because I am struggling to understand how the proposal would differ from the quarterly dashboard already published by the Department of Health and Social Care that, as I understand it, already presents such data.

Munira Wilson: The dashboard does not go into the level of detail required in the Bill. I will come on to the different bits of data that the Bill would require to be published, especially on waiting times. That is not particularly transparent, although the Children's Commissioner requests some of that data on an annual basis. On the dashboard, the spending figures that are reported are not always accurate, which is why there have been a lot of independent audits. That is why I want to put it on to a statutory footing, to give some weight to it and to try to drive up the quality, so that we have that transparency and accountability.

When young people are not seen in a timely manner, often their condition deteriorates and then they have to be re-referred and go to the back of the queue. The data

on waiting times from referral to assessment and from assessment to treatment by area are not routinely and easily available. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and I have had a long-running battle locally to try to access some of that data, because our case loads on children's mental health are so high.

Every year, the Children's Commissioner uses her statutory powers to request information from NHS Digital on referrals, waiting times and spending. The waiting times reporting in that analysis uses a proxy measure of two contacts, even though for a variety of reasons that can be misleading. We should not have to rely on the Children's Commissioner's requests, which may not always continue, nor should we have to rely on proxy measures.

Additionally, as the Children's Commissioner makes clear in her report, the data she is able to access and publish, some of which comes from the dashboard that the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) referred to, is limited to the NHS and does not include the spending or activity in schools and local authorities, even though those services, as we have heard, are an important part of the vast and complex patchwork of mental health provision for our children and young people. We need a holistic picture.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for being generous with her time. Is she aware that the NHS and clinical commissioning group spend has increased year on year since 2016, and does she welcome that?

Munira Wilson: The hon. Gentleman may have missed it, but I did acknowledge earlier in my remarks that for the past four years, at an England level, the spending has gone up. The problem is that that does not always filter through to the local level. I highlighted earlier in my speech the postcode lottery whereby there is a tenfold difference between what is spent in Halton and what is spent on the Isle of Wight. It is increasing at the national level, but without tracking it and having transparency about what is being spent at the local level, we cannot be sure that it is always filtering through.

Where the NHS is committed, based on what the Government have asked of it, to increasing its spend on children and young people's services as a proportion not only of NHS spending, but of mental health spending, the data is not very clear and the quality is not always very good, so we cannot track it at a local level.

Jerome Mayhew: Is there not a degree of conflict between the need to ensure that support is put in nationally, wherever the need is, and the real desire to have localism, so that local spending more accurately reflects the priorities of individual communities? I do not know the background of what happens on the Isle of Wight, but it may be right that there should be increased spending there compared with the assessed need in Halton. Does the hon. Lady think there is a more serious problem behind that difference, rather than just different prioritisations from local communities?

Munira Wilson: I applaud a Conservative Member for talking to a Liberal Democrat about localism. I wholeheartedly embrace localism and would like to see much more local accountability for spending, and yes, there will sometimes be obvious reasons for variability.

[Munira Wilson]

However, I would ask whether £15.90 sounds like a reasonable amount to spend per child on mental health. Unless there is a suggestion that in Halton there are pretty much no children struggling with mental health, which I doubt is the case, that tenfold difference does need investigation. Looking at the figures, Halton is one of the areas that has had a massive percentage increase in the past year, presumably to try to correct for that very low level of spending and the need that is there.

My Bill would make the publication of data on the provision of those services a statutory requirement. As such, we could secure a higher quality of data published in a coterminous way across NHS units—currently clinical commissioning groups, but in future integrated care systems—and local authorities by requiring publication on a regional basis. The Bill would also put a specific requirement on Government to publish spending per head on child and adolescent mental health services, as well as the proportion of overall NHS spending and mental health spending on CAMHS by region.

Clause 2 also requests that a statement be included as to whether the expenditure has met the aims of the NHS long-term plan. That is an important requirement to ensure the mental health investment standard is met. The standard is the Government's tool to ensure CCGs increase how much they spend on mental health every year and, in particular, on children and young people's mental health. Reporting on that standard has been of variable quality in recent years, with some areas reporting that they met the standard while including one-off, non-recurring pots of money or dementia and learning disability spending, all of which are specifically excluded.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): The hon. Member is being very generous with her time. On the point she made about the CCGs meeting the investment standard, every CCG met that standard in 2021-22. Of course, this is an English Bill, but as a Welsh Member of Parliament, can I reflect that until recently, Wales had a Labour and Liberal Democrat Government? There was a Liberal Democrat Minister for Education until recently, and the data in Wales is so poor compared with the dashboard. If we just had the right level of dashboard in Wales, we could really dig into the detail, so could the hon. Member reflect on why that is not happening in Wales, given that until recently, her party was in government there?

Munira Wilson: I hope the hon. Member will forgive me, but I am not briefed on what is going on in terms of the data in Wales. He is correct that every CCG is reporting that it meets the mental health investment standard, but as I am trying to explain—I will touch on this a little later—independent audits have shown that some CCGs inaccurately reported that they met the mental health investment standard because they included spending that they should not have included. That suggests they have met the standard, but they have not. That is why this Bill is trying to put some of those standards, and the explanation of how they have or have not been reached, on a statutory footing, so we can all have the clarity we need to hold Ministers and services to account. These requirements to report on

CAMHS spending should not put a significant strain on NHS resources because, as has already been alluded to, a lot of that data is already being collected and some of it is being reported on the mental health dashboard.

I have no doubt that in her response, the Minister will refer to the Government's amendment to the Health and Care Bill in the other place that requires the Secretary of State to lay a written ministerial statement setting out the Government's expectation on mental health spending by NHS England for the year ahead. That amendment also requires integrated care boards to publish details of this spending in their annual reports. That is a very positive step forward; I welcome that amendment, and am glad—having been lobbying for it for the past two years—that we are making progress in the right direction. However, nothing on the face of the new legislation specifies that those reports should refer to children and young people's mental health services in particular. Children and young people's mental health services have always been the Cinderella of Cinderella services in our NHS, so I strongly believe they should be named on the face of the Health and Care Bill if the Government will not accept my Bill today.

With the retrospective reporting requirement on spending being in integrated care board annual reports, aggregating and comparing that data locally and regionally will be much more challenging. Furthermore, given the question marks I have already alluded to that have been raised about the quality of financial reporting by local organisations, which is why independent reviews of mental health spending have been commissioned for the past two financial years and this financial year, I have concerns that what is being done in the Health and Care Bill—the report of what has actually been spent—is just subject to annual reports by ICBs. Again, a report to Parliament would strengthen the basis of that data and its quality.

As I have said, some CCGs have been found to be erroneously reporting whether they are meeting the mental health investment standard, and although NHS England and Improvement has demanded explanations, I am not clear that any of those explanations are published anywhere. To me, the fact that the quality of the data remains an ongoing concern strengthens the need to ensure an annual report is made to Parliament with regional breakdowns.

To turn to data on waiting times, clause 3 of my Bill draws on the recent consultation on the mental health clinically-led review of standards. I welcome the broad support demonstrated for the proposed standards and particularly a four-week waiting time standard for access to community children and young people's mental health services. However, as expressed by the consultation respondents, there needs to be clarity on what the four-week waiting time is for. Is it for assessment, starting treatment or another intervention?

My Bill would require a report to Parliament showing exactly how long children are waiting to access non-urgent treatment by region. That would better reflect the reality for so many young people, parents and carers who are beside themselves, waiting months or even years for an assessment and even more until they commence treatment. The statutory report that I propose would allow Parliament to hold Ministers to account for the appalling waiting times that every Member of Parliament has heard about in their constituency.

Peter Gibson: The hon. Lady will know that the Government tabled a number of amendments to the Health and Care Bill to improve transparency. Does she welcome them?

Munira Wilson: Yes, I already have. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman missed that part of the speech, but I welcomed them and pointed out where I thought they were deficient and should go further.

I am introducing the Bill because too many children and young people right across the country are in crisis. Unless our children are happy and well, they cannot learn and thrive. Our children are buckling under the pressure. Last year, a year 11 student at a secondary school in my Twickenham constituency took his own life. Teachers and doctors desperately tried to get CAMHS support for him, but he would not engage, so they said that they could not help. To my mind, that is exactly the sort of person they should work intensively to engage with. When I spoke to the school, they told me that they had five more pupils who were identified as high-risk. Staff in schools are overstretched and trying to provide services that they are neither qualified nor equipped to deliver, nor should they have to do so.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a powerful speech. I am glad that she is talking about children in crisis, because too often, we talk about the softer side of things, including the need for counselling and early intervention. Although that is very important, a significant number of children are very ill indeed and are not getting the help that they need. The number of A&E attendances by young people with a diagnosed psychiatric condition has tripled since 2010. If they are resorting to going to A&E, that means that they are being badly let down by the system. Would her Bill reveal details of how they are dealt with at A&E, how long they have to wait and whether they end up getting treatment?

Munira Wilson: Yes. If the hon. Member looks at clause 3, she will see that it draws on the definitions in the clinically-led review of mental health waiting time standards and mentions both urgent and non-urgent presentations, so that we get data on waiting times for all of them. I completely agree with her point about presentations to A&E; I have heard that from many local NHS leaders in my patch and across London. Indeed, I have heard about paediatric units in hospitals having to look after CAMHS patients—which is totally inappropriate, both for the other children in those wards and the CAMHS patients—because there is such a dire need for beds. We need more provision and intervention from across the lower level that she mentioned right up to the acute and crisis side of things.

Many headteachers tell me that their staff are effectively becoming social workers, trying to support families with their problems outside school and get children to re-engage with schools, as the number of children missing from school has increased since the pandemic. A number of primary schools in my constituency are relying on parental donations to offer therapy and mental health support.

Urgent action and further investment is desperately needed. We should have a trained mental health counsellor in every school, community mental health hubs and additional crisis beds, as has been suggested. We need to

track that action and investment properly so that the Government can be held to account. The Bill would be the start of holding Ministers' feet to the fire on their promises by giving the public, and Members of Parliament as their representatives, the tools to do so. Young people and their parents and carers could ensure that they are no longer short-changed in their own area and see in stark daylight the reality of what is being spent in their area on children and young people's mental health. We would all have a much clearer idea of just how long those children and young people are languishing on waiting lists.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): The hon. Lady has been extremely generous with her time. I very much respect what she is saying and I fully understand her point about the statutory requirements to support mental health. However, to take the discussion slightly to one side, as she has given the matter huge thought and consulted others, how can we help young people with mental health conditions as part of a holistic approach aside from whatever the state can contribute, which is obviously central and vital to the process?

Munira Wilson: I have been arguing for some time that we need a holistic approach, including in schools—there has been a real narrowing of the curriculum and we need more extracurricular activities and other, softer skills to be built back into the curriculum and school time, because that all helps wellbeing—as well as specific services and interventions to support young people who may start to get into either crisis or lower-level anxiety and other issues. We also need provision of youth services. I am sure that we can all cite fantastic examples of projects and things in our constituencies that enable young people to improve their physical and mental wellbeing. There is a whole host of things. The Bill would be just one tool, measuring what is going in right across the board—whether in the NHS or by local authorities or schools—and what the waiting times are. I think there is unanimity across the House that there is a problem and that we need to do more. I have acknowledged that the Government are attempting to do more, but we need to improve transparency and accountability.

Through the Bill, we would have a much clearer idea of how long young people are languishing on waiting lists, often with their conditions deteriorating, and sometimes with tragic consequences. Progress is needed now. Our children cannot wait. I commend the Bill to the House.

2.12 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): Thank you for calling me in the debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to contribute to this very important discussion. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). It is important that she has brought her Bill to the House for us to debate, and I am pleased that we can have that discussion.

It is fair to say that some of the most profound experiences that I have had since I was elected in December 2019 are those of helping parents who have had terribly sick children, generally for mental health purposes. It has been so profound to see the extent to which young children who are five, six, seven or eight years old have been in such a desperate place and have had to wait

[Chris Loder]

quite some time to get help. I therefore have great sympathy with the hon. Lady's wanting to bring the Bill to the House for debate.

The Bill very much focuses on the need for more reporting, with the Government to report still further to this House on child mental health statistics. I am afraid that I do not entirely agree with her on that point, and I would like to take the opportunity to explain why. I hope she will not misunderstand me, because I care deeply about this. In Dorset, we have also seen some terrible circumstances. Systemic issues are the core reason why these children have not got the help they have needed; they have fallen down the gaps in provision between the local authority, the education authority and the NHS.

The Government have introduced the extensive Health and Care Bill. I recognise that it does not enjoy the support of the whole House; indeed, I think I am right in saying that the hon. Lady has not supported the Bill so far. However, I think the Government's intention to change the CCG setup and move towards an integrated care system for all parts of the country, and the steps that they have already taken on that in anticipation of the Health and Care Bill, are the single most important thing that will improve children's mental health. It is one of the reasons why I am such a keen supporter of my hon. Friend the Minister and her colleagues.

We have to take great care before we put more bureaucracy and cost into the system. It is already far too heavy with bureaucracy, which distracts from core delivery. I looked carefully at the notes that the hon. Lady sent me a few days ago—I thank her very much for doing so—and I have read her Bill. We have to be careful not to change the priorities to finances and money, rather than looking after the individual child. I agree that considerable improvement is needed when it comes to holding to account the relevant organisations in the three groups that I have just mentioned. I have found that quite difficult when I have supported parents who have come to me in desperation for help. She is right to highlight that point, and it is right that the Government hear it. I am sure that it is already well heard, although I am hoping that the Bill may be further strengthened to address it.

In a vast number of cases, young children have had to wait not days, weeks or months but in excess of a year to get the help they need. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the challenges with CAMHS, and the difficulties that parents often face with getting the assistance that they require.

Munira Wilson: If the hon. Member is so concerned about those year-long waits—we all have constituents who have experienced them—why is he so opposed to better reporting on that? He complains about bureaucracy, but some level of reporting is required for accountability. It is not just bureaucracy for bureaucracy's sake, which I hate.

Chris Loder: The hon. Lady makes a valid challenge, but she misunderstands me. I am not necessarily wholly opposed to changes in reporting and changes in how local integrated care systems approach the matter, but I am not sure it is right or good for the UK Parliament to legislate in that level of detail. I repeat that I fear we run

the risk of losing focus on the child or children amid all the bureaucracy of the reporting. That is a concern; I see that today to an extent. I do not want us to always resort to having to wait for annual reports to come out before we can bring up such matters with Ministers and others.

Peter Gibson: I am sure that my hon. Friend engages regularly, as I do, with his local mental health trust and local authority to raise and discuss these issues. Does he agree that it is an entirely appropriate step for a Member of Parliament to take to hold health authorities to account to ensure that the problem of the backlog is delivered on and addressed?

Chris Loder: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is difficult; I sympathise with many of the points of the hon. Member for Twickenham, but in my opinion, we can do that better through some of the considerable reforms that the Government have proposed in their new Bill. As I articulated earlier, with the three components—the education authority, the NHS and the local government authority—it is difficult for us as Members of Parliament to get to the nub of the issue, because we are often pushed to somebody or somewhere else. The parents of the families concerned also feel that. It is absolutely right, therefore, that we look to focus much more on the system and its outcomes and on ensuring that our children, especially those in the greatest need, are much better looked after than they are today.

Simon Baynes: To go back to my hon. Friend's comment about bureaucracy, apart from reporting, are there any other aspects of bureaucracy that he feels currently mean that we cannot give the level of service that we would like to young people in mental health services?

Chris Loder: From my perspective—I am not an expert in the field—there is a level of bureaucracy that prevents us from getting to the nub of the issue to fix it, which is part of the reason why the Government's reforms are coming forward, as far as I understand it. The Minister may add to that in due course. My hon. Friend would probably do well to ask an hon. Member who comes from a health profession or who is a practising doctor for some better-informed insight into that area than I can offer based on my relatively brief experience since my election.

This debate also gives us the opportunity to highlight some of the difficulties in the NHS in terms of the provision of services. For example, in Dorset, there have been several situations where those in need of care have been unable to access it because The Retreat centre in Dorchester has been closed because of a workforce difficulty.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. When we talk about the delivery of services to young people, something that has struck me from my experience in my constituency is how they sometimes expect services to be delivered in a different way from us. They expect more digital services and they do not always want to sit in a dusty old waiting room for hours as we have perhaps been used to. Part of the challenge that we face is to look at children and young people specifically and at the different ways that they might want to experience the services that the NHS delivers.

Chris Loder: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind intervention, and I could not agree with her more. She is absolutely right, and her point highlights the difficulties that those of us who represent rural constituencies face when we cannot get on the internet because of a lack of broadband. I am conscious that we are going off on a little bit of a tangent, but NHS services and the other services for children that she outlines are hugely dependent on that.

I was making a point, before the intervention, about the provision of services for young children in Dorset, and I referred to The Retreat, a mental health facility in Dorchester. I also thank and pay tribute to those at St Ann's Hospital in Poole who look after many children who have great difficulties.

I will bring my remarks to a close by saying that the hon. Member for Twickenham has brought a very important debate to the Floor of the House. While I do not agree with her on all of her points, I thank her for her tireless campaigning. Even if we do not agree about all the Bill's components, by bringing the Bill to the House of Commons she has enabled us to have a debate that has caused a great deal of interest, as we can tell by the number of interventions that those of us who have spoken have taken. It is an important issue, and I am delighted that the Ministers are on the Front Bench to hear the debate. Having discussed the subject with the Minister, I know she understands fully the difficulties that we face, and I look forward to seeing if there are learning points that the Government can take from the debate to further improve the Bill.

2.26 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I will not detain the House for long, but I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for bringing this excellent Bill to the House and for her continued cross-party work on the vital issue of children's mental health.

We in Her Majesty's Opposition are always happy to support legislation that improves transparency and makes it easier to hold the Government to account on children and young people's mental health. It is shame that we do not have more time to get this Bill beyond today's stage—I fear there are more speakers than time allotted, but I hope the hon. Lady, or another hon. Member, brings forward this Bill again in another Session. It is absolutely crucial that we tackle the real problems with children's and adolescents' mental health. I and the Opposition support this Bill, but it is saddening that we do not have time to take to the next stage today.

2.27 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The basic provision of the Bill is to require the Government to report annually to Parliament on mental health provision for children and young adults. In preparation for this debate, I looked at the Bill in detail and do you know what, Mr Deputy Speaker? It is a really good Bill that I think we should be taking forward, and let me explain why.

As we know, waiting lists in the UK for CAMHS range from one to two and a half years, depending on where people live. The fact that our children are waiting so long for a consultation is pretty immoral. The key point for me is that GPs cannot prescribe medication or

any form of mitigation for symptoms of attention deficit disorder or obsessive compulsive disorder without a diagnosis from CAMHS, so the two-and-a-half year waiting list for CAMHS impacts families across the UK.

However, in my view three factors weaken the argument of the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). First, the Government are providing £2.3 billion a year to expand NHS mental health provision. Such provision is currently provided for 345,000 children, and that will expand. Secondly, £79 million has been invested in children's mental health services in 2021-22. Thirdly, the NHS mental health dashboard marks progress against the delivery of the five-year plan.

Crucially, the special educational needs and disabilities review is inbound. As somebody who takes a keen interest in this subject and who has been through this myself over many years, I am waiting for the SEND review to come out. The point I want to make in these last few seconds is that the Government need to be on notice if, ultimately, we do not deliver the improvement to the services we need, if we do not shorten the waiting lists for CAMHS, if we do not invest more money in CAMHS and reprioritise across the NHS, and if we do not give these children and their families the solace they desperately need. The Bill has huge merit and I urge the hon. Lady to keep going with it.

2.29 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I am grateful to have been called for the third time, but with nine seconds to go. I am very short of time—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. The House has been deprived, I am sure, of a great speech.

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).
Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 6 May.

Business without Debate

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We are going to take this next part very slowly. If people are objecting, make sure you do so loudly. If you are moving a Bill on behalf of another Member, please make that clear.

GOODS DELIVERY SERVICES BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

COMMERCIAL RENT (PROHIBITION OF UPWARD-ONLY REVIEWS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

CONVERSION THERAPY (PROHIBITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

**TIBET AND XINJIANG
(RECIPROCAL ACCESS) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

EMPLOYMENT BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

**WORKERS (EMPLOYMENT SECURITY AND
DEFINITION) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

DOGS (PROTECTION OF LIVESTOCK) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

BEREAVEMENT (LEAVE AND PAY) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

**CROWN ESTATE (DEVOLUTION TO
WALES) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

**RECOGNITION OF ARMENIAN
GENOCIDE BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

HATE CRIME (MISOGYNY) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

ISRAEL ARMS TRADE (PROHIBITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

**CLEAN AIR TARGETS (WORLD HEALTH
ORGANIZATION GUIDELINES) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

**EMPLOYMENT AND TRADE UNION RIGHTS
(DISMISSAL AND RE-ENGAGEMENT) BILL**

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (22 October), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 6 May.

**TRADE AGREEMENTS (PARLIAMENTARY
SCRUTINY AND FARMING) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

**BRITISH GOODS (PUBLIC SECTOR
PURCHASING DUTY) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 6 May.

CONSUMER PRICING BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

**BROADCASTING (LISTED SPORTING
EVENTS) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

PUPPY IMPORT (PROHIBITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

**EMPLOYMENT (APPLICATION
REQUIREMENTS) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

**PUBLIC SECTOR WEBSITE
IMPERSONATION BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

HUNTING TROPHY IMPORT (PROHIBITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This Bill has overwhelming support both from the public and in this Chamber. Is there any way of getting it across to the public that the Government, having failed to produce their own promised Bill, are actually blocking this one, and to assure them that this Bill will be coming back in the next Parliament until we can get rid of this vile trade?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I think the right hon. Gentleman has just done it.

ARMENIAN GENOCIDE (RECOGNITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

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

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

MISUSE OF FIREWORKS BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (21 January), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 6 May.

CLIMATE EDUCATION BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT (PROHIBITION OF SECOND JOBS) (MOTION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Conservative party is stacked with MPs lining their pockets with second jobs, but the Tory Government have repeatedly blocked my

Bill to bar MPs' second jobs. What can be done to force the Government to act to ban MPs from having second jobs, as the public wants us to do and as this Bill provides?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, but this is now turning into an abuse of points of order. We all know how private Members' Bill operate and, therefore, if there is an objection, I have to take the objection.

PLASTIC POLLUTION BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

STATUS OF WORKERS BILL [LORDS]

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

PUBLIC ADVOCATE BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

SEALS (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 6 May.

MINISTERIAL DISCLOSURE (FIXED PENALTY NOTICES) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

SOCIAL HOUSING (EMERGENCY PROTECTION OF TENANCY RIGHTS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

IMMIGRATION (HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE STAFF) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

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 6 May.

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 6 May.

PEDICABS (LONDON) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 6 May.

MEDICAL CANNABIS (ACCESS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 6 May.

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 6 May.

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 6 May.

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 6 May.

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 6 May.

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 6 May.

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 6 May.

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 6 May.

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 6 May.

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 6 May.

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 6 May.

REGULATORY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 6 May

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 6 May.

**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 6 May.

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 6 May.

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 6 May.

**ELDERLY SOCIAL CARE (INSURANCE)
BILL [LORDS]**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Government have now killed the Public Advocate Bill, which aimed to prevent families bereaved by public disasters from having to go through what the Hillsborough families have endured, by objecting to it eight times, even though it would have fulfilled a manifesto commitment of theirs from 2017. On 16 September last year, after the Hillsborough criminal trials collapsed, I was told by the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice,

the hon. and learned Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), at the end of a Backbench Business debate on helping families bereaved by public disasters that the 2018 consultation on the matter would be replied to, and proposals brought forward, before the end of 2021. That has not happened. In a few weeks it will be the 33rd anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster. How much longer will those families have to wait? Can you advise me, Mr Deputy Speaker, on how I can now take these matters forward, given that the Bill has been killed and the Government seem intent on doing nothing but repeatedly blocking this essential reform?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order, and for giving me notice of it. I know which Minister she was speaking about, and I know that she is a doughty fighter for the cause of not only those who have been affected by the Hillsborough disaster, but others in the future. If she were to seek a meeting with the Minister, I should be amazed if he did not readily agree to such a meeting to see how progress can be made in this matter. I wish her well.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As we are almost at the end of the 13th and last Friday sitting for private Members' Bills in this Session, I wonder if it would be in order for us to collectively thank the Clerk in charge in private Members' Bills, who has done such a great job in encouraging us to participate in this important process, and, more important, giving us cogent advice. Adam Mellows-Facer has been doing this job for several years, and I think that we all owe him a great debt of gratitude.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I think it is pertinent to ask for proper recognition of the amazing work that is done on private Members' Bills, and also of the incredible service that we receive from the Clerks' department. We are extremely grateful for it, and it is good for that to be said publicly now and again, so I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for his point of order.

Accelerated Payment Notices

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

2.46 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am extremely grateful to the House authorities for giving me the opportunity to introduce this Adjournment debate, which I have sought for a long time. I am also grateful to the Minister for being here, to my constituents for their help with the drafting of my speech, and to the House of Commons Library for its support.

I know that all Members in all parts of the House support the efforts of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to secure the tax revenues that are necessary for the running of this country's public services. To that end, we need procedures that enable those in HMRC to be efficient revenue collectors, especially when faced with the spectre of evasion and contrived but ostensibly lawful avoidance schemes. While these mechanisms need to give HMRC the tools that are necessary for it to work effectively, they must also be balanced and fair so that they do not inadvertently create injustices.

During the debates on the Bill that became the Finance Act 2014, I, along with several of my colleagues, expressed concern about the potentially far-reaching consequences of some of the anti-avoidance provisions being proposed. It was a concern widely held among taxation experts. In July 2014, an article in the *Financial Times* stated:

"The tax authority's new powers have been criticised as unfair and even unconstitutional by the Law Society and Chartered Institute of Taxation. Concerns relate not only to the payment of disputed tax before any tribunal decision, but also the absence of a right to appeal."

Our present Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab)—whom I have notified of my mention of him—wrote a paper on this subject in February 2017. In one paragraph, he wrote:

"The UK taxman has gained new, punitive powers in recent years, which have corroded the basic fairness of the system...New powers include Accelerated Payment Notices...and Direct Recovery of Debts...Such powers undermine the basic tenets of British justice, allowing HMRC to bully taxpayers into paying debts without proper safeguards."

I have asked my right hon. Friend if he will please make representations within the Government. He went on to argue that HMRC should be subjected to financial penalties when APNs were wrongly used. He observed:

"This would incentivise greater oversight within HMRC and prevent HMRC bullying taxpayers without proper recourse."

I agree that the application of APNs has fundamentally changed the basic tax rules and the fairness of the system. The Law Society, the Chartered Institute of Taxation and our Justice Secretary—as well as me—all warned that APNs would create serious injustices.

I would like to illustrate an injustice by reference to the experience of one of my constituents and many like him. In the 2006-07 tax year, my constituent invested a considerable sum in two enterprise zone projects. At the time, this was uncontroversial; enterprise zones were created by the Thatcher Government specifically to attract private sector capital into the regeneration of depressed regions. That is a subject that should be close

to everyone on the Conservative Benches under this Government; we are seeking to level up, and we need to do it with private sector investment.

The first example of such a zone was in 1981 in the London docklands on the Isle of Dogs. Those derelict docks were successfully transformed into Canary Wharf, essential to the success of the City of London as a world financial centre. For 30 years or so, the system worked well, and a large number of new jobs were created in erstwhile depressed regions, many of which had suffered from the decline of traditional industries, such as coalmining and steelmaking. This was levelling up 1980s style, and it proved very effective for decades.

Successive Governments offered 100% capital allowances to individuals who invested their money in projects within enterprise zones. My constituent invested in an office project in the Lanarkshire enterprise zone, which was fully let on completion to John Lewis Partnership and Carillion. His other investment was in a warehouse development in East Durham enterprise zone, initially let to a seafood processing firm and now operated by Biffa as one of Europe's most advanced plastic recycling facilities—all worthy things. Both projects have been highly successful in creating valuable employment and economic activity in two formerly depressed areas—exactly what the Government sought when offering the tax incentives. However, the outcome for investors has not been at all successful; they have lost the whole of their investment.

Let us fast-forward to the banking crisis of the mid-2000s. Due to concerns about the wider state of the public finances, HMRC was instructed to aggressively pursue all opportunities to maximise tax receipts. Following the Finance Act 2014, HMRC levied APNs on taxpayers to recoup those capital allowances. That meant that they lost both their investment and the tax incentives that the Government had offered to induce them to invest. These taxpayers have no right of appeal against their savings being taken from them, and I am told that HMRC is not even prepared to discuss their cases with them, despite all this going back to early 2007. HMRC, having decided to pursue serial litigation, tells taxpayers that they cannot even begin to settle their cases until the litigation has played out. That could take years or even decades.

The then Financial Secretary to the Treasury, David Gauke, made this argument in favour of introducing APNs:

"The Government will not tolerate tax avoidance and Accelerated Payments has been a real game changer. It is no longer possible for these individuals to avoid tax and sit on the money while their affairs are investigated."

Here is the problem for the Government: there is a real danger that that is exactly the tactic now being used by HMRC against taxpayers. We must be vigilant in ensuring that HMRC is not seizing taxpayers' savings and then engaging in the same kind of delaying tactics that HMRC itself found unacceptable. It is the case that HMRC is now sitting on taxpayers' money, including my constituent's, while investigating those claims.

My constituent is in his 70s and, having seen his retirement savings taken by HMRC in 2016, has absolutely no idea when he will be able to recoup what has been taken from him. In the meantime, HMRC refuses to give any reason why it deems his enterprise zone projects to be undeserving of the promised tax allowances. To me, this is a really serious injustice.

Most of these taxpayers are just ordinary people—I do not particularly like the term, but they are normal people. They are decent, sensible people who were investing where Governments incentivised them to invest. Any of us could have been drawn into such things when the Government specifically offered tax breaks to get people to make those investments. My constituent is a retired surveyor. Many others involved are professional people in sought-after sectors, including the health service.

In 2014, the chief executive officer of HMRC, Lin Homer, apologised for the seven-year delay in settling these capital allowance claims. Some seven years later, we are no further forward, and we may be saying just the same thing in another seven years. I really feel that my hon. Friend the Minister could agree with me that this is wholly unreasonable and that, in a fair and democratic society, we should see things move on.

I think there is a compelling case for abolishing APNs and, indeed, direct recovery of debts. Although I would like that to happen, I will instead make four modest proposals for reform. First, there should be greater oversight of the APN process to ensure fairness; that is something the now Justice Secretary raised in 2017, and I believe it is long overdue. Secondly, APNs should be repaid to the taxpayer when a test case is lost. At the moment, HMRC is obliged to refund APN payments to the successful claimants in a litigation; however, they do not refund APNs to other taxpayers, despite HMRC citing the case as its basis for contesting those other taxpayers' claims. That is anomalous, and should be changed.

Thirdly, HMRC should not be permitted to retain APN moneys for more than five years. That is a reasonable timespan over which to settle tax claims, and would act as an incentive for HMRC to expedite the process. If it chooses to take longer, often—as in my constituent's case—by citing a lack of staff resources, the taxpayer should not be the one to suffer. Fourthly, as the now Justice Secretary recommended in 2017, there must be meaningful penalties where HMRC is shown to have levied APNs unreasonably. That should limit any bullying of taxpayers by HMRC by giving the taxpayer some financial recourse.

The public can only have confidence in our tax collection system if it is honest and fair, and seen to be so. The Government themselves offered investors these tax breaks, and it will look suspiciously like a scam if the system uses delay and unfair tactics to deny investors what they were promised. I believe my constituent's predicament highlights precisely why some of us expressed concern about the enabling legislation. The basic fairness of the system has been corroded, and we must put that right, not only for taxpayers but for the people who work at HMRC. Having been on the Treasury Committee for a long time, I have seen how hard those people work and with what good intent, particularly during the covid crisis. My goodness, what things they achieved in making sure we built a bridge through this crisis—it is often forgotten that we did so. We need to resolve this system, in the interests of not only taxpayers but everyone who works at HMRC, so we do not end up with Members of Parliament reluctantly standing up in the House of Commons to criticise the work those people do in the public interest.

2.57 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Helen Whately):

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing today's debate and setting out his argument so clearly. I listened carefully to his constituent's experience, and I take on board the issues he has raised. As I am sure my hon. Friend knows, I am unable to go into an individual case at the Dispatch Box, but I will set out the Government's overall position on the accelerated payment notices that are the subject of this afternoon's debate.

The top line—as, in essence, my hon. Friend said himself—is that tax is paid for our public services. Without that revenue, schools could not open, roads would go unrepaired, and the NHS would be unable to treat the sick. Therefore, we all agree it is only right that the Government do all we can to make sure the correct tax is paid at the correct time, and that we clamp down on those who shirk their fair share. That is why the Government continue to take tough action to tackle tax avoidance, and Parliament has granted HMRC a range of powers to do so. Accelerated payment notices are one of those tools. As my hon. Friend mentioned, they were introduced through the Finance Act 2014 with the goal of changing the economics of tax avoidance, because tax disputes can often take years to resolve. Before APNs were introduced, users of tax avoidance schemes could purposely string out disputes and unfairly benefit from the cash generated by their liabilities until the matter was resolved. That situation was clearly wrong, especially when contrasted with the behaviour of the majority of taxpayers, who pay what they owe on time and swiftly resolve any queries with HMRC.

There is not, and has never been, any principle that disputed tax should sit with the taxpayer rather than the Exchequer. APNs ensure that the tax in avoidance disputes sits with the Exchequer while that dispute plays out. APNs have meant that the Government could remove this unjust advantage from tax avoiders, so that instead of enjoying unfairly gained cash, avoidance scheme users would have to hand over any disputed tax to HMRC until matters were resolved. That was a significant change.

In the eight years since their introduction, APNs have brought forward over £5.6 billion in revenue to fund those vital public services.

Mr Steve Baker: Is not the fundamental problem, though, that whether a scheme is an avoidance scheme is often contested? Is not the problem that whether or not this is a just retention of funds, it is often subject to the judgment of courts to see whether something is or is not lawful?

Helen Whately: I absolutely hear my hon. Friend's point. Let me come to some of the checks and balances, and I take his wider point about HMRC's powers in that regard.

To take a step back, I recognise, in the specific case we are discussing, how deeply worrying such a dispute can be for the individuals involved. That is one reason why fairness is HMRC's guiding principle when dealing with such matters and why it is right that although, on the one hand, HMRC has the capability to robustly tackle tax avoidance, that is balanced with checks to make sure that it does not over-reach its powers.

[Helen Whately]

We recognise that tools such as APNs must be carefully targeted. That is why they can be used only in tax avoidance cases and in limited prescribed circumstances, and they have important safeguards. There must be an active dispute between HMRC and a taxpayer either in the form of an open tax inquiry or a live tax appeal. That dispute must be about tax being either underpaid or overclaimed as a result of avoidance. And APNs cannot be issued unless one of the following applies. First, the individual issued with an APN has used an avoidance scheme that has already been defeated in court and they have consequently been given a follower notice—a legal request from HMRC to the individual to settle their avoidance dispute. Secondly, the information on the scheme must have been provided to HMRC under the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes—the DOTAS regime. Thirdly, HMRC must have taken action to challenge the taxpayers’ use of the avoidance scheme under the general anti-abuse rule—the GAAR. In addition to those conditions, APNs can be issued only with the approval of an oversight board of senior policy, technical and legal members of HMRC.

My hon. Friend correctly highlighted that there is no right of appeal against an APN. However, under the legislation, HMRC must examine any representations against a notice, and nothing is due from the taxpayer until HMRC has finished those considerations. I should point out that an APN does not in any way inhibit a taxpayer’s right to continue their dispute with HMRC or to appeal against its conclusions, and taxpayers who believe that their dispute is not being suitably progressed can apply to the tax tribunal to resolve it. I make it clear that if a dispute against HMRC is settled, any disputed sums paid under an APN will be repaid with interest, providing the taxpayer with redress where applicable.

In short, accelerated payments are a fitting response to the problem of individuals who purposefully spin out tax disputes and unfairly benefit from the funds in question. That has been backed up by the courts, which have examined cases where taxpayers have tried to challenge HMRC’s use of accelerated payments and have found APNs to be proportionate, reasonable and fair. Mr Justice Green said in one case that

“the provisions in the Finance Act 2014 are perfectly fair and adequate. There is no need for the Court even to consider the need for supplementation through the implication of additional duties.”

HMRC continues to ensure that APNs are used appropriately. For example, the implementation of APNs was included in a review of HMRC’s powers and safeguards. Following that review, the published guidance on APNs was updated. I stress that APNs do not increase someone’s

tax liability. Instead, they simply require an individual to pay the tax they would have owed had they not joined an avoidance scheme.

Mr Baker: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. As she goes through her speech, I am reminded of something that I have impressed on Ministers in the past. A problem with DOTAS is that perfectly decent, normal people who want to pay the right amount of tax can get drawn into schemes because the nature of a DOTAS registration is misrepresented. Could we have a boilerplate that firms are required to place prominently before their customers, so that customers can be told, “The reason this scheme is registered with DOTAS is because HMRC thinks it doesn’t comply with the rules. It is not how Parliament intended things to work, and you will probably have HMRC coming after you later”? If normal taxpayers who intend to pay the right amount tax could see such a boilerplate, they would not be drawn into such schemes and we would not have nightmares such as this.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes an important point about how, if I understand him correctly, we can help taxpayers have the information and awareness that they may be taking a tax risk—a risk of doing something that could be seen as tax avoidance. HMRC already takes steps to communicate in that way, and I am happy to take up his specific suggestion with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, whose area this is, to see whether more can be done.

Returning to the point I was in the middle of making, I recognise that individuals in such circumstances can face significant bills, which is why HMRC is committed to working positively and empathetically with anyone with an APN facing payment difficulties, including, where appropriate, agreeing more time to pay. HMRC teams are trained to identify customers who may need extra help managing their financial affairs. I urge anyone who is worried about being unable to make a payment to contact HMRC to work out an individual approach.

In conclusion, I emphasise that Ministers cannot intervene in HMRC’s operational decisions and individual cases, but if HMRC is directly provided with information about this case, its officers will look into it. The Government value every penny of tax revenue. That is true at any time, but particularly so now as we recover from the economic consequences of covid-19 and face new demands on public finances. That is why HMRC must continue to tackle tax avoidance and pursue the tax owed to the Exchequer.

Question put and agreed to.

3.8 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 18 March 2022

CABINET OFFICE

Standards Committee Call for Evidence: Government Response

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): On 29 November 2021, the House of Commons Committee on Standards invited responses to its proposals for reform of the code of conduct for Members. The Government's joint response to the Standards Committee in the name of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Leader of the House of Commons has now been published by the Committee.

The joint response reflects the Government's view that the rules relating to Members of the Executive, in particular Ministers of the Crown, are different from those relating to Members of the legislature, in particular, Members of Parliament. The rules, and the application of those rules, are rightly separate, reflecting the different roles that these offices play and reflecting the underlying constitutional principle of the separation of powers.

The response makes clear that, first and foremost, Members have a duty to their constituents, and any outside work should be within reasonable limits, in order for an MP's parliamentary duties to take priority. That is why the Government brought forward an amendment (which the House approved on 17 November 2021) to support the introduction of limits on Members undertaking outside work. These were that MPs should be prohibited from any paid work to provide services as a parliamentary strategist, adviser or consultant and that outside work should be undertaken only within "reasonable limits". It is imperative that paid advocacy work is regulated in order that any employers—be they businesses, NGOs or trade unions—do not obtain undue access or strategic parliamentary advice.

The Government are also now considering with interest Sir Ernest Ryder's review of the House's current system of investigating and deciding upon breaches of the code of conduct and its compatibility with the principles of fairness and natural justice. The Government have previously indicated that they support the broad principle of a right to appeal.

The Government are grateful to the Standards Committee for its consideration of these important questions, await with interest its final report and look forward to further debate on the issues raised, to ensure that our standards system commands both the confidence of the public and Members on a cross-party basis.

The Government's joint response to the Standards Committee can be found at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/106952/pdf/>.

The Government are also today publishing their response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's review of local government ethical standards, setting out the Government's position on the successful operation of the Localism Act 2011, which ensures transparency and accountability in local government. The Government note their willingness to take further steps to protect the home addresses of councillors, where there are concerns that disclosure could lead to intimidation.

In both cases, the Government have underlined the importance of protecting elected representatives' rights to exercise free speech within the law. The Government express concern that some of the proposed changes to the Commons code of conduct could have a chilling effect on Members commenting on contentious matters of public policy.

It is important to distinguish between strongly felt political debate on the one hand, and unacceptable acts of abuse, intimidation and violence on the other. British democracy has always been robust and oppositional. Free speech within the law can sometimes involve the expression of political views that some may find offensive. A line is crossed when disagreement mutates into intimidation, which refuses to tolerate other opinions and seeks to deprive others from exercising their free speech and freedom of association. But standards rules should not be used to suppress the legitimate expression of different political views.

[HCWS699]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Genome UK

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lord Kamall, has today made the following written ministerial statement:

In September 2020, we launched Genome UK—the UK's genomic healthcare strategy, which set out a vision to create the most advanced genomic healthcare system in the world to deliver better healthcare at a lower cost. The first implementation plan for this strategy was published in May 2021, to align with the spending review cycle.

For the UK to remain at the forefront of international competition in genomic research and healthcare, and attract investment, it is essential that we continue to deliver on the commitments set out in Genome UK.

I am therefore delighted to inform the House of the launch of a UK-wide shared commitments document which sets out how we will work together with the devolved Governments to implement the strategy over the next three years.

The commitments included in this document have been agreed by members of the National Genomics Board, a group of senior life sciences sector stakeholders, which I chair with Sir John Bell. We have worked with the devolved Governments and delivery partners over the past six months to identify commitments that we can work together to deliver by 2025.

I am pleased to announce the following UK-wide commitments:

A continued emphasis on keeping the public across the UK at the heart of genomic healthcare research programmes by providing opportunities for representatives to be involved in discussions and decision-making both in healthcare genomics and genomics research.

Ongoing review and appraisal of emerging genomic science, new clinical indications and new technologies on a UK-wide basis to enable all four healthcare systems to stay at the forefront of genomic healthcare.

Delivering on the promise of personalised medicine including in cancer diagnosis and treatment through improved access to clinical trials and targeted therapies.

Building on our successful partnership on SARS-CoV-2 sequencing to develop public health pathogen genomics services across the UK.

Establishing a clear, evidence-based position across the UK on whether and how genomic sequencing may be implemented in the newborn period, for the benefit of newborns and their parents in all parts of the UK to enable earlier detection of disease.

Continuing to explore opportunities that could support a UK functional genomics initiative to deepen our understanding of disease and assist the identification and validation of novel drug targets.

Working collectively to increase access to genomics-enabled clinical trials, linking up across the UK, to ensure research feeds back into clinical services to improve and transform patient care. For example, using “Find, Recruit and Follow up” to better identify and recruit individuals who might benefit from clinical research studies.

Supporting initiatives to link large genomic datasets across the UK to improve access for researchers. Potential examples including the Trusted Research Environments hosted by Genomics England, UK Biobank and Our Future Health.

Working together to establish a joint workforce group across the United Kingdom to share best practice and strategic priorities, ensuring consistency of capability and expertise across the UK.

Given that Genome UK runs over 10 years, some of its 45 commitments are either long term or will be delivered through cumulative action over the coming years, which is why the implementation process is phased. Genomics is a fast-moving field, and the phased approach allows us to review our commitments to reflect emerging science and the latest research findings. Our intention is to continue to align future iterations of this plan with Government funding cycles.

We will continue to work with the devolved Governments and our partners in the NHS, industry and research, including via the National Genomics Board, to ensure that we deliver on our goal to create the most advanced genomic healthcare system in the world. I also want to emphasise that engagement and dialogue with the healthcare workforce, patients and the diverse UK population, will be at the heart of the journey to reach the vision set out in the strategy.

[HCWS698]

WORK AND PENSIONS

DWP Workplace Transformation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): The Department is committed to continuing to deliver for customers, families and the economy, and yesterday announced its strategic ambition for its back-of-house services, i.e. those that are delivered virtually and where customers are not seen face to face. This will not affect any public-facing roles, or any Jobcentre Plus services.

I want to provide reassurance that this is not a plan to reduce our headcount—where possible, our colleagues in offices due to close are being offered opportunities to be redeployed to a nearby site, or retrained into a new role in DWP or another Government Department. That is alongside our effort to utilise our hybrid working policy to help facilitate more inclusive workplaces, which are capable of adapting to the needs of employees and the Department.

The Department’s plans for transformational change will support delivery of the Government priorities for getting people back into employment, deliver long-term savings and meet Government modernisation commitments. The Department has developed a strategy which will, over the next 10 years, reshape how, where and when it delivers its services. Over the 10-year period the Department will transition to an estate that is smaller, greener, and better—making DWP more efficient. By having a smaller footprint, this helps us to be greener. This type of bold modernisation can support efficiencies, create value for money, reduce fraud and error, build resilience and sustainability, and achieve improved customer outcomes and experience.

To ensure that DWP can continue to build on its success, it needs to make progress over this spending review period to set the foundation for more significant changes in the future. The Department needs to take advantage of shifts in post-covid expectations around customer service delivery and ways of working, build on digital transformations of services and make use of estate lease breaks in 2023 to enable the Department to achieve its future service delivery aspirations.

The Department currently operates from over 920 buildings and employs over 92,000 people. Reducing the Department’s estate footprint will deliver value for money for the taxpayer and enable investment to improve the working environment for colleagues in our remaining buildings. Modernisation will enable a customer-focused, digital-first organisation with more self-serve and automation.

That transformation needs to be viewed alongside the massive recent investment in frontline services. Since the start of the pandemic, we have opened over 170 new temporary jobcentres as part of our rapid estate expansion programme. We have also recruited 13,500 new work coaches in order to provide our claimants with the tailored face-to-face support they need.

The plan also supports three other key Government strategies—strengthening the Union—ensuring the Department maintains a footprint in Scotland and Wales; Places for Growth—by committing to move roles out of London; and levelling up, by retaining a presence in some of the most deprived areas throughout the nations and regions.

This change to our estates will have different implications in different places, so I have sent a letter to each MP with an affected site in their constituency explaining what the change will mean in their specific case. The letters include notification of a virtual surgery I will hold on Wednesday 23 March to hear feedback from hon. Members. I have also sent a “Dear colleague” letter to all Members, which includes the detail of the sites affected.

[HCWS700]

Ministerial Corrections

Friday 18 March 2022

EDUCATION

National Tutoring Programme and Adult Education

The following are extracts from the Estimates Day debate on the National Tutoring Programme and Adult Education:

Mr Robin Walker: The Government meet all training costs for young people aged 16 and 17, and this has been extended to the age of 25 for care leavers.
[Official Report, 9 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 387.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker):

An error has been identified in the response to the debate on the National Tutoring Programme and Adult Education.

The correct information should have been:

Mr Robin Walker: The Government meet all **apprenticeship** training costs for **the smallest employers taking on** young people aged 16 to 18, and this has been extended to **those aged 19-24 who are** care leavers.

Mr Robin Walker: We are increasing apprenticeships funding, which will grow to £2.7 billion by 2024-25, and we have already seen more than 164,000 starts in the first quarter of the academic year, which is roughly a third—34%—higher than in the same period in 2020-21 and 5% higher than in 2019-20, before the pandemic.
[Official Report, 9 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 390.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker):

An error has been identified in the response to the debate on the National Tutoring Programme and Adult Education.

The correct information should have been:

Mr Robin Walker: We are increasing apprenticeships funding, which will grow to £2.7 billion by 2024-25, and we have already seen more than 164,000 starts **so far this** academic year, which is roughly a third—34%—higher than in the same period in 2020-21 and **6%** higher than in 2019-20, before the pandemic.

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Iran Detainees

The following are extracts from a statement on Iran Detainees on 16 March 2022.

Elizabeth Truss: On the subject of Morad Tahbaz, **who I spoke to at the end of last year when he was in prison**, we have secured his release on furlough. He is now at home. That was an important point that we pressed with the Iranian Government. I know **from speaking to him** that the conditions in prison were abhorrent and appalling, so he is now in better conditions, but of course we will continue to get him home, as well as other detainees who do not want their names released in public.

[Official Report, 16 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 945.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy).

The correct response should have been:

Elizabeth Truss: On the subject of Morad Tahbaz, we have secured his release on furlough. He is now at home. That was an important point that we pressed with the Iranian Government. I know that the conditions in prison were abhorrent and appalling, so he is now in better conditions, but of course we will continue to get him home, as well as other detainees who do not want their names released in public.

Elizabeth Truss: The Tahbaz family and I have spoken today. It is a very difficult situation. Morad Tahbaz is of course a tri-national—US, UK and Iranian—and the Iranian Government treat him as being a US national as well as a UK national. We pushed very hard to get Morad out of prison. **I spoke to him when he was in prison and he was in appalling conditions.** I am pleased to say that I have been in touch today and he is now back at his house—with security in place—with his family in Tehran.

[Official Report, 16 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 949.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan).

The correct response should have been:

Elizabeth Truss: The Tahbaz family and I have spoken today. It is a very difficult situation. Morad Tahbaz is of course a tri-national—US, UK and Iranian—and the Iranian Government treat him as being a US national as well as a UK national. We pushed very hard to get Morad out of prison. I am pleased to say that I have been in touch today and he is now back at his house—with security in place—with his family in Tehran.

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

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