PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

LEVELLING-UP AND REGENERATION BILL

Twenty Seventh Sitting

Thursday 20 October 2022

(Afternoon)

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New clauses considered.
Bill, as amended, to be reported.
Written evidence reported to the House.

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not later than

Monday 24 October 2022

The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chairs: Sir Mark Hendrick, Mr Philip Hollobone, † Mrs Sheryll Murray, Ian Paisley

† Bradley, Ben *(Mansfield)* (Con)
† Cartlidge, James *(South Suffolk)* (Con)
† Davison, Dehenna *(Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities)*
† Farron, Tim *(Westmorland and Lonsdale)* (LD)
† Fletcher, Colleen *(Coventry North East)* (Lab)
Gibson, Patricia *(North Ayrshire and Arran)* (SNP)
† Huddleston, Nigel *(Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury)*
† Jupp, Simon *(East Devon)* (Con)
† Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma *(South Shields)* (Lab)
† Maskell, Rachael *(York Central)* (Lab/Co-op)
† Moore, Robbie *(Keighley)* (Con)
† Mortimer, Jill *(Hartlepool)* (Con)
† Norris, Alex *(Nottingham North)* (Lab/Co-op)
† Pennycook, Matthew *(Greenwich and Woolwich)* (Lab)
† Rowley, Lee *(Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities)*
† Smith, Greg *(Buckingham)* (Con)
† Vickers, Matt *(Stockton South)* (Con)

Bethan Harding, Kevin Maddison, *Committee Clerks*

† attended the Committee

Public Bill Committee

Thursday 20 October 2022

(Afternoon)

[Mrs Sheryll Murray *in the Chair*]

Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

New Clause 74

Community Right to Buy

"(1) The Localism Act 2011 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 95(6), leave out 'six months' and insert 'twelve months'.

(3) In section 98(1), leave out 'potential bidder' and insert 'buyer of first refusal.'"—*(Alex Norris.)*

Brought up, and read the First time.

2 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

It is a pleasure to resume proceedings with you in the Chair, Mrs Murray. I feel strongly about the new clause. It relates to the community power that we feel is missing in the legislation. I will make a big case for it, and am interested to hear the Minister's views. It is an important new clause, which would strengthen the Bill and make a strong contribution to achieving the levelling-up mission, in particular to increase pride of place in every part of the UK by 2030.

A community right to buy, as set out in the new clause, would build on the existing community right to bid legislated for in the Localism Act 2011 and its statutory instruments, which gives communities the right of first refusal once buildings and spaces with significant community value come up for sale. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' own research shows, however, that the existing legislation is not quite doing the job: only 15 assets make it into community ownership for every 1,000 listed as an asset of community value.

Under a much stronger community right to buy, a community organisation or group that is able to raise the required funds when an asset of community value comes up for sale would be able to purchase it without competition. The new clause would extend the existing moratorium from six months to 12 months, because the process of not only raising capital but preparing and building a business plan takes time. Six months has clearly not been enough. This could be a transformative change for many community organisations and the places where we live, and the new clause is very compatible with high street rental auctions, which we discussed in part 8.

In too many places, we see shuttered-up shops and empty buildings blighting high streets and town centres. They are often left vacant by distant private landlords with little stake in places. Members will have stories about that from their constituencies, I have no doubt. Introducing a community right to buy would be a recognition that it is time for that to change. It would give communities new powers to take control of assets in their area and, where assets are in community ownership, we know that vacancy rates are lower, footfall is driven to other businesses, more money stays in the local economy and hiring is more diverse—certainly more than if they are unoccupied.

As I said, the rental auctions are a welcome provision, but the new clause goes further. There is an important point of distinction between the Government and the Opposition on this legislation. Whatever the politics of levelling up, the Bill is born out of a consistent message that we have heard from our communities for a number of years: they want a greater say in what happens in their communities. Having been promised devolution, however, what they will get from the Bill is a transfer of power from Whitehall to, generally, regional or sub-regional bodies. That is a good thing, and we support those provisions in the Bill, but it is an incomplete process; it needs to be accompanied by a transfer of power from town halls and sub-regional bodies to local communities to shape place. People expect that, but as yet do not have it in the Bill. The new clause is a good step to rectifying that. I hope to hear that the Minister is keen.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): I thank the hon. Gentleman for the new clause and for talking us through it. We absolutely agree that the issue is significant and one that we need to get right. Buildings such as community centres and pubs are a hugely important part of our social fabric. I understand the intent behind his community right to buy proposal. We share the same sentiments about getting the process right and giving communities an appropriate and reasonable opportunity to see whether they can take action, while ensuring that the process is not too long or difficult to be feasible.

I absolutely accept the need to review the existing legal and policy frameworks underpinning community ownership. We have said already in the levelling-up White Paper that we will consider how the existing assets of community value framework could be enhanced, but we probably need more time to consider that and whether changes to the framework are workable in practice. It needs consultation and discussion with stakeholders, and we need to work through the implications in significant detail. Although I accept and understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, I would prefer not to accept these proposals at this time. I will review them in more detail separately.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman feels that the commitments in the levelling-up White Paper and those I have given just now are sufficient, notwithstanding other activities that may be happening elsewhere on this estate and beyond, and that he will withdraw the new clause.

Alex Norris: I am pleased to hear that, in concept, the Government agree with this proposal. That is good news, and those who are campaigning and active in this space will be very glad to hear that.

There is obviously a commitment to this in the White Paper, and the Minister has accepted that the Localism Act provisions will not do. There needs to be a change,

so it needs to be looked at and amended, but the Minister said that the vehicle for that is not the Bill. That seems really strange to me; it seems exactly the moment to do it. I take the Minister at his word, as I always do, and we will continue to advocate very loudly for this change. The hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and I are particularly keen on it. I hope there will be an opportunity in this Session to do that.

I do not intend to divide the Committee on the new clause. If I am entirely honest, I think the vote that will change the future of community power will be a general election, rather than a Division in this Committee, so I am happy to withdraw the new clause on that basis, but it will not go away. The public demand for it will only grow, and we as politicians have to demonstrate that we understand that people want this. We must deliver on it, even if it is not today. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 75

HOMES ENGLAND STATUTORY OBJECTS

"(1) Section 2 of the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 is amended as follows.

(2) After subsection (1)(d), insert—

"(e) to ensure that spending decisions by Homes England are designed to deliver Levelling-up,

(f) to reduce regional inequality by delivering homes and stimulate related economic activity,

(g) to report to Parliament annually assessing the progress that has been made in reducing regional inequalities."—*(Alex Norris.)*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Alex Norris: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Ministers have talked about the importance of building houses, but as a country we are still not building enough affordable homes. Crucially, we are not building them in the places that need them the most to support growth. We could talk about that all day. My hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich has made many good points about why that has happened.

To bring this back to levelling up, we need to ensure that all organisations that touch communities have a strategic drive to level up. At the moment, levelling up is not a strategic priority for Homes England. Its focus is on supply and quality, rather than reducing regional inequalities, so we think we should add that. For example, through the so-called 80:20 rule, housing infrastructure cash has tended to be targeted at London and the south of England.

New clause 75 seeks to address that disconnect. I hope I am on relatively good ground with the Minister. In a previous discussion, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) said in response to one of my interventions that he expected Homes England to adopt levelling up as a statutory objective, but I want to be clear on that.

The new clause would add three statutory objectives. First, it would require Homes England to consider levelling up as part of its spending decisions. Secondly, it would require Homes England to reduce regional inequality by delivering homes and stimulating related economic activity. Thirdly, to ensure transparency and accountability, it would require Homes England to report back once a year on the progress that has been made towards reducing regional inequalities.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I want to support this new clause, with reference to proposed new subsection (2)(e). There is a real disconnect in Homes England: it does not understand the way communities work, including transport systems, the economy and housing. In addition, the fact that it is so distant—it is London-centric—means that it does not focus on communities. That is a real faultline in Homes England that must be addressed.

Alex Norris: That is precisely why I tabled the new clause. Writing that into the fibre of the being of Homes England would make a real difference in those areas, as my hon. Friend says. The Minister may be able to give us some clarity, but I understand that a revised strategic plan for the Department has been drafted. I will be keen to know from the Minister, if he is unable to tell us quite what is in that, when we might get to see it, and whether it is his view, as it was that of the then Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Harborough that levelling up will be reflected as a priority for the agency in the coming years.

Lee Rowley: The new clause seeks to introduce, as the hon. Gentleman outlined, a series of further statutory obligations on Homes England. Although I understand the sentiments behind those additional statutory obligations and we all, on both sides of the Committee, accept and wish to promote the underlying objectives of levelling up—even if we may disagree about how to describe it—I am not personally convinced that we require additional statutory objectives here.

Homes England is a delivery body. It is a body charged with undertaking the work that is effectively set by the Department. It is a very big delivery body and goes over numerous different areas. I am already working closely with it and look forward to doing so further. However, it is charged with delivery, and the delivery of something requires the Department to set what that is, so my preference remains that we do not legislate on something like this, but that the conversation and discussion continues between the Opposition and the Department and between the hon. Member for Nottingham North and me in order to confirm what the Opposition wish to see in this area and then what the Government wish to see. I think that that is an area, a discussion and a responsibility that should remain with the Department, and then the Department can inform the delivery body of what to do, rather than us mandating in legislation what the delivery body should do. For those reasons, I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider withdrawing the new clause.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that answer. I am not particularly excited by how this happens; my wish is just that it does happen. But I am grateful for the Minister's answer and his explanation of how he feels. I have absolutely no issue with it sitting as a departmental prerogative. I do not think the two things need to be in tension. The thing for me is that we will keep pushing

[Alex Norris]

on this point. I was not as clear, I have to say, from the hon. Gentleman's answer as I have been from previous answers from previous Ministers that it remains the position of the Government. Perhaps that is something that will be followed up on in due course, because this is really important. The one thing we know about levelling up is that it takes active interventions and that if we leave things to the market or to how things currently are, that will not deliver, so there has to be something different in this regard. I think that this measure was something different, and improving. It has not been successful today and I will not push it to a Division, but we will, again, stay on this point. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 76

STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND

"(1) There is to be a body corporate known as the Standards Board for England ('the Standards Board').

(2) The Standards Board is to consist of not less than three members appointed by the Secretary of State.

(3) In exercising its functions the Standards Board must have regard to the need to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of local authorities in England.

(4) The Secretary of State must by regulations make further provision about the Standards Board.

(5) Regulations under this section must provide for—

(a) a code of conduct of behaviour for members and co-opted members of local authorities in England,

(b) the making of complaints to the Standards Board a member or co-opted member has failed to comply with that code of conduct,

(c) the independent handling of such complaints in the first instance by the Standards Board,

(d) the functions of ethical standards officers,

(e) investigations and reports by such officers,

(f) the role of monitoring officers of local authorities in such complaints,

(g) the referral of cases to the adjudication panel for England for determination,

(h) about independent determination by the adjudication panel its issuing of sanctions,

(i) appeal by the complainant to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman,

(j) appeal by the member or co-opted member subject to the complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, and

(k) the governance of the Standards Board.

(6) In making regulations under this section the Secretary of State must have regard to the content of Chapter II (investigations etc: England) of Part III (conduct of local government members and employees) of the Local Government Act 2000, prior to the repeal of that Chapter.

(7) The Standards Board–

(a) must appoint employees known as ethical standards officers,

(b) may issue guidance to local authorities in England on matters relating to the conduct of members and co-opted members of such authorities,

(c) may issue guidance to local authorities in England in relation to the qualifications or experience which monitoring officers should possess, and

(d) may arrange for any such guidance to be made public."—*(Mrs Lewell-Buck.)*

This new clause seeks to reinstate the Standards Board for England, which was abolished by the Localism Act 2011, but with the removal of referral to standards committees and the addition of appeal to the Local Government Ombudsman.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Murray. As this is probably one of the last times I will speak in this Committee, I want to thank you, your fellow Chairs, the Clerks of the Committee and all House staff.

I am presenting new clause 76, in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for York Central. It would increase accountability and transparency and restore public faith in local government. Since the Standards Board for England was abolished by the coalition Government in 2011, local authorities have been tasked with making up their own rules and standards of conduct for local councillors. As the current system stands, the monitoring officers, who work side by side with councillors every day of the week, are the very ones tasked with handling complaints about those same councillors. Should they feel that a complaint warrants further investigation, they can ask that the local authority's standards committee looks further at the matter and decides on suitable sanctions. The committee can be comprised of other councillors, largely from the authority's majority ruling group. They then decide what happens to their close colleagues and friends. They can decide whether the hearing is in public or not. If they decide to put any sanctions in place, they may be limited to, at most, simply barring them from meetings for a few weeks or taking away their ICT resources. It is abundantly clear that that system is totally unacceptable. Councillors should not be free to police themselves, and monitoring officers should not be put in such potentially impossible situations.

In 2019, a report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life highlighted the fact that the vast majority of councillors and officers maintain high standards of conduct. However, there is clear evidence of misconduct by some councillors. The majority of these cases relate to bullying or harassment, or other disruptive behaviour. We have also heard evidence of persistent or repeated misconduct by a minority of councillors. This misconduct occurs at both principal authority level and at parish or town council level.

I know all too well from my own local authority the consequences of limited checks and balances, and of processes open to interference. In 2020, the former leader of my council resigned suddenly in the wake of allegations of bullying and financial concerns, just weeks after our chief executive walked out after 10 years in post. Police and other investigations are ongoing.

2.15 pm

Just last year, a Middlesbrough councillor was sentenced after pleading guilty to a charge relating to abuse of public trust in public office. He remains in post. Two former council chiefs in Liverpool and Lancashire, and an ex-Lancashire County Council leader, are due to

appear in court soon, after being charged in connection with a long-running police investigation into financial irregularity.

It is clear that the current system is not working. It is opaque and open to abuse. As more powers are devolved to local areas, with that should come more accountability and robust improvements in standards. The handling of complaints in relation to councillors should be through a fully independent standards board for England. It is the greatest of honours to serve your community, be it at council or parliamentary level, but that should come with the right checks and balances. The public need confidence in the system; they need to know that those in charge of their local services and budgets are always acting in the service of their residents and not in their own service.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mrs Murray, in this last sitting of the Committee. I know everyone in the room is incredibly saddened about that.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for South Shields for tabling this new clause. She is right that it truly is an honour for anyone in elected life to be able to serve their community. We all must do so with the highest regard for integrity and public service. However, we will not accept the new clause. I will outline a few reasons why.

The Standards Board for England, which was established under the Local Government Act 2000, was a flawed regime. It was a deliberate decision in the Localism Act 2011 to abolish it. During its short existence, the Standards Board for England allowed politically motivated and vexatious complaints, which had a chilling effect on free speech within local government. As a central Government quango, it was clearly incompatible with the principles of localism.

The Government's position remains unchanged since then. That was recently restated in our response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's review of local government ethical standards. The Government consider that it is the right of the electorate to determine who represents them and that local issues are best resolved locally. The abolition of the Standards Board restored power to local people. The new clause would effectively reinstate that flawed regime. All councillors are ultimately held to account via the ballot box. On that basis, I ask the hon. Lady to withdraw the new clause.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for that response. We could rehash all the arguments that were heard last time, but I will not detain the Committee for long. The Minister claims that there were politically motivated and vexatious complaints. The other argument is that there were some genuine complaints. Sanctions were put on councillors and it stopped them from acting in such a manner in the future. Of course the electorate can decide, but sometimes they cannot decide for four years, which is a long time if somebody is abusing public money and their position. For now, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 78

RESPONSIBILITY OF EXECUTIVE COUNCILLORS TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

"(1) Chapter 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 (executive arrangements) is amended as follows.

(2) After section 9DA (functions of an executive: further provision) insert—

'(9DB) Responsibility to answer questions

A councillor who is a member of an executive must take all reasonable steps to give a timely answer any question about the executive, its functions or the local authority (including about standards of conduct) from any councillor of the local authority that is asked—

(a) in writing, or

(b) orally in a council meeting.'"—*(Mrs Lewell-Buck.)*

This new clause would establish a legal requirement for executive councillors to answer written questions from fellow councillors and oral questions in council meetings.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The new clause is in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for York Central. I will be brief; I sense that the mood of the Committee is that everyone would like us to finish as soon as possible. This new clause is in much the same spirit as new clause 76 and new clause 79, which we will consider later. Local government can be a mystery to many people. Anyone logging on to their council's website or attending a meeting would testify to how confusing procedures can be. In this place, those who hold the position of Secretary of State or Minister are rightly asked questions in the Chamber, in the public domain. We may not always like the answers—in fact, I very rarely do—but the process allows a level of public accountability. In local councils, though, it is up to local councillors whether they answer questions from other members. I am aware that the executive members of many councils already do, but I have also witnessed the opposite approach, where every single question is dismissed, shut down or deferred for a written response. Surely those in senior elected positions, such as council leaders, or cabinet members who hold responsibility for a service and budgets, should answer questions from other members. To refuse to do so is to be unaccountable. New clause 79 seeks to positively enhance the public's faith in their local government representatives. Once again, I look forward to the Minister's views.

Dehenna Davison: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the new clause, which has a noble aim. I think we all believe that the transparency of any executive, national or local, is incredibly important. Accountability is equally important, particularly considering the point about trust in politicians and politics.

As the hon. Lady outlined, the new clause would put into statute a requirement for executive councillors to answer questions from other councillors. It is vital that back-bench councillors be able to hold the executive to account. In their published constitutions, many councils will already set out the procedure for both elected members and members of the public to ask questions at full meetings of the council, or at any other committee meeting. However, we firmly believe that the Government would be going beyond the role that they should play in local matters if they required in law that such councillors answer questions. Local authorities are already subject to checks and balances as part of the local government accountability framework. In addition, authorities with

[Dehenna Davison]

executive governance arrangements are required to have overview and scrutiny committees, governed by statutory guidance, to ensure that members of the authority who are not part of the executive can hold the executive to account. It would not be right for central Government to dictate the minute details of local authority arrangements, although I appreciate the noble aim behind the new clause. I kindly ask the hon. Lady to withdraw her new clause.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister, and I am happy to beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 79

NO ROLE FOR COUNCILLORS IN RECRUITMENT OR DUTIES OF MONITORING OFFICERS

"(1) The Local Government and Housing Act 1989 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 5 (designation and reports of monitoring officer), after subsection (1) insert—

'(1ZA) No elected councillor of a relevant authority in England may have any role in—

(a) the recruitment or selection of the officer designated monitoring officer under subsection (1), or

(b) the performing by the monitoring officer of the functions imposed by this section and, where relevant, section 5A.'" —*(Mrs Lewell-Buck.)*

This new clause would prohibit the involvement of elected councillors in the recruitment or duties of officers appointed to monitor lawbreaking, maladministration, failure and injustice within a local authority or its executive.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

I appreciate that the majority of local authority appointments of chief officers such as chief executives or monitoring officers are made after a robust interview that has followed human resources processes. Those processes can involve senior elected members. However, I have witnessed, and am aware of local authorities that experience, inappropriate or partial influence being exerted when officers are conducting operational business. I recall once sitting with a chief executive and a leader, and the leader was demanding that something be done that the officer was deeply uncomfortable with. The leader shouted at the chief executive, "I hired you; I will fire you if you don't do this." I could go on, but I think the point is made.

It is clear why there should be no elected member involvement whatsoever in the appointment of any local authority monitoring officer. These officers work hard and are incredibly professional. They are already working in politically restricted, tightly governed senior roles. They should never be exposed to unacceptable scenarios, such as the one I just outlined. That is why new clause 79 is important. I hope the Minister agrees.

Dehenna Davison: I am sure the hon. Lady will not be surprised to hear that we will not accept the new clause. First, I want to say that the example of terrible practice that she witnessed is not isolated. All examples of bad practice absolutely must be called out, but there is a strict framework already in place. The new clause appears to seek to protect the objectivity of monitoring officers, and their ability to speak truth to power—that is, to elected members. The new clause requires that elected councillors have no role in the selection or recruitment of a relevant authority's monitoring officer. Of course, the monitoring officer is one of three crucial statutory officers that any principal local authority must have, the other two being the chief executive and the section 151 officer. Some councils may already have designated the responsibility for appointing the monitoring officer to the head of paid service, but we must remember that councils are independent, democratic bodies that have the freedom and flexibility to manage their workforce. If they choose to operate a member appointment panel, it would be neither appropriate nor consistent with the principles of localism to prevent them from doing so.

The new clause would also mean that elected councillors played no role in a monitoring officer's performance of their duties. However, monitoring officers' specific speak-truth-to-power role is already protected in their responsibilities under sections 2 and 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Those statutory responsibilities include reporting anything that they believe to be illegal or to amount to maladministration relating to the conduct of councillors and officers, or to the operation of the council's constitution. On that basis, we do not feel that the new clause is necessary, and it is contradictory to the core principles of localism in which we so strongly believe. I ask the hon. Lady to withdraw it.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for that response. My new clause would have given an extra layer of protection. She has misunderstood how impossible an environment can make it to speak truth to power. The clause would have helped people who are stuck in that situation, but I am happy to withdraw it. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 80

LICENSING SCHEME: HOLIDAY LETS

"(1) The Secretary of State must make regulations to require each relevant local authority in England to introduce a local licensing scheme for holiday lets.

(2) Any local licensing scheme introduced pursuant to regulations made under subsection (1)(a) must require any owner of a holiday let to—

(a) obtain any fire, gas and electricity safety certificates as specified by the scheme;

(b) ensure that the holiday let complies with any health and safety regulations specified by the scheme, including the completion of any risk assessments required by those regulations;

(c) secure a licence for the holiday let from the local authority prior to trading;

(d) obtain a licence and renew this licence—

(i) every three years,

(ii) when the property changes ownership, or

(iii) when there is a change in the person holding day to day responsibility for the property; and

(e) not let out a property without a valid licence.

(3) A local authority introducing a licensing scheme must—

(a) outline—

(i) the terms and conditions of the licence,

(ii) the application process for securing the licence, and

(iii) the licence renewal process;

(b) determine an annual licence fee for each licensed property;

(c) inspect any property prior to issuing a licence;

(d) require the owner of a short term holiday let to —

(i) apply for and hold a licence to operate for each property they let prior to trading,

(ii) pay a licence application fee and annual charge for the licence,

(iii) renew the licence as required by the local authority under their licensing scheme,

(iv) pay any fines associated with breaches of a licence as laid out in the local licensing scheme,

(v) ensure that the holiday let complies with any health and safety regulations specified by the scheme, including the completion of any risk assessments required by those regulations, and

(vi) provide up to date property details including details of who will hold responsibility for the day to day management of the property;

(e) maintain an up to date list of all licensed short term holiday let properties within the local authority area to include—

(i) the address of the property,

(ii) whether this is a shared property occupied by the owner or a separate let,

(iii) how many people are eligible to stay at the property, and

(iv) how many days of the year that the property will be advertised for letting and be let;

(f) inspect the property following a report from the public of an issue of concern relating to the property or to any other property owned by the same person;

(g) monitor compliance with the licensing scheme;

(h) publish an annual report on the number and location of licences including the number and location of licences in each ward and their impact on local residential housing supply and details of any breaches reported and fines issued; and

(i) provide residents adjacent to the short term holiday let contact details of their enforcement officer should they experience any issue at the property.

(4) A licensing scheme must allow the local authority to—

(a) set out details of any area where the granting or renewal of licences will be banned, suspended or limited;

(b) set limits and or thresholds on the level of the licencing permitted in any area;

(c) require property owners to renew their licences every three years, or when a property changes in ownership;

(d) issue fines or remove a licence of a property if—

(i) fire, health and safety conditions are breached,

(ii) criminal activity occurs at the property, or

(iii) excess noise and nuisance or anti-social behaviour rules as set out in the licensing conditions are repeatedly breached, or

(iv) the registered owner or the person listed as holding responsibility for the property has had licences on other properties removed; and

(e) issue penalties or licensing bans on those renting properties without a licence.

(5) In this section—

An 'area' may be—

(a) a polling district;

(b) a ward; or

(c) the whole local authority area;

'holiday let' means—

(a) a dwelling-house let for the purpose of conferring on the tenant the right to occupy the dwelling-house for a holiday, or

(b) any part of a dwelling-house let for the purpose of conferring on the tenant to occupy that part of the house for a holiday;

'relevant local authority' means—

(a) a district council in England;

(b) a county council in England for an area for which there is no district council;

(c) a London borough council;

(d) the Common Council of the City of London."—*(Rachael Maskell.)*

This new clause provides for the introduction of a licensing scheme for holiday lets.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Rachael Maskell: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Murray, for the last time on this Bill. The new clause is in my name, and the name of hon. Members from across the House; it also has much support from colleagues who have not been able to sign their names to it because of their position in Government.

I hope that the Government will buck the trend and accept the new clause, because it is so important. Up and down the country, there is a sharp rise in the number of Airbnbs. Across the world, jurisdictions are licensing Airbnbs in order to control what is happening not just in the holiday industry, but in housing. This new clause would address the crisis in communities.

Over the last five years, there has been a sharp rise in Airbnbs in my community; the number is 2,118 and still rising sharply. The reason is that private rented accommodation is being flipped into Airbnbs because of the differentiation in tax introduced by George Osborne to try to address the buy-to-let market. Unfortunately, that is having serious consequences. Our stock of housing for purchase is also being hoovered up, mainly by purchasers from London and the south-east. They are buying family houses as assets to turn them into Airbnbs. That impacts not just housing, but communities, which are becoming more fragmented and fractious. Weekend after weekend, there are parties in these properties—that happens in the urban setting that I represent—and it causes people to feel unsafe in their community. It is breaking up communities.

It is vital that the Government moves forward by supporting this new clause. They should also look at what is happening in Scotland, where the Government have just passed legislation to license Airbnbs, not just register them. I appreciate that the Government Whip, the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire, took forward a consultation on Airbnbs in his former role; however, any scheme has to go further than registration.

This evening, Councillor Michael Pavlovic in York will move a motion that would allow local authorities to go as far as they can on the issue, but it will not be far enough. That is why we need legislation to license Airbnbs. I draw the Minister's attention to my private

[Rachael Maskell]

Member's Bill, which is due for its Second Reading on 9 December. I trust that we can work together to ensure that that will be the moment—if not today—that we see the full licensing of Airbnbs.

2.30 pm

I appreciate that the issue affects colleagues in coastal and rural settings, as well in as urban ones. It is having a significant impact, to the point where many communities are being completely hollowed out; schools and community facilities are closing, causing much pain. In these areas, there is a real housing shortage; that is why the issue is particularly relevant to this Bill. People can no longer access the housing market in my constituency. They save up to purchase a house, but London and south-east purchasers come up to buy properties, so unfortunately no housing is left for people in my constituency. Cash buyers pay over the price for properties—to the tune of £70,000 more in York—putting everyone else out of the market.

In the private rented sector, there has been an escalation in section 21 notices being served, which means that people then have to find other accommodation, but there is none to be found, so they have to withdraw their children from school and leave the local economy. That hurts businesses, and public services cannot recruit. Our city is imploding bit by bit, as people exit en masse, because they have no other choice. That is why we need to be able to license Airbnbs.

Further to that, Airbnbs are changing our economy in York. More and more party groups come to York—it is, sadly, the hen capital of the country—and that has a real impact on our city centre. Local people no longer go into the city centre, because it is not an environment in which they feel safe or where they want to be. That causes a problem, too; people take their drinking culture back into the community. We need to get the situation under statutory control at every level, and to license Airbnbs.

I draw the Minister's attention to a few other issues impacting our community. Criminal activity is occurring in Airbnbs. I am aware of drug dealing taking place in those properties, with criminal gangs involved, and there are pop-up brothels and instances of modern slavery. I am seeking information about child exploitation as well. There is an obligation to know who is staying at these properties.

Ultimately, this is about an extraction economy. People say, "Well, these lets bring money into the economy", but they do not. We have to burst that false bubble and highlight what is really happening. My communities are changing at pace: I knock on doors in my community every weekend, and I literally go from Airbnb to Airbnb. Some streets are absolutely hollowed out, and the few remaining families are disturbed about remaining there.

The problem is also affecting new build. Most new build in York is high-value accommodation that local people cannot afford. It is about investment for property owners. They buy the properties as an asset. The asset gains value, which spirals up the value of property in York. There is so much demand in York now. It is being marketed as a place for investment, including inward investment from overseas, as are so many other places across the country. New build places being flipped en masse into being Airbnbs. One new build in York is made up solely of Airbnbs—by "Airbnb", I do not just mean the company; it is a byword for short-term holiday lets, as we all know. The situation is simply wrong; it is harmful and prevents our building any semblance of community.

I say gently to the Minister that there is no point in having housing targets if existing stock is just disappearing, and if new stock does not deliver for local people. That just creates a false economy; it does not deliver for the Government. I appreciate that this is a new problem that took off particularly over the covid period, but it is escalating and heating up. The Government need to get control of it right now.

My new clause would give local authorities extensive powers through a licensing system. It would give them control, so that they can curb some of the problems and gain revenue. Many of these properties do not pay council tax and fall under the threshold for business rates relief, so local authorities such as York lose millions of pounds every year.

I want to draw the Minister's attention to a few issues. I appreciate that this is quite a thorough new clause, but there is a reason for that. On safety checks, traditional bed and breakfasts and guest houses are required to have fire, gas, electricity and health and safety certification, but Airbnb properties do not, and that puts the community at risk. The B&B and guest house sector and the tourism industry are being undercut on price because Airbnbs do not need all that certification. Those businesses are under threat or are exiting the market; they cannot afford to continue because they are not getting the trade; it is going instead to Airbnb. There is not a level playing field in the tourism industry.

People would have to pay a fee for the licence, which of course would benefit the local authority and enable it to employ staff to manage the stock. At the moment, nobody knows who to contact and who is dealing with antisocial behaviour and other big challenges. The local authority would also have the power to remove the licence if the property was not being managed appropriately. It would be able to issue fines for nuisance and antisocial behaviour, and if certification was not held or there was criminal activity, that would clearly need to be addressed.

Most importantly, the new clause would enable local authorities to introduce control zones. That is necessary in places such as York; there is a deep concentration of Airbnbs in the city centre. Control zones could be used to mark out areas where there is a total ban on Airbnbs—Scotland has introduced legislation that allows that—or a limit on the number of properties that can become Airbnbs. Some local authorities may want to use the short-term holiday let sector to draw in tourism. I do not want to bar them from that opportunity, but that should be determined by the local authority. We have upper limits for houses in multiple occupation, so there is no reason why we cannot have such limits on Airbnbs.

This is a really important new clause. York's housing market has been completely skewed by this new insurgent enterprise, which is significantly affecting not just people's housing but their health. The mental stress for communities is significant. Families are having to move away from the places where they grew up, and businesses are having to close. The situation is urgent. I hope that the Minister will use this Bill to bring forward much-needed

legislation. I hope he will talk to colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about the review it has carried out, and listen to our communities. This is a big issue for Members from right across the House. We have had so many debates about it; it is time to move forward. It is time to license, so that we can build real communities again.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I want to say a big thank you for your role in chairing many sittings of this Committee, Mrs Murray. I also thank the Clerks, who have supported you and all of us.

Earlier this week, we offered Government Members the opportunity to vote to enable local authorities to compel developers to build only affordable housing for a period of time, and they rejected that. Now, the hon. Member for York Central has put forward a very reasonable and timely suggestion about how we might do something about the stock that we have. If they will not do one or other, what is meant to happen to our housing stock? The reality for communities such as mine in Cumbria is that the evaporation of the long-term housing rental market has led to enormous hardship. It is a catastrophe.

It was a problem before the pandemic, but the combination of the stamp duty cut, introduced by the last Chancellor but three at the beginning of the pandemic, and a failure to acknowledge the consequences of the staycation boom, meant an absolute avalanche of full-time residential property going into either the second home market or the short-term rental market. That has had absolutely devastating consequences.

The fact that the Government have not kept their manifesto promise to scrap section 21 evictions means that there is literally an open door for any landlord to get rid of the people they have in those homes, and those homes then go into short-term holiday let usage. In South Lakeland, in my constituency, in one year we saw a 32% rise in the number of holiday lets. As hon. Members can image, South Lakeland had tonnes to start off with, so that is a vast number. Where did they come from? They were not new build properties, but existing homes that were lived in by families and others who have now been evicted, not just from those homes but from those communities.

I do not want to make any assumptions, but I imagine that in a community such as yours, Mrs Murray, the situation is similar and you have lost some of the full-time population. What then happens to the working-age population? I can think of successful primary schools that have lost 20% to 40% of their pupils for that reason in the last two years.

Cumbria Tourism undertook a survey of its member organisations and businesses, which work throughout the lakes, dales and other parts of Cumbria, and found that some 63% could not work at capacity over the last year because they did not have the staff to do the job. The lack of affordable housing kills economies as well as ruining family life and undoing the fabric of our communities, including schools, churches, pubs, businesses and bus services, the demand for which dries up.

The situation is catastrophic. If the Government will not accept the amendment proposed by the hon. Member for York Central, the amendment I proposed or any of the other amendments that have been proposed, what are they going to do about the crisis in our existing housing stock in communities such as those in York, Cumbria and many other areas of the country? They might nod and show their concern, but they must act. This is an absolute emergency, so act. This is something they could do, so why would they not do it?

Dehenna Davison: I am incredibly grateful to the hon. Member for York Central for raising the issue so passionately. I know she is deeply concerned about it and has been campaigning incredibly hard on it throughout her time in Parliament. I note she mentioned her private Member's Bill. I have already offered to engage with her on issues that we have discussed previously in Committee, and I am happy to engage with her on that as well.

Online platforms have enabled greater choice in accommodation for holidaymakers and have brought benefits to the tourism sector. On the one hand, it is an incredible compliment to a place to see a lot of Airbnb rental properties popping up, as the area becomes a tourism hotspot and a lot of people want to visit incredible places such as York and Cumbria, but unfortunately we know the issues that can come with that as well.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale mentioned local school numbers declining and local shops and pubs seeing their year-round trade turning to seasonal trade, which is not something they necessarily expected or planned for. Many hon. Members from across the House are familiar with such arguments and have raised them in debates. I have had particular representations from hon. Members from Cornwall and Devon, who I know face similar issues.

The hon. Member for York Central mentioned illegal activity and gave examples from her constituency. That is another area where it is crucial that we get our policy right. That is why DCMS launched the call for evidence on this topic, which she made reference to, as an important first step in understanding how we can continue to reap the benefits of short-term lets, while also protecting holidaymakers and local interests.

The Government are now carefully analysing over 4,000 responses to this exercise. What local people and affected stakeholders have said will help to inform the development of evidence-based and proportionate policy proposals. Accepting this amendment before we have analysed those responses would pre-empt the necessary policy development needed. We plan to publish our response to the consultation in the usual way. We want to make sure we get the policy right because we recognise that there are so many issues related to it.

Rachael Maskell: I have two points. First, could the Minister set out a timeline? This is so urgent because of the pace of change, so we really need to understand what the timeline is. There has been a lot of talk and debate in this place; many colleagues from across the House have articulated the pain this issue is causing their communities. Secondly, would the Minister be willing to hold a cross-party roundtable to enable Members to get a full understanding of those experiences? The most acute problems are essentially occurring in holiday destinations and places that people come to visit, so it would be important to ensure a combination of coastal, rural and urban. That could help to move the debate forward and land the legislation in the right place, so

[Rachael Maskell]

that it pays heed not just to what are seen as the benefits of the short-term holiday let industry, but to our communities.

2.45 pm

Dehenna Davison: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the constructive way she is approaching this important debate. As I say, this is a DCMS consultation, so I cannot provide a timeline today, but I will write to her to follow up and try to provide as much clarity as I can on that point. I would certainly be happy to hold a roundtable, but this specific policy does not actually sit within my brief. However, I will endeavour to write to the relevant Ministers and encourage them to take this up. As I say, I will follow up in writing on those points.

Rachael Maskell: If I may, I seek the indulgence of the Committee a little longer. The Minister has raised a real issue here: the matter now needs to move into the Levelling Up Department. The impact on housing is enormous. Although I appreciate that it started in DCMS, it now needs to move, because this is essentially a housing issue. It is about how the housing sector is working, rather than about the tourism sector. The industry has grown and become far more professionalised; it now clearly needs to move Departments in order to bring forward the legislation.

Dehenna Davison: On that point, I have heard from my colleague sitting beside me, the Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire, that he is happy to meet with the hon. Lady to discuss the matter in further detail.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to both Ministers for that, and I welcome that opportunity. I am quite relaxed about other colleagues also bringing their experiences to that meeting. It is important that we get this nailed now and get it right for all our communities. It is far too important. Time is of the essence. I will most certainly take up that offer.

I will not push the new clause to a vote today, although I will bring it back on Report. I cannot wait around—people in my community are exiting at such an alarming rate that I need to get this addressed. However, I thank the Ministers for being able to debate this matter this afternoon and to have a bit more time on it. It is of real importance for all of us and we have to get it right. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 81

CYCLING, WALKING AND RIGHTS OF WAY PLANS: INCORPORATION IN DEVELOPMENT PLANS

"(1) A local planning authority must ensure that the development plan incorporates, so far as relevant to the use or development of land in the local planning authority's area, the policies and proposals set out in—

(a) any local cycling and walking infrastructure plan or plans prepared by a local transport authority;

(b) any rights of way improvement plan.

(2) In dealing with an application for planning permission or permission in principle the local planning authority shall also have regard to any policies or proposals contained within a local cycling and walking infrastructure plan or plans and any rights of way improvement plan which have not been included as part of the development plan, so far as material to the application.

(3) In this section—

(a) 'local planning authority' has the same meaning as in section 15LF of PCPA 2004;

(b) 'local transport authority' has the same meaning as in section 108 of the Transport Act 2000;

(c) 'local highway authority' has the same meaning as in the Highways Act 1980;

(d) a 'rights of way improvement plan' is a plan published by a local highway authority under section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000."—*(Rachael Maskell.)*

This new clause would require development plans to incorporate policies and proposals for cycling and walking infrastructure plans and rights of way improvement plans. Local planning authorities would be required to have regard to any such policies and proposals where they have not been incorporated in a development plan.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Rachael Maskell: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

I will be brief in speaking to new clause 81. Cycling and walking are the future. Ensuring that walking and cycling infrastructure plans are hardwired into the planning system is not before its time. That infrastructure may vary from charging points for electric bikes and parking spaces for bikes to wider transport planning and planning for cycling, walking and wheeling routes. We must also think about wheelchair users and people who use other accessible forms of transport, who also need safe, accessible routes. That is essential in any new build area of housing across the country. Rights of way have to be determined and we have to ensure that all routes facilitate greater take-up of active travel. We need to see a real transition from the dependency on cars, which so many communities have, into a new era.

They were talking on the news today about the shortfall in available raw materials, which is preventing the escalation of electric vehicle production. A good public transport system sitting alongside active travel will help to facilitate that. Infrastructure can often deter people from participating in cycling and walking, yet in places such as Holland, where there has been significant investment, that is the main mode of transport for short distances. With the advent of electric scooters and electric bikes, people can make journeys over longer distances. Good, safe infrastructure makes a real difference. Holland has had a 40-year campaign to reach its current standard, and we know that other communities across the world are raising their standards. I draw the Minister's attention to Ghent, which has made a real pivot in its active travel offer. It is time that we really look at ensuring cycling, walking and wheeling rights of way plans are hardwired into development plans.

Lee Rowley: I thank the hon. Member for her amendment on this important matter, and for recognising the importance of walking and cycling and the important role that the planning system plays. I understand the sentiment behind the new clause, and I accept the challenge that she gives, rightly, to the system and the Government as a whole, but I am not convinced that it is necessarily proportionate to hardwire, as she says, this level of detail in legislation.

My preference is for these matters to continue to be dealt with at national planning policy level. There is already a requirement for local authorities to consider

such issues when preparing a development plan; they are also material considerations in planning decisions. Local authorities have tools already. I do not think the Bill changes that in any way, and it will perhaps even strengthen the importance of national policies when they relate to such decision making.

My preference is to remain with the existing NPPF on transport issues, particularly around the promotion of walking and cycling, with the recognition that these can be material considerations in dealing with planning applications already. Given that the decision maker must take into account all material considerations, I am not convinced that this additional provision is necessary in law at this stage, although I understand the underlying point. I therefore ask the hon. Lady to consider withdrawing the new clause.

Rachael Maskell: We as a nation creep forward. This afternoon, we have seen why it is a creep, rather than the change we see in other jurisdictions. We need to do far more on enabling and facilitating active travel. I will not press the new clause this afternoon, but I hope that the Minister takes the proposal back and looks again at how we can escalate, within the national planning framework, getting good-quality infrastructure built for cycling, walking and wheeling. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 83

REVIEW OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND POVERTY EFFECTS OF ACT

"(1) The Secretary of State must review the public health and poverty effects of the provisions of this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) The review must consider—

(a) the effects of the provisions of this Act on the levels of relative and absolute poverty across the UK including devolved nations and regions,

(b) the effects of the provisions of this Act on socioeconomic inequalities and on population groups with protected characteristics as defined by the 2010 Equality Act across the UK, including by devolved nations and regions,

(c) the effects of the provisions of this Act on life expectancy and healthy life expectancy across the UK, including by devolved nations and regions, and

(d) the implications for the public finances of the public health effects of the provisions of this Act."—*(Rachel Maskell.)*

This new clause would require the Government to report on the public health and poverty effects of the provisions of the Act.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Rachael Maskell: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

I hear a cheer in the room as I rise to my feet for a final time. I thank you, Mrs Murray, for your chairing of the Committee. I also thank your colleagues, the Clerks and *Hansard.* We have had a lot of really important debates.

New clause 83 stands in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). Reviewing our public health policy is really important. Understanding its context and impact on poverty is at the heart of what levelling up is all about. The new clause would ensure a real focus on the data that is required and a proper review of public health policies, which is vital, with a report being laid before Parliament within six months of the passing of the Bill. That would ensure that Parliament's eyes are on the issue.

The new clause focuses on relative and absolute poverty, and putting forward the data that has often been debated and disputed in the House, so that we can see what is happening from an authoritative source. We ultimately have to measure what is happening. Levelling up cannot be just about the infrastructure and the pounds spent; it has to be about the outcomes that really impact people. When poverty is such an issue in our country, we have to look at the inequality and disparities that we see. Having data to properly manage the system and drive inputs and outcomes is really important.

The new clause also looks at the socioeconomic inequalities and population groups with protected characteristics. We all know that black, Asian and minority ethnic, LGBT, elderly, young and disabled people experience disparity when it comes to so many issues within the levelling-up missions. It is important to look at ensuring that people with protected characteristics have the necessary assessment to ensure that they, too, are levelling up and not being left behind. Covid was a real example of why that is so necessary; we saw it for whole swathes of communities, particularly those from the black, Asian and minority ethnic community, who faced the worst impact because of their socioeconomic status.

Life expectancy, and healthy life expectancy, is really important for planning an economy for the future. We need to understand its impact, particularly on excess deaths due to poverty, to ensure that we are monitoring what is happening among those communities. In my constituency there is a 10-year disparity in life expectancy between the poorest and the richest communities. That is a really serious issue within levelling up. I appreciate that there is a debate within that about extent of life versus quality of life, but those with shorter lives also do not have a good quality of life on many occasions. We have to drive down inequality in that area.

The new clause also looks at funding for public health provision. We know that there is a real deficit in areas of deprivation, and we need to ensure a proper matrix for health spending as we move forward. The new clause is about providing the good, solid data that is required to analyse what is happening with the levelling-up agenda, and putting that before Parliament and Ministers to ensure that the right policy decisions are being made to level up our country.

Dehenna Davison: I thank the hon. Member for York Central for these proposals, which speak to an objective that I think we all share of reducing the entrenched spatial inequalities across the UK. That is fundamentally what levelling up is all about.

While I appreciate the sentiment behind the new clause, the specific mechanisms proposed may not be the best way to add value in this area for a couple of reasons. First, there are robust and long-standing mechanisms in place to assess trends in public health and poverty already, including through the public health outcomes frameworks, relevant statistics for which are

[Dehenna Davison]

regularly updated and published by the Office for National Statistics. Additionally, the Bill will create a statutory responsibility on the Government to define and report against long-term levelling-up missions to address spatial disparities. The missions in the levelling-up White Paper, for example, include living standards, pay and productivity, and healthy life expectancy. Those are particularly relevant in addressing the themes and concerns that the hon. Member raised.

The Government have established cross-departmental structures to measure long-term progress against their levelling-up missions and to assess how their policies and programmes are contributing to making progress towards those missions. I refer the hon. Member to comments that I have already made about the spatial data unit, and the role it can play in helping on that assessment. The measures in the Bill will not operate in isolation but as part of a much wider range of both legislative and non-legislative measures, which will in turn shape outcomes on the ground. It is right that we should pursue our policy objectives through the more systemic frameworks that I have outlined rather than what could be seen as more fragmented reports and reviews, as called for in the new clause.

The hon. Member will be aware of the well-established mechanisms overseen by His Majesty's Treasury and highlighted in "Managing Public Money" and elsewhere to assess the impact of policy interventions on the public finances and to allow Parliament to hold the Government to account on their expenditure. As such, we do not feel that an additional specific assessment of the impact of measures in the Bill would add value as we pursue our aim to level up the country. I hope that I have provided enough reassurance for her to withdraw the motion.

3 pm

Rachael Maskell: I listened with interest to the Minister's response. The challenge that I would put back to her, and ask her to reflect on further, is that it is because we have a very fragmented framework across many different Government Departments that we are not making progress. While the levelling-up agenda was very much a central agenda, with some clear missions to try to measure it and move it forward, excluding this form of monitoring and advancing public health information by leaving out the new clause will not help the Government.

While I appreciate what the Minister says about the spatial data unit, this is really about the analysis and bringing the whole agenda together on the levelling-up missions, to be able to start driving down the inequality that exists across our society, which is so damaging to our nation and to people across the country. I will not push the new clause to a vote—I am sure that it will return at later stages of the Bill—but I ask her to reflect on how we bring these agendas together. On Second Reading—if we can remember that far back—we were very much talking about trying to bring an agenda together in order to take our country forward. Leaving out really important elements such as this could take us back, not forward. However, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Question proposed, That the Chair do report the Bill, as amended, to the House.

Alex Norris: I want to put on record for myself and on behalf of my colleagues our thanks to you, Mrs Murray, and your colleagues in the Chair; to the world-class Clerks for all their assistance; to the Doorkeepers and the *Hansard* Reporters for all their work; and to Government colleagues, both Front Benchers and Back Benchers, for the discussions and debates. I know that they have been lengthy, but that is because the Bill is important, and we appreciate the spirit in which that has been done. I extend that to the Government's officials, as well as our own staff. I am very grateful. Thank you.

Dehenna Davison: For fear of this sounding like an Oscars acceptance speech, I have an awful lot of thank yous to say. First, I express my sincere thanks to the shadow Ministers. This is my first Bill Committee as a Minister. Hopefully it will not be my last, but given today, who knows? I thank them for the very constructive and warm way in which they have engaged with me, and with my colleague beside me, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire, on the Bill. There are some incredibly important debates to have. We have had some of them, and I know that many more happened before I took over as the Minister in this area. The fact that they have all been conducted in such a constructive and jovial way is something that I am certainly very grateful for.

I am also incredibly grateful to the officials who got us briefed on the Bill and got us through it, and to the Clerks and all Chairs of the Committee, including you, Mrs Murray. I am very grateful to members of the Committee of all colours for the spirit in which we have conducted it today, and to Whips past and present, Parliamentary Private Secretaries past and present, and Doorkeepers. I think I have pretty much everyone covered. A huge thank you from me. I am delighted to see the Bill through to the end of Committee stage.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill, as amended, accordingly to be reported.

3.3 pm

Committee rose.

Written evidence reported to the House

LRB71 Pocket Living