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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Friday 18 November 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

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

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House divided: Ayes 0, Noes 45.

Division No. 93]

[9.34 am

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Chris Clarkson and
Dr Ben Spencer**

NOES

Argar, rh Edward
Baker, Duncan
Barker, Paula
Blackman, Bob
Bowie, Andrew
Browne, Anthony
Buchan, Felicity
Burghart, Alex
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Cunningham, Alex
Davies, Gareth
Eagle, Maria
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Evans, Dr Luke
Everitt, Ben
Foxcroft, Vicky
Freeman, George
Gibb, rh Nick
Glendon, Mary

Harris, Rebecca
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, Tom
Johnston, David
Jones, Sarah
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Mahmood, Shabana
Mangnall, Anthony
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morgan, Stephen
Opperman, Guy
Pennycook, Matthew
Percy, Andrew<pa>
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Spencer, rh Mark
Tami, rh Mark
West, Catherine

**Tellers for the Noes:
Andrew Stephenson and
Mike Wood**

Question accordingly negatived.

Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill

Second Reading

9.46 am

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The private Member's Bill process, and the ballot at the start of every Session of Parliament, gives all of us the opportunity to apply to champion a cause that we believe will make a real difference to society. Whenever I have been asked about my proudest moment as the Member of Parliament for Harrow East, I have always answered that it was my previous private Member's Bill, which became the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. I hope that very soon I will be able to refresh my answer to incorporate the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill. When I was drawn at No. 2 in the 2016 private Member's Bill ballot, I thought my luck had concluded. Members can imagine my surprise, therefore, when earlier this year my phone blew up again with every charity and good cause trying to get through to champion their proposals. I knew that I had to draft a Bill that would develop the attainments of the Homelessness Reduction Act and simultaneously make a positive difference to vulnerable people's lives.

The HRA focused on preventing people from becoming homeless and introduced the most comprehensive changes to the rights of homeless people in England for over 39 years. Fundamentally, its purpose is to ensure that everyone who is at risk of homelessness or is currently homeless is legally entitled to meaningful help from their local authority, regardless of their current status. Previously, only those who were deemed in priority need and at crisis point had been entitled to assistance from local authorities; this excluded the majority of people, including almost all of those who were single.

The Act also addressed the significant lack of meaningful advice and assistance. More often than not—in the majority of cases—the advice and assistance provided was not tailored to the individual's needs and requirements. The Act implemented a duty on public bodies to refer to the housing department any person they believe to be at risk of homelessness within 56 days. That has helped to direct appropriate and efficient support and resources to those in need, and to prevent them before it is too late from having to sleep rough. That 56-day deadline marks a significant extension: previously, only those at risk of homelessness in the following 28 days would potentially receive some guidance. The extension to 56 days has meant that people have a longer opportunity to relieve their situation.

I am pleased to say that in its first year of operation the Homelessness Reduction Act prevented 37,000 people from becoming homeless, and continues to be just as effective today, some six years later. In the first year, an additional 60,000 people who were previously ineligible for homelessness support were assisted in getting off the streets and into appropriate accommodation. That was a rise of almost 50% on the assistance prior to the Act's implementation. As a side note, the Bill was notable for being the longest private Member's Bill in history, at 13 clauses in length. In keeping with tradition, I can confirm that the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill with supersede that, at 14 clauses long.

[Bob Blackman]

Needless to say, I have put a lot of pressure on making my second private Member's Bill a highly impactful and instrumental piece of legislation. I have maintained an active and invested interest in the housing and homelessness sector, chairing the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness, along with the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), and having sat on the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee—in its various forms—since 2010. It is therefore fitting that, having previously focused on preventing homelessness, I should focus on supporting those coming out of homelessness and going into supported accommodation. This Bill on social housing therefore became a reality as a natural extension of my previous Bill.

I have been made aware via our recent Select Committee investigation and report, which I shall come on to a bit later, that there was almost no research into the area of exempt accommodation and supported housing, and that it was absolutely rife with rogue cowboys taking advantage and exploiting vulnerable people. The Bill presents a felicitous opportunity to ensure that the Government intervene before the situation becomes critical for the majority of local authorities up and down the country.

Once I was satisfied that my private Member's Bill would reform the provision for exempt accommodation, I began looking into the research previously obtained by both public and private bodies. It quickly became abundantly clear that, with the exception of studies commissioned by Birmingham City Council, there was next to nothing in the way of research or records, certainly not at national level, which highlights the urgent need for central Government to recognise the issues and commission more findings.

I am pleased that the recently published Select Committee report makes a very constructive and prodigious start at addressing that, and I commend the work of the Committee Clerks and advisers involved in compiling the report, together with my colleagues on the Select Committee. The report, as always, was agreed unanimously. That brings me to its findings. I begin by urging Members to consider reading this rather excellent tome, "Exempt Accommodation", which is available in the Vote Office and all other good bookshops, so that they may learn of the absolute horrors that we unearthed that are currently being imposed on extremely vulnerable people. Having been on the Committee for some 12 years, I can confidently say that this specific piece of work truly shocked and alarmed all members of the Committee. I would like to make it clear at this point that there are a huge number of excellent organisations up and down the country that provide brilliant help for vulnerable people. Although we came across many good providers, the worst instances in the system urgently need addressing.

We came across the situation in Birmingham—I see at least one Member from Birmingham here today, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood)—whereby speculators buy two or three-bedroom houses for about £200,000; under permitted development rights, they expand by building to the sides, to the back and to the top of the house to the absolute maximum without requiring planning permission; they provide one small bathroom and one kitchen area,

and create an eight-bedroom property from a two or three-bedroom bedroom; and they then charge an absolute fortune in rent, which is picked up by the public purse.

Worse still, the primary concern that arose was the abysmal level of care being categorised as "appropriate support". The residents referred to such institutions are critically vulnerable, but have the potential to and are trying to rebuild their lives, including by embarking on the property market, despite at present not being entirely independent. They could be prison leavers, survivors of domestic abuse, those suffering from mental health conditions, previous rough sleepers, people recovering from drug or alcohol abuse—the list goes on. We know that these people might often share one thing in common, which is the need for support in rebuilding their lives, but it is regrettable that in many cases such people are lumped together in the same premises. I find it repugnant that a survivor of domestic abuse might be housed with a drug abuser as well as with a prison leaver who may have been convicted of sexual offences against women. In reality, there is no control over that whatsoever, and local authorities cannot control what happens.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case. I have come across an instance where the sorts of properties that he is talking about have the added problem that, in order to get around some of the regulations that would normally have to be complied with, people have to sign for a property as a holiday let.

Bob Blackman: One of the problems with exempt accommodation is that once it has become exempt, normal licensing rules on houses of multiple occupation, and other rules, go out the window. There is therefore no control whatsoever over what happens within that property. Frequently, the support that providers were supplying involved someone turning up once a week, completely unqualified, uninterested and frankly impetuous. Without asking, they enter the property, which has had every room converted into a small bedroom to maximise profits. They shout up the stairs, "Is everyone all right? Fine, I'll see you next week," and they depart 30 seconds later. That is not support in any sense of the word, and we need to call those people to account.

Other accounts we heard included those of landlords forcing tenants into prostitution and other illegal activity by threatening them with losing the roof over their heads and any future housing benefits. They also threaten tenants on the basis that, if someone leaves one of the properties, they will be classified as intentionally homeless and will not qualify for local authority support. Often, residents are encouraged not to enter the job market. We are trying to get people to rebuild their lives, but these rogue landlords try to prevent them from entering the job market. Even if tenants do so, it is for a maximum of 14 hours per week, making it almost impossible to save for the deposit needed to enter the private housing market.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a really good speech. When I visited Croydon jobcentre, I was told that support-exempt accommodation was the biggest problem faced, and that young people who could be working, doing things with their lives and be on the right path, were encouraged not to do so because the tapering off of support was so great that it made it impossible for them.

Bob Blackman: Clearly, one problem is that we do not know where all these properties are. We do not have the data right now. The hon. Lady will obviously know about Croydon, and we have concentrated on Birmingham. We know about Blackpool, Scarborough, Southwark, and certain other places in the country, but that just highlights that this issue is endemic across the country and why we need to take appropriate action.

Once a resident is working they may lose part of their housing benefit, and providers receive lower profits as a result, even though it is adequate to pay the rent. The conundrum therefore is that someone cannot afford a private rented property until they have a job, and they cannot get a job until they move into a property with affordable rent. That vicious cycle leaves nothing for those individuals to do during the day, and adds to increasing levels of antisocial behaviour resulting from inadequate exempt accommodation.

Exempt accommodation draws its name from its categorisation as exempt from locally set caps on housing benefit. That means that landlords can set sky-high rents, paid for out of taxpayers' money, on the basis that they are offering adequate support. Where every room in a property is converted into a small bedroom, often properties would have with 60 or 70 bedrooms and a mere three bathrooms. Unscrupulous landlords have a licence to print money, making excessive profits by capitalising on loopholes in the market. In many cases, we were informed that there was more money in being a rogue provider than in illegal drug dealing. We are already seeing exempt accommodation abuse spreading across local authorities—I have mentioned Birmingham—and, without the Bill, it is only a matter of time before cases prevail in all areas of the country.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): My hon. Friend may remember the evidence given to the Select Committee of a local authority in the south-east of England that had a case where a block allocated to exempt accommodation was sold and flipped overnight into an offshore property fund for hundreds of times the sale price. It is an absolute scam, and it is going international.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The example he cites is, of course, of millions of pounds. Not small amounts of money but millions of pounds are going offshore as a result of this issue.

Another common theme in the report was the neglect of interest in residents' previous circumstances. We found, more often than not, that when domestic abuse survivors find their way into the hands of these rogue operators rather than specialist domestic abuse services, there is a real risk that they end up living in the same building as the perpetrator—literally the person who abused them in the first place. I am sure the whole House will agree that that is completely inappropriate and insensitive. Housing victims with potential abusers is hugely damaging and will have the reverse effect of the original intention of supported housing, which is, after all, to help people rebuild their lives.

If I may, I will share a short extract from the report on one tenant's experience with a rogue provider. They say that their accommodation was

“managed by what could possibly be called gangsters, who would scare tenants at various times for various reasons, often for no reason. They were sometimes drunk and they were untrained for their roles. They were abusive, intimidating and preyed on the vulnerable...tenants were abused physically and mentally, but nothing was done.”

That quote is from someone who gave evidence to us and was a very brave individual to do so. The report goes on to cover the aforementioned issues in more detail and justifies the need for a Bill to regulate such scandalous plights.

I have already touched on the lack of data and documentation on providers, which is caused solely by the lack of regulation or previous acknowledgement of the issue. I therefore wish to explain how I found the relevant information needed to create a full picture in order to formulate the Bill. The journey began with multiple meetings with Crisis, which as we all know is a wonderful housing charity, to discuss its experience of working around exempt accommodation and those who have been subjected to harsh environments with inadequate support. It held a similar concern that it was a rapidly growing problem that until then was not receiving the political attention that it needed at national level.

The various Crisis skylights also enabled me to meet some brave and willing people with lived experience in such organisations. It was truly shocking to hear the impact that conditions had had on them and the further difficulties they had caused. That was disheartening, considering that those people had sought help and, in theory, the supported accommodation should have helped them back to normality rather than being a preventive barrier, as was the case. I am grateful to have met those people, who have been whistleblowers for the greater good. It takes a lot of courage to come forward, particularly when the providers know intimate details about them, which could easily be used against them by such manipulative bullies.

Understandably, many local authorities have taken a vested interest in the Bill throughout its journey. I have received many representations from local authorities up and down the country, which has enabled me to meet regularly with authorities from all over the country to discuss and address potential concerns arising from the sector and potential regulation. The consensus arising from those conversations was that the spiralling knock-on effects from merely one rogue provider in a district can be huge, whether from increased antisocial behaviour, prolonged claiming of housing benefit, or mental or physical health issues arising for residents.

I was saddened that, due to the dreaded conference cold, I was forced to miss the exempt accommodation conference held by Birmingham City Council in October. Colleagues have reliably informed me that it was an informative, eye-opening and productive series of discussions that has undoubtedly helped to align our goals and provide further weight to the case for a change in the law. Housing providers, and more widely housing representative boards, have engaged regularly on this issue through roundtables, private meetings and other such correspondence.

From the very beginning, I have been clear that one thing I did not want to bring about with the Bill was over-regulation or a negative impact on good providers. I have thus far concentrated on the dark side of exempt accommodation, but I am clear that we need to stress

[Bob Blackman]

that that is not the only side. There are countless providers who do a really good job, offering high-calibre accommodation with attentive, benevolent care and providing vulnerable people with assistance. For some, they provide a helping hand to get residents back on their feet and live independently. For others with long-term needs, they provide a permanent supported home. They should also be able to carry on their good work with minimal implications from regulation and minimal additional costs. Having liaised with many representatives, interested parties and boards, we have collectively reached that intended objective.

There is also a third group: providers who entered the market without understanding what is expected of them, or providers whose services are not up to scratch but want to stay in the business and improve. We are committed to ensuring that they get the support they need to improve and develop their services.

Moving on to my parliamentary comrades, many Members, particularly those centred in the west midlands, have direct casework relating to the provision of exempt accommodation. Their views and perspectives have offered me an advantageous insight into the wider impact or consequences of supported housing from a greater perspective, and into what they believe are the most appropriate measures to combat such problems. I am humbled to see so many here today to support the Bill on Second Reading.

There is no doubt that we are all far too aware of the turbulent political climate in recent months leading up to this point. The Bill has outlived two Ministers and I am pleased to see two of them here today. Regrettably, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North is unable to be with us this morning, but I look forward to his support as we go forward. We are on the third Minister, who I welcome to her place on the Front Bench. I look forward to hearing her reply to the debate in due course. That has caused a number of setbacks as we have tried to ensure we have agreement with the Minister and officials, but, to a certain extent, it has been advantageous because we have had three separate and hugely valuable contributions from Ministers.

Sarah Jones *rose*—

Bob Blackman: I knew I would tempt someone.

Sarah Jones: No, I will ask a different question. I wonder if the hon. Gentleman has engaged with Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions on the cost of housing benefit for supported exempt accommodation. Do we have any sense of the scale of what is being paid out, quite often to rogue landlords?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Member for that contribution. We have indeed engaged with DWP Ministers. We believe, and it is mentioned in the report, that literally millions of pounds could be saved by preventing rogue landlords from getting away with what they are getting away with. However, the data does not exist. One issue she may be aware of is that covering more than one Government Department when one is presenting a private Member's Bill is a big risk, to put it mildly, but she is absolutely right that we need to look at that issue.

We believe there is a huge amount of money to be saved for the public purse, which could then be directed to help those vulnerable people in the first place.

Let me begin with my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North, who is extremely well versed in this topic. He has a background in local government, worked for an accommodation provider—a charity—and was chairman of the Walsall Housing Group, so it was a pleasure to meet him on multiple occasions to discuss the initial plans. Although we did not always agree, he gave constructive feedback on what needed to be done.

Moving on to my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle, his vastly impressive portfolio in various ministerial positions provided favourable advice on ensuring that the Bill was appropriate for Government support and encompassed the necessary points to help secure success and, in turn, Royal Assent. I hope that, with such support, that will be true of my Bill.

I warmly welcome the most recent Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington. She has only recently come into post, but I thank her for her efficiency and productive inputs on a host of matters relating to the publication of the Bill and to get us to this point today—lastminute.com is certainly in order here.

I will briefly explain the Bill's intentions and clauses. Clause 1 provides for a supported housing advisory panel. That requires the Secretary of State to set up a panel of representatives from across the entirety of the supported housing sector. That may include, but is not limited to: registered providers, local authorities, social services, charities and residents of supported housing organisations. The panel will have an independently appointed chair, who will be expected to provide advice, counsel and guidance on matters directed by the Secretary of State. Panel members are appointed for a five-year term and may be elected for a maximum of two terms.

The Bill then moves on to local housing strategies to combat unscrupulous providers. Local housing authorities, including lower-tier councils, unitaries, metropolitans and London boroughs, will be required to review all examples of supported housing in their district and to publish a strategy every five years. That review should include a needs assessment and the consideration of future availability. The Bill entitles social services to co-operate with such reviews and have involvement in the future strategy. I hope that requirement will address the significant lack of data on the whole sector and help to shape future developments in the area. We should remember that there are often two contracts in place: one for the rent and one for support for residents who need help.

The Secretary of State may seek to publish a set of nationally supported housing standards that lay down minimum standards on accommodation and care support supervision. Those must be kept under constant review as circumstances regularly change, as happened during the recent pandemic, for example. Following meetings with the Minister and officials from her Department, I positively anticipate that the Government will choose to exercise this power because it builds on the previous commitment in the March 2022 statement to introduce nationally supported housing standards. Those standards will help us to get to grips with the third group of providers I mentioned: those that are not up to scratch at the moment but are ready to improve. As I said, for

most reputable providers those standards should reflect what they already do and should not pose them a concern.

That brings me to the clauses on licensing regulations. The Secretary of State may make regulations on which accommodation, as defined in clause 12(2), has to be licensed. There is no binding time constraint on the Government to make the regulations in the Bill, and it is fair to say that there has been detailed discussion of that.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): One is struck, on reading the Bill, by how many times the word “may” is used rather than “must”. I wonder whether the hon. Member could perhaps give us a sense of why that particular wording was chosen for clauses 4 and 3, to which he has previously referred.

Bob Blackman: We are seeking to have a number of permissive clauses in the Bill, so that if the things that have to be done are done and they work, and we drive the rogue providers out of the market, we will not need to initiate the other measures. However, I was keen to make sure we got the hooks in the primary legislation whereby the Secretary of State could then enhance with what is needed, so that we get to the point of controlling the supported housing providers in the way that we would envisage. It has been a matter of discussion between myself and Ministers and officials to get to this point; in the original draft we were seeking to do that immediately, but we took the spirit of compromise. I am looking forward to our reaching that position, and one provision in the Bill is that if after a year no regulations are published, the Secretary of State must release a progress report and report to the House.

I also welcome the Minister’s commitment in the House this morning to deliver a licensing scheme within 18 months of commencement, and I trust that she will confirm that commitment when she responds to the debate. Regulations must include provisions giving councils the power to set up licensing accordingly. That may include a further provision that requires local authorities to set up a scheme if provisions in the regulations are met.

The regulations mentioned up to this point must have the approval, by a resolution, of both Houses. I am clear that we do not wish to impose a requirement on every local authority to set up a licensing scheme, as that may not be required immediately everywhere. The Bill therefore allows for a further provision about refusal of licences should the applicant not pass a fit and proper person test. The licensees will not be subject to other forms of licensing under the 2004 Act, and the housing benefit regulations—this picks up on the intervention from the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones)—can be amended to remove or restrict entitlement. It further allows for licensing regulations to amend, repeal or revoke any enactment, should it be necessary. I make it clear that the expectation is that if providers fail to reach the standards required, their ability to change enhanced housing benefit will be withdrawn.

Let me move on to the consultation clause of the Bill, which stipulates that the Secretary of State must consult a list of statutory consultees about matters raised in regard to licensing. He or she may wish to ask for views on:

“whether the proposed regulations are likely to be an effective means of securing that National Supported Housing Standards are met, and

(b) any additional mechanisms for securing compliance”.

The current statutory consultees include the Local Government Association, the National Housing Federation and the Regulator for Social Housing. Local authorities have an obligation to have regard to the national standards and the advice or guidance issued by the Secretary of State whenever they carry out their duties regarding supported housing matters.

Let me turn to planning matters, where the Secretary of State must review the licensing regulations and, in the light of the review, consider the case for specifying exempt accommodation as a separate use class, referencing the Town And Country Planning Act 1990. In my view, there should be a requirement that providers need planning permission for a change of use, as per the Select Committee report recommendations. However, I have accepted the position that we will allow the Secretary of State to determine whether that is necessary going forward.

During the drafting phase of the Bill, the intentionality clause—this is about those who would be classified as “intentionally homeless”—caused much discussion. I was keen, having seen things at first hand with the Select Committee on the visits we made to Birmingham, that if someone is in inadequate accommodation and they take the brave leap to leave the often dangerous and compromised situation they find themselves in, they should not be found intentionally homeless. Therefore, section 191 of the Housing Act 1996 is amended so that should the departed accommodation or support be below the national standards, no intentional homelessness will be caused. Many authorities are already looking at trying to make that change, because of the scandal of these rogue landlords.

Finally the Bill addresses the sharing of information and consequent use of specified information. It enables the Secretary of State to make regulations regarding data sharing between local authorities, registered providers, regulators of social housing and the Secretary of State. Further, it allows for local authorities to use information obtained under the housing benefit or council tax functions for the exercise of its functions under the Act. This is a particularly difficult area. For example, victims of domestic abuse need their whereabouts to be kept confidential, especially from historically abusive partners. This is a particularly difficult area, but victims of domestic abuse need their whereabouts to be kept confidential, especially from historically abusive partners. Others in vulnerable positions also need confidentiality to be maintained.

Although I have briefly touched on some of these issues, I intend to cover a few possible objections to the Bill and refute them—it is always good to anticipate what people may think of raising. Understandably, the concern that good providers, particularly those of a much smaller size, will face a considerable burden and be forced out of the field was prevalent in discussions on the Bill. The worry was that, through the implementation of further regulation, the financial cost would be so great that it would not be viable for them to continue practising. Another worry was that they may have to restructure their entire business model to suffice the new regulations again, creating costs and a considerable amount of restructuring work.

[*Bob Blackman*]

A further such concern, which was highlighted throughout the research meeting for the Bill, was raised by local authorities. They were concerned that, while the scheme would be beneficial and necessary for districts where there are many providers in operation, it would be cost-ineffective for local authorities where the district contains, for example, only a single provider, which may be operating with very good intentions and providing an appropriate and respectful service. Building on that, there were discussions that the scheme would be costly for local authorities regardless of the number of providers. These costs would cover implementation, the establishment of regulation, administration recourses, and procedural measures for providers that do not comply with licensing standards as set out by the Secretary of State.

Additionally, a threat to the Bill was that, if appropriate personnel from relevant bodies could not be persuaded to join the newly established supported housing advisory panel, it would lack invested advice and appropriate scrutiny. The Secretary of State is, undoubtedly, incredibly experienced and well versed in matters within his Department. However, as much as we would like it, we do not have all the answers to everything. If a full board could not be established, it would risk losing the breadth of expertise on every potential implication of the topic.

Finally, another objection was the timeframe in which the Bill is to be enacted by the Government. There is no stipulation of a threshold in which the Government must enact the panel and release their regulations for supported housing licences. This could allow the Government to prolong the process—I am sure they would not do such a thing—allowing many rogue providers to continue abusing the system, taking high levels of housing benefit in return for providing poor quality care and accommodation to residents. The premises used for such rogue institutions are so poorly constructed that they would take minimal time to set up, allowing new entrants to the market to rinse the system before regulation is introduced in a somewhat distant future, effectively making the Bill redundant for some while.

After much consultation on the objections raised in my previous comments, along with two incredibly useful pre-legislative scrutiny sessions, which the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee held recently, we have addressed those issues and I am satisfied that, as a consequence, they will cease to exist. First, it is essential that the Bill does not harm or penalise good providers for their good work. Although I have extensively focused on the providers that are not up to par with their care provision, many, as I have said, are doing a really good job, earning the entire housing benefit they receive, going above and beyond in supporting individuals rebuilding their lives and gaining independence. In this regard, as I mentioned when outlining the Bill, some good providers will be allowed to exempt themselves from licensing schemes so as not to compromise their provision, particularly those from smaller, more intimate, not-for-profit providers. What these exemptions look like will be decided following consultation with these good providers, so that their voice and good work is front and centre of the provisions.

The objection that the licensing scheme set up by local authorities would be pointless when they have only a single organisation in their district that this

would affect has also been addressed by measures in the Bill. These are that the national supported housing standards created by the Secretary of State can be adopted by local authorities directly. There are then opportunities for councils to team up with neighbouring local authorities to ensure that their resources are not being wasted. That also prevents rogue providers from jumping from one local authority to another.

To refute the third objection, that sufficient board members for the supported housing advisory panel would not be in place, having had copious discussions with boards and representatives of organisations such as Women's Aid, the National Housing Federation, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and many others, it was abundantly clear that there is no shortage of volunteers to serve on the board. It is in the best interests of members to have their views represented, and thus I do not deem that a problem likely to arise for the sector.

Finally, there is the objection of the lack of time constraints on the Government throughout the Bill. Admittedly, this was an area where we went back and forth with the Department several times, to ensure that the Government were efficient in providing the licensing minimum standards and to prevent the barbaric activities of poor providers from continuing any longer. I understand that today the Minister will make a number of commitments at the Dispatch Box, for which I am grateful, that these measures will be enacted within the previously agreed 18 months from the commencement of the Act. That will reassure the thousands of residents currently suffering in below-par housing.

I am pleased that that builds on the further Government commitment to give 22 councils a further £13.5 million to help them to clamp down on rogue landlords who exploit the supported housing system and fail vulnerable residents. The measure comes on top of the £6 million distributed in August to five separate council areas to build on previous pilot schemes. The new funding will help councils to step up inspections, carry out better scrutiny of housing benefit claims to ensure they are reasonable and ensure the quality of accommodation and support to residents. Along with my Bill, that will ensure that together we crack down on all malpractice in the sector.

In the last few years, with the war in Ukraine and the covid-19 pandemic, we have become more aware than ever before that circumstances and environments can change with the flip of a coin. I was therefore keen to incorporate measures that would enable the Secretary of State to appropriately update aspects of the Bill should that be needed in future. Those powers include the ability for the Secretary of State to publish amendments or replacements to the national supported housing standards, as well as to withdraw such standards should he deem it necessary.

Additionally, the Secretary of State may by regulation make provision under which a person having control of or managing supported accommodation that is located in a district designated for the purposes of the regulations and that is not categorised in the Bill's defining features of supported housing accommodation must also obtain and comply with a licence. To ensure the appropriate use of the provision, the Secretary of State must consult the statutory consultees before enacting the aforementioned powers.

As I reach the conclusion of my speech on Second Reading, it is only right that I mention the people who have made it possible to get to this stage. It has been a long and sometimes uphill challenge, but one that has enabled me to work with some incredible people, coming together with one main goal. Firstly, the entire team at Crisis have provided invaluable support and guidance throughout the entire process. Most notably, Jasmine Basran and Sarah Rowe have both worked tirelessly on policy and logistical aspects of the Bill, providing briefings, advice and counsel, and been part of the multitudinous meetings that have taken place over the last six months. Emily Batchelor, Beth Exworth and Martine Martin have also been enormous support in arranging press releases and MP briefings on the Bill.

Justin Bates from Landmark Chambers has been instrumental in drafting the Bill with his expertise on housing, property and local government law. Having edited the erudite “Encyclopaedia of Housing Law and Practice”, there is not much about this topic that Justin is not learned on, and he has been a tremendous addition to the team working on this Bill. I also had the support of Joe Thomas from Landmark Chambers at the beginning of the process to advise on planning laws.

Throughout this process, we have had the pleasure of working with three separate Ministers with the portfolio for housing and homelessness. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) and the current Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), have all been influential in getting the Bill to this point. Their advice and flexibility throughout the last six months are greatly appreciated by me and by the whole team. I have no doubt that those who have been afflicted with homelessness can trust that their views will continue to be represented passionately and devotedly by the Minister in her new role. The Officials from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities have also been a great help in drafting the Bill and agreeing the various clauses. They have engaged in countless meetings and conversations with my team, supporting and advising the Ministers effectively and efficiently on all the aspects on which we have needed to agree.

I have had the pleasure of meeting several direct witnesses of supported housing. Many of my colleagues in the Chamber today will have listened to Wayne and Ian, both from Crisis Skylight Birmingham, at the Regulate the Rogues briefing. Both of them displayed bravery and raw honesty when describing their experiences of living in supported housing. I am sure we can all agree that sharing experiences of such tough times—stories of sheer exploitation—is never easy, and I send them copious thanks for their invaluable contributions in spreading awareness of rogue landlords.

I am pleased to see that some Members from Birmingham constituencies are present, and I appreciate their giving up their time on a Friday to support the Bill. Birmingham City Council has provided much useful evidence, as well as the invitation to the Select Committee that I mentioned earlier; I also mentioned the conference that it held, sparking much constructive discussion of this issue. I particularly thank Councillor Sharon Thompson, who has done brilliant work in this area.

The Committee has been very supportive of the Bill. The publication of its report has highlighted the corruption in the sector, and has opened many eyes to the need for

regulation. I thank all its members not only for their work on the report, but for the two sessions of pre-legislative scrutiny. The contributions of colleagues helped to shape the Bill and ensure that it targeted the areas I had originally hoped it would.

Let me also express my gratitude to the housing providers and interested bodies that have met me over the last few months to discuss the Bill and offer their thoughts. This has helped me to ensure that there is support from across the sector, and that their worries are addressed to prevent any unwarranted consequences that might have potentially arisen. Specifically, I thank Sapphire Independent Housing and Livingstone House for allowing me to walk around their properties, see the services they are providing, and meet many of their clients.

Finally, I thank my team in the office for their continued support—particularly Hattie Shoosmith, who joined me only in February, and who has attended virtually every meeting and been involved in virtually every aspect of this process. No doubt she did not expect that when she came to work for me.

I am sure that, after the best part of an hour—[HON. MEMBERS: “More!”]—I have exhausted all things related to the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill, and I now look forward to hearing the comments of other Members. Let me end by saying, once again, how grateful I am to those who have offered support, and to all right hon. and hon. Members who are present today. I very much hope that the Bill will have continued support from the Government and from all parties. The message we have to send today is “Rogue landlords, your time is up”, and I commend the Bill to the House.

10.33 am

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): I am delighted to speak in today’s debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his decision to use his Private Member’s Bill slot to address some of the issues in the supported exempt accommodation sector. They are issues that are close to my heart, for they have affected my constituents very deeply. The proliferation of rogue providers and poorly managed supported exempt accommodation across Birmingham has scarred the communities that I represent.

Although the Bill does not do everything in quite the way I would wish, it is a huge leap forward. The hon. Member for Harrow East and I may agree on almost nothing else, but I am an enthusiastic supporter of his efforts in this regard, and I appreciate the generosity that he showed in his speech towards colleagues in Birmingham City Council, particularly Councillor Sharon Thompson, who has also been working incredibly hard in trying to get to the bottom of not just the issues in the sector, but the best ways of tackling them.

So I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I deeply appreciate his efforts and the Bill. I also recognise the work of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on which he sits. Without its in-depth reporting on exempt accommodation, we perhaps would not have made the progress we see today.

I resisted the temptation to intervene on the hon. Gentleman when he listed the previous Ministers with whom he worked. I welcome the new Minister to her place, and I recognise the efforts of her predecessors, particularly the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

Hughes) and the right hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson). I worked very closely with the former, who worked in this sector before coming into politics. He was careful and assiduous in trying to increase the salience of this matter across Government, but I am afraid I cannot give them a free pass on the amount of time it has taken us to get to this point. We are here today only because we have used a private Member's Bill slot to make this progress.

I feel so strongly about the Government's delay on this matter, and I call them out for it, because every week and month that passes without action, without the regulatory oversight we need in this sector, rogue providers ruin communities all over our country. Whole streets have been utterly ghettoised by the proliferation of poorly run supported exempt accommodation. Vulnerable people are housed in these properties and, where they are unlucky and have a rogue provider, we effectively get state-sponsored grooming, state-sponsored abuse and all sorts of other horrors, some of which the hon. Member for Harrow East outlined and many of which I have seen in my constituency and across my city. It is high time that the Government called time on this behaviour, because taxpayers' money is funding rogue individuals who are lining their own pockets—they are laughing at us while they do it, and it is completely unacceptable. They have ruined lives and communities, and they must face the consequences.

I welcome the progress we are making, but we could and should have got here faster. Even once the Bill passes, with Government support, there is still so much more work to do.

As the hon. Gentleman outlined, we all know that exempt accommodation is a type of supported housing that is exempt from the housing benefit regulations that limit rents to local levels, and we all know exempt accommodation is often used to house vulnerable people, including prison leavers, domestic abuse survivors, recovering addicts and those at risk of homelessness. We all recognise that the cost of helping such individuals is higher, so the exemptions that apply to this type of housing, and therefore the ability to access higher payments to house such people, were designed to allow providers to access adequate sums of money to help individuals as they seek to turn their lives around. Nobody envisaged that we would enter the world of abuse we have seen in the sector once the exemptions took effect. Obviously, this was not planned. Unfortunately, although the purpose of the exemptions is good, we have seen abuse proliferate.

The higher rate of housing benefit goes directly to the provider in return for their housing and supporting these vulnerable people, but we all know that, too often, it does not happen in practice. Like the hon. Gentleman, I recognise and appreciate the work of legitimate providers who act in good faith. They are in this work to do the right thing by deeply vulnerable people, and it is in all our interests that these vulnerable people—whether they have left the prison or care systems, whether they have fled domestic abuse and violence or whether they are trying to recover from addiction—have the help they need to turn their lives around, so that they can be productive and healthy citizens once again. Good providers, those that are not just looking for a job but have a social mission to help the most vulnerable in our society to turn their lives around, are doing important work, but

there are now simply too many providers that, because they have seen the gaps, are willing to game the system and give the entire sector a bad name.

Vague housing benefit regulations—this relates to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) made—and the sector's exemption from council powers such as planning and the licensing of houses in multiple occupation mean that pretty much any provider can pop up anywhere and begin accessing housing benefit, with no test to ensure that they are decent or doing right by the vulnerable groups of people they are looking to house. Dodgy providers are cramming vulnerable tenants into badly run hostels and HMOs, and the system is a complete money-spinner for cowboy landlords who are lining their pockets with housing benefit payments while providing little to no support at all.

The system too often fails everyone. In the light of that, the Bill is not only necessary but long overdue. I have lost count of the number of times I have spoken to a constituent about a problem exempt property on their road or the disgusting treatment that an exempt tenant has received at the hands of their unscrupulous provider.

We are in this mess because of the gaps in regulations. The Housing Benefit Regulations 2006 state that a property cannot be exempt unless the claimant is being provided with "care, support or supervision". However, those regulations do not define what "care, support or supervision" means, so local authorities are left relying on case law, which only says that the care, support or supervision has to be "more than minimal". In practice, that means hardly anything at all. As the hon. Member for Harrow East said, it is not unusual for providers to suggest that care, support or supervision can be accounted for by somebody popping along to a property once a week, if tenants are very lucky, and shouting up the stairs, "Are you all okay?" and then walking straight back out again. If tenants are lucky, they might get a provider that thinks care, support or supervision responsibilities are discharged by putting CCTV cameras in communal areas. That is often the low threshold that rogue providers feel they have to overcome. It is obviously not what was envisaged when the regulations were drafted, and it is the reason I have engaged regularly with Ministers and officials in the Department for Work and Pensions.

While changes in regulation by the Housing Minister and her officials are necessary and important, we also need to destroy the business model and the gaps in housing benefit regulations that are the reason why this has proved to be such a lucrative money-spinner for the cowboys who have flooded into the sector. It is crucial that the Government tighten up welfare regulations and set out in law a proper test for what counts as care, support or supervision, because we must cut off the ease with which this extra cash can be accessed.

In Birmingham, we have had a worrying and significant growth in the exempt accommodation sector. As a result, we have a serious dependence on exempt providers to house many of the vulnerable people across our city. That is perfectly exemplified by the astronomical rise of a provider called Reliance, which is now the largest exempt accommodation provider operating in Birmingham. Just four years ago, Reliance was a dormant housing association based in Kent, and today it houses nearly 8,000 exempt tenants—approximately 38% of all exempt accommodation tenants in Birmingham.

I have come across a number of examples of bad practice by Reliance as a provider of this type of social housing that is failing my constituents and exacerbating the issues in the exempt accommodation sector. Right now, I am dealing with a case that involves two constituents who told me they were threatened with eviction, intimidated and left with less than an hour of one-to-one support during their tenancy at the hands of their provider, Reliance—all of this while being housed in a property that required a number of repairs. My constituents told me that for the six weeks that they were in one of these properties, they only had gas for two weeks.

After I referred the matter to Birmingham City Council, it made the decision in September to claw back some of the housing benefit that had been paid to Reliance in respect of these constituents in that property because it concluded that they were not being adequately supported. This action appears to have resulted in Reliance issuing all the tenants in the property with an eviction notice on the trumped-up charge that the residents were not engaging with the support it was providing, despite the council deeming that support to be inappropriate and of an unacceptable standard. To make matters worse, Reliance also asked the tenants to set up a direct debit to repay the “debt”, as it called it, for the housing benefit payments that it lost as a result of its poor support provision. Sadly, the saga does not end there.

Reliance has since tried to push for an informal agreement with Birmingham City Council, whereby Reliance would agree not to pursue the so-called debt against my constituents if my constituents and I withdrew our complaint. It is basically punishing my constituents for telling the truth, for calling out the absolute abject lack of support they have been receiving and for seeking help from their elected representative. This is a provider housing thousands of vulnerable people across my city. It seems to me that it basically thinks it is too big to fail, that it has Birmingham City Council over a barrel, and that it can essentially hold us all to ransom and therefore get away with this utterly outrageous behaviour. I appreciate that may seem an extreme example, but it demonstrates perfectly the need to take power away from providers such as Reliance and put it back in the hands of local authorities, which at least have responsibilities to citizens first and foremost.

The licensing scheme in the Bill provides a framework for councils to determine who can provide exempt accommodation within their areas, and that is an important step forward. A licensing scheme would drive up standards and ensure that both the accommodation and support are good enough to enable people with incredibly complex and changing levels of need to move on with their lives. To achieve that, the scheme must provide new powers to councils to ban or fine dodgy providers so that they can finally clamp down on those who flout the system. It must also include what effectively amounts to a fit and proper persons test. It should not be possible to provide housing to some of the most vulnerable people in our country and not even have to establish that someone is of good character before they do so.

I also stress that a licensing scheme must include an inspections regime, which will ensure that even after a licence has been secured we can keep providers on their toes to prevent a situation whereby rogue providers think that they just have to cross the threshold of getting a licence and they can then go back to their

previous practices. They must be made to continue to demonstrate good practice to keep their licence. For that, regular inspections to keep providers on their toes and to ensure a decent level of service is maintained must be brought forward.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): The hon. Lady is right to want to ensure that standards and an inspection regime are in place. Does she feel that there should be a complaints procedure as well, which could be raised with the bodies, so that if someone is running into trouble, they have that back-up?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I was just about to make that point. A complaints procedure is necessary to protect, for example, the two constituents whose case I have already highlighted. They are effectively being punished for escalating a complaint to their elected Member of Parliament. We need a complaints system in-built into whatever regulation emerges after the licensing provided for by the Bill, so that there is recourse to help and so that providers getting into the sector understand that if they fail their tenants they can be complained about and they cannot hold them to ransom if a complaint comes in. A complaints mechanism would be an important element of keeping everybody in this sector honest, if I may put it that way.

The good providers will have no problem in proving that they are doing good work and will pass any test required of them with relative ease. I can pinpoint exactly who is doing a good job in Birmingham and who is not. Anyone who has done any work in this sector knows who the good guys are and knows where the problems are. I do not believe that any regulatory threshold applying to every provider would in the end amount to a barrier for the good providers. None of us would want to see them driven out of this sector, but I do not believe asking them to pass the same test as everyone else would achieve that.

Ben Everitt: Perhaps I am about to repeat the mistake made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) and this may be a point that the hon. Lady is about to come to. Further to licensing, the inspections regime and the complaints regime, does she not agree that we need valid and robust enforcement practices, so that once these rogue landlords are identified through regulation, licensing and complaints, we can throw the book at them and then word will get round so that we drive them out of the sector?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member makes an important point: we absolutely need enforcement. I might also observe that we need some money in order to pay for that enforcement—it does not happen automatically. There is no magic wand that can be waved to make sure that enforcement takes place: it requires staff, officers to go around and do the enforcement, and a proper system that is well regulated and sufficiently resourced—to put it bluntly, a system that has the money that it needs.

The hon. Gentleman is right that enforcement of these rules will be incredibly important. That is one of the reasons why, although I welcome a local licensing regime, I still want to see action from the Government. In the end, it is only a national regulator—or by passing a duty to one of the existing national regulators—that will be able to police the system consistently across the

[Shabana Mahmood]

whole of the country. By regulating practice nationally, rather than leaving it to local licensing regimes, we will achieve the economies of scale that are required to make the system of enforcement affordable. Local authorities do have a crucial role to play, though, and I have seen the changes in Birmingham: the pilots that the Government commissioned have been undertaken and have reported, and have done good work. However, if we leave it to local licensing regimes, we will still allow rogue providers to play a whack-a-mole system. These are highly enterprising individuals who will, at lightning speed, work out where the gaps in the system lie. If they think Birmingham has got tougher, what is to stop them going straight across to Sandwell or Walsall, where the licensing might not be as strong because those areas have not previously had such a big problem? Suddenly, they have a big problem and have to bring in licensing, and those rogue providers just go to another part of the country. Local licensing is a good step forward, but the Government's feet should be held to the fire. We need a national regulatory system that applies everywhere, so that this whack-a-mole system can be defeated once and for all.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an important point about consistency between different local authorities. Arguably, some of that could happen through sharing best practice, as we saw for example when Blackburn piloted the scheme: it worked with other local authorities. However, does she agree that the good providers will welcome local licensing, because it will give them an opportunity to demonstrate that what they are providing is a quality service?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member is absolutely right: people who are in this sector for the right reasons, trying to do the right thing by vulnerable people, will welcome licensing and the new threshold. So many good providers in Birmingham have told me that they are tearing their hair out because the rogue providers are giving them a bad name too, and are driving them out of the sector because the rents go sky-high. If a provider is trying to do the right thing, the business model does not work for them; if they are in it just to cream off taxpayers' money and line their own pockets, it is a great system, and they can do whatever they like. Strong regulation—national regulation—will be welcomed by all the sorts of people we want it to be welcomed by, which can only be a good thing for vulnerable tenants and citizens across the country.

Ben Everitt: The hon. Lady is being very generous in giving way. To her point about playing whack-a-mole, does she agree that the best way to end whack-a-mole is to grab one of the moles and give it a really good whack? If we catch one of these rogue providers and throw the book at them, word will get around, and we can chase those providers out of the sector.

Shabana Mahmood: Would that it were that easy. My experience of rogue landlords is that the worst really do act like a bunch of gangsters. Going after one will send a message to some of the others, but we need to close down all of the routes into the system. As I say, unfortunately, these are enterprising individuals; if they

put their enterprising skills to good uses, we would probably welcome their contribution to our national life, but they are currently abusing the system, and abusing people while doing so. Until we close down all the avenues for abuse, we will still get rogue individuals thinking, "That's a bit of easy money."

In some parts of the country—I strongly suspect it has happened in a few cases in Birmingham—such lax regulation is providing ample opportunity for those involved in other criminal acts effectively to launder their money and pose as respectable citizens running housing associations. We know that that is part of what is happening in this sector across the country, so we need to push the Government—collectively, I hope; cross-party in this House—to bring forward national measures. That is why I will fight the cause for a national regulator come what may, because that is ultimately the proper answer to this problem.

As well as securing the quality of exempt accommodation nationally, the Government also have a responsibility to ensure that the taxpayer is getting value for money and that the money being spent in this sector is doing what we all believe it should be doing. In Birmingham, there are more than 21,000 providers of exempt accommodation accessing the higher rates of housing benefit that are available. This equates to millions of pounds of taxpayers' money, but currently there is no way of knowing how much is being claimed by each provider, or whether providers are upholding their commitments and providing support to the tenants. The hon. Member for Harrow East made similar points.

The Government have been aware for at least a decade that robust information about exempt accommodation is not held centrally, but they still do not collect even basic data to understand the levels of housing benefit being spent within the exempt accommodation sector. When I asked the Department in December 2021 how much money is being spent on this sector, it simply responded that it was too costly to collect that information. I would say that it is too costly not to collect it given the abuse we have seen occur. As the Select Committee noted, the Government have been caught sleeping:

"The Government has no idea how much taxpayer money is spent on exempt accommodation, nor what this money is spent on."

Again in my constituency, we have seen the emergence of what are called ghost tenancies, whereby a managing agent or a registered provider is claiming enhanced rates of housing benefit for an occupant who has already vacated a property, or who in some cases never lived in the property in the first place. We just have to clamp down on all this abuse, and good data collection by the Government can help us to do that.

One of the things missing from the Bill is a firm commitment on planning. I think there is a possibility for the Government to bring forward such measures, but I would have liked them to commit to planning measures in this Bill.

Bob Blackman *indicated assent.*

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member is nodding, and I suspect he would have liked that to make its way into the Bill in a stronger form than it currently has. I welcome the direction of travel of the commitment that has been given, but it would have been a much stronger

Bill had those measures been a requirement on the Government. Oversaturation in certain areas is a huge problem, particularly in Birmingham, and it can only be dealt with if there is a planning requirement to get planning permission. That would enable local authorities to prevent oversaturation in their areas. There are streets in my constituency where a quarter of all the houses are now exempt accommodation. If we had proper planning powers and the ability to deny planning permission to people who want to turn these properties into exempt accommodation, a council would be able to prevent that from happening, and therefore prevent the saturation and the ghettoisation I have spoken of.

I really welcome this Bill. I do not believe that the Government have discharged their responsibilities to my constituents or people across the country sufficiently at the speed that is required—because, as I say, every moment of delay scars another community across our country for a long time—but I do welcome that they have at least supported this Bill. This Bill will pass, and I hope we can very quickly fill the gaps in regulation that exist so that all the vulnerable tenants across our country can get the support they need to turn their lives around, and no longer are communities scarred and damaged for a long time to come.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I call Gagan Mohindra, but I warn him that I will have to interrupt him at 11 o'clock. [*Laughter.*] I was rather hoping that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) would have continued until just before then.

10.58 am

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I will on purpose be a bit slow with my introductory remarks because I may have to repeat them after the urgent question.

First, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who is a passionate advocate for this particular area of our society. I also welcome the Minister, who I know is a doughty champion for our communities, especially in the housing arena. I think this is a really important Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East spoke about its length, at 14 clauses, but I would argue that the quality definitely outweighs the length. It is one of those things that I think is really required. From the Government's perspective, it is right that the legislation is there to encourage people to do the right thing. I am now purposefully elongating my words because I have about 10 seconds left. So it is something I will think about for another two seconds.

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

Fleet Solid Support Ships

11 am

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on fleet solid support ships.

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Alex Chalk): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. On 16 November my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced that Team Resolute—consisting of Harland & Wolff, BMT and Navantia UK—has been appointed as the preferred bidder in the competition to build the fleet solid support ships. Having appointed Team Resolute as the preferred bidder, the Ministry of Defence expects to award it a contract around the end of this year. That appointment follows on from the award to BAE Systems in Glasgow of the £4 billion contract for five Type 26 frigates earlier this week. Both are excellent news for UK shipyards and the shipbuilding skills base in our country.

Those crucial vessels will provide munitions, stores and provisions to the Royal Navy's aircraft carriers, destroyers and frigates deployed at sea. Ammunition and essential stores will ensure that the mission can be sustained anywhere around the world. The contract will deliver more than 1,000 additional UK shipyard jobs, generate hundreds of graduate and apprentice opportunities across the UK, and a significant number of further jobs throughout the supply-chain. Team Resolute has also pledged to invest £77 million in shipyard infrastructure to support the UK shipbuilding sector.

The entire final assembly will be completed at Harland & Wolff's shipyard in Belfast to Bath-based BMT's British design. The awarding of the contract will see jobs created and work delivered in Appledore, Devon, Harland & Wolff Belfast, and within the supply chain up and down the country. This announcement is good news for the UK shipbuilding industry. It will strengthen and secure the UK shipbuilding enterprise as set out in the national shipbuilding strategy, and I commend this decision to the House.

Chris Evans: The awarding of this contract raises one fundamental question: are the Government on the side of British workers? When the Secretary of State for Defence designated these ships as warships in 2020, he said:

"The Fleet Solid Support warships competition will be the genesis of a great UK shipbuilding industry".

However, he then seemed to cool on the idea. When speaking in front of the Defence Committee in July, he stated that ships will only be constructed and integrated in the UK, and two weeks ago at Defence questions he said that he would

"not cut corners for party political ideology".—[*Official Report*, 7 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 13.]

This is not about party politics; this is about creating British jobs for British workers, with British ships using British steel.

Ministry of Defence spin doctors were quick to get to work on the press release, claiming that this bid will create 2,000 jobs in UK shipyards and in the supply chain. However, research by the GMB and Team UK's contract bid shows that if these ships were built in the UK rather than in Spanish shipyards, it would mean

[Chris Evans]

more than 6,000 UK jobs. The Government have created a new Spanish armada more than 430 years since the last one lost. It is also highly unusual for warships to be built abroad, due to security implications. Earlier this week, the Government announced that the new Type 26 warships will be built in the UK, yet the fleet solid support ships will not be. Why has a different decision been made, and how will security and economic concerns be managed?

Before we hear calls from the Government Benches of “What would Labour do?”—well, we would build British by default. Our approach has broad support. The Defence Committee has said that Ministers should “ensure that warships are built in UK yards and that this designation continues to include the Fleet Solid Support ship contract”.

The Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions has argued that building and maintaining fleet solid support ships in the UK was strategically important, but how much of those ships will be built in Spain and not the UK? Will Ministers continue to use UK steel to build those ships? British workers have the right to know whether their Government are on their side. Based on their words and deeds, the answer is a resounding no.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman but, with great respect, what a load of nonsense. He started by saying that the Labour party would be on the side of British jobs for British workers, and that is exactly what the contract delivers. There will be 1,200 jobs—not any old jobs but fantastic new jobs—in our shipbuilding sector. The Government are already investing in Type 26, and we are seeing full order books in Scottish yards. This will mean additional jobs in Harland & Wolff. It is worth focusing on what Harland & Wolff had to say. Its chief executive said:

“I am pleased to see UK Government seize the last opportunity to capture the skills that remain in Belfast and Appledore before they are lost for good”.

The contract is about ensuring that there is strength and depth in shipyards across our country.

The hon. Gentleman went on to make points about how some components will be built overseas, but in modern engineering designs ’twas ever thus. Take, for example, the F-35—a highly sophisticated bit of equipment built in the United States. Where is much of the equipment designed and manufactured? Here in the United Kingdom. That is exactly what we do. Do the Americans think that, somehow, because of its British components, it is some latter-day invasion on the lines of the Spanish armada, as he referred to? Of course not. That would be complete nonsense. This is fantastic investment that, by the way, also ensures an additional £77 million invested in Harland & Wolff. That is supporting British jobs, British know-how and a pipeline of British expertise that will sustain our shipbuilding industry into the future.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I declare an interest as an active officer of the all-party parliamentary group for the Celtic sea. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that it is important for these jobs to be spread around the whole country and that, in particular, Appledore in the south-west is important strategically for the project, given that we need to upgrade

some of the ports in the south-west to ensure that we can provide proper maintenance and support to the floating offshore wind sector once that gets under way?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. If we are to have shipbuilding not just now but in the future, it must be sustainable, it must have the skills and it must have the strength and depth. By investing in yards such as Appledore, we do not put all our eggs in one basket; we grow the pie, as someone once said, and ensure that there is greater capacity. That will be good for jobs in the south-west and good for UK plc as a whole.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): The union Prospect has warned that, as a result of this decision, as much as 80% of the work on these vessels could be offshored to Spain. This is a devastating blow to British shipyards and will compound the anxiety felt by workers at Cammell Laird in my constituency following last week’s announcement that, as a result of procurement laws imposed by Whitehall, much of the work on the new Mersey ferries will take place in Romania. It is time that the Government began to back British business. Will the Secretary of State or the Minister now commit to implementing Sir John Parker’s recommendation that all Defence-funded vessels should be open to UK-only competition and speak to Cabinet colleagues about the need for a broader overall procurement law so that, at last, we can begin to build in Britain by default?

Alex Chalk: These are British ships built to British designs in a British dockyard. I am pleased to be able to make that absolutely clear. The contract is essential to ensure not just that there are British jobs but, critically, that there is the best know-how—wherever in the world it comes from—so that our yards are equipped with the expertise, skills and talent they need to sustain these ships and ships into the future.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): We have world-class shipbuilding capabilities across the UK, so does my hon. and learned Friend agree that building our three fleet solid support ships in Belfast with £77 million of investment will boost jobs in Northern Ireland, demonstrating our Government’s commitment to spreading opportunity and jobs throughout the entire UK?

Alex Chalk: Brilliantly put; my hon. Friend is absolutely right. It spreads the jobs and spreads the know-how but sustains our capability. One of the exciting things that I have discovered since starting this job is that not only is there a pipeline of warship orders, but the overall strength of our sector is on the up. This contract brings additional jobs, additional resources and additional prospects to this important British industry.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The Minister must understand the importance of sovereign capability when it comes to defence, so can he confirm what percentage of the supply chain for the fleet solid support ships is expected to be UK-based? Can he tell us whether he has required contractual guarantees on that percentage?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the importance of ensuring sovereign capability. That is why I am so proud that Scottish yards, and indeed other yards, have full order books of British Royal Navy

warships that are to be built to increase sovereign capability. She asks about supplies. What I can tell her is that 800 British jobs are directly supported in the supply chain. That, overall, is good news for British business, British manufacturers and British jobs.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I welcome my hon. and learned Friend's statement about the jobs that will be created. Clearly, this is an important industry not just for now but for the future. To that end, is he able to comment at this stage on the opportunities that might be provided for young people to do apprenticeships and so on, so they can be the next generation of shipbuilders?

Alex Chalk: I am so glad my hon. Friend raised that point, because that is exactly what I was discussing just this week when I was in Devonport. I do not know about him, but when he and I were a little bit younger, a lot of people felt that, at the age of 16 or 18, they either went into the workplace or they decided to go to university. What is so exciting now is that there are opportunities for people to get apprenticeships, whether degree-level or others. The companies supporting some of those apprenticeships are those involved in advanced engineering, precisely the sorts of businesses that will be supported by this excellent announcement today.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) said, the Defence Committee is very clear that British ships should be built in British yards. As I understand it, this consortium is led by the Spanish. Will he confirm whether it is the case that they are ultimately responsible for the contract, and how can he square that with what the Conservative party has told us for many years, which is that leaving Europe would ensure that British ships would be built in this country?

Alex Chalk: It is perfectly true that there is an international collaboration, but I gently point out that that is not unusual and nor is it unwelcome. In any modern sophisticated piece of engineering, whether Typhoon or F-35, there will be an international component. If all nations produced everything themselves, that would become incredibly expensive and would defeat the object. Through international collaboration, which by the way we are proud of, we will produce something world-class and meet the needs of the taxpayer as well as the needs of our armed forces, and—I have not emphasised it enough before, so I must do so now—critically, a world-class shipbuilder will bring a lot of its technical know-how into Harland & Wolff, allowing it to build excellent ships long into the future.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I do find some of the anger from the Opposition Benches ever so slightly confected. It is also quite unusual for good news to be brought to the attention of the House by the Opposition. However, in terms of quality, will the Minister guarantee that the key consideration here is ensuring that the Royal Navy continues to be a gem and one of the reasons why we are so proud of our armed forces?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend made an excellent point at the beginning, because never was such good news more surprisingly UQ'd. This is excellent news for the United Kingdom and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans)—who is very kind and courteous

in his dealings with me, for which I am grateful—for having done so. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Royal Navy is critical to the safety and security of this island nation. I was at Devonport earlier this week to see the work of an amazing crew on HMS Portland. To see the determination, commitment to the mission and sense of duty from those sailors and their captain was hugely inspirational. It is important for them to have confidence in their mission. We have confidence in them. That is important for the security of the United Kingdom.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): As both a newspaper and radio reporter, I had the privilege of seeing British-built ships launched on both Clydeside and Teesside. It was exciting and I admit it really engendered pride in being British, but can the Minister tell me why the Government appear to have so little pride and confidence in the UK shipbuilding industry and are prepared to turn their collective backs on British workers? Can he confirm how many jobs will be created or protected abroad, rather than at home?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Member is right: it is a matter of pride to see a British ship going into the water. However, I say respectfully that characterising things in the way that he does is a great mistake. I am happy to make it clear that the overwhelming majority of the jobs will be here in the UK. However, just as it would be absurd for the United States to say, "We will not have any British involvement in the production of the F-35", it would be absurd for us to say that we will turn our face against some of the best expertise in the world. That would also be counterproductive, because we would be setting our face against the technological know-how that will secure British jobs in the future. I am pleased to say that this decision does two things: first, it secures British jobs; secondly, it secures the British know-how that we need for a thriving and prosperous shipbuilding industry in the future. I hope that the hon. Member will therefore, in the fullness of time, enjoy the pride of seeing many more ships go into the water.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): In responding to the urgent question, the Minister seems to have left out a number of important details. Will he confirm whether the prime contractor for the fleet solid support ships will be the Spanish state-owned company Navantia, or will it be a British company?

Alex Chalk: I invite the hon. Member to look at the things that really matter—that is, the jobs that will come into British yards. Since we set out the national shipbuilding strategy, which was refreshed earlier this year, we have ensured that, for the first time in decades, there is a lasting pipeline for all Government-procured ships, whether for defence or elsewhere. That is important because the stability ensures that there can be investment.

On the hon. Member's specific point, there is, of course, a role for Navantia UK—there is no secret about that—just as there is a role for BAE Systems and all sorts of other industries in other badged weapons systems. That does not mean, however, that there is any reduced benefit for British workers. On the contrary, there is £77 million of investment. I respectfully say to him that the question that he has to answer is: would he set his face against a deal that would mean £77 million-worth of investment in a British yard, which, by the way,

[Alex Chalk]

desperately needs it? Without that investment, who knows what the future would be for Harland & Wolff? With that investment, we can be sure that it is bright, and he should welcome that.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Of course, if the whole contract was coming to UK yards, the investment would be more than £77 million. Now that the Minister has confirmed that the consortium is indeed Spanish-led, I remind him that no other G7 country offshores its warship production. Will he tell us how many jobs are going to Spain that would have come to this country as a result of this reckless decision by his Government?

Alex Chalk: I say respectfully that that is an absurd mischaracterisation. I am pleased that the overwhelming majority are coming here. By the way, jobs are also included for the people who designed this—BMT in Bath—which the hon. Member should welcome. The majority of the manufacturing is coming here. This decision also means that we will have the know-how to ensure that we have the pipeline to the future. If he wants to say that there are some jobs in Spain, that is perfectly true, but the overwhelming majority are here. Some of the Typhoons, for example, are assembled in Italy, so does he resent the fact that there are British jobs making some of the components? Of course he does not, because that is the modern world in which we live. Crucially, that modern world ensures that, as opposed to having some sort of prehistoric, antediluvian approach, we have strength for the United Kingdom, strength for the British armed forces and strength for British industry.

Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill

Proceedings resumed.

11.18 am

Mr Mohindra: I might recount my introductory remarks for colleagues who were not here 15 or 20 minutes ago, although they will not be as elongated as they were the first time around.

More seriously, this is a really important Bill. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—my good friend—for promoting it. As someone who, like him, has had experience in local government, I know at first hand the excellent work done by local authorities. One challenge that we need to face in debating this Bill is the capacity of local authorities to have a meaningful impact on both the creation of the regulatory environment and enforcement. Another point about the first part, which is important, is consistency across the country. We have unfortunately seen cases where one council may have capacity to enforce properly, but neighbouring ones are not able to do so. Entrepreneurial wrongdoers will use that opportunity to cross the invisible line of local government boundaries to continue to exploit the most vulnerable in our communities.

In my own South West Hertfordshire constituency I have good housing providers, which provide adequate support. In the south, I have 136 units of supported housing in Three Rivers, none of which is provided by the local authority. In the north, in Dacorum, there are 2,541 units, of which 536 are provided by private registered providers.

The Bill is not and should not be focused on those who do the right thing; it is for those who are not particularly discouraged from doing the wrong things. There is evidence, as we heard in the excellent introductory speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, of bad behaviour up and down the country. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) referred specifically to her own constituency and a local council. We need to ensure that there is a framework in place to actively discourage people from even attempting to exploit those whom we are looking to support.

The motivation to exploit and the need for supported housing are both real. The fact that it is uncapped means that it can potentially be quite lucrative. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) referred to some of the millions involved in this particular industry. The ambition for the Bill, which I fully support, is to have a minimum standard for the types of dwelling on offer to those who really need it.

On the impact on local communities, there is unfortunately a strong correlation between communities with a high concentration of supported homes and antisocial behaviour and crime. I think it was the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood who referred to the cyclical nature of that problem, with the most vulnerable being continually the victims of persecution and, in this case, exploitation.

Poor-quality housing, communal areas being turned into rooms and building control remain critical issues. If permitted development rights and probably failings in planning enforcement mean that dwellings that were built for two or three bedrooms could potentially have

eight or nine, with a couple of people in each, yet only one or two amenity spaces such as kitchens, WCs or larger bathrooms, that cannot be right. While housing supply remains tight up and down the country, we need to ensure that the quality is improved. As someone who sat on a planning committee for 16 years in local government circles before I came to this place, I saw the continual challenge of ensuring that developers, whether public or private, were doing the right thing.

It remains one of my ambitions to see that we future-proof our dwellings so that, theoretically, someone could live in the same home from the age of zero all the way to 100 years. That is fine if people are able to afford a decent, well-built home, but this debate is focused on those who need the state, both local government and national Government, to step in to ensure that they have the safety net they need to find their own way to get back on their feet and out of supported housing.

One critical thing we need to be mindful of is data. Both my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood mentioned the lack of data in this area. I studied mathematics many years ago and I know that, while from a policy perspective no politician wants to create bad legislation, we need the evidence base to confirm our assumptions. I have a continuing passion for value for money, and I am sure the Minister, who was previously in the Treasury, will agree that whether it is a local authority or the national Government, being able to prove that money is being spent well should be of paramount importance. We should be able both to improve the quality of homes and to offer better value for money. My challenge to her is not necessarily to spend more money, but to spend it better. The ultimate outcome should be a better quality of life for those who require this service.

The numbers show that 153,700 households in Great Britain were housed in exempt accommodation in May 2021. These are thousands of families who rely on the state. One of the biggest things we should do in this place is to ensure that people live to the best of their potential, and part of that is ensuring that they are not focusing on having a roof over their head, dealing with mould or putting food on the table. It is about saying to them, "You can be brilliant, exceptional and amazing."

I am sure I speak for all colleagues in saying that one of the joys of this job is going to speak to schoolchildren, and saying, "The opportunities you have, being brought up in this country, are second to none." As a second-generation immigrant, my sitting on these green Benches would be a rare phenomenon in other parts of the world, which makes me proud to be British.

On protecting vulnerable people, we unfortunately continue to hear about cases of sexual harassment and threats of eviction by landlords. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood mentioned a local provider who seems to use bully-boy tactics to threaten tenants who do the right thing by escalating. Although we want to discourage bad behaviour, there are occasional unintended consequences where a decent, reasonable landlord is tainted or accused of being a bad landlord. If there were a national register, it is important that they should be able to quickly appeal erroneous decisions.

Although I am not well versed, I have a little experience of cab licensing, which involves people's livelihoods. Accusations obviously need to be properly investigated, but frivolous accusations should not be detrimental to a person or company being able to earn their livelihood.

I will keep this fairly short, as I am conscious that a lot of people want to speak. On the Government's track record, I applaud last year's £5.4 million year-long pilot in five local areas, which has created the evidence base to say that this is required. I strongly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East that a panel of experts should feed into policymaking but, ultimately, decisions should be with the Minister and the Department. Although they will happily allow the input of good-quality evidence and data, it is for politicians to make policy. I applaud the independent panel, but the executive policy positioning and levers remain with the Department.

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

11.28 am

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra).

I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on bringing forward the Bill, and I commend his efforts in recent months to ensure that what we have before us is a robust piece of legislation. I thank all those who had a hand in developing and drafting the Bill: Justin Bates, Joe Thomas, Sam Lister, the team at Crisis and the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) who we, on this side of the House, fully acknowledge did much to get us to this point.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) for her earlier contribution. A handful of Members have doggedly pursued this issue over several years due to its impact in their constituencies, and she stands out among that small cohort for her persistence and determination in bringing this scandal to an end. She deserves full credit for doing so.

This is, without question, an important and impactful piece of legislation, yet it is also one that is long overdue. We have known for a considerable amount of time that far too many vulnerable people across the country find themselves living in unsafe, poor quality shared housing without the support they require and that those people have been exploited by unscrupulous providers who, by taking advantage of gaps in the existing regulatory regime, use them to extract significant amounts of public money through the exempt provisions relating to housing benefit. That there exist many good supported exempt providers is not in dispute, nor is the need to act with care to ensure that any measures introduced do not unduly impact on them, but that was never a convincing argument against acting at pace to address this scandal.

The harm that sharp practice in this sector is causing, both to vulnerable individuals left without adequate support and to communities struggling to cope with the impact of concentrated numbers of badly run exempt accommodation properties, is precisely why the Opposition tabled a motion in February this year calling on the Government to implement a package of emergency measures to end the exploitation and profiteering that is taking place as a result of rogue providers gaming the system. So, while I do not in any way wish to detract from the hon. Gentleman's achievement in securing a

[*Matthew Pennycook*]

place in the ballot and selecting this issue for his Bill, we on the Labour Benches do regret that the Government did not act sooner to bring this scandal swiftly and decisively to an end and that we are instead having to rely on a private Member's Bill to make progress on this matter.

That criticism aside, we very much welcome the measures contained in the Bill, which will enhance local authority oversight of supported housing and thereby enable local authorities to drive up standards within their areas. In particular, we welcome the provisions in the Bill that will enable the Secretary of State to prepare and publish national supported housing standards for England and those that will provide powers to make licensing regulations. As we have long argued, introducing a robust framework of national standards for the sector is essential given the vague present criteria that exists for determining what qualifies as the "more-than-minimal" care, support, or supervision to be provided by an exempt accommodation landlord. There is an overwhelming case for better regulating the eligibility for, and therefore access to, exempt benefit claims at a local level, to ensure that high-quality supported housing providers are the norm.

That said, there are ways in which we believe the Bill might be strengthened. Let me take an example that has been mentioned several times this morning. While we appreciate both the complexities involved in designing a workable system and the understandable concerns that exist about what such powers could mean for overall levels of supported housing provision, on balance we feel that the measures relating to planning set out in clause 8 are too limited, requiring only that within three years of Royal Assent the Secretary of State must carry out a review of the effect of the first licensing regulations introduced and then to consider on the basis of its findings whether to exercise powers in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to designate a new use class.

We believe that there is a robust case for considering again whether new planning powers that would allow local authorities to better proactively manage their local supported housing market should be incorporated into the Bill. I am aware, as the hon. Member for Harrow East will be, that many local authorities on the frontline of this problem are calling for precisely that to happen.

Other areas for improvement that we would suggest include: enhancing provisions for national monitoring and oversight; adding social security offences, such as dishonesty in claiming housing benefit, to the list of new banning order offences alongside the failure to comply with the licensing regime; and establishing evaluation and improvement notice procedures that mirror part 1 of the Housing Act 2004, so that local authorities with limited resources or only one or two problematic supported exempt providers have other options to drive up standards short of implementing a full licensing regime.

We hope that these and other constructive suggestions, as well as more general issues, such as whether local authorities will get the resources they need to implement the provisions in the Bill, can be debated constructively in Committee. What is important for today is that this Bill passes its Second Reading. For that reason, as well as to give the House sufficient time to do justice to the

important Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) will introduce next, I do not intend to detain the House for any longer, other than to state the following. The Bill is not a panacea. It does not address, in any way, the reasons that we have become overly reliant on non-commissioned exempt accommodation, including: a chronic shortage of genuinely affordable housing; reductions in funding for housing-related support; and new barriers to access for single adults requiring social rented or mainstream privately rented housing. But the Bill will help to put rogue exempt accommodation operators out of business and better enable local authorities to drive up supported housing standards in their areas. In doing so, it will improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society—those fleeing domestic abuse, those with severe mental health needs, those who have served their time in prison and are trying to make a fresh start, those leaving care and those battling addiction and substance dependence.

For that reason, I urge the House to give the Bill its Second Reading. I look forward to the anticipated commitments from the Minister. I hope the Bill will be further improved in Committee, and I trust that we can work on a cross-party basis to ensure that it becomes law as quickly as possible.

11.35 am

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing the Bill forward and for his long-term commitment in this sector. It has taken a lot of work for him and his team to bring the Bill to this point, and I congratulate them all on the work they have done. I welcome the Minister to her place. I know from the work she has done with her constituents that she is also committed to this sector and will bring some much-needed conscientiousness to the passage of the Bill.

The driver for most of us in this place—in fact, pretty much all of us, on both sides of the House—is that we want to protect the most vulnerable people in our communities. If we do not agree on that, we will not get anywhere fast, but I think we do. What we disagree on, perhaps, is how we get there. If we can keep that at the heart of all our debates, we will not go too far wrong.

Cornwall has long had a shortage of affordable housing, and it will come as no surprise to anyone that I will concentrate my remarks on that. Housing supply for local people continues to be squeezed, with more and more properties being held as holiday accommodation. The growth of the online short-term holiday lettings sector and the prevalence of second home ownership in the area has led to a shift in the rental market, with an acute reduction in the number of tenancies available for local people. This is important, because that sector is being squeezed the most in our towns and villages, and where the local council and providers cannot find suitable accommodation, that is relevant to the context of this discussion.

Cornwall is on a peninsula. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) talked about licensing needing to be consistent in all the local authorities in the surrounding area, but we do not have that luxury in Cornwall. We are a peninsula, and we need to get it right. We have a finite amount of housing

in our area, and therefore we need to make sure that all the housing is being used for the right purposes. That is why I always bang on about second home ownership and holiday lets—not because I want to demonise any one community, but so that everybody understands the fight we are fighting in Cornwall.

The Conservatives took control of the council a couple of years ago, and I pay tribute to our new portfolio holder for housing, Olly Monk, who has worked tirelessly on this. We had over 1,000 people in temporary accommodation, and he purchased SoloHaus homes, which provide safe, comfortable and sustainable dwellings for homeless people. There was the Everyone In initiative during the covid pandemic, and we are trying to keep that going in Cornwall. SoloHaus offers safe homes with their own front door for people who are in crisis. Homelessness has been growing in Cornwall for a number of years. That was brought sharply into the spotlight during the covid pandemic, as it was in many areas, and local authorities had to do something quickly.

We have a lot of these types of home in Old County Hall in Truro, and they are working. They give somebody a place to go. They have their own front door, they are welcoming spaces, and they are built to the highest standards of sustainability, safety and durability. They are designed with leading homelessness charities and stakeholder groups. They have a considered layout, an abundance of natural light and good storage. Most of all, they mean that we know people are in a safe space.

Nearly 3,500 households received support from the local authority last year through either homelessness prevention or temporary accommodation. There are over 650 households—approximately 1,200 people—still in temporary accommodation. Some 21,000 households are on Cornwall's social housing waiting list, which is about 8% of our population. There is precious little data on the number of people who live in precarious housing situations or are sofa surfing, but we know that more than 700 of the people who have received help from the local authority stated that family and friends were no longer willing or able to accommodate them. We believe that that is just the tip of the iceberg and that significantly more people are vulnerably housed in Cornwall.

Many people who find themselves homeless or at risk of homelessness are not entitled to any support from the state, hence where we are today. So I want to pay tribute to a local charity that is beloved by many in Cornwall, St Petrocs, which helps to step in to offer support and advice. St Petrocs currently manages and provides accommodation for about 150 people throughout Cornwall; every one of those properties is very different, with a variety of locations and tenants, but the properties are all a step up from homelessness and help with integration into society. St Petrocs deals with a lot of addiction issues and a lot of vulnerability from other areas of people's lives. Although the properties are all set up differently, all residents have their own bedroom, with shared communal facilities, and the residents take responsibility for making their own food and maintaining a clean home. The houses are managed by their accommodation officers, who, crucially, provide support and guidance in person, as well as via a 24-hour on-call system. Many residents are given an old brick mobile phone with the phone number of the accommodation officer, which means that if they find themselves in crisis, they have somebody on hand they can call, who understands their case and situation, and knows them.

That crisis can come in any way, shape or form, be it because of substandard accommodation or people taking advantage of them.

Together with the accommodation officer, the residents agree a pathway for their time at the house and they prepare themselves for moving on. They learn to cook, gain budgeting skills and prepare themselves for work, by taking part in a vocational development project. They are also encouraged to have hobbies and to engage with the wider community. I am going into such detail on this because I want to share with the House what I believe is best practice and should be the gold standard for people who have been struggling in this way and for those trying to get them back into society. I am sure there are many other providers that right hon. and hon. Members can highlight, but that one is beloved in Cornwall and does a huge amount of good work,

One reason I want to draw attention to the good work is that one other vulnerability we have in Cornwall is that we are at the end of the lines for the county lines scourge on our constituencies. A few years ago, we were finding that our vulnerable residents not being cared for by people such as St Petrocs were being cuckooed in accommodation such as that to which my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has referred. This was a real scourge in our towns and villages. Drugs gangs from cities think that we are an easy target and I suppose that at one point we probably were. Devon and Cornwall police have been brilliant on this in the past five or six years, and have given a lot of good advice to people—to neighbours and communities. What we do well in Cornwall is having great communities, still, so people can look out for unusual activity, which we need to do. Where the Bill will help, particularly though clauses 7 and 8, is on the licensing.

I go back to the parallel that I started with, which is that of a housing crisis in Cornwall. One thing we want to achieve in Cornwall is a similar licensing scheme for the short-term holiday lets. The right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) intervened to say that some of these rogue landlords were registering places as holiday lets, which provided a loophole. That interested me because in Cornwall we want to make sure we know where all of our short-term holiday lets are and exactly where the types of accommodation we are discussing today are too. We need to look to the Minister to combine these licensing schemes, so that local authorities can have a bit more control over what is going on and where. I support my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East in everything he is achieving today. I absolutely support clauses 7 and 8, which deal with planning and draw the same parallels with what we are trying to achieve in Cornwall on change of use. My Cornish colleagues and I are campaigning for the autonomy for Cornwall Council to make these decisions itself. We are looking towards a county deal in Cornwall and I understand that a lot of what we are calling for needs changes to be made in primary legislation, but actually if we incorporate this into a licensing scheme, rather than go through the planning process, perhaps we can start to achieve some of these things more quickly.

I pay tribute to what my hon. Friend is attempting to do through his very well-thought-out Bill. It goes to the heart of what we need to do in our communities, which is to support the most vulnerable people whose voice often goes unheard. We are here today to speak up for them, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

11.44 am

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory). For a long time we had a railway line from Croydon to Exeter, so I am well aware of the situation with the county lines and the little kids going down to Exeter, and I have worked with the police there in trying to reduce that vulnerability. It is also a real pleasure to speak in the debate, although my speech will be brief.

Let me start by saying how strongly I support the Bill. We have debated it at length, and, although it does not go as far as anyone of us would like, it is a step in the right direction, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on his work. I also congratulate—on our side of the House—my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), and the Select Committee, on the work that they have done.

I want to paint a picture of what is happening in Croydon. I have been told that it has more supported exempt accommodation than any other area. That may not be the case, given that Birmingham seems to have so much of it, but we certainly have very high levels of such accommodation. We also have the second highest number of looked-after young people in the country, and almost the highest, if not the highest, number of unaccompanied asylum seekers. Thousands of people are moved to our borough from other London boroughs because our accommodation is cheaper. Myriad problems are associated with that, but at the heart of them all is supported exempt accommodation, which is driving up the business model for the rogue landlords and fuelling a push towards Croydon from other parts of London, because more money can be made from its cheaper accommodation.

Let me briefly describe a few incidents that have occurred. Some of them involve supported exempt accommodation, while others involve other forms of vulnerable accommodation. In one road there were two murders in six months. The first person who was murdered had been moved from another London borough into a flat in Croydon. People were subsequently drinking in the street in memory of him, as it were, and that behaviour was protracted and became antisocial. There was a fight, and a second young man was murdered. There is a case at the Old Bailey at the moment involving a young man from my constituency. I cannot talk about it in detail, but he too was murdered. The accused is the man who lived in the next room, in supported accommodation. There was another person who the police thought for several days had been murdered because of the horrific nature of the way in which he had committed suicide; he was another vulnerable young man in supported accommodation. In cases such as these, which are beyond horrific, vulnerable people have been placed in accommodation where, for one reason or another, they have not received the support that they needed.

An increasing number of streets in Croydon in areas that are not historically known for having such problems are having difficulties related to antisocial behaviour because of the large number of vulnerable people being placed in several properties in one street and not receiving the support they need. Supported exempt accommodation is wrapped up with permitted development, which is

another huge problem in Croydon. Additionally, very large office buildings are being converted into flats which are not of good quality and are often let to people on a short-term basis.

One of the issues highlighted by the hon. Member for Harrow East was the inadequate sharing of data and information. The local authority is clearly not informed about many of the people who are placed in Croydon, so the data is not there; where there are vulnerable people, the authority does not know about them. The most extreme case of that concerned a young man from another part of London who was placed in accommodation for looked-after people in the borough. He had a problem with another person, owing to gang rivalries, who was also placed in Croydon. The two bumped into each other by chance, and one murdered the other. It is enormously damaging to our communities, and to families and individuals, when data is not shared and people do not know where vulnerable people are. I have submitted a freedom of information request to all London boroughs asking them how many families they have in Croydon in any form of accommodation, whether temporary, looked-after or supported, and whether those people have addictions, mental health problems—or whatever it is. The data is coming back, and I will analyse it, but it refers to thousands and thousands of people, more in some boroughs than others. It is a real problem.

As I said earlier, supported exempt accommodation is at the heart of this issue. When I went to the local jobcentre, I was told that it was also at the heart of the problems with trying to get young people into work: they cannot go into work, because the model does not work and they are encouraged not to work. Not only do we have very vulnerable people in what is often very inadequate and unsupported accommodation, but they are not getting the opportunities to improve their lives—to go out and get work—that we all want them to have.

I will leave it there: I just wanted to give a few examples of some of the more horrific cases in my constituency. It cannot be right that we have any kind of model whereby people can make money at the expense of the taxpayer by exploiting vulnerable young people. Older people are affected as well, but in my borough it seems a lot of young people are being exploited. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East on his Bill, and all those who have been fighting for such legislation for so long. I give them my full support.

11.51 am

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). I will also talk about support for vulnerable individuals. It was harrowing to hear the examples from her constituency, where care—if we can call it that—in supported exempt accommodation has gone horrendously wrong and needs to be fixed urgently. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing forward this important Bill.

Supported accommodation covers a range of people with a range of needs: those with learning disabilities, care leavers, prison leavers, those with mental health needs—both complex and quite simple mental health needs—refugees and victims of domestic abuse, to name a few. In my previous career as a mental health doctor, I looked after people from all those backgrounds and in

all those situations. I looked after many patients who have required supported accommodation of one form or another, and I visited lots of different types of supported accommodation that was providing care, both in a broad sense and in a more specific, medical sense.

Finding good accommodation is a huge issue when it comes to providing care and treatment for people, particularly those with mental health needs, and it can be—I am sure this remains the case—a huge barrier to discharging people from hospital. When I was the consultant on Gresham ward 1 in Croydon hospital—I suspect, although I am not sure, that some of the people I looked after will have been discharged to the constituency of the hon. Member for Croydon Central—we would prioritise in the first few days of any admission consideration of the discharge location and any barriers to such accommodation. That is absolutely critical in the context of providing care to people, particularly those with very complex and severe mental illness.

In preparing my speech for this debate, I was thinking back to all the different types of accommodation I have visited that patients I have looked after have lived in or been discharged to, and I was trying to think whether they would come under the category of supported exempt accommodation. I struggled to try to make sense of commissioning arrangements and which precise regulatory framework would be in operation, to be honest. I would like to be able to say to the House, “I have been to one of these places. I have seen patients there”, and so on, but I cannot, because I cannot be sure. I strongly suspect that people I have seen and looked after, particularly people in wet hostels, for example, or people with low-level mental health needs but in complex circumstances, have been in supported exempt accommodation, but I cannot be sure. That in itself is concerning.

I am also concerned how all that fits with a new regulatory framework, because any care and treatment provided by NHS services will be regulated by the Care Quality Commission. Personal care is CQC-regulated. The question is where that fits into the whole regulatory morass of supported exempt accommodation that provides general supportive care. The CQC badge may come from personal care that is outsourced to an external provider. Going through this exercise of trying to think where it all fits is concerning and challenging.

Some of the remarks I have found interesting in this debate were about unpacking the whole area of general support. General support is really important, too, and it can have powerful impacts on people’s transitions and people’s lives going forward. General support in accommodation is not to be belittled as the second-class cousin to the more intense interventions we get from regulated providers with the CQC. For example, there was a discussion earlier about providers not giving employment support, because if people get into work, it creates more problems for them in how much profit they can make. That is probably the most perverse situation I can imagine. When I was previously working as a mental health doctor, one of the critical things I would try to do for my patients was support them to get back into work, for their health and wellbeing going forward. Employment support is not a little thing; it is a huge thing that has a huge impact on people’s overall health and wellbeing.

Dr Luke Evans: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Drawing on his expertise, and looking on a system-wide basis, does he think that the invention of the integrated care boards, pulling together social services, councils and the NHS all in one place, provides the chance to try to join up exactly the care he is talking about?

Dr Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. It is a really good question. As the Bill goes through, and hopefully in the Minister’s response, I would like to hear how the regulatory framework it puts forward sits alongside the role of the new integrated care systems, particularly in regard to the duties of organisations that provide healthcare-type treatments to people in exempt settings.

To give a different example of how important general support is, in my career I have looked after many people with complex and severe psychotic illnesses. I recall quite a few cases where people sadly were, despite best treatment and intervention, quite disabled and continued to be quite disabled as a result of their illness, and they were being discharged back into community settings and supported accommodation. Although over the past 30 or 40 years we rightly dismantled the asylum system and brought in care in the community, we then expected the community almost organically to provide general support to people who had severe chronic mental health needs.

However, what I quite often saw was that we had created what I call an asylum of one, where somebody was in a type of supported accommodation on their own with very little social interaction and not much of the sort of stuff coming under general supportive care going in. With many of the people I saw, my conclusion was that they did not have reason to be well, because in the community there was not the outreach, support or ongoing engagement, and that led to destabilisation, worsening mental health problems and admission to hospital.

I want to stress the importance of the general supportive care that is being provided to people in supported exempt accommodation, and how necessary and important it is that there is proper oversight and scrutiny, as well as thought about how and what is delivered and making sure it is badged so that it meets the appropriate criteria. Not giving this the same importance as other regulated activities, such as those regulated by the CQC, is unwise and, as we have discussed and seen today, has the potential to do a disservice to some of the most vulnerable people in society.

I congratulate again my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East on bringing forward the Bill. I am really pleased that this is being supported to make these very important changes, particularly the national supported housing standards, the advisory panel, which makes a lot of sense, and the licensing framework. To finish, there is a need to collect data, because without data we do not know what the situation is or how many of these organisations operate. With data, we can understand where the problems are and we can scrutinise what is being done to ensure that the most vulnerable in society—this is a group of highly vulnerable people—are getting the support, care and treatment they need. I very much welcome the Bill, and I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to take part in this debate.

12.2 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): First, it is a delight to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) and, with his background, his very informed contribution. I particularly want to commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing forward this important Bill. To pick up one of his comments, he said that his previous private Member's Bill was his proudest moment as an MP, and he could add this to it. This really shows the role that Back-Bench MPs can play in improving the lives of people across the country.

I think across the House we all agree that protecting the most vulnerable in society is one of the core duties of Government, and that the Government also need to protect the taxpayer. On both these measures, the current legislation—or indeed the lack of it—fails abysmally. Exempted sheltered housing is a vital part of the support given to many vulnerable groups, as we have heard. As Conservatives, we certainly believe in helping people to help themselves, and some people need more of a helping hand than others. Supported housing provides a vital stepping-stone to a normal life, and if it fails to provide a supportive environment, people can become stuck in the system, trapped and end up far worse off.

As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) mentioned, many good organisations and local authorities already provide fantastic support with exempted housing for vulnerable groups. For example, victims of domestic abuse often take seven years to extract themselves from their abuser, and they need supported housing as a waypoint between such a vicious circle and being able to rebuild their lives. If the supported housing is unsafe and squalid, they may end up back in the hands of their abuser. We have heard several examples of very similar situations in which people were actually in rooms next door to their abusers or attackers. Other vulnerable groups, whether those recovering from drugs or refugees, need places of calm and stability to help them find their feet and become productive members of society again.

However, despite all the good work that lots of good organisations and local authorities do, a minority are clearly abusing the system. We have heard many examples of that. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East talked about some of the horrors, and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood, who is no longer in her place, gave many examples of abuses from her city, as did the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). I am glad that I have yet to come across any such abuses in my South Cambridgeshire constituency, but they clearly happen across the country.

Unscrupulous landlords often provide appalling accommodation and care to residents who deserve far better. In addition to the cases that we have heard about, I have read stories about 65 residents having to share three baths and two showers. There are countless stories of abuse and mistreatment of vulnerable people while in supported housing.

On the landlord side, we have all heard the stories about the creation of special-purpose vehicles to make huge profits out of the financial support given by the taxpayer to support the vulnerable. As we have heard, they can make millions of pounds of profit in a single day by flipping sales of properties back to back, which are leased to help the most vulnerable people in society.

Those private landlords are generating completely unjustifiable profits by abusing the most vulnerable in society. That is clearly a major failing of the system, which enables unscrupulous landlords to abuse both residents and the taxpayer. It needs to change. That is why I welcome the Bill and the increased regulatory glare that it will bring to that unsavoury corner of the current system.

The Government will set standards for exempted sheltered housing so that local authorities, landlords and—most importantly—residents will know exactly what is expected. Landlords of exempt housing will have to apply for licences from their local authorities, who will be empowered to properly manage the system and ensure that standards are upheld.

There has been discussion about the need for a national regulator to back that up and about exactly what the enforcement mechanism and role of the local authority should be. I will make a wider point about property regulation and ombudsmen, which is an area that I have been involved with in the past. There is a proliferation of ombudsmen and regulators in the different property sectors, with the new homes ombudsman and the social housing ombudsman and regulator for as well as an estate agent regulator and the property ombudsman. In my previous role I dealt a lot with financial services, where there is one regulator and one ombudsman—the Financial Conduct Authority and the financial services ombudsman—to cover the entire spectrum, rather than having a series of them.

The advantages of having a single ombudsman for a sector are that: they are far more high-profile, so people know who to go to; they can share expertise across subsectors; and they can be independent from lobby groups. There is a real risk that a regulator or ombudsman in one specific area can become captured by the industry and over-influenced by it. A single ombudsman and regulator can generally attract far higher quality and more experienced staff than a proliferation of smaller ombudsmen. I therefore urge the Minister, whom it is good to see in her place—she is a former fellow member of the Treasury Committee, where she did many years of good service—to give a thought to the overall regulatory and ombudsmen regime for the property sector, with all its different parts and the downsides of having a really fragmented system along with the advantages of a more co-ordinated system.

We have also heard about the data that will be collected under the Bill. As someone with a mathematical background, I have always tended to approve of data-driven approaches and having better data—we can never have too much data. Indeed, I was surprised by the lack of data that we have about the supported housing sector. It is quite concerning as we look into it how little we know about what the different organisations are, how many people they have and where those people are. That really limits their accountability. If we do not know what we are spending or who is there, we cannot hold the providers accountable. Who are they?

These are not small, insignificant amounts of money: the best estimates that I have seen are that the total bill is more than £2 billion a year. Therefore, with the greater oversight that the Bill would provide, we could ensure that public spending went to the right places and not into the pockets of rogue operators. I note that in a pilot conducted last year, the greater scrutiny and understanding of the system prevented the five councils

involved in the pilot from paying out £6.2 million in error. Hopefully, the Bill will help to unearth similar errors and misspend, to deliver better value for money for taxpayers. The exempted sheltered housing sector has elements of the wild west about it, and the Bill will help to drive out the cowboys, and protect residents and the taxpayer. I fully commend it to the House.

12.9 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on his speech, but I think he has done us a bit of a disservice. He spoke for 45 minutes, and I am sure he could have spoken about this topic for about three hours, given his immense knowledge. That is testament to him, and to his time and effort spent dealing with this important Bill.

I am pleased to support the Bill, and I pay tribute to the work of Justin Bates of Landmark Chambers, and to Crisis. Crisis has a long-standing reputation as an important advocate for policies on homelessness and housing. I pay tribute to its Regulate the Rogues campaign. With Christmas fast approaching, I also wish Crisis well with their upcoming Crisis at Christmas campaign, which I know is highly regarded across the UK. I appreciate, however, that Crisis and other bodies campaign throughout the year, because homelessness and housing problems are not seasonal issues, but a matter that we must continue to work through. Many of our constituents are counting on us to make progress, and the Bill is an important addition to supporting a critical sector of housing.

When I researched for this debate, I was troubled by comments from the important report by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee about exempt accommodation. Statements such as

“some residents’ experiences of exempt accommodation are beyond disgraceful”

and

“some people’s situations actually deteriorate as a result of the shocking conditions in which they live”

leave us wondering why we have reached a situation where some of the most vulnerable people in our society, who are trying to get their lives back after a period of personal crisis, feel that their lives are getting worse in exempt accommodation, which is meant to provide them with the necessary support to get back on their feet.

The report continues to make further worrying conclusions, such as that

“organisations with no expertise are able to target survivors of domestic abuse and their children”

and notes:

“Millions of pounds are being poured into exempt housing benefit with no guarantee that vulnerable residents will get the support they need.”

I admit to a deep sense of concern when reading a report that highlights evidence that in some cases,

“vulnerable residents who are likely to have low incomes have to pay for support out of their own pockets.”

We heard about that from several accounts in the Chamber today. I am left with the conclusion that in some instances there is a vicious cycle of residents on low incomes living in exempted accommodation, while paying for the questionable “benefits” of patchy support. Is patchy a strong word in certain cases? I think not.

Some providers of such accommodation are exempt from the benefit cap and other restrictions on housing benefit, which enables them to charge the higher rents we have heard about. We cannot ignore the fact that this is public money flowing into these operations. As we have heard, exempt accommodation means accommodation that is exempt from housing benefit regulations that limit local housing allowance levels. The higher running costs associated with that type of accommodation must be considered, but I am troubled that in some cases poor-quality and even dangerous provision for vulnerable people is the return on that investment. There must be a better return for such support in these troubling cases. I am concerned that exempt accommodation can be increasingly associated with supported accommodation that is of poor quality. Considering the needs of residents who are living in such housing, we must break down the associated stigma when people raise their concerns.

At this point in a speech, it is usual for the speaker to bring forward a mass of statistics to highlight the problems in the sector, but as we have heard countless times, that is difficult because there is no clear picture of the extent to which rogue landlords, and good operators, are operating in this sector. Advocates such as Crisis are hearing real horror stories, and we have read about them in the report and in the Chamber today. It is hard to know whether such cases are playing out in all our constituencies, in some of them, and whether some areas are worse than others. Our local councils are hearing about cases, but we may just be trying to resolve individual problems; we simply do not have the data to know. The difficulty is compounded by the different types of provider, involving multiple regulators. We must try to work out how we can tie the patchwork together.

When I spoke to my local council in Bosworth, I was advised that there were 43 exempt accommodation properties in my borough, but there may also be private landlord arrangements that are not notified to the council. My council has rightly raised concerns about standards and regulation and, strangely enough, expressed the need for licensing and possibly for inspections, as we heard from Labour Members. I am keen to see those options explored.

Then we need to know the definition of support, as the standard of support is also unclear. We veer wildly between good and bad stories, and there is no consistency even across a constituency. The provision should not be a lottery; it affects the lives of the residents we represent, and that is more important.

To be fair to the Government, I sense that they recognise the issues. I was pleased that earlier this year the previous Minister with responsibility for rough sleeping and housing, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), announced a series of targeted measures to be introduced when parliamentary time allowed. Those measures included minimum standards of support to ensure that residents receive the good-quality support that is expected and deserved, new powers for local authorities to manage the local supported housing market, changes to housing benefit regulations to seek to define care, support and supervision and a £20 million supported housing improvement programme to drive up the quality of accommodation in the sector. However, some months have passed and, from what I have read and considered on this subject from people in the sector, I think that real progress needs to be made, so I am pleased that the Government are supporting the Bill.

[Dr Luke Evans]

Turning to the provisions of the Bill, I welcome the introduction of the supported housing advisory panel, which will be as a useful sounding board and a way to gather evidence to support policy making in this area and, crucially, to drive progress. Nevertheless, it is important that the panel draw upon a geographical spread of voices, representing different voices and needs in the UK.

For instance, I can imagine that the issue facing exempted accommodation providers in more rural areas such as Bosworth may be different from those we have heard about in London, or those in Leicester or Coventry. I also want to ensure that the panel draws upon expertise and innovation in the sector, so that large and small providers can come together to innovate and drive forward good practice.

I welcome the duty for local housing authorities in England to carry out a review of supported exempt accommodation in their districts and publish a supported housing strategy, though I would be interested to understand the guidance and matrix for what the assessment should cover and how the strategy will be made up. I also want assurance that the strategy can be incorporated into any ongoing local plan process. Those documents cannot be mutually exclusive, so I would want to be sure that my local council can provide the necessary direction to ensure that its supported housing strategy really captures the needs of Hinckley and Bosworth.

Clause 3 captures the nub of the problem, and I support the idea of clearly defined standards for this accommodation. I also note that clause 4 deals with licensing as a means of ensuring that national supported housing standards are met, and I hope for swift and effective decision making about licensing.

We are coming up to the end of my third year in Parliament. When I look back over these most eventful of years, I am struck about how the good intentions that we have work out in this place and can make a real difference to the people that we represent. Hearing and reading baffling accounts of people with a history of substance misuse being housed with drug dealers, and of survivors of domestic abuse being housed with perpetrators of such abuse, as outlined in the Select Committee report, is very concerning.

We must boil the argument down to the basics. In a world where there is much talk about the disposable society, the commercial society and the desire to seek short-term happiness from the most temporary of means, there are occasions when we need to think about the basics of what we need to get through life. One of those basics is a safe and secure room where you can put your head down for the night and wake up refreshed to fight the next day.

One cannot help but be troubled by what we have heard today from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and other colleagues. However, there is hope, and I applaud everyone for shining an important light on this issue today. I am heartened by the will to put things right and to tackle the rogue landlords who appear to be exploiting the situation off the back of some of the most vulnerable in our society.

12.19 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): It is a great pleasure to contribute to this incredibly important and meaningful debate on an incredibly important and meaningful Bill, which has brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for whom I have great respect and who I have spoken to about many different policy issues.

The timing of today's debate is very good because of the report published so recently by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. All Members have cases relating to exempt accommodation and supported living. We have vulnerable constituents contacting us who often do not have the support they need from those responsible for their buildings. I would add, however, that we also have examples of where providers have done a good job and are doing a good job, and they take their responsibilities very seriously. I have gone to those premises and spoken to those professionals in Ipswich, so I do not want to cast an entire group of people as somehow not acting in a way that is morally right. Many do. But ultimately, we are talking about a situation where the stakes are very high and we cannot afford to get it wrong.

When we are dealing with vulnerable individuals who may be the victims of domestic abuse, who may be getting over substance abuse, who may have just come out of prison or who may have mental health difficulties, the stakes of getting it wrong are incredibly high, so it seems to me that an overly light-touch approach is not the right approach. I am not an expert in this area, but this is a debate about how we can put in place more intelligent regulation to ensure we get it right for these vulnerable people. That is incredibly important, clearly, for the vulnerable individuals in question, but, as we have heard already today in contributions made by Members on both sides of the House, if we do not get it right it can also have negative consequences for the immediate community in the surrounding area.

In my own constituency of Ipswich, county lines has been a huge issue. A number of young people have lost their lives as a result of the evil that is county lines. If we have a situation where somebody has been living in that world and may be trying to get away from it, they need to have particular support. The consequences of not having that support could bring really negative community impacts to the immediate and surrounding area. So this is not just about doing what is right for individuals and giving them the support they need; it is also about the immediate community, so it is very important to get this right.

The Bill proposes both a national and local approach, with national standards and a national regulator, and an enhanced role for local authorities. It only seems right and proper that that is the case. It is vital to ensure regulation and accountability structures are in place for exempt accommodation and supported housing, so that if somebody does not get it right, they can be held to account and we can ensure change is implemented.

Earlier this week, the Levelling Up Secretary talked about how social housing tenants can be protected, which is also important. I have examples in Ipswich, particularly relating to Sanctuary Housing. I have a number of constituents I am currently working with. Only two months ago, I went to a property of a constituent

in south-west Ipswich managed by Sanctuary Housing. To say that the condition of the flat was squalid would be an understatement. They had been messed around repeatedly by Sanctuary Housing. They had some time in a Premier Inn in Ipswich on the understanding that the property was being upgraded by Sanctuary Housing. They were told it had been completed, but when they returned they found that literally no work had been completed. So they were back out to the Premier Inn and then a Travelodge; this was constant, and it has blighted the life of my constituent and his young family for a long time. That is not the only example in Ipswich, so I welcome what the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities had to say about the ways in which such landlords should be held more to account.

As Conservatives, we believe in the free market, but our party is at its best when we are compassionate and we think about the most vulnerable in society. We are not always a party of regulation and not always a party that thinks that if there is a problem more regulation will solve it. However, there are occasions when smart regulation is needed, and not just on supported housing, exempt accommodation and social housing; there are other occasions when private management companies are taking decisions that are destroying the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

One example I wish to mention, which is connected to the general thrust of this debate, is what we are seeing in St Francis Tower in Ipswich, which is an issue I have raised on more than one occasion in this place through my own special debate, at Prime Minister's questions and so on. That large building, a tower in the heart of Ipswich, has had cladding replaced, with remediation funds secured, but it has been covered in shrink wrap for well over a year. All the ambition, all the timescales and all the promises about the work being completed and the shrink wrap coming down have not been met. I have had many constituents, some of whom are vulnerable and not altogether that different from the vulnerable individuals in exempt accommodation that we have been talking about today, left in a situation where they have no natural light and where bars have been placed on the windows so that they cannot open them to get on to the structures around the tower block.

It is important that the Government broaden out this debate, from supporting vulnerable individuals at the accommodation we are talking about today and in social housing accommodation, to addressing examples of where vulnerable people are in private accommodation but those management companies still have a responsibility. When they do not meet the people they are responsible for halfway, they should also be held to account. As a Conservative party, we are at our strongest when we are compassionate and when we put in place sensitive but intelligent regulation to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are not abused and are not let down—there are too many examples of where that is not happening.

I am not surprised that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has done such a good job with this private Member's Bill. He is a very experienced colleague, whose wisdom I try to secure—I try to learn from him often, when he allows me to experience some of his wisdom from time to time. Obviously he is very busy, as one of the most active local Members of Parliament, in his constituency. He inspires me with his legislative

genius, his compassion for the most vulnerable, his relentless campaigning zeal and his ability to grow a network of engaged supporters. Perhaps one reason he is able to do that is that his constituents see things such as today; they see his diligence in suggesting small changes to regulation that can lift up the lives of some of the most vulnerable in not only his constituency, but the country.

I am not an expert in this matter, but I have enjoyed being able to make a small contribution to this free-flowing debate, which, in essence, is about how we can put in place regulation to ensure that some of the most vulnerable people in our society get the support they need and are not let down. I welcome the fact that we have had positive and constructive contributions from Opposition Members during this debate. Quite what the legislation will look like in the end, I do not know, but I am confident that, in a general sense, we are moving towards a better situation when it comes to supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our constituencies.

Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker—I have now spoken for over 10 minutes. I think that is probably enough and that you have all heard enough of what I have to say.

12.29 pm

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt)—they say that brevity is the mother of wisdom. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman); this is his second private Member's Bill, and it is an excellent and incredibly timely piece of legislation. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) and the Minister for their work on this important Bill. I know that it has been a labour of love for them all.

I will admit a secret: I am a big fan of Friday sittings. I actually quite like them because we usually have a Bill like this that is born from somebody's wisdom and understanding of a particular area of law. They attempt to address a single problem to facilitate an important change. We get to have a proper debate and to talk cross-party about the rights and wrongs of what is happening already, what can and cannot be done and where we go next. The Opposition naturally challenge that and ask us to go further, but we are given an opportunity to plug some gaps.

I will be honest: I have been thinking about housing a lot this week, for obvious reasons. We were all here for the statement about the tragic death of Awaab Ishak in Rochdale, the neighbouring constituency to mine. I have the same housing provider and, although this is not a debate on social housing, I will take a moment to develop my thinking on housing, because my hon. Friend the Member for Runcymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) touched on something very important: the role of housing in mental health, personal wellbeing and, as we saw, unfortunately, in that tragic case, physical wellbeing.

If we do not get simple things such as housing right, people's lives can be utterly devastated. The reality is that there are people who are trapped in a system that simply has not been working properly. We assume that there are thousands of them, but the problem is that we do not have that data, as we have heard. For me, that is

[Chris Clarkson]

shocking. The fact that we consider it too expensive to collect data about what is happening to members of our society—including vulnerable people, people who rely on assistance and do not get it—is deeply concerning, to put it politely.

We have thousands of vulnerable citizens—whether they are people who have left prison or people who have mental health or physical health needs—who are reliant on a system that is simply not fit for purpose. Let me put on one of my many metaphorical hats as the chair of the all-party group on local government and as a recovering councillor, because I have some insight into the licensing world. Actually, I quite enjoyed reading the report from the HCLG Committee—sorry, the LUHC Committee. The names change almost as many times as the Ministers do these days—please do not note that down. The report highlighted some important areas where local government can do a great deal of good.

We are already well into the discussion about how we integrate health and social care, and housing is a really important part of that mix. Interestingly enough, when we talk about prison leavers, we say that the three things they need are a job, a home and a friend. A home is a really important part of that because it gives them stability and the means to access such things as work. We have a system where, essentially, scammers—slumlords—can trap people in worklessness and effective homelessness. They are being kept and are almost prisoners in the system.

I know from personal experience the good that local government can do. As an avowed Manchester liberal, I am slightly dubious about the idea that we need a national regulator. I would see that in the last instance. Personally, I would like to see local authorities sharing best practice. We saw a live example of that in the trial period, when Blackburn with Darwen unitary authority began communicating with its neighbours. As a unitary authority in Lancashire, I imagine that it has quite a lot of experience of doing that. It was a good example of best practice. We are also quite good at that in Greater Manchester. Well before the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, we had the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, so we were already talking to one another.

There will be ways to develop a framework. My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) made the point that the regulatory framework might look different in different parts of the country. For example, it will look different in London from how it looks in Manchester. In rural communities, for example in Cornwall or Devon, it will have to take another form, but the underlying basic standards have to be there for everybody. It is about finding the right balance. When the Minister is summing up, will she give us some further thoughts on how this will be put in place?

On another note of caution, local government is extremely stretched and has been for a long time. Councils and council officers do a fantastic job, often with diminishing returns. I implore the Minister to ensure that, when we hand over these responsibilities to councils, they are properly funded. We will not find most local authorities wanting in their ability to deploy these skills, but, realistically, the pot has to have at least enough resource in it for them to discharge proper enforcement, as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) mentioned in an earlier intervention.

I am certain that what we are debating here today is a necessary piece of legislation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich said, smart regulation is the way forward. The law should be a scalpel, not a machete. What we are trying to do here is to excise from this system the very worst people. The truth is that there are many organisations that are doing that very well and we want to encourage them. We want to have almost a gold standard for those people providing good quality housing—those people who can say, “Well, yes, we are licensed. We have met the conditions. You can feel safe and secure in my accommodation. When I say that I will provide support, it will actually be support.” It will not be—as we heard from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood)—just sticking their head round the door saying, “Are you alright?” when, quite frankly, they may not even have seen the individual in question. That is all to the good. Those providers will probably find that they have more influence and more agency with that regulatory framework. I am just very keen to make sure that it does not become too burdensome and too expensive for them to comply with it, so that good providers drop out of the market.

Most of the good points that could be made about this have been made, and I will not belabour the point because I know that this is a popular Bill. However, I do want to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East that it is remarkable to secure a private Member’s Bill in the first place, but to have two must seem like good fortune. To do what he has done with them is impressive, and he can be extremely proud of what he is doing here today. I am sure that his constituents are, too. I am extremely proud to have been able to participate in the debate.

12.36 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson). I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for introducing this Bill, but in the top trumps of adulation, I do not think that I can compete with my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt).

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East is a proud champion of speaking up for the most vulnerable in society, and I pay tribute to him for all the work he has done in this area and for introducing this important Bill. I am really pleased that it has so much cross-party support, as it shows the importance of what he is doing. This House is at its best when we are united in the common good of trying to protect the most vulnerable in society.

I also welcome the Minister to her place, and I look forward to hearing from her later. What really resonated with me, as a vet and a scientist, was when my hon. Friend and other colleagues talked about the paucity of data in this area. If the data are not there, we just do not know what we are looking at. We can make good policy with evidence-based decisions, and we need the evidence out there. This debate today has highlighted the importance of that data collection.

It is clear that those who are protected by this Bill are among the most vulnerable in our society. I pay tribute to those across my constituency of Penrith and The Border who support the most vulnerable people. In the

housing arena, I pay tribute to Eden Housing Association, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. I hope that the Bill complements the work of people up and down the land who are supporting the most vulnerable in society. At a time of economic crisis, when people's livelihoods have been affected, forcing them to live from day to day, it is so important that we are putting forward good legislation to provide help in these troubling times.

I welcome the fact that the Bill will try to stamp out the awful practices that have been highlighted today of rogue landlords exploiting people. There have been some pretty harrowing examples from Members on both sides of the House, and it is so important that the Bill will clamp down on these practices and rid them from society. These people on benefits are really struggling, as are many people across the country. As we have heard today, this is a compassionate piece of legislation, and when we are driving Bills with cross-party support through the House, it is so important that compassion is at the heart of that. To get political, I welcomed the Conservative Government showing some of that compassion yesterday with measures in the autumn statement, and the fact that we are now uprating benefits in line with inflation is critical to that compassionate conservatism.

We have heard from many Members, including esteemed medical colleagues, about the mental health implications in the supported housing sector, and we have also heard about physical wellbeing. Something that has really resonated with me today is the mental health impact of the situations that these people find themselves in; that impact is lasting, profound and very damaging for them. The mental health stresses in this sector compound the trauma that many of these people have experienced, having faced domestic violence, homelessness and all other manner of challenges in their lives. If they are then challenged in their own homes, that exacerbates the awful problems in their lives.

In rural areas such as my constituency of Penrith and The Border in Cumbria, the factors that challenge mental health are compounded by rural isolation. I have pressed the Government to ensure that policy making reflects the challenges we face in different parts of the country. Rural communities often struggle to get the mental health support they need due to the long distances and poor connectivity, whether that is physical or virtual connectivity or even mobile phone signal. This is something I feel very strongly about. I sit on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and I initiated an inquiry on rural mental health. We looked at some of the trigger factors for people in rural communities, and we found that challenges in the housing sector were among those.

The Bill has to be part of an holistic approach, to protect the most vulnerable in exempt accommodation. We have heard today about mental health, and I feel passionately that mental health needs to have parity of esteem with physical health. The two go hand in hand, and they need to be balanced together.

To segue into another issue, as a vet, I am passionate about animal health and welfare. As a dog owner, I know the impact that animals have on people's lives and the importance of people being able to have animals in their accommodation. I have worked with Ministers on various types of legislation, and we want people in the

rental sector to be able to have pets in their accommodation. Responsible pet owners should be allowed to have a pet, to give them that companionship and to help their mental health and the health of the animal. That is something we can move forward with.

Dr Luke Evans: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about the impact of animals on mental wellbeing. Does he agree that having an animal to provide that support is even more important in rural areas, where loneliness is such a big problem?

Dr Hudson: I very much agree with my medical colleague about the role of animals in society and in supporting us, and the support we can give to our animal friends, and that is pivotal in rural communities. We love animals in rural areas and in towns and cities. Our love for the animal world is something that unites us in humanity and across the Chamber.

I welcome the statutory requirement on local authorities to publish a strategy for supported housing, so that they can respond to the needs of their area. In rural areas such as my constituency, the importance of local councils and local democracy cannot be overstated. Local councils and parish councils are at the heart of these communities, in terms of community engagement and providing the key services on which we all rely daily.

I urge central Government to take care that the Bill's statutory requirements on the Secretary of State at national level do not create inertia or an inability to act at local level. We have seen a bit of inertia in Cumbria with local government restructuring, as we move to two unitary authorities. Sadly, local democracy has ground to a halt as people jockey for position and decide who is in charge of which parts of the county. Parish councils are struggling to get things through, and grant applications are not being looked at. For local democracy, we have to make sure that we do not have inertia after decisions are made. This is a really good Bill and, when it gets on to the statute book with cross-party support, we need to make sure the process is lubricated.

I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) highlighting the lack of housing in rural areas, exacerbated by the upsurge in short-term holiday lets and Airbnb, which is also a critical issue for us up in Cumbria. I welcome the fact that the Government are listening to Back Benchers who have raised the lack of housing. In our rural communities, we see people being driven out of their local area because they cannot find rented accommodation, so I welcome the fact that Ministers are looking at this issue on a cross-departmental basis. There has been a consultation on short-term holiday lets, and I look forward to the Government working through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill to make sure we have sensible legislation so that people in rural communities can live, work, study and have their kids go to school in their local community. I very much hope the Government move on that, too.

There is a huge impact on employers in rural Cumbria, as they are not able to attract staff to come and work in their pubs, restaurants and farms because of the lack of housing due to short-term holiday lets. I welcome the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth has raised this issue, as have I in Cumbria

[*Dr Hudson*]

and as have other colleagues from up and down the land. It is a key point, and I hope the Minister will look at it in parallel legislation.

Again, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for bringing forward this Bill. I welcome the strong cross-party support, including from the Government, as the compassion at the heart of this Bill has my firm support.

12.47 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I also start by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing forward this important Bill. He has worked exceptionally hard, alongside other colleagues, on its legislative journey.

Of course, this Bill will do so much to address the problems surrounding supported housing. We have heard today that some exempt accommodation in this country is, quite frankly, in a shocking condition for residents and occupants. The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee produced a report revealing some of the horrendous conditions faced by residents, and I am pleased that the Bill aims to address some of those issues, including sexual harassment and violence by landlords under threat of eviction. There have been cases where staff and landlords have threatened residents, sold drugs to residents and been complicit in antisocial behaviour. We have to get to a position where the Government and the state enable these situations to be addressed.

Colleagues on both sides of the House have highlighted the challenge of county lines. I represent a community in Keighley that is challenged by drug misuse and drug distribution via county lines, which filter into some of the accommodation provided through exempt housing. The report also discovered that neighbourhoods with a lot of exempt housing attracted other issues with antisocial behaviour, to do with crime, vermin and so on, and that organisations without any experience might target victims of domestic abuse and their children without offering other specialist help or a suitable and safe setting. That is why this piece of legislation is really important.

Given all the examples that have been cited, it is absolutely vital that this House pass this piece of legislation. We need to tighten up regulations in this sector and ensure that those things are not allowed to continue. Of course, it is important to note that the Government have taken some steps to try to resolve the problems regarding supported exempt accommodation. From October 2020 to September 2021, DLUHC invested £5.3 million in five pilots in five local authorities, testing interventions to drive up quality and value for money. In the areas in which those pilots were carried out, it was shown that authorities were able to drive up the quality of accommodation and support residents; value for money was also improved through enhanced scrutiny of housing benefit claims. Through the pilots, it was possible to prevent some £6.2 million from being paid in error, which again goes to show why this Bill is so important. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said in his speech, we will be able to get better efficiency regarding taxpayers' money, as well.

If the Bill is passed, as I hope it will be, it will create a supported housing advisory panel, which is a huge step forward in ensuring that the sector is better supported. That panel's mandate will be to offer information and guidance on supported exempt accommodation, as well as on their provision for regulation. The panel must comprise a broad range of individuals from the registered social housing providers, local housing authorities, social services authorities and non-profit organisations—all there to support the aims of the Bill. To pick up on some of the points that have been made by my hon. Friends the Members for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson) and for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), dealing with housing is all about looking at the wider things that are associated with it—it is also about health, social care and education. That is why the direction of the Bill is so important, in trying to deal with some of the challenges related to the conditions that currently exist in exempt housing that have already been identified by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

The Bill will hopefully ensure further regulation of the sector through its call for local housing strategies, placing a duty on local housing authorities to review supported exempt accommodation in their districts in light of the findings of a published supported housing strategy. That illustrates why it is so important that local authorities talk to one another and share best practice. We have seen that in other pieces of legislation—I am thinking of the private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), the Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Act 2022, which dealt with taxi licensing. That Bill was a mechanism of ensuring better sharing of dialogue and datasets between local authorities, so that we can drive good practice. This Bill will help in that area, too.

One of the key things I am really pleased about is that the Bill will strengthen and broaden the definition of "homeless", so that we can help more people who find themselves in dire straits. The Bill amends section 191 of the Housing Act 1996—which sets out the conditions under which someone can be treated as intentionally homeless—to establish that where someone leaves supported exempt accommodation for reasons related to the standard of accommodation, care, support or supervision provided and that accommodation does not meet the national supported housing standards, that person will not be able to be treated as intentionally homeless. That is important. As has been said, it is unfortunate that we do not have enough datasets covering a long period of time to drive forward some of the positive benefits of the Bill. I hope the Government will recognise the point that data collection is key.

As we have all heard today, supported exempt accommodation is in dire straits. It needs to be sorted out, and I am sure the Bill will drive things forward to ensure that the next steps greatly improve the quality of provision. That will help all our constituents, and I am proud to support the Bill.

12.54 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am normally called last!

It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), who made a thoughtful and insightful speech, and it is a pleasure to speak in this debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned in his introduction, he once promoted another private Member's Bill that dealt with a very similar issue. I pay tribute to the work that he put into that first Bill, which made it all the way to becoming law—the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. It is tremendously satisfying for a Back Bencher to be involved in making laws in this way, especially when it is for such good reasons. Let me also welcome the Minister to her place: it is wonderful to be working with her, and I look forward to getting stuck in on multiple issues, not just this one.

Many people have been involved in getting my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East to this point, but I can say from the perspective of the Select Committee, of which I am a member, that a considerable debt is owed to the whistleblowers who have shone a light on the terrible conditions in which some people are living. As we have heard, some of the conditions to which they are subjected amount to what is effectively a gang environment, so those who come forward are doing something that is incredibly brave as well as incredibly useful. I also appreciate the work of the charities Shelter and Crisis and that of the all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness, co-chaired by the my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East.

The work that has already been done is fantastic, but this debate is about the work going forward. The Bill is primarily aimed at dealing with rogue landlords and the regulation of supported exempt accommodation, and it will strengthen the enforcement powers that are available to local authorities, as was pointed out earlier by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood). If passed, it will become the first piece of legislation to regulate directly the standard of support provided to residents of this kind of accommodation in England, which is no mean feat.

Currently, unscrupulous housing agencies are allowed to profit from the housing benefit system, and that is simply not right. There has been an increase in demand for supported housing—in fact, there has been an increase in demand for housing across the board—but at the same time, the exempt accommodation sector is in need of huge and urgent reform. Rogue landlords have been exploiting loopholes in the regulation, making obscenely huge profits while not ensuring that the accommodation they provide meets the standards that occupants deserve. Throughout the Select Committee's inquiry, we encountered many cases in which rogue landlords are using exempt accommodation simply as a cash machine, and, as I mentioned in an intervention earlier, that can involve property deals that are international.

The scale of this problem is disgraceful. Landlords drive the rent high while pushing standards down, forcing marginalised, vulnerable people to live in unsafe, unfit housing. The system is so warped that—in my view—it aids organised crime. Indeed, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood used the word “gangsters”, and I agree with her. The Committee's report describes the conditions in exempt accommodation as “beyond disgraceful”, and says that there has been a “complete breakdown” of the systems that should protect residents. The Bill will tackle these issues head-on. It will bar

rogue operators from entering the market, while ensuring that action is taken against bad-faith actors. We should be clear, of course, that even though there are gangsters out there getting away with this, the vast majority of the operators in this sector are good people who are in it for good reasons: supporting the most vulnerable of our society. We need to be mindful of that and ensure that, in putting this legislation together, we do not get in their way. I will come later to how we can use this legislation to drive up standards in the sector as a whole and focus on sharing good practice.

However, we need to focus on driving out the bad behaviour, so this is about growing the quality of the provision and ensuring that those examples we have heard about today—of residents in cramped, inappropriate accommodation, often grouped with exactly the wrong type of person—can be resolved. We want to ensure that the growth of exempt accommodation in certain areas is managed, because of the impact on local communities. Again, that comes back to data; we need to understand where the exempt accommodation is and who is in it, which in turn will solve the problem of the lack of regulation, so that we can get a grip of the governance of the providers and stamp out the exploitation of the system by those unscrupulous landlords.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), who is sadly no longer in his place, paid fulsome tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, but it is not just him who is full of admiration for our hon. Friend. Crisis has worked closely with him in the development of the Bill and it, too, is fulsome in its praise:

“Overall, this is about changing the national narrative and discourse around supported housing. Crisis knows how key exempt accommodation sector can be to helping people rebuild the lives so they don't have to go back to rough sleeping.

When the system works well, people receive the support they need in accommodation that is suitable for them. This Bill will be vital toward ensuring that this can be achieved.”

I wholeheartedly agree.

Let us look at a few of the key measures in the Bill. It introduces a supported housing advisory panel, to be drawn from across the sector. That is important, because it is not just about the housing; it is about recognising the complex multiple needs of the people in the housing. They come from all areas of society—they can be refugees, care leavers, people with disabilities, people who have been previously homeless or sleeping rough, recovering drug addicts, victims of domestic abuse and, as the shadow Minister rightly pointed out, people recently released from prison. We know that in the critical 12-week period after release those people really need support and structure around them, helping them to turn their lives around and get on the straight and narrow.

So this is mostly about the needs of the people within the supported accommodation, but it is also about looking toward the demand. The local supported housing strategies would therefore place a duty on the local housing authorities in England to review the exempt accommodation in their districts and then publish those findings. That will help us to highlight the future needs and feed in that data, which we simply do not have at the moment and which will be so crucial to managing that issue as we go forward. Again, it will help us to identify and root out rogue operators.

[Ben Everitt]

Then we come to the national supported housing standards, which are the critical bit about identifying good practices, which are across the whole sector. Let me be clear again that there are some good people doing good things for good reasons and getting good outputs for the most vulnerable in our society in this sector.

Dr Hudson: My hon. Friend is making a powerful contribution. Something that has been highlighted today is that there is good practice in this sector. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr raised the point that people who are in the right place in this sector doing the right thing will engage with this legislation and then we can shine a spotlight on this best practice, which will really raise standards and drive out bad practice.

Ben Everitt: I could not agree more. The entire point is to identify those national standards and ensure that they are met, and the Bill does that in two ways. First, it legislates for the power to introduce the licensing scheme to support exempted accommodation. That is optional between districts, but it is an additional power. Further, it supports exempted accommodation that falls outside the definition in subsection 12(2), and includes a power to introduce licensing for that accommodation as well.

In the Select Committee, when we were scrutinising that question, I wondered whether that was perhaps regulatory overkill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson) said:

“The law should be a scalpel, not a machete.”

However, the scale and complexity of the issue we are trying to deal with is so vast that we need a variety of tools within our locker. That is not to say that they will all be used at every point. Therefore, there is a good reason for putting in these licensing schemes and potentially following up with some form of compulsory registration, although I am sure we will come on to that in later stages of the Bill—sort it out in the Lords, as I have heard before.

We know that we will have the powers to put that scheme together and that the licensing scheme can work with a system of compulsory registration, but the most important and critical factor in what could potentially be a bureaucratic Frankenstein of a piece of legislation is that it works with other Acts. It works together with the Housing Act and the forthcoming Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, so there is a neat legislative fit, filling in those cracks in the legislation that are being used as loopholes by unscrupulous landlords to scam their way into making a fortune from the most vulnerable in our society.

1.7 pm

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the excellent and thoughtful speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt). Along with all my colleagues, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on bringing this Bill to the House and on all the work he has done. I recognise the work of the Select Committee and express gratitude for being part of this important debate.

It is also a particular pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), who captured the mood of this debate when she said that debates and subjects such as this show that all of us across the House care about how we can support those in most need and how we can all make a positive difference to vulnerable people in our constituencies. She was absolutely right about that.

There are big questions to answer about how we can best support those who may have made mistakes or suffered misfortune in their lives, but, at a very simple level, how can we possibly expect anybody to rebuild their life without the basic requirement of adequate shelter? I welcome this Bill, because it will improve the quality of supported housing and improve governance at both local and national level. It will also ultimately improve taxpayer efficiency, by providing the means for people to live more independently of the state.

No matter what a person's background, condition or circumstances, we in this place have a duty to ensure that quality accommodation and care is the baseline. We should acknowledge, as my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) rightly did, the Government's work to date in this area. I acknowledge the national statement of expectations in 2020, which set out minimum standards guidance for supported housing. It set out, for example, that housing should be accessible and be assessed by local council commissioners and that housing staff should be trained. The National Housing Federation endorsed and supported that guidance, but the Bill clearly builds significantly on that work to date, and quite right too.

In the many excellent speeches today we have heard examples of terrible things happening in this area. Landlords are still providing unacceptable housing. New residents are still being placed with unsuitable co-residents, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East pointed out, and some accommodation is not fire safe, frankly. I warmly welcome this Bill and, in particular, three measures: the introduction of a supported housing advisory panel makes a ton of sense; the requirement for local authorities to review exempt accommodation and publish a supporting housing strategy is something we all completely agree with; and then we have the powers given to the Secretary of State to make licensing regulations for exempt housing.

This is an excellent Bill. I am not surprised that it will go through today with cross-party support. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend. If I can build on the praise that my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) set out, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has shown that if a Member acts with strong purpose in this job, they can, with the right energy, drive real change. He showed it in 2017 with his Homelessness Reduction Act. He has shown it through his tremendous work to build relations between the UK and India, for which he has received one of India's highest civilian honours. He is the only person I know with a Padma Shri. I am also very familiar with his campaigning for a smoke-free England. I am greatly proud to share these Benches with him.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister, Matthew Pennycook. [Interruption.] I beg your pardon; I did not know that the hon. Gentleman had already spoken. I am sorry I missed his speech. I call the Minister, Felicity Buchan.

1.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): I start by warmly congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on his incredibly important Bill reaching Second Reading. I pay tribute to everything he has done to get the Bill to Second Reading and for everything he has done in the sector. It is great to see members of his team in the Gallery, and his wife was also there earlier—it was so great to see her.

I pay tribute to my predecessors, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who is on the Front Bench with me as the Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury. It is great to see him here. I also pay tribute to everyone else who has worked so hard on the Bill, including the Select Committee, Crisis and the councils that worked on our pilot projects.

I pay tribute to the thoughtful contributions from so many Back Benchers, including the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), who I know has worked intensively in the sector. On my Benches, we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), for Bosworth (Dr Evans), for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson), for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) and for Keighley (Robbie Moore), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), who is on the Select Committee, and my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), and that is not to miss out the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones).

The matter we are here to discuss is one of the utmost seriousness and importance to the Government. I am pleased to confirm that the Government fully support the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill, and I look forward to continuing to work together with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and Opposition Members to get the Bill through Committee and to get these crucial and necessary measures into law.

As many hon. Members have said, when done well, supported housing provides a safety net for people who require help to live independently or need help in transitioning to mainstream housing. It is also a crucial factor in reducing rough sleeping and homelessness, and in reducing pressure on health and social care services. It is a better alternative to institutional care and prevents poor outcomes such as homelessness and delays in leaving hospital.

The many good supported housing providers must not be lumped in with the rogue landlords that I and many hon. Members want out of the sector. But, unfortunately, as we have heard, there are some rogue landlords, and it is completely unacceptable for their abuse of the supported housing system to continue. To them, I say that their time is up.

Through the Bill and subsequent regulations, we intend to drive out substandard providers. It is intolerable that certain landlords are trying to profit at the expense of vulnerable people. The Government's priority will always be to protect the welfare of its most vulnerable

citizens. We will prevent disreputable landlords from exploiting people who find themselves living in accommodation that is poor and, at times, of dangerous quality and lacking in safety and security. People in supported housing have a right to be treated with decency and respect, to have their needs properly assessed and to receive proper, tailored support. We will ensure that residents of supported housing can be confident in the standard of both their accommodations and their support. Driving up standards is crucial, given the wider repercussions that the worst of the shoddy accommodation can have both on the individuals living there and on surrounding communities.

As we have heard, neighbourhoods that experience high concentrations of poorly managed supported housing can become a magnet for antisocial behaviour and criminal activity. On Tuesday, I visited Coventry and met senior council officers and councillors. I heard about the wide range of supported housing, from the very good to the unacceptable, and about how they are working to help substandard providers to get up to scratch. Coventry will be one of the recipients of our supported housing investment programme. In Coventry, I also had the opportunity to meet people who had previously experienced homelessness but have benefited from good quality supported housing services, which have helped them to move on with their lives. I was struck by the impact that that has made on an individual level. It underlined the significant difference that this type of housing can make to people's lives.

Let us not forget that the financial benefit gained by substandard providers rests on exploitation of the rules on housing benefit, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood explained. Ministers at the Department for Work and Pensions agree that it is totally unacceptable for large amounts of public money to be paid out in housing benefit to rogue landlords who are gaming the system and doing little or nothing to support vulnerable residents. We must do all we can to ensure that vulnerable residents get the support that they need and that standards are driven up. We must also ensure that better value for money is delivered for taxpayers.

A key issue is how we can align measures in the Bill with any changes to housing benefit regulations, to stop those who are gaming the system being able to do so. At the same time, we will ensure that the measures set out in the Bill are implemented and deployed proportionately. It is crucial that we avoid unintended consequences in the sector, and also avoid placing unnecessary burdens on the many good providers out there.

The Government have already acted to tackle rogue landlords. In October 2020, we published the national statement of expectations, setting out the Government's vision for the planning, commissioning, and delivering of good quality accommodation in supported housing. In the same month, we launched the supported housing pilots. Between October 2020 and September 2021, we funded five local authorities with a total of £5.4 million to explore ways of improving quality and value for money in the supported housing sector, particularly in exempt accommodation.

We have continued to build on the success of the pilots. Last week we announced that we are funding 26 local authorities, including the five that took part in the pilots, through a supported housing improvement programme, awarding £20 million to some areas of the

[*Felicity Buchan*]

country most affected by problems with supported housing. That programme sends a clear message to unscrupulous providers that the Government will not tolerate poor-quality support, the exploitation of vulnerable people, or abuse of the supported housing system. This Government are sending a clear message: time is up for rogue landlords who take money from the taxpayer while exploiting vulnerable people.

Despite the success of the pilots, and enhancing the ability of other local authorities to begin to tackle this issue, we recognised that more is needed to drive out the unscrupulous profiteers. That is why in March this year we announced our intention to bring in standards for supported housing, including powers for local authorities to manage supported housing in their area, and to seek to make changes to housing benefit regulations.

Mr Mohindra: I thank the Minister for the reassurances she has given the House. Does she agree that this may not be a silver bullet, and is she confident that she will continue to keep an eye on this brief, in case there are unintended consequences or, more importantly, other things we may need to do in the future to ensure that this bad behaviour is stamped out?

Felicity Buchan: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We must continue to monitor this sector. Enforcement is important, as is consultation. We must get the regulations right because we want to target unscrupulous landlords, not the good providers. We had a written statement at the beginning of the year, and it very fortuitous that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East chose this issue for his private Member's Bill. It is an excellent opportunity to take forward the necessary legislation to make this happen, deliver on that commitment, and build on the action that the Government have already taken. Once the measures set out in the Bill are implemented, there will for the first time be a set of national supported housing standards, issued by the Government, and a licensing scheme that local authorities can deploy, so that all residents and providers of supported housing know what good-quality accommodation and support is, giving confidence to residents and landlords alike.

Helping to oversee the implementation of the Bill will be the supported housing advisory panel, and I welcome this provision. The panel will bring together key players in the sector to advise and work in partnership with the Government. The board will be able to provide challenge, help with direction and hold us to account as we move to deliver the measures in the Bill. As many Members have alluded to, it will also help us to build a body of data and information at local and national level, which I agree is of the utmost import.

The Bill will require all local authorities in England to put in place supported housing strategies, which will help them to better understand their local supported housing market. The supported housing oversight pilots demonstrated that strategic planning is a valuable tool that enables local authorities to assess the type and stock of provision in their area, estimate the need for supported housing and look to future requirements.

While strategic planning is an essential tool that will provide greater intelligence and data on supported housing, it will not eradicate the problems with rogue providers.

Hard enforcement is required, and that is where the licensing regime suggested in the Bill comes in. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has been clear—and I completely agree—that, where licensing requirements are not met, penalties should apply. I am pleased to see that the powers in the Bill allow us to make provision for that in the licensing regulations.

The Bill enables regulations to be made so that local authorities will require providers of supported housing to obtain a licence to operate in their area. Providers will need to meet conditions on the adequacy and suitability of accommodation and on the support services set out in national standards, and they will also need to pass a fit and proper person test, which the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood raised.

The Government believe that action to stop the problems in supported housing needs to be taken as quickly as possible. We will launch a formal consultation on measures in the Bill as quickly as possible following Royal Assent. I commit today at the Dispatch Box to laying regulations for the licensing regime within 18 months of the Bill being passed.

Providers will need to demonstrate that they are meeting national supported housing standards. Those standards will look at the quality of accommodation and the quality of care, support or supervision that people are receiving. I am pleased to say that my officials have already been working closely with the sector on what those standards might include, but it will be a complex task, and we will consult widely to ensure we get it right and do not place undue burdens on providers that are already providing excellent services to residents.

Mr Mohindra: I thank the Minister for that excellent update. After that consultation with the industry, will she commit to share with the relevant local authorities best practice in other parts of the country, so that they do not need to reinvent the wheel?

Felicity Buchan: That is a very important point. We will have national standards. We will also have best practice guidelines, so that local authorities throughout the country can adopt those practices.

How people become residents of supported housing is an important aspect of this work. It is unacceptable that disreputable providers are advertising on Gumtree and Twitter and taking advantage of vulnerable people who are experiencing a crisis in their lives for their own profit. Referral pathways into supported housing are a very important issue and one we will look at as part of the introduction of the Bill.

We will, of course, be consulting on what national supported housing standards might include and how the licensing regime will work. We will ensure that people living in supported housing have the opportunity to have their views heard, as well as providers of supported housing, local authorities and other stakeholders. I know there is concern in the sector around the types of supported housing scheme that licensing requirements will apply to. To that end, we will be able to make provision for exemptions from the requirement to apply for a licence. The Government will take great care with that and, where we are convinced that other satisfactory oversight arrangements already exist and that the risk of exemptions being exploited is low, we will set out which specific types of housing are exempt.

Many Members discussed housing benefit. As I said, DWP Ministers are also keen to see an end to this exploitation, and we welcome the fact that the Bill makes it clear that the interaction between licensing and housing benefit regulations will be carefully considered as details of the licensing regime are developed. As with the other licensing requirements, we will consult fully on that.

Many Government Members talked about the need to improve national data. The Government already have research under way to provide an up-to-date estimate of the size and cost of the supported housing sector across Great Britain, as well as estimates of future demand. In addition, DWP has made changes to the way local authorities provide housing benefit data on supported housing claims, which will ensure that over time we have better data on exempt accommodation, which relates to the point raised by the hon. Member for Croydon Central.

I want to spend a few minutes talking about the intentionally homeless provision in the Bill. Members will be aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East brought forward the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. That important legislation placed a duty on local authorities to try to prevent and relieve a person's homelessness. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will agree that should vulnerable people find themselves in poor quality supported housing, they should not be afraid to challenge their landlord. Where this leads to adverse consequences, people in that position should be able to look to their local authority for help. The Bill also sets out that a person will not be treated as intentionally homeless if they are leaving supported exempt accommodation because of the poor quality of the accommodation or the poor quality of the support, and that the accommodation and support

"does not meet National Supported Housing Standards."

This will ensure that residents feel confident in leaving poor quality supported housing provision and challenging those landlords who are not providing the accommodation and support that we expect.

Before I conclude, I want to pick up on a few points that were raised by Members. My opposite number, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) asked my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East why there were "mays" as opposed to "musts" in the Bill. I just want to address that. I want to be clear that we are required to consult on the regulations. We do need to make a progress report within 12 months. As I have said at the Dispatch Box, I am today making a firm commitment to lay the regulations within 18 months. I believe that the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich alluded specifically to clause 5 being drafted as "may", but that is because it deals with the consultation, so we want to allow for flexibility to form the most appropriate regulations.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood talked about the necessity for a fit and proper person clause. As I have already mentioned, there is one in clause 5(2). I reassure her that the Department for Work and Pensions has committed to defining "care," "support" and "supervision" to improve the quality of that care, support and supervision, and to ensure that taxpayers get value for money.

My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge talked about the importance of having a link with integrated care systems. I assure him that my

officials are working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care, which will be very much involved in developing the advisory panel and the strategies and regulations we put in place. My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth also mentioned that, and I see him nodding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton asked about money being made available to local authorities. I reassure him that there will be an assessment under the new burdens doctrine. Local authorities will be compensated if it is determined that they have new burdens. I also reassure him that the licensing regime will be a fee-paying scheme, so its ongoing operation should be self-funding.

A number of Members talked about the importance of national consistency. As I said, we will have a national standard and there will be guidance. A few Members raised the possibility of a national regulator, and the advisory panel will clearly have it within its remit that it can advise the Secretary of State.

This is a very important Bill, and it is only too clear that poor-quality supported housing is having a very real and harmful impact on certain vulnerable people in parts of the country. I express my gratitude to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee for its report and recommendations, to which the Government will formally respond in due course.

I said at the outset that the Government fully support the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, and I repeat our support here. We must work together to drive up standards and to make it clear that time is up for rogue providers who take public money while failing vulnerable people.

1.38 pm

Bob Blackman: With the leave of the House, I would like to respond to the debate. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

At the outset, the aim of this Bill is to ensure that vulnerable residents in supported housing are provided with proper support and care where they need it, and to drive out the bad providers. As such, we have had to strike a balance in the Bill as we do not want to burden the good providers with excessive regulation at a time when they are struggling to make ends meet.

One of the gaps that several colleagues have emphasised is the lack of data about the number of supported housing units and their extent. One reason why the Bill has many "may" provisions that enable the Secretary of State to introduce regulation is precisely so that we can get the data and take the necessary action so that we do not drive the good providers out of the market while driving out the poor providers who are exploiting vulnerable people.

There are two levels of regulation in the Bill. There is the regulation of providers. One issue that we discovered on our visit to Birmingham was that a voluntary scheme had been introduced, but, of course, the good providers register for the voluntary scheme, and the bad providers do not. That is why we need to make the licensing arrangements appropriate and mandatory. That is a key issue that must be looked at as we take these measures forward in regulation. We should be clear that this Bill is a start; it will require a huge amount of regulation to be introduced on the back of it. As my hon. Friend the Minister has said, there will be a great deal of consultation

[Bob Blackman]

with the sector to make sure that we get this right. The benefit of that is that it enables the Government to be more nimble if these bad providers try some other tricks. Therefore, we can change the regulations accordingly.

I thank the 13 hon. Members who spoke in the debate. At some stages, they were competing over their fulsome praise for me. Just to update the House, I have now entered my 37th successive year of directly elected representation. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] One benefit of doing that as a councillor and an MP is that one can specialise in particular areas and bring expertise where, possibly, Ministers keep changing.

I sincerely thank all hon. Members for their contributions. Many points were raised during the debate and I will be looking at them subsequently, so that, as we take the Bill through Committee, we can look at whether there is a need for any changes in the legislation and, equally, whether we are striking the right balance. I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), and the Opposition for their support of the Bill. We need to take the Bill forward on a cross-party basis, because that will enable us to demonstrate to these rogue landlords that, really and truly, their time is up and that they should get out of the market now, so that we can make sure that the innocent people, who just need our help and assistance, are given what they need, which is the ability to rebuild their lives in a safe and secure environment. I hope that the House will pass the Bill, so that we get on to the Committee stage to look at it in much more detail.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Terminal Illness (Support and Rights) Bill

Second Reading

1.43 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

May I be the first to congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on achieving a Second Reading for his Bill? Perhaps we could persuade him to organise a masterclass on how to achieve Government support for proposed legislation.

I am grateful to the Public Bill Office and, in particular, to Anne-Marie Griffiths, for their tremendous support in preparing this Bill and to the Minister who has taken the time to talk to me about what I am proposing today.

As I begin, I wish to thank the teams at both Marie Curie and the Trades Union Congress for all the vital work that they do in supporting those living with terminal illnesses. I also pay tribute to the many inspiring campaigners who work with these organisations, particularly Jacci Woodcock MBE who founded the TUC’s Dying to Work campaign, which I will talk about when I get to clause 3. I would also like to recognise the work of Mark and Cheryl whom I had the privilege of meeting a couple of months ago when I hosted Marie Curie’s Dying in Poverty parliamentary event. These campaigners and their families have been through one of the most difficult experiences that we can imagine—a terminal diagnosis—and yet they continue to use their voices to advocate to improve support for all people with terminal illnesses. Their work should inspire and humble us all—it certainly does me.

The first time I promoted a private Member’s Bill, to ban smoking in cars with children present, I am proud to say that the Government eventually implemented the measures, albeit three and a half years later. I am hoping they will make quicker progress this time. As the cost of living crisis deepens, people living with terminal illnesses will be disproportionately impacted. Indeed, they are already facing increasing financial precariousness. Between April and September of this year, almost one in five calls to Marie Curie’s support line were from people affected by terminal illness who were concerned about their finances—an increase of 38% on the same period last year. Therefore, I hope the Government take up the measures in my Bill quickly, and provide those living with terminal illnesses with much-needed additional financial support, without costing the Exchequer a penny.

Nobody should die in poverty, but, tragically, many of our constituents who should be able to spend the last stage of their lives enjoying the company of the people they love, are instead worrying about their finances, struggling to pay bills and incurring debts that will be passed on to their loved ones when they are gone. In 2021, Marie Curie commissioned Loughborough University to examine the number of people who die in poverty in the UK each year. The findings of the research are stark and horrifying: 90,000 people die in poverty every year in the UK, one in four people who die in working age are in poverty in their last year of life, and two in three working-age parents who die experience poverty in the last five years of life.

Being diagnosed with a terminal illness can lead to a number of additional costs, including travel to appointments, medication costs and higher energy bills, which I will come on to a little later. These costs all land on the doorstep just as people's income is reduced, as they may be forced to stop work or at least reduce their working hours. As Marie Curie noted in its briefing ahead of the autumn statement:

“For many, this ‘double squeeze’ on household finances directly leads to a fall below the poverty line. Working age people living with a terminal illness are a third more likely to be in poverty than other working age people.

For those who die in working age the risks are even higher. Without the fixed income provided by the State Pension and other lifetime savings to rely on, people who die in working age are more than twice as likely to experience poverty at the end of life as those who die in pension age.

Working age families with children are particularly vulnerable to falling into poverty when hit by terminal illness. Childcare costs cannot be avoided and the impact of one or both parents leaving the workforce means that these families are more likely than any other group to fall below the poverty line when one parent is terminally ill.”

These statistics underline the urgent need for additional financial support for those living with a terminal illness, particularly those who are of working age.

There is a range of possible practical and impactful interventions that Marie Curie has worked up, such as placing elements of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guideline NG6, “Excess winter deaths and illness and the health risks associated with cold homes”, on a statutory footing and including people with terminal illnesses on the priority services register. That obliges providers to prioritise vulnerable customers for additional support, such as advance notice of planned power cuts or priority support in emergencies. It has also been energetically campaigning to give all dying people access to their state pension, no matter their age; to protect dying people from soaring energy bills, including by extending eligibility for the winter fuel payment; and to support dying parents with childcare costs. I urge the Minister to consider Marie Curie's proposals that are wider than we are discussing today, and to meet it to discuss the full range of policies it has developed. For my part, the scope of this Bill is much narrower, so I hope she will be able to commit to advancing these limited but important proposals.

If implemented, my Bill would require utility companies to provide certain financial supports to customers with a terminal illness, and it would strengthen the employment rights of people with a terminal illness. Clauses 1 and 2 will enable people who are terminally ill to access financial support from their energy provider via the warm home discount and the energy company obligation. The measures will amend the eligibility criteria for these schemes in existing legislation, to give energy providers an obligation to provide such forms of support to customers who are thought to be in their last year of life.

In a 2021 report, “No place like home?”, the all-party parliamentary group for terminal illness concluded that the added costs of heating homes could drive many terminally ill people and their families into poverty and have a negative impact on their physical and mental health and wellbeing. That finding was confirmed by Marie Curie in the 2022 report “Dying in poverty”,

which said that the energy bills of terminally ill people could increase significantly after their diagnosis. For example, some terminally ill people may need to heat their homes for longer than before, or to a higher temperature, as a result of their condition, while others will need to power medical equipment in the home, such as ventilators, respirators or monitors. Those higher energy needs can push households affected by terminal illness into fuel poverty.

The UK's energy providers are required to make certain forms of support available to customers who may struggle to afford the cost of their bills, or who may be vulnerable and need support. They include the warm home discount—a £140 discount on electricity and gas bills over the winter period—and the energy company obligation, which obliges providers to deliver energy efficiency measures to homes in order to help households cut their heating bills. In some cases, eligibility for these schemes is set nationally: for example, low-income pensioners are automatically eligible for the warm home discount under the “core group” system, while customers in receipt of certain benefits are automatically eligible for support under the energy company obligation's help to heat group. In other cases, energy providers set their own eligibility criteria—such as those for the warm home discount wider group—which are often based on receipt of certain means-tested benefits or other criteria.

Terminally ill people, especially those of working age, are not automatically eligible for support via these schemes despite their vulnerability to fuel poverty. They may be eligible to apply for support based on other criteria—for example, disability or receipt of means-tested benefits—but they will not necessarily be successful. Both the warm home discount and the energy company obligation require energy companies to make a limited pot of money available to support customers, and a provider's criteria do not necessarily prioritise those who are terminally ill for support.

Legislation places obligations on UK energy providers to make support available to customers via the warm home discount and energy company obligation on the basis of eligibility criteria set out in legislation. Regulation 8(5)(c) of the Warm Home Discount (England and Wales) Regulations 2022 sets out the eligibility criteria for the core group, who are automatically eligible for the payment. At present, people are considered eligible for support under the core group system if they are in receipt of the “guarantee credit” element of pension credit. Article 2 of the Electricity and Gas (Energy Company Obligation) Order 2022 sets out the eligibility criteria under the energy company obligation for the help to heat group, who are eligible for interventions to improve the energy efficiency of their homes to help reduce their bills. At present, people are considered eligible for support under the help to heat group if they are in receipt of certain benefits outlined in schedule 1 to the order.

My Bill amends each of those items of legislation to introduce a new eligibility criterion based on the Social Security (Special Rules for End of Life) Act 2022, extending automatic eligibility for the warm home discount and energy company obligation to people who are thought to be in the last year of their lives. The Government have already demonstrated some commitment to improving financial support for those with terminal illnesses by

[Alex Cunningham]

amending the legal definition of terminal illness in benefits law to enable anyone who is thought to be in the last year of life to claim certain benefits on a fast-track basis. I welcome that, but I also hope that the Government can take this further step and provide necessary additional support for some of those who will need heating the most this winter as their energy bills climb.

The third and final clause of my Bill aims to put the demands of the TUC's Dying to Work campaign on a statutory footing, ensuring that terminal illness is recognised as a protected characteristic, so that an employee with a terminal illness would enjoy a protected period during which they could not be dismissed as a result of their condition. This protection will provide those who have received a terminal diagnosis and are still of working age with the choice of how to spend their final months, and the peace of mind of knowing their job is protected and the future financial security of their family is supported. Losing one's job following a terminal diagnosis can lead to reduced income, further exacerbating the issues with financial security that I have discussed. Sometimes, it leads to a deeply stressful and upsetting HR procedure, which should not have to be a concern for those in the final stages of their life. If a worker with a terminal illness loses their job, they may also lose any death-in-service payments that they have earned through a lifetime of work but which are payable only to those who die while still in employment.

Clause 3 provides that employers must take into account an employee's terminal illness when deciding whether it is a reasonable adjustment to retain in employment those who have terminal illnesses, rather than dismiss them in accordance with a sickness absence policy. This will provide people with a terminal illness who are still of working age and who wish to continue working with additional security at the end of their life, and remove some of the stress and fear that they face. Although in some cases the individual may wish to stop working and spend their remaining time outside of work, some workers decide to continue working as long as they can, either because they need the financial security or because they find that their work can be a helpful distraction from their illness. Those who decide to stay in work should not be having to stress about dismissal or salary reductions after any periods of sickness associated with their illness. The clause ensures that whatever choice a person makes, they can expect the appropriate help and support from their employer, because when a person receives a terminal diagnosis, their job should not be on their list of worries.

Thanks to the efforts of the TUC, over half a million workers in the UK are already covered by the Dying to Work charter. I hope that today the Government can commit to extending that to all workers. I desperately want these proposals to succeed, and would be more than happy to work with the Minister to amend the Bill if necessary ahead of implementation; I know that Marie Curie and the TUC would be pleased to meet officials in order to help in any way they can, too. I reiterate that these changes will not cost the Exchequer a penny, and the cost to energy companies is also very limited, especially when compared with their huge profits.

The change to the warm home discount in clause 1 will not necessarily require additional funds, as all it does is widen the criteria of the core group who automatically receive it to include terminally ill people.

The cost per person of the energy company obligation will depend heavily on what steps are needed to make that person's home more energy efficient: for example, they may need a new boiler, insulation or a smart meter, among other things. However, again, I am sure the Minister can recognise that those costs would be extremely modest. While these clauses will not be able to ensure that no one dies in poverty—which is what this House should be striving for—I believe they could have a significant impact on the lives of terminally ill people, particularly those of working age, when they are at their most vulnerable. I hope the Minister will support the Bill's Second Reading today, and work with me in Committee to make it law.

1.58 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to respond immediately to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). I congratulate him, and thank him for bringing this important issue to the House's attention. He has a distinguished record of bringing private Members' Bills before the House and getting them put on the statute book, albeit on the slow wheels of this place. I, like all colleagues present, feel very strongly that private Members' Bills days are not just for fun and games; they are a chance for Members to bring issues before the House, and for Governments and Oppositions to listen and see whether we can achieve some progress together. It is very much in that spirit that I come to the Dispatch Box today. I put on record my apologies to the Wymondham Access Group, which I was supposed to be meeting in my constituency today. I am sure its members will understand that this issue goes to the heart of many of the challenges they face.

The hon. Member's Bill seeks to tackle some very important issues faced by those suffering from terminal illnesses, many of whom experience real difficulties and really want to have as fulfilling and purposeful lives in the workplace for as long as they possibly can. I join him in paying tribute to Jacci Woodcock, whose story and campaign has been so inspiring.

To put on record my experience, my dear childhood friend, Charlie Williams, died of a brain tumour a few years ago. I watched this incredibly fit young man cut down in the prime of his life, and I saw through him many of the issues highlighted by this campaign. I join the hon. Member in paying tribute to Mark, Cheryl and the others. Their work is genuinely inspiring and humbling. I look forward to going through the Bill and seeing how best we can deal with the issues that the hon. Member raises.

As the Minister responsible for research, I am in some sense standing in today for the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who has responsibility for small business. However, research by Marie Curie—it has done great work—clearly shows that people with terminal illness often face a loss of income and increased pressure

on their finances, adding to serious anxiety for them and their loved ones. Nobody wants that and we must do everything we can to try to avoid it.

One in four people each year who need palliative care miss out on their entitlements, because their needs are not properly recognised and they are not referred to the right services. To tackle that issue, the Marie Curie campaign calls for a change in the way those care services are provided. Colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care are very aware of that and are working on it, albeit along with the wider pressures on the health system, particularly this winter, post-pandemic.

The Bill essentially seeks to do two things. It seeks to require utility companies to provide financial support to customers with a terminal illness and to make provision about the employment rights of people with a terminal illness and for various connected purposes. The Bill is heavily supported by the TUC's Dying to Work campaign, which has helpfully highlighted a lot of these issues on behalf of members. It seeks to change the law to provide additional employment protection for terminally ill workers.

Dying to Work was set up following, and inspired by, the terrible case of Jacci Woodcock, a sales manager from Derbyshire who was forced out of her job after being diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. The truth is that many excellent employers around the country do everything they possibly can, rightly, in the best spirit of best business, to employ well and be flexible and look after those who are suffering. However, there are also bad employers who do not fulfil their responsibilities properly, as we heard in the previous debate. The Government face the classic problem of how to identify good practice and clamp down on bad practice, and how to identify the difference. Interestingly, in preparing for this debate, when I asked for the data—I am Minister for research, so it will be no surprise that I was keen to see the data—I found that there is, as ever, a lack of hard data on how many people are suffering, where, when and where the real gaps and problems are.

Let me be clear that everyone in the Government, and I think in the House, absolutely agrees that we all must fulfil our duties of care to the most vulnerable in our society. That is precisely what the Bill seeks to do. My duty as Minister is to ensure that the measures in it are implementable and to work with the hon. Member for Stockton North to get that right. He is very aware of that, having done this before with his excellent ban on smoking in cars with children.

I will deal with the points on energy and then on employment. The Government recognise that this is a hugely difficult time for people all across the country, particularly for energy customers facing hugely higher bills as a result of the shutdown and restart of the economy after the pandemic, as well as, particularly, the Ukraine war and the appalling invasion of Ukraine by Russia. That is why, even prior to the energy price guarantee, the Government announced £37 billion-worth of additional support last spring to help consumers with the impact of the unprecedented global gas price increase. Eight million of the most vulnerable households will see up to £1,200 of extra support in instalments across this autumn and winter, on top of the £400 energy support scheme that households are already benefiting from between October and March. The Government's energy price guarantee will save the typical British household around £900 this winter.

Turning to the warm home discount, which the hon. Member for Stockton North particularly focused on, it has been in place since 2011 and has provided more than £3.3 billion of total assistance to low-income and vulnerable households across Great Britain. We have extended that scheme until 2026 and expanded the spending envelope from around £350 million to £523 million per year. That figure will rise with inflation and, as a result, an extra 800,000 low-income households will receive rebates of £150 off their energy bills. Indeed, households have already started receiving those rebates from their energy suppliers.

As before, we will provide rebates to about 1 million households where someone is in receipt of pension credit guarantee. Those households are likely to spend more time inside their homes, require higher temperatures and be more vulnerable to cold. Furthermore, under reforms we have introduced in England and Wales to improve targeting, around 560,000 more households in fuel poverty will receive rebates and around 160,000 more households with a long-term illness or disability will benefit each winter. I can see the hon. Gentleman nodding—he knows we are trying to get the right money to the right people.

Incidentally, the reforms in England and Wales have resulted from use of innovative data matching between the Government and the obligated energy suppliers—data matching enabled by powers in the Digital Economy Act 2017 to help people in fuel poverty. That is an example of good legislation working. We have identified eligible households based on two key criteria: those on means-tested benefits or tax credits below a specific income, and those who live in a home with a high energy cost threshold. We have used the age, size and type of property to estimate its relative heating costs.

As a result of those reforms, most eligible households will not have to take any action to receive the rebate. They will receive a Government letter explaining the scheme and will have their accounts automatically credited by their energy supplier.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): The Minister is rightly outlining the support the Government have given to people, as well as acknowledging, as the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) has done, that not all people who are terminally ill are getting the right services at the right time. Does he agree that the hospice sector, in particular the Mountbatten hospice in my constituency, but also hospices that provide services across all of the United Kingdom, are not only a key player in ensuring that people receive the services they need, but can be part of the solution in directing them to some of the support they need because of the cost of living crisis?

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point on behalf of the hospice sector, and Mountbatten hospice in particular. The hospice sector is key through its provision of not only care, but support to citizens at the most vulnerable time in their life. I join him in paying tribute to hospices, and I will come on to talk about some of the ways they contribute. Macmillan Cancer Care has done some interesting work on energy in particular.

Customers on prepayment meters may receive a top-up voucher, and all payment types benefit as long as they have an account with a participating energy supplier.

[George Freeman]

For eligible households where there is no data or we are unable to match, they receive a Government letter by mid-January, asking them to call a helpline and verify their eligibility. We are doing everything we can to try to reach out. That helpline opened on 14 November and has already started processing customers.

The warm home discount provides further help beyond that £150 rebate. Under the industry initiatives element of the scheme, worth more than £40 million this year, several hundred thousand households receive help such as debt write-off, energy efficiency measures, financial assistance and benefit entitlement checks. All households helped under that element of the warm home discount also receive energy saving advice. Charities and businesses offering those services can provide genuinely life-changing packages, and we encourage everyone to pursue them.

Low-income and vulnerable households, including those with a terminal illness, may be able to benefit under industry initiatives even if they are not eligible for the £150 rebate. Indeed, under those industry initiatives energy suppliers have worked with charities, including Macmillan Cancer Support, to provide particular help to people diagnosed with cancer.

On energy efficiency, which was the second point raised by the hon. Member for Stockton North, while the Government, Ofgem and energy suppliers offer direct help with energy bills, we know that the best long-term solution is to improve the efficiency of people's homes. That is why yesterday the Government announced a major new commitment to drive improvements in energy efficiency to bring down bills for households, businesses and the public sector with a clear ambition to reduce the UK's total energy consumption from buildings and industry by at least 15% by 2030 against 2021 levels.

To achieve that, a new energy efficiency taskforce will be charged with accelerating the delivery of energy efficiency across the economy, and new Government funding worth £6 billion will be made available from 2025 to 2028. That is in addition to the £6.6 billion committed to over this Parliament, of which just over half has already been allocated to significantly improve the least energy-efficient homes through our social housing decarbonation fund, the home upgrade grant and the local authority delivery scheme. I hope that he can see that we are trying again to focus that money on that most vulnerable cohort whom he has spoken for. Homes receiving energy efficiency measures under those schemes will benefit from average bill savings of between £300 and £700 a year based on an average energy bill of £2,500.

I turn to the energy company obligation, which is a specific part of the hon. Member's Bill. ECO, as it is known, is a regulation on larger energy suppliers to deliver energy bill savings through the installation of energy efficiency measures. Since the scheme started in 2013, about 3.5 million energy efficiency measures have been installed in about 2.4 million homes across Great Britain. Therefore, just under 10% of British households have lower energy bills as a direct result of ECO. This year, the Government extended the scheme until March 2026 and increased the spending envelope from about £640 million to £1 billion a year. That is focused on low-income and vulnerable households living in the least energy-efficient homes.

Households can benefit either through means-tested benefits or if they are social housing tenants or identified as low-income and vulnerable by the local authority or energy supplier. That last element is known as ECO Flex. Energy suppliers can meet up to half their overall obligation through ECO Flex, which is focused on private tenure housing. Under the current iteration, we have introduced a route intended specifically to help households experiencing severe health issues—both mental health and physical disability—including terminal illness-related disabilities. Households who receive energy-efficiency measures under ECO will typically save about £600 a year. There are organisations helping low-income households who offer help under ECO Flex and warm home discount, and the Government recently announced a further expansion of that support with a supplementary ECO Plus scheme, which is worth a total of £1 billion from 2023 to March 2026 and will allow a broader set of households to benefit. We plan to publish a consultation on the detailed proposals later this month.

I turn finally to employment rights, which is the final substantive clause of the Bill. Let me take the opportunity at the Dispatch Box, as a Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to make it clear that the Government strongly expect and encourage all employers to treat people in such a situation with the care, sensitivity and compassion that we would all expect people we know to be treated with. Being a good employer and a good business means exactly that. People suffering from a terminal illness should not have to face any additional burdens as a result of their employment—not least fearing for their job—at a time when they are dealing with the very hardest illnesses and having to make plans for the end of their life.

The Government fully support the objective of enabling employees with life-threatening conditions to continue working for as long as possible. One of the things that many people feel most strongly about on diagnosis is wanting to be able to carry on living their life for as long as they possibly can, and we owe it to them to make that possible. The hon. Member has been a great champion of that. The Equality Act 2010 provides that workers who are disabled due to chronic diseases or conditions are fully protected from any discriminatory treatment by their employers. In the overwhelming majority of cases, someone with a terminal illness will meet the definition for being disabled under the Act. I say, “the overwhelming majority”, but one thing that we might want to look at offline, as it were, is trying to ensure that that is everybody. Any kind of cancer, for example, is automatically regarded as a disability.

Under employment law, a qualifying employee who is unfairly dismissed or forced to resign from a job because of a terminal illness may bring a claim of unfair dismissal against their employer. However—before the hon. Member for Stockton North asks me, as I suspect he will—I would be the first to accept that if one is in the late stages of a terminal disease, bringing a case to the employment tribunal is not for the faint-hearted. It is not, in many cases, a reasonable remedy, and given that, we need to think about how we can ensure that people are not being asked to rely on a remedy that, in practice, they will struggle to call on. Depending on the nature of the illness and its impact on them, they may also be able to bring a claim of disability discrimination under the Equality Act, but again, the same condition applies.

The Equality Act goes further in relation to those whose illness renders them disabled: it places a clear statutory duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments for those with disabilities, quite rightly, so that they can access or remain in work. Reasonable adjustments can include making changes to the workplace, changing someone's working arrangements, finding a different way to do something or providing reasonable equipment, services or support. Crucially, reasonable adjustments are specific to an individual employee, and making a reasonable adjustment is not a one-off requirement; it requires review, adaptation and ongoing support as people's needs change and develop. Equally, it is not a limitless requirement; it has to be reasonable in all circumstances, taking a variety of factors into consideration.

More generally, where an adjustment is not directly required because of a disability, for many people an additional bit of flexibility in the workplace is crucial to allowing them to deliver their job. Employees with 26 weeks' service already benefit from the right to request flexible working, which allows them to ask for a change in their hours or location of work. Most employers rightly and honourably go further than their minimum statutory duties. It is the bad employers that we need to get on top of. I was pleased that the Government were able to support the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Bill, which deals with that issue, on Second Reading on 28 October. If that Bill successfully gets through Parliament, it will update the existing right to request flexible working to encourage more effective dialogue between employers and employees, allow more statutory requests in a year and require that they are administered more speedily. The Government believe that that will benefit employees generally but also those who are working with a life-threatening condition. We look forward to working with the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) to take that Bill forward.

The Government are absolutely committed to improving the lives of people with disabilities, terminal illnesses and related conditions. We believe it is imperative that all employers fulfil their obligations to their employees. There is a lot of guidance and support available to them, and the House has heard the considerable package of support the Government have put in place, including through the ACAS website, which I encourage anyone listening to or watching the debate to look at. We encourage all employers to make use of those resources and ensure that employees with terminal illnesses are given the help and support they need to stay in work if that is what they wish to do, which many do.

Having gone through the Bill carefully with officials in the Department, we now need to go through it with officials in the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health and Social Care. While I am aware that the lead on this is the Small Business Minister, in my Department, I suggest to the hon. Member for Stockton North that we convene a group of key Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the DWP and the DHSC, to look at the specific groups who are not able to receive their entitlements—that is the hon. Gentleman's point: many people have entitlements but are not getting them—and to ensure that good employers who are trying to do the right thing can provide a mixture of private employer support and universal credit support.

Everyone here today has heard the extensive support the Government are providing, but it is not just a question of announcing lots of pots of money. For the people who are living in this very difficult situation, we must ensure that we make it easy for them to apply for and secure that help. I would happily undertake to request that Ministers in those two Departments and the Small Business Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) sit down to look in particular at how we can ensure that eligible people get what they are eligible for and how we can promote best practice and make sure that these people who have the tragedy of a terminal illness are able to fulfil their lives properly in the workplace.

Alex Cunningham: I just place on record my thanks to the Minister for the constructive way in which he is responding to my speech and my Bill. I hope we will be able to work on it sometime in the future.

George Freeman: I am grateful, and in return I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter. I look forward to our being able to make some progress, whether or not in the form of this Bill. I think he understands that we need to try to focus on solving the problem, and he probably does not want to wait three years to get his Bill on to the statute book—he would rather get something done more quickly.

In conclusion, I will sign off where I started, and pay tribute to the work of the Marie Curie team and all the hospices that Members have mentioned around the country, which do so much for this most vulnerable group. I hope that Members across the House can hear how seriously the Government take this matter. We are putting significant funding out there. The real challenge is to make sure that the people on the frontline who are eligible and dealing with the very hardest situation in life can get the help they need.

On the employment side of the hon. Gentleman's Bill in particular, everyone can see that there is a problem when people do not have the most enlightened employers. Asking those people to take recourse through the courts when they are in the situation they are in is hard, and we need to sit down and see whether there is something we can do to ensure that happens less and less, and that people suffering from disabilities and terminal illnesses can live and work as they want, with dignity right through to the end of their working lives. I think all of us in the House would support that.

2.21 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on bringing forward an important and heartfelt piece of legislation. I hope, as the Minister said, that he is successful more quickly this time than he was with his private Member's Bill on smoking in cars with children present, which he introduced some years ago. I remember it well, because I sat on the Children and Families Bill Committee and moved one of the amendments in his name, as he was not on the Committee. I spoke on it again on Report, and I was with him on the Delegated Legislation Committee where the legislation was implemented in the Smoke-free (Private Vehicles) Regulations 2015. I hope he is successful far more quickly, and I think the spirit of what the Minister said suggests that my hon. Friend can make enormous progress quickly.

[Bill Esterson]

I add my thanks to Marie Curie and the TUC for the work they have done and the way they have informed this debate and for the evidence they have presented to my hon. Friend and the Minister. As my hon. Friend and the Minister said, the fact that 90,000 people die in poverty each year and that people of working age are dying, the effect that has on children and families and the challenges presented to people who are terminally ill mean that this issue must have our attention. I hope the Minister can convene other Ministers in the way that he said in short order and put in place some of the measures that he suggested can be done relatively quickly.

In my hon. Friend's Bill, he has proposed a series of pragmatic financial measures. The measures on the warm home discount and the energy company obligations speak for themselves in how the Bill is set out. He has told us about the high energy needs of people who are terminally ill, and clearly any help that can be given should be given. That brings me briefly to clause 3. The TUC's Dying to Work campaign highlighted, as the Minister rightly said, that employers who do not act in the best interest of their workers need to be brought to account. I am grateful for his acknowledgement that the remedy of a tribunal is not an appropriate or practical way of addressing these problems. I am pleased that he said the objective should be for workers with a terminal diagnosis to be able to continue as long as possible, and that we will have that in *Hansard*, because it will form the basis of the discussions he mentioned.

I welcome the Minister's commitment, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North on bringing forward an incredibly important and powerful piece of legislation. I hope with all sincerity that he is successful in short order, and that the Minister is able to fulfil his promises.

I welcome the Minister to his role as Science Minister, which he assured us earlier in the week he definitely is, and I believe it has now been confirmed.

2.25 pm

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on bringing forward this Bill.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. For the avoidance of doubt, the hon. Gentleman has the floor. If he wishes to give way, that is entirely up to him.

Chris Clarkson: I said in the previous debate that I enjoy Friday sittings, because people introduce Bills to address concerns that are probably not covered by current legislation.

I agree with quite a lot of what the Minister said. There is a great deal of support in the current framework, but the point of the Bill, as I understand it, is to try to address the places where that support is not getting to people who need it in a timely fashion. The example of a person having to go to an employment tribunal when they may have only a few months left to live is very powerful, because it throws the situation into stark relief.

Part of the problem is that we can go into abstraction, because there is no ticking clock showing how much longer we have on this earth. People will have myriad concerns at that moment in their life. They will want to tidy up their affairs and they will want to make sure their family are looked after, but they will probably also forget to take care of themselves in the way they normally would. They might lose out because they do not necessarily know what support is available, as they will be so busy trying to ensure that, when they exit the stage, those around them are able to carry on, and we do not want them to lose out. Nobody in this country should ever be in a position where they are not able to look after themselves properly. People should die with dignity. Dying well is a good way of looking at it. We need to remove the stigma that attaches itself to being terminally ill. I am the son of a cancer survivor. We were very lucky, but many families are not. That moment crystallises people's thinking about what has to happen in a very short period of time.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North on bringing forward this Bill. It is a worthwhile piece of legislation, and I can tell that he has given it serious thought and has worked with partners. I implore the Minister to make good on his promises to bring together people from the various Departments that will be affected. We have a good suite of things available. The special rules for the end of life provide pretty powerful protections but, as we saw in the previous debate, even where we have a framework that is supposed to work, it is not always the case in lived experience.

I would like to see the Bill continue in some form down the legislative pathway, which will rely on us all working together to understand where pressure needs to be applied to things that are not working, and where best practice can be enhanced by looking at other sectors. I look forward to seeing what comes next, but I go back to my original point. We need to lean on the existing protections. We need to better understand what levers we need to pull and how we can apply best practice where we have it, so that we can ensure that everyone around us has the option to live with dignity and to die well. I look forward to having a conversation with the hon. Member for Stockton North, because the Bill has piqued my interest. As I said, I like Friday sittings because I get to think about things I would not normally think about.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I am struck by the point my hon. Friend makes about people being tied up with legal wranglings in the last part of their life. It is incumbent on everybody to make sure that they do not have to fight the system while they are also fighting for their life.

Chris Clarkson: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Far too often, we become the system and we should not do so. We should want to be there to support.

2.30 pm

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

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 9 December.

Business without Debate

Mobile Homes (Pitch Fees) Bill

Bill read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): For the benefit of the House as a whole, can the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) confirm his wish that all proceedings in Committee take place today without debate?

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Yes.

Considered in Committee.

Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Bill reported, without amendment.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Three minutes and 11 seconds!

Sir Christopher Chope: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I thank everybody for facilitating this? I think it is the first time since 1998 that a private Member's Bill has gone through all its stages at one sitting.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I believe that to be correct: it is the first time. Many a worthy Bill has appeared to have support of all Members but one. [*Laughter.*] It is noticeable that this particular Bill is brought by that very Member and its worthiness has therefore outweighed its procedural position. Interesting and notable.

COVID-19 VACCINE DIAGNOSIS AND 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 25 November.

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE CO-FUNDING AND CO-PAYMENT BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

PUBLIC ADVOCATE (NO. 2) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (15 July), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 9 December.

ANONYMITY OF SUSPECTS BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (28 October), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

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 25 November.

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 25 November.

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

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

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 25 November.

INTERNET ACCESS (CHILDREN ELIGIBLE FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Have we not just seen, in swift time, how a worthy Bill can be dealt with in this Chamber? In fact, you referred to it. The Public Advocate (No. 2) Bill, which has just been objected to, has been brought to this House by me since 2016. It has widespread support across the House, including many senior Members, yet it is still being objected to, and I have not received any notification of why. This Bill would help prevent families caught up in public disasters, such as the Hillsborough families, from having to go through the heartache that they do, yet we are still seeing objections to it, and the reasons for that are not brought forward. Is it not a farce that we can see one Bill go through in three minutes, yet this Bill has been objected to every year since 2016?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I fully appreciate the point of order that the hon. Lady makes. I have heard her speak to her Bill on a few occasions in this Chamber. It is not for me to judge whether it is a worthy Bill, but I have noted that it has widespread support. There is indeed often a feeling in the Chamber on a Friday that some Bills, which have been looked at, considered, debated and amended, and which have considerable support from all political perspectives, should probably be given a fairer wind. It is a point well made.

Association of Jewish Ex-servicemen and Women: Remembrance Parade and Ceremony

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

2.38 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My staff are counting this as “Bob Blackman Friday” in the Chamber, and I notice that many colleagues have heard enough from me and are departing rapidly as I start my third speech of the day.

I am very pleased and proud to introduce this debate to highlight the 100th anniversary of the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women, who commemorate their annual remembrance ceremony and parade on Sunday. During the time I was absent from the Chamber, I have quickly changed my tie to that of the AJEX honorary member tie. I am very proud to be an honorary member of AJEX, and to have been able to attend the parades every time they have taken place since I was elected.

This debate has such significance because, 101 years ago, Jewish veterans of world war one—the great war—laid a wreath at the newly erected Cenotaph on Whitehall for the very first time. One hundred years ago to the day, the British Jewry Book of Honour, which marked the Jewish contribution between 1914 and 1918 and thereafter, was published. This demonstrates the great commitment that the Jewish community has given to the British armed forces over many years.

For over 200 years, prior to the great war, Jewish servicemen had played an important part in the British military. However, 1914 marked the precipitated emergence of a lasting and discrete Jewish identity within HM armed forces. Leaders of the faith, community bodies and the *Jewish Chronicle* urged recruitment into the British Army as support for the UK’s ongoing support and acceptance of all. This targeted recruitment eventually led to the establishment of the Jewish War Services Committee in 1915, led by Edmund Sebag-Montefiore and Lionel Nathan de Rothschild.

The Jewish momentum grew in the British Army, with the forming of a Jewish legion comprising: the 38th Battalion, the Royal Fusiliers in the east end of London; the 39th Battalion of Canadian, American and Argentinian Jews; and a 40th Battalion of Jews from Palestine, including one Lieutenant Corporal David Ben-Gurion, later to become the first Prime Minister of the state of Israel.

Over 55,000 British and British Empire Jews served with the allies throughout the great war. Sadly, at least 2,000 lost their lives in the conflict, and we should be eternally grateful to them. Their roles spanned from generals to nurses, and each helped play their part in securing victory and protecting future generations.

The pride of every Jewish serviceman and woman was captured in the 1922 British Jewry Book of Honour. This book contains the names of all those who served, details of fatalities and casualties, military honours, the Jewish units, the work of Jewish hospitals and of all other Jewish institutions and agencies. At 100 years old, the book remains a highly powerful publication. The comprehensive 1,000 plus page volume contains some 55,000 records of Jews who served in the armed forces during the conflict between 1914 and 1918.

The book contains hugely moving forewords written by Adler, Monash, and others such as the then Secretary of State for War, Winston Churchill, and Field Marshall Haig. The book contains extensive details of fatalities and casualties, military honours, the Jewish units, and the work of hospitals as well as other institutions.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Reverend Michael Adler, who tirelessly conducted meticulous research in editing the original book, enabling this significant piece of history. Reverend Michael Adler was the first Jewish chaplain to serve in HM forces and remains an inspiration to many.

It is worth noting that the Jewish contribution in world war two was just as important as in the first world war, with more than 100,000 Jewish military personnel—remarkably, that is one fifth of their entire community. Sadly, almost 3,000 lost their lives during the conflict.

Today, a century later from the book of honour’s inaugural publication, AJEX, the Jewish Military Association, continues to support veterans, their families and serving personnel of every rank. It continues to support and work with the British Legion, having a huge impact across the globe, providing essential welfare services during conflicts.

In the 1930s, AJEX was home to thousands of members from all parts of the country. It was beginning to become growingly concerned with activities commencing in Germany. AJEX members began to take to the streets to call out against Mosley’s Blackshirts and against fascists who were beginning to speak at rallies and on the streets more frequently. The German Jewish ex-servicemen had also raised alarm at the growing movement, getting in touch with AJEX to co-operate on aiding visa applications for Jews to escape the rapidly worsening Nazi Germany. The help that AJEX provided had a huge impact, saving many lives.

In 1934, King George V granted AJEX the right to march to the Cenotaph on the Sunday following Remembrance Sunday—hence why I have put on my poppy to celebrate and commemorate this event—in recognition of the Jewish contribution and as a display of loyalty from the Anglo-Jewish community. This Sunday, 20 November, will mark the 89th AJEX annual parade. It remains one of the most significant remembrance events in the whole country, with up to 2,000 people in attendance. I am pleased that this year’s parade will also include a detachment from the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, renewing the connection established back in 1917. The parade takes place on Horse Guards Parade and is an opportunity for veterans, branch standard bearers, a serving battalion, youth organisations and family members to pay their respects and march to the Cenotaph. They are accompanied by a band from the Guards Division that plays both martial and patriotic music, as well as traditional Jewish hymns. It also gives relatives of those who have served and, unfortunately, no longer with us the opportunity to wear their medals with pride and march in the parade.

The parade has welcomed a host of esteemed guests to pay their respects over the years, including members of the royal family and the highest ranks of the military. This year’s honorary attendee will be Major General Jon Swift OBE, colonel of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers and General Officer Commanding, Regional Command for the British Army. As ever, the ceremony will be led by the Chief Rabbi, with the senior military

Jewish chaplain in attendance and rabbis of other denominations also present. I am also pleased that parliamentarians have confirmed their attendance, including Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent, Baroness Henig of Lancaster, and Lord Sterling of Plaistow. I hope that through this debate, we will encourage more to attend and honour the veterans.

Today, approximately 500 members of the Jewish community are on active duty. The annual AJEX parade provides an opportunity to recognise their efforts and the huge sacrifices they make to protect Great Britain and her allies. I would urge everyone who is able, whether they be colleagues, members of the public or military personnel, to join AJEX this Sunday and stand with the Jewish community and its servicemen and women. The theme of this year's parade is "connection". That feels particularly fitting, as we must continue to educate future generations about history, and about the great sacrifice our ancestors made for our freedom. It is 100 years since the original book of honour was published, which is a very long time, and sadly, those who were alive during world war one are becoming far and few between. Their stories have been shared, and we must continue to talk about them, learn about them and raise awareness of all they did, out of respect. In doing so, and by spreading awareness, we are passing on the baton of remembrance and nurturing a connection between the past and the present.

I am grateful that my hon. and learned Friend the Minister is on the Front Bench to respond to the debate. I look forward to his contribution, which will no doubt touch on some of the history that has taken place for the Jewish community in contributing to our military across the years. However, before I conclude, I would like to thank the main organisers of the event: AJEX chief executive Fiona Palmer, deputy parade commander Major Danny Yank, and AJEX national chairman Dan Fox, as well as Jonathon and Barbara Kober, who I am pleased to say are with us in the Gallery today. There are also countless more individuals who I cannot name now who make this remarkable event possible, and to whom we are deeply grateful for their hard work in ensuring we remember those who have gone before us. I also thank the police and other forces who provide security for the event, enabling it to take place.

Finally, I hope that in this year of all years, my hon. and learned Friend the Minister will be able to attend. He will become unique, because Ministers have not attended on behalf of the Government for many years—I do not know whether any Ministers have ever attended, but they certainly have not during the time I have been a Member of this place.

Thank you for your forbearance in allowing me to make this contribution, Madam Deputy Speaker, and, indeed, for allowing me to initiate this Adjournment debate. I look forward to the Minister's response as we commemorate, and congratulate, the many men and women who have given excellent service to this country.

2.49 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Alex Chalk): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his excellent speech, and for securing this important debate. He has been a powerful advocate for the Jewish community over his many years in Parliament. When I was doing my research for the debate, I looked

at his website and saw that he had recently teamed up with the Stanmore and Canons Park synagogue volunteers to clear up Canons Park, which is but one small fixture in his many years of service. He is rightly proud to have attended the remembrance parade held by the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women every year since his election.

As my hon. Friend said, last year's parade was the 100th anniversary of the first wreath-laying by Jewish veterans at the Cenotaph. As he also said, it is also 100 years since the publication of the British Jewry Book of Honour, marking the Jewish military contribution between 1914 and 1918 and beyond. Both are significant milestones, and I am so pleased to have this opportunity to mark them—not least because, significant as the contribution of the Jewish community to our armed forces has been, I am sorry to say that on some occasions it has not been as well celebrated as it should have been. This is an excellent opportunity to commemorate, celebrate and salute those Jewish soldiers, sailors and aviators who served and sacrificed to preserve our freedom, and did so with such distinction.

More than a century ago, Jewish soldiers fought in the Boer war, and Jewish chaplains even arranged annual Chanukah parades for troops. In Aldershot synagogue there is a plaque with an inscription that reads:

"To the glory of God and in loyal and patriotic memory of the soldiers of the Jewish race and faith who lost their lives in the service of their country".

I think that that simple inscription speaks to the very point that my hon. Friend made. These were brave service personnel who lost their lives in the service of their country.

Tens of thousands then fought in the first world war, many signing up voluntarily to play their part, with five winning the Victoria Cross: Frank de Pass, Issy Smith, Leonard Keysor, Jack White and Robert Gee. Frank de Pass is honoured in a memorial paving stone outside the Ministry of Defence, having served in the Indian Army. Let me put this in context. Of the 6 million men who fought, only 578 received the Victoria Cross—less than 0.01%. What that tells us is that Jewish soldiers served with conspicuous gallantry.

However, not only Jewish men but Jewish women volunteered. Among them was Florence Greenberg, who bravely served on board a hospital ship during the devastation of the Gallipoli campaign. Not only did she save countless lives, but she wrote a diary about her experiences so that future generations could learn from the horrors she witnessed. I read some excerpts from the diary this morning when I was preparing for the debate. In one she described caring for a soldier who had been shot in the chest but was ultimately saved by his Bible, which was in his breast pocket. She reported that an inch of the cover had been shot away, and the top of the first page, which had been exposed, was from the Book of Exodus, recounting the delivery of the people of Israel from Egypt.

I also found it striking to look at what the Jewish recruiting committee had done during the first world war. In 1916, it took out a full-page advertisement in *The Jewish World*, declaring that there must be "no Jewish slackers". It certainly secured its wish—as indeed it did in the second world war, when more than 100,000 Jews served in all branches of our armed forces. They included Lieutenant Commander Tommy Gould, who famously

[Alex Chalk]

saved the lives of his fellow submariners on board HMS Thrasher. After discovering an unexploded 100 lb bomb lodged in the side of the gun emplacement, he spent 50 minutes carefully moving it with his bare hands, while lying flat on his back as he squeezed past deck supports and machinery, before eventually throwing it safely over the side. He received the Victoria Cross for those heroics, and his cross remains on display today at the Jewish Museum in Camden.

This year we heard of the sad passing of Bernard Maurice Levy. He was just 19 when he helped to liberate Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in April 1945, before going on to support the trials of 45 high-ranking Nazi officials at the Lüneburg military tribunal. I saw some footage of his visit to those camps this morning—it is still on YouTube—and it was unbelievably moving.

Indeed, the Jewish contribution extended far more broadly. Jewish personnel served as secret agents behind enemy lines and even as codebreakers at Bletchley Park. A former director of GCHQ in my constituency wrote an article in 2017 titled “The Jewish codebreakers who won the war”—praise indeed.

In particular, we must remember the crucial role played by Jewish women in the Special Operations Executive, not least Vera Atkins, who was part of the team which evacuated Poland’s Enigma codebreakers to Britain, and later ran a network of intelligence agents across France. After the war, she joined the search for those being investigated for war crimes. There was also Krystyna Skarbek, the longest-serving of all Britain’s female agents, whose resourcefulness and success on operations in eastern Europe convinced officers to recruit more women, including some of the 10,000 Jewish refugees who had arrived from Germany and Austria as refugees.

Those refugees had been interned as “aliens”, potential enemies of the state, but only until their motivation to help the allied effort became clear. Nicknamed “the King’s most loyal enemy aliens”, they were trained and then deployed throughout the armed forces, with many ending up in the Intelligence Corps, eavesdropping on captured Axis officers who had been lulled into a false sense of security. By the end of the war, those listeners had amassed more than 74,000 transcripts of conversations from 10,000 prisoners, including Hitler’s generals.

That distinguished record of service has continued in more recent times. Jewish paratroopers served in the Falkland Islands 40 years ago, where Britain secured a decisive victory over a military dictator against all the odds. Among the fallen was paratrooper Private Jason Burt, from Hackney. After a gruelling march across country, he hid his trench foot on the eve of battle and took his place on the start line. He was shot and killed by an Argentine sniper just short of his 18th birthday during the battle of Mount Longdon, a mere two days before the end of the conflict. He was 17 years old.

Jewish soldiers were in Afghanistan too. Lieutenant Paul Mervis, 27, was the first British Jewish combatant to fall during the operation. At the time his family noted how,

“he was passionately committed to his men, far beyond mere duty”,
and how he went,

“with a genuine desire to help bring enough stability there to enable reconstruction to follow.”

I looked him up this morning. His commanding officer wrote of him:

“He read more about Afghanistan than anyone as we prepared for this tour and his empathy for the people of this fascinating country was exemplary.”

Today our Jewish troops remain an integral part of our forces. In the last 12 months alone, Jewish personnel have served on Operation Newcombe in Mali, in eastern Europe under Operation Orbital and in various continuing operations in the middle east. They have also been supporting their counterparts fighting in Ukraine by sending them their entire stock of kosher ration packs.

The truth is that the contribution of British Jews to the freedom and security of the UK has far outweighed the community’s comparatively small size. Remembrance Day is our opportunity—indeed it is our privilege—to recall that exemplary record of service and sacrifice.

I will say a little about AJEX—the Association of Jewish Ex-servicemen and Women—and its remembrance parade, which plays such an important role. Ever since those first marchers, to whom my hon. Friend referred, laid a wreath at the Cenotaph in 1921, AJEX has brought together people of all ages to pay tribute to Jewish personnel. Last year’s event was naturally very special, marking not just the 100th anniversary but the first full parade since the outbreak of the pandemic. More than 1,000 people participated in the march from Horse Guards Parade down Whitehall to the Cenotaph, with current personnel, veterans and the families of now-deceased veterans walking side by side. Many thousands more watched on.

This Sunday’s parade is set to be just as moving, and following the earnest, important and well received entreaties of my hon. Friend, I am pleased to be able to say that I will join him. I thank him very much for the strong representations that he made. It will be a duty and a pleasure to join him and, no doubt, several of his constituents.

The Jewish community is rightly proud of its history of service and loyalty. In synagogues across the country every Shabbat, a prayer is offered for the protection of His Majesty’s armed forces. As part of the respect and pride that we have in our Jewish personnel, we continue to do all that we can to ensure that the Ministry of Defence is considered by them a home from home, whether that is through the provision of kosher food packages, by ensuring that we grant annual leave for sacred holidays wherever possible, or by making places available to pray. We also have an armed forces Jewish chaplain, a Jewish champion and a thriving armed forces Jewish network.

I want to finish by reflecting on a pamphlet that I recently came across calling on Jewish people to volunteer for the armed forces in the first world war. In the preface, it asks them to

“join in unflinching defence of the weak, and in vindication of those principles of justice, humanity and international good faith which they, as Jews, have so much reason to cherish, and from which they have still so much to hope.”

It seems to me that those words sum up the attitude exemplified by all our Jewish combatants over the last 100 years and beyond. It is an attitude that has invigorated every branch of our armed forces and helped us repeatedly triumph over our adversaries. As the marchers make

their way down Whitehall on Sunday, it will be an opportunity to reflect on those words, to pay tribute to the immense endeavours of Jewish personnel on our nation's behalf and to underline our sincere wish and expectation that that contribution in future will go only

from strength to strength. Given the timing of the debate, I thank our Jewish friends and colleagues and wish them Shabbat shalom.

Question put and agreed to.

3.1 pm

House adjourned.

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CONTENTS

Friday 18 November 2022

Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill [Col. 940]

Motion for Second Reading—(Bob Blackman)

Fleet Solid Support Ships [Col. 960]

Answer to urgent question—(Alex Chalk)

Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill [Col. 966]

Debate resumed

Read a Second time

Terminal Illness (Support and Rights) Bill [Col. 1002]

Motion for Second Reading—(Alex Cunningham)

Association of Jewish Ex-servicemen and Women: Remembrance Parade and Ceremony [Col. 1017]

Debate on motion for Adjournment
