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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Friday 2 December 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).

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

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

Equipment Theft (Prevention) Bill

Second Reading

9.35 am

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before I begin, while I have no direct or technical interest to declare, for the sake of transparency, I should bring the House's attention to the fact that my in-laws are farmers and that we have agricultural equipment in the family, including quad bikes.

Fighting crime has been a priority for me throughout my political career. Some moons ago, I spent eight years as a councillor in a London borough where I was the portfolio holder for community safety. Working closely with the police, we reduced crime in that borough by a quarter, which showed me that, sometimes, simple ideas can make a huge difference to people's lives in reducing their chances of being a victim of crime and deterring criminals from committing offences in the first place.

The Bill has been on something of a long and winding road from the base ideas that formed it, including the idea to shut down the resale of stolen power tools on online platforms that formed the basis of my 2021 ten-minute rule Bill, which was born on a community Facebook forum in the town of Buckingham in my constituency. That long and winding road has involved extensive negotiation with industry, insurers, the police, representative bodies such as the National Farmers Union, the Country Land and Business Association, the Countryside Alliance and others as well as, of course, the Government, to get to the plan before us. The framework started with a focus on combating thefts of equipment stolen far too often across rural communities, but is expanded in the Bill, having proven that the concept works on quads, all-terrain vehicles and side-by-sides, to other agricultural equipment such as tractor GPS units and way beyond. I sincerely hope that, once we have proved the Bill's concept, that expansion can take place not just to further agricultural equipment but to equipment in other trades and industries.

More than 40 years ago, a significant change took place in UK farming, which transformed the way in which many farmers operate. The piece of machinery that precipitated that transformation has now become as synonymous with sheep farming as the sheepdog. That revolution in farming methods was brought about by the introduction of ATVs, which were originally three-wheel motorcycles, but are now most commonly

four-wheel quad bikes. By allowing farmers to reach significantly larger geographical areas and previously impenetrable rough terrain, their impact on farming has been considerable. They are now a crucial element of livestock farming. However, the versatility of ATVs has meant that they have also become an essential piece of machinery in moorland management, urban parks and beaches, and even to spray weeds and clear snow off our streets in urban and rural environments alike.

Those machines also play fundamental roles in our military, emergency services, and mountain rescue teams across the country carrying out essential functions. They are not designed for fun—although of course there are leisure uses for them, too—but, like most other motorcycles or off-road vehicles, they really are workhorses for so many. On many farms, particularly around lambing time, they are in near constant use. They not only lighten the load of day-to-day activities but play an essential role in ensuring the wellbeing and protection of livestock, which is fundamental to the livelihood of so many farmers, land managers and their families.

Without all-terrain vehicles, many farms would simply not be able to meet the demands of caring for livestock over large geographic areas, which would have previously necessitated the employment of far larger numbers of people at a greater cost to the farmer and to the viability of the farm. In fact, they are so integral to contemporary farming businesses that many farmers choose to operate multiple ATVs, because being left without a machine in the event of a breakdown or theft is unthinkable.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is an excellent Bill to help to support farming and farming communities at this time? I congratulate him on bringing forward such a Bill.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what was quite an easy intervention because I am happy to agree with her. The Bill will make a huge difference to farmers and all businesses that use quad bikes as part of their day-to-day operations.

There is a difficult truth, which is why I felt it so important to bring the Bill before the House. The universal trend for all-terrain vehicle thefts in the United Kingdom has amounted to between 800 and 1,100 thefts per year for the last decade. I was informed only this morning that a search on the police national computer shows that we are already up to 800 such reported thefts this year alone, so the trend is not declining.

In the 43 years since their introduction, ATV technology has developed significantly. From the early three-wheel models that had only very basic handlebar controls and had to be kickstarted, modern machines are almost unrecognisable. Today's ATVs are much more advanced and incorporate features such as four-wheel-drive, tank tracks, cabs, heaters, winches, power steering, electric start buttons and LED lights. Modern ATVs are, in short, infinitely more sophisticated than their predecessors. That is perhaps appropriate, given that they now have a market value of between £7,000 and £20,000, each.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): My hon. Friend has run through the list of advances that we now see on ATVs. Can he tell the House why manufacturers have not added to that list by fitting immobilisers, which would remove the need for this legislation?

Greg Smith: It is almost as if my right hon. Friend read my mind, because the very next part of my speech is to say that, despite all those advances and everything else that is offered on modern ATVs, there has not been development of safety and security features that prevent theft, such as immobilisers. Those are a very basic security feature; it is almost unfathomable given that most manufacturers of quads and ATVs tend to make other equipment—motorcycles or construction equipment—that are fitted with immobilisers and other security equipment. It is striking to me, and has been somewhat surprising the more I have researched it, that the rollout of these security features has been so slow that some leading manufacturers have used the very same basic key system for 35 years.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): It is easy to say that the best security advice for farmers and ATV owners is to take the key out, but when I was farming, every key seemed to fit every vehicle. When I went home at the end of the day, I would take my key home; it did not matter which tractor I would be driving the next morning, because I knew the key would fit.

Greg Smith: My hon. Friend is quite right. Indeed, a lot of the quad bikes and ATVs out there have ignition systems so basic that in some cases people do not even need the key; they can simply start them with a screwdriver or another piece of flat metal. That should really disturb us. We should shine a spotlight on why such equipment can be started in that way.

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): I declare an interest: I live on the Grundy family farm, and although we do not have an ATV, the subject is obviously of interest to my family and my wider family. Does my hon. Friend agree that in many ways these issues make farms and other rural businesses more vulnerable than others? That is why legislation such as his Bill is so necessary.

Greg Smith: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. With the scale of the theft of quad bikes, ATVs and side-by-sides, we have come to the point where the legislation is simply necessary. With those numbers—800 to 1,100 per year are stolen—something has to give. Farmers, land managers and those who use a quad bike in their businesses need the security of knowing that, when they lock it up in the barn, or wherever they keep it at night, there is a greater chance that it will still be there the next morning. The Bill is not a magic bullet—it will not simply end the theft of all quad bikes and ATVs—but it addresses practical measures such as immobilisers and forensic marking, to ensure a greater chance of equipment and machinery remaining with their owner and shut down the incentives for would-be thieves to steal them.

Ben Everitt: The frustrating thing is that the technology is here. Millions of dollars' worth of John Deere machinery stolen by Russian Federation forces from a dealership in Ukraine was subsequently shut down remotely by John Deere. Will my hon. Friend join me in commending John Deere for its use of technology to stop that theft of agricultural equipment by the Russian state?

Greg Smith: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in commending John Deere and all manufacturers that put the effort into research and development and into providing such products. Higher-value pieces of agricultural

machinery—the tractors, the combines, the sprayers—can be fitted with remote control to shut them down and stop them being used. The Bill focuses on smaller agricultural equipment, but there is no reason why we should stop at that. The more the industry can develop such technologies, the better. If our mobile phones or iPads can be remotely wiped and turned off if someone steals them, so that they cannot be used and the data cannot be extracted, there is no reason why equipment used on farms and on land cannot be treated similarly.

To get back to the central point, when property is stolen it is a nightmare for police and law enforcement to track it and return it to its rightful owner. When the police are called to track down and apprehend a suspect who may have stolen a quad bike or other agricultural equipment from a farm, it really is a race against time. Vehicles such as quads and ATVs are light and easily transportable: within hours, thieves can have them strapped to the back of trailers and towed hundreds of miles from their owners, sometimes heading for seaports where they can be transported to and through any number of countries. By that point, it is simply too late for either the police or the owner to recover the vehicle. That leaves the farmer or landowner with a hefty bill for replacing the whole thing, and productivity lost as a result of no longer having access to such a vital piece of machinery for their business.

On the other side of the same coin, shipping delays, the effects of the covid pandemic and other global factors are contributing to a rise in demand for both new and second-hand farm machinery. As waiting lists grow and market values soar, I am afraid to say that thieves are seeing quads and ATVs as easily portable hot-ticket items.

James Grundy: Does not my hon. Friend further agree that this plague of thefts, due to the ease of making such thefts, is having a considerable impact on insurance for farmers and other rural businesses? Given the current financial circumstances, that is obviously making it very difficult for the more marginal farms to continue.

Greg Smith: I absolutely agree. I have worked closely particularly with NFU Mutual in the preparation of this Bill. It is clear that, if these provisions are adopted and the Bill becomes an Act, having new quads and ATVs both immobilised and fitted with forensic marking should—of course, the market will always dictate this, but, in theory—massively bring down insurance premiums. Any slight increase in the cost of the machine to fit the immobiliser and install the forensic marking equipment should be far more than offset by the reduction in the insurance premium.

Jane Hunt: Does my hon. Friend agree that the current lack of security and safety measures here is almost a criminal waste of police time? Police still have to deal with the crime, try to identify the perpetrators and so on, yet they are not being helped by the manufacturer of the product.

Greg Smith: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend's analysis. The police are having to spend an inordinate amount of time simply trying to identify stolen pieces of equipment, such as a quad bike, if they find them. It is not uncommon for serial numbers or chassis numbers to be ground off, making the stolen items almost unidentifiable

as to where they came from and were originally manufactured and who they were stolen from or, indeed, bought by. Some of the provisions I will outline, particularly forensic marking, will go some way to massively cutting that demand on police time, enabling our fantastic police officers across the whole country to more readily identify stolen property and return it to its rightful owners, as well as prosecuting the criminals who stole it in the first place.

James Grundy: Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), is it not correct that, further to the issues we have discussed with the police, many police forces are simply ill-equipped to deal with rural crime, making it even more difficult to deal with these issues once such thefts have taken place?

Greg Smith: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Some police forces around the country have put in place robust measures, such as my home police force area, Thames Valley. The force has a new rural crimes taskforce that is very much focused on these issues and ensures that officers have the training to understand all forms of rural crime, including hare coursing, and particular elements of agricultural machinery. If someone has never worked on a farm or lived in a rural community, they would not necessarily immediately get what the machinery is on site.

The establishment of rural crimes units in different police forces is a welcome addition to the response to rural crime. It is something that needs to be rolled out across the whole country, because pretty much everywhere has a rural part to it. We need to ensure that, of the additional 20,000 officers this Government are recruiting and providing to our police force, some of that resource goes into fighting rural crime.

Ben Everitt: Will my hon. Friend give way one more time?

Greg Smith: As my hon. Friend is my constituent, I will give way to him one last time.

Ben Everitt: My hon. Friend is very generous. I know he wants to make progress, but will he join me in commending Thames Valley police's rural crimes taskforce? It has made fantastic progress in tackling rural crime—not just theft of farm machinery, although a significant amount of stolen farm machinery has been recovered by Thames Valley this year, but things such as hare coursing, which is such a blight and such a pain for farmers. It is another one of those complete time hoovers that sucks up time and attention on farms when we should be focusing on productivity.

Greg Smith: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on that. Thames Valley covers both my constituency and his, and, as I said a few moments ago, the taskforce is making great strides to tackle rural crime, under the wonderful leadership of Inspector Stuart Hutchings, “The Mighty Hutch”. He is doing incredible work to ensure that those who wish to commit crimes in rural Buckinghamshire, and indeed rural Milton Keynes, are held to account, apprehended and prosecuted, and that stolen equipment is returned to its rightful owners.

Sir Greg Knight: Will my hon. Friend give way—to another Greg?

Greg Smith: I will give way to my right hon. Friend in a few moments, once I have made a little more progress.

This Bill will tackle the problems we have just outlined head-on. As I alluded to in response to a number of interventions, it mandates the fitting of forensic markings at source, which feed into a national database accessible to all police forces across the country. There are many manufacturers, and different standards and options out there, but the quads, ATVs and side-by-sides fitted with this forensic marking will be almost as unique as our own DNA; this will make them entirely traceable and identifiable to the police officers who have the scanning equipment to be able to read and understand that forensic marking. That will streamline the ability of each force involved to work with the same resources, simultaneously, thus massively increasing the opportunity to apprehend the suspect, and identify and return the stolen machine to its owner.

Let me turn to the other key change that this Bill makes, which has also been alluded to in answer to some of the earlier interventions. The Bill mandates the fitting of an immobiliser. For more than 20 years, immobilisers have been mandatory for all new passenger cars sold in the UK—that has been the case since October 1998. I dare say that none of us in this place, or indeed outside it, can imagine buying a car, truck or van that did not have an immobiliser, and for good reason: immobilisers are fundamental in preventing vehicle theft. Without the ignition system talking to the engine, there is simply no way that a car can be operated under its own power. Yet despite the many functions of both quad bikes and ATVs, that rule does not currently apply to either, and I put it to the House that that is simply preposterous. Something as simple and easy to fit as an immobiliser is a no-brainer in the case of such essential and valuable assets to our farmers.

This is not an isolated problem; farms of all types across the UK are impacted by vehicle theft, as are the surrounding communities. We are often talking about small communities where everyone knows each other. Farms are the beating heart of rural life, and news of any and all threats they face spreads quickly, and a sense of fear and panic sets in for residents and businesses in the whole area. Rural communities have suffered immeasurably, both during the pandemic and since. Rural businesses teetered on the edge throughout covid, and they continue to feel the effects from that extremely difficult period. When combined with the theft of farm vehicles and equipment, this situation cannot be ignored and must be taken seriously. As the chairman of NFU Mutual, Jim McLaren, has made clear:

“With diesel and fertiliser prices soaring and the cost of living crisis biting, it looks likely that we will see rural crime rise in the coming months.

Current supply chain shortages mean farmers who suffer a theft are facing delays sourcing replacement equipment which may be vital to carrying out essential farm work.”

We are in a race against time to stop farms and farmers not only facing a rise in rural crime, but dealing with the impact of those crimes, potentially and needlessly prolonging the effects on their businesses for months or even years to come. Farmers deserve as much as anyone else to operate in a safe and secure environment. That means getting ahead of the criminal gangs who are perpetrating thefts of these vehicles, and this Bill, I hope, provides a solid foundation on which to pursue them.

[Greg Smith]

The Countryside Alliance, with which I have worked closely on this Bill, revealed through its 2021 rural crime survey that 95% of respondents believe that crime in their local community had become significant over the preceding 12 months. Seventy per cent. believe that there has been an increase in the local crime rate. It is clear how this worrying trend is manifesting itself, with 43% of respondents reporting having a crime committed against them over that period, and 32% of respondents saying that that took the form of agricultural machinery theft.

When we look across the whole country, I can understand how some might say that, in the grand scheme of things, those numbers are not so high, but I say that they are high. Indeed, they are too high, and they need to be tackled. Behind every victim of crime, and more specifically every theft, there lies a business and a family who are dependent on that enterprise for their own financial security. It is a business that can no longer function as it should because that piece of equipment, whether it be large or small, is likely gone forever as it cannot be tracked or retrieved in good time.

Digging deeper into the feedback from rural communities reveals the urgent need for measures specified in the Bill. Looking back to that same rural crime survey, 53% of respondents said that they had installed crime prevention measures in the past 12 months due to an increased fear of crime and directly being victims of crime. These measures include security lighting, industrial barn doors, securing keys and installing CCTV systems. Each of those comes at great cost to the farmers—to those businesses. The measures that we are seeing in farms in rural communities across our country are more typical of an industrial estate in a built-up urban area.

Sir Greg Knight: I am obliged to my hon. Friend for giving way. Just going back to his earlier comments about rural crime, is it still not the case that, sadly, suspects are 25% more likely to be arrested for crimes committed in urban areas than those committed in the countryside?

Greg Smith: My right hon. Friend makes a valid point, and it is something that the rural crime taskforce in my police force area, Thames Valley, and the rural crime units in other police forces, are taking seriously and are trying to get on top of. The statistics speak for themselves. The Bill is a part of the jigsaw puzzle in starting to tackle rural crime. It ensures that, where they cover rural areas, our police forces have the powers, the facilities and the equipment themselves—for example, the scanning equipment for forensic marking—to identify stolen equipment and return it to its rightful owners. These powers will give our police forces greater confidence that they can get on top of rural crime, by identifying stolen equipment, identifying who has stolen it and bringing them to justice.

The Bill, as I said earlier, is no magic bullet; it will not end rural crime overnight. However, it does introduce significant duties for the manufacturers and those who sell this equipment, to help to lift the burden on our farmers of installing all that expensive security equipment and of essentially having to turn their premises—the beating heart of the countryside—into exclusion zones. I am not saying that that other security equipment is

not needed—of course it is; every little bit helps—but we must acknowledge as a country that farms being turned into mini-fortresses is not befitting to the countryside, and we need to take other measures, too.

Ben Everitt: That is an important point, and I hope my hon. Friend will agree that people who are not from rural communities need to understand how food is produced. If as a nation we are to make the transition to producing, growing and selling our food much more sustainably, the public need to see the process. Turning farms into fortresses is counter to that. Does he agree that we need more accessibility and less security if we are to get more people on farms?

Greg Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He and I share a passion for farming and ensuring that farming is visible and accessible to everyone in our country. He makes an important point about people understanding how food is produced—that the chicken does not get into the plastic box on the shelves in the supermarket by magic and that the cereal does not make itself in a factory, but has to be grown somewhere first. He almost tempts me to get into the amendment I have tabled to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, but I will leave that for when it comes back on Report—as I hear my hon. Friend the Whip encouraging me to do.

Coming back to the subject at hand, pre-fitting quad bikes and ATVs with the means necessary both to prevent them from being stolen and to effectively track any that are stolen will lift a huge weight off the shoulders of our hard-working farmers. The threat is well documented, and it is more widespread and organised than most think. We are not necessarily talking about a couple of opportunists who are bored and looking for something to fill their time; those who are stealing this equipment are predominantly organised criminal syndicates intent on profiteering from high-value theft.

Let me give the House an example. A prominent recent case of agricultural equipment theft saw the successful prosecution of two men for conspiring to steal agricultural global positioning systems and other technical equipment valued at approximately £380,000 from agricultural vehicles on 13 farms and estates across the county of Essex between 28 September and 27 October 2021. Following investigations by Essex police, they were convicted and sentenced to a total of six years and 10 months in prison.

This Bill will prevent the need to pursue this time-consuming and extremely costly legal process by ensuring that the quads and ATVs, and potentially further equipment in due time through secondary legislation, either cannot be stolen in the first place or, through forensic marking, are made less attractive to the would-be thieves. That case took Essex police a considerable amount of time, a lot of investigation and probably hundreds, if not thousands of hours of police time to get that fantastic prosecution. This Bill is about short-cutting that process for our police and ensuring they can get the result and get justice in much faster time.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) mentioned, Thames Valley police, my own local force and his, reported recently that officers from its groundbreaking rural crime taskforce, which I referred to earlier and which has only been in operation since April this year, has recovered more than 100 items totalling

more than £1 million-worth of machinery, tools and equipment, 25% of which were related to theft. Those are investigations resulting in a positive outcome for the victim. That is encouraging and a great start, but we need to go much further and expand that excellent work beyond the individual forces. I am pleased to say that there is already strong engagement on this from both rural representative groups and local law enforcement, but we need to go further by tackling the problem at source.

A good example of the behind-the-scenes work already being done to tackle that type of rural crime is NFU Mutual's approach, which is based on close co-ordination with national and local police forces, as well as with the manufacturing sector. The dedicated agricultural vehicle theft unit at the national vehicle crime intelligence service saw £2.6 million-worth of stolen machinery recovered in 2021, up from £2.3 million in 2020. Specific measures, such as the funding of CESAR—the construction and agricultural equipment security and registration scheme—forensic markings for 200 quads in Northern Ireland through working with Datatag and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, have contributed to a drop of nearly 20% in the cost of dealing with rural theft in Northern Ireland. Of course, other forensic-marking products and brands are available.

We need to lock in reductions, such as those of that Northern Ireland project, for the whole of our United Kingdom, and for every farm, because each suffers from the same threat. The Bill will provide the groundwork to bring down rates of theft and reduce the overall threat of theft, tackling the problem at source and building on the prevention measures that are already in place.

The cost of not doing that is clear. The CLA estimates that the average financial impact on the victim per rural crime equates to £4,800, and that figure increases each day as supply chain costs and overheads continue to rise. The value of quad bike and ATV thefts reported to NFU Mutual in 2021 was £2.2 million. Almost half those reports were received between September and December, demonstrating the extremely challenging circumstances that we are dealing with and how much is at stake for farmers as the weather begins to turn.

For the 10.3 million people who live in the countryside, this hits right at the heart of everyday life. Rural crime cannot simply sit alongside urban crime, as the CLA makes clear. Difficulties in tracking criminals over such vast swathes of countryside mean that local police forces are always faced with a uphill battle—they have to spread resources over a much larger geographical area compared with their more urban counterparts—and criminals already have a head start.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an absolutely vital point. I live close to the Ceiriog valley in my constituency of Clwyd South, where there have been a lot of problems of this nature. Often, thieves come from outside the constituency. They do not come from a rural area but, in this case, from Liverpool, Manchester or Birmingham, so they are not known to the police and so on, which makes apprehending them all the more difficult. I strongly support everything he is saying.

Greg Smith: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support for the Bill. I agree on apprehending criminals and local knowledge. The evidence shows that so much of this

acquisitive crime is committed by criminals who are not local to the area in which they are committing the crime. They are passing through as an organised criminal gang, which adds to the pressures on our police in apprehending them.

Close collaboration between communities and the police is also key to tackling theft, as demonstrated by the agricultural and construction equipment police unit, which, since April last year, has been central to tackling the cross-border organised crime that my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) rightly highlighted. Its guiding principle is one that goes right to the heart of the Bill: cross-industry co-operation is crucial for crime prevention, and prevention is fundamentally better than the cure. Just as the vehicles themselves are important to farmers, so intelligence-sharing is essential for tackling theft. That is what the Bill enables.

Dealerships would be required by law to submit details of a vehicle's appearance and registration and the location of its forensic marking to a central database that is accessible to all police forces right across our United Kingdom, no matter their size or scope. This would better enable officers from different forces to work together within dedicated units and apprehend the assailant in an effective and timely manner. That is an essential tool not only for police forces today, but for tomorrow and far into the future as the technology evolves and is developed further.

The use of a national database for training new officers is crucial for making the most of this opportunity, because by using and sharing data, forces can pinpoint hotspots where theft is particularly prevalent and respond accordingly in a co-ordinated way, knowing that their officers are properly trained to use and interpret those information systems. That is essential to beat the ever-changing tactics that these criminal gangs use to pursue what is becoming an increasingly sophisticated operation. They have the upper hand in more rural areas. Without the same level of CCTV and automatic number plate recognition systems in place, it can be incredibly difficult to track stolen vehicles moving through rural areas, especially under the cover of darkness. That is why the behind-the-scenes work already being rolled out not only needs to be accelerated, but formalised, and that is what the Bill does.

Before I conclude, I want to place on record some particular thanks to everyone who has worked with me and my team on this Bill. That is above all, but certainly not limited to, David Exwood and his whole team at the National Farmers Union and everyone at NFU Mutual who deals with this issue day in, day out for its thousands of members and consumers across the UK. Likewise, the Bill would not exist without the vast insight, knowledge and experience of Superintendent Andy Huddleston, whose hard work and determination as the rural crime co-ordinator at the National Police Chiefs' Council has made this Bill possible. I also thank the many other industry-led organisations that have contributed to the preparation and research for the Bill, including the Country Land and Business Association, the Countryside Alliance, the Construction Equipment Association and the Agricultural Equipment Association among others. For his huge dedication and hard work supporting me on this Bill, I thank my senior parliamentary assistant, Ian Kelly.

[Greg Smith]

It would also be remiss of me not to thank the succession of Ministers with whom I have negotiated since I came out of the ballot earlier this year, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on the Treasury Bench, who alongside his hard-working and dedicated officials has made himself and them available to me frequently throughout the drafting and production of the Bill, which I hope will lead to the Government's full support for it as it passes through Parliament.

The Bill will allow my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and future Home Secretaries to expand its scope where necessary and ensure that rural communities remain protected as the threat evolves and changes. The demand is still there for globalised criminal networks of stolen equipment and machinery, and we must continue working to break that link and to shut it down at source. That means identifying and monitoring other such industries that are vulnerable to having similar types of valuable assets stolen at large. There is just as much a threat to the construction industry and other trades. There are vast amounts of specialist equipment and vehicles found everywhere, from driveways to building sites, containing everything from power tools to excavators, all of which are at risk of being stolen. Tackling it will require a cross-departmental effort, just as it requires a cross-border and cross-community approach to tackle it on the ground, but we have a starting point.

We simply cannot lose this opportunity to build a network that will ultimately enhance safety and security for countless communities, businesses and farmers across our country. I trust that these calls for a strengthened approach to tackling the scourge of rural crime will not have gone unheard. I urge the Minister to keep monitoring this policy area closely and to continue to work with the police and the farming community. This Bill can make a difference to rural crime, and I commend it to the House.

10.19 am

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Often when I come to the House on a Friday, I look at the Order Paper and do not really have a clear position on a Bill. I sit here and listen to the debate and try to work out what the key points are and what position I am going to take. Happily, this morning I am in no such position; I fully support the Bill presented to the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), who I am very pleased to call a friend. I offer him my huge thanks for his work on the Bill, and I extend my thanks to the folk he mentioned, with whom he has worked so hard to bring the Bill to this stage. I know it has been a difficult passage since he came number 4 in the private Member's Bill ballot.

Greg Smith: Number 3.

Ben Everitt: Sorry, I did my hon. Friend a huge disservice. He was number 3 in the private Member's Bill ballot.

I was going to say that many Members on both sides of the House take rural crime incredibly seriously, but it is disappointing to see the lack of numbers on the Opposition Benches.

Sir Greg Knight: Is my hon. Friend, like me, rather shocked to see the Liberal Democrat Benches completely empty? Clearly, the Liberal Democrats do not care about this matter.

Ben Everitt: That is the point I was stumbling to make, so I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for his timely intervention. Yes, it is surprising and disappointing.

Rural crime is an incredibly important topic. My constituency contains not only the wonderful top half of Milton Keynes, but two amazing market towns and dozens of villages and farms. It is the interrelationship between the city, towns and farms that really makes our part of England so representative of England as a whole. Being a community is a team game and involves towns, villages and cities, and the interrelationship is really part of that. It is surprising that, apart from the shadow Minister, who is in her place, there are no Opposition Members here to support the Bill.

My family's farming background makes me acutely aware of the vast range of issues facing our farmers and the agricultural sector at large. Additionally, the correspondence I get, and the visits I make to my constituents in rural areas, show me what a real pain rural crime is, specifically the theft of agricultural machinery, and that is the angle from which I will focus my remarks today.

I have worked on a farm where we have had kit stolen, and it really is so frustrating. In farming, time is money. Harvests are a race against the weather and a race against time. If a farmer does not get their harvest in while the weather is good, they will be getting it in while it is damp. They will not have had the sun dry out their crop, and they will have to spend an absolute fortune drying the grain. With today's energy prices being so high, that is the difference—

James Grundy: Is it not true to say that the loss of a key piece of equipment during the harvest season is devastating? My hon. Friend has mentioned grain, but an entire crop of hay or straw can be entirely ruined if it is rained on, and it is impossible to get it dry in time.

Ben Everitt: Absolutely. That is entirely the case, and we are talking about food. Our farmers provide food for our nation, and the work that they do is so time critical and time intensive that thefts from farms can totally disrupt that. These small incidents can have a catastrophic effect on profit and loss, and on productivity—basically, on the viability of a farm. It is such an important issue.

One of the frustrating things is that we know that thefts of farm machinery are quite often the result of targeted organised crime. It is not just the horrendous effect on the viability of a farm and the impact on the food chain, prices and so on; it is the fact that farm thefts go on to fund organised crime and all the horrible things that are done, and I will come to that later.

There are concerns that the increase in the cost of living may lead to an uptick in rural crime. Regrettably, compared with other types of crime, rural crimes often go unreported, making it difficult to understand the scale of the threat faced by tradespeople and farmers. This is highlighted by the fact that suspects are nearly 25% more likely to be charged for crimes in urban areas than in the countryside.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham mentioned the recent survey which showed that the theft of agricultural machinery is a top priority for people in rural communities. I certainly know that to be true, from talking to my farmers in Milton Keynes North and reading my correspondence on the issue. Furthermore, 32% of respondents to the survey reported experiencing agricultural machinery theft. If we do anything through this debate today, it is to shine a light on the importance of tackling this huge issue for our rural constituents.

Worse still, rural crime is having a significant economic impact. According to NFU Mutual's recent report, rural theft cost the UK economy £40.5 million in 2020-21. Tractors, combines, drills and cultivators make up the core of a farm's arsenal for preparing and harvesting the land. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham said, ATVs provide a vital support role for farmers, with the mobility they provide to move people around and move seed around. Unsurprisingly, these complex and vital pieces of machinery come at a huge cost to farmers, in terms of both the initial purchase price and then the maintenance.

It is not just the bits of kit themselves; it is the technology that goes into them. There is a huge amount of technology poured into farming now. I am of a generation described as being born analogue and being digital immigrants, and that is certainly true of my farming career. I do not recognise the technology picture of an ATV that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham paints, because it was a simpler bit of kit when I was buzzing around the countryside on them. In the late '90s, I was fortunate enough to work on a farm that was considered to be an early adopter of technology, and I remember fitting a GPS kit to a combine harvester. That GPS kit, we were told, came at a cost of £12,000, which was a lot of money in those days. I remember making sure that we could get the software working and then turning the computer on, making a cup of tea while it booted up, combining the field, avidly watching the GPS as the combine crawled through the field, going back to the office, having our tea, putting the kit away, waiting for the computer, and teasing out what turned out to be three pages of A4 in very scrawly graphs, telling us exactly what we knew already—£4,000 a page.

Technology has moved on a lot since then, and frankly, it is so good and so expensive that it is such a target for thieves. GPS units now are not what I described from the late '90s. They are incredibly valuable bits of kit and command a high price in the resale market. I happen to know that in my hon. Friend's constituency of Buckingham, there is a company that is currently testing robot tractors, which is a fantastic innovation and will probably plough fields in neater lines than I used to. We also have ground-penetrating radar, which is a wonderful innovation that allows for the accurate and precise application of pesticides and fertiliser, minimising run-off into the watercourse and supporting our natural environment. Critically, it also makes farming much more efficient so that we can feed our nation.

Without these vital tools, our farmers cannot harvest their crops efficiently or carry on their important work on the land. Now, more than ever, our farmers need the protection they deserve to give them peace of mind and to ensure we maintain food production levels during this testing time, both domestically and, importantly,

internationally. Given Russia's actions in Ukraine, the world is at a critical time for food supply. We will be okay in the UK. We will feed our people because, comparatively, we are a very rich nation but, as the global food supply goes down, we are unfortunately heading for famine.

Time is money, and we need to make sure we do everything we can to support farmers to get the harvest in on time. The theft of larger farming machinery is often carried out by organised crime, by multiple criminals working together. It is therefore time we started treating the security of farming machinery with more importance and focus.

James Grundy: Does my hon. Friend agree that, given the advancement and increasing value of farming equipment, the lack of security features that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) mentioned is akin to leaving a house full of Fabergé eggs unlocked?

Ben Everitt: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. I wonder whether his family's farm is a Fabergé egg farm, which I suspect might be a profitable agricultural innovation.

The challenge of equipment theft is huge, and we need to prevent not just the theft of equipment but the resale of it, too. These bits of kit are so versatile, particularly the ATVs on which this Bill focuses, that they can be resold to support many different industries and trades. They are versatile, but they are also fun. I confess that, in my earlier years, I perhaps drove an ATV a little faster than recommended, not on the public road, of course. People race these things, so they are genuinely versatile bits of kit.

By preventing the theft and resale of this equipment, which is vital to tradespeople and agricultural businesses, we can deter and reduce theft. Specifically, as my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham mentioned, by mandating and fitting forensic markings and vehicle engine immobilisers, we will set a new standard for security on vehicles manufactured and sold in the United Kingdom.

Sir Greg Knight: On preventing resale, is it not clear that there may have to be a record-keeping requirement on retailers? Sadly, because retailers come and go, the best way for this to be effective is by way of an online database.

Ben Everitt: I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend. Data is critical to resolving these issues and, in fact, it links directly to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes), who said there is a national issue, as these criminal gangs often operate from different sides of the country. The availability of data and the ability to track not only the bits of kit that have been stolen but where they are being resold, and by which channels they are being resold, will be critical to solving this.

The requirement to fit new agricultural machinery with visible engine immobilisers is key, because we need to ensure that criminals can see that they will be caught. It will prevent vehicles from running under their own propulsion, and, obviously, it will make it very difficult for criminals to steal them. I mentioned earlier the John Deere kit that was shut down remotely by the

[Ben Everitt]

company after being taken by the Russian forces in Ukraine. That is a very effective way of removing the resale value of stolen goods.

Perhaps most significantly, the Bill will require the recording of sales data, which, of course, includes the vehicle registration. The police will then be able to track stolen vehicles more easily once the theft has been reported. The idea is that criminals can be apprehended before arranging the transport of the vehicles. They are often transported abroad, so it is not just an organised crime in the UK, but an organised crime issue around the world. The Bill's core aim is to design out crime, protecting our farmers and tradespeople and making the jobs of our police forces much easier.

More locally, I join my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham in welcoming the launch of the Thames Valley police rural crime taskforce earlier this year, which has already had a positive impact on the whole region. So far, £1 million-worth of equipment has been recovered by the taskforce, and last summer it recovered a machine worth £250,000 from a quarry in Buckinghamshire. Critically, the vehicle identification number plate had been removed by the criminals, the only remaining identifying feature being a 3-digit VIN. Alarming, that number was not registered on any database—which is relevant to the point made earlier by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight).

This case highlights two issues clearly—the first being that existing vehicles are not fitted with enough security features, and the second being that expensive vehicles are often difficult to identify and track, which makes it less likely that criminals can be apprehended and the stolen vehicle can be returned to its owner. As I have already explained in detail, I am confident that the Bill will enable us to make significant progress towards tackling both issues head-on. For example, an engine mobiliser might have prevented that vehicle from being stolen in the first place.

I also believe that the Bill will enable us to make significant progress towards reducing rural crime and protecting farmers, but there is still more to be done. We need to find ways to engage with manufacturers on the issue of designing security into their tools and vehicles, because criminals will always find new ways of adapting to new security features, and we need to encourage farmers and agriculture businesses to up their security. As was pointed out earlier, it is important for farms to be accessible, but they must also be secure. The focus of the Bill is right: it is not about turning farms into fortresses, but about holding manufacturers to account, and to high standards, when it comes to security.

The Bill puts us on the right path, a path on which security becomes a bigger factor in the way in which equipment for tradespeople and agricultural businesses are designed. Ultimately, these vital pieces of equipment are inextricably linked to the functioning of our economy and our food security. Through the Bill we can show our support for the farmers and tradespeople of this country, who play a critical role in our economy—especially now, given the rising cost of living.

I am pleased to support the Bill today, and I hope that Members on both sides of the House will do so as well.

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

10.39 am

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), who has shared some of his insight and expertise, having clearly spent a great deal of time working on a farm in a previous life—I am curious about the notion of Fabergé egg farms and the potential for expansion there. In all sincerity, I congratulate the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) on bringing forward this private Member's Bill and on comprehensively and convincingly setting out the case for it today.

Having considered the hon. Gentleman's Bill and having listened carefully to his arguments, the Opposition are inclined to agree that his proposals would have a strong impact on mitigating against quad bike and all-terrain vehicle theft. That form of criminality has blighted rural and more urban communities for too long, either because of the initial theft or the illicit and antisocial use of such vehicles thereafter in constituencies across the UK.

As outlined, the Bill seeks to mandate the fitting of forensic markings and an immobiliser on all quad bikes and all-terrain vehicles sold in the UK, which would solve a specific problem. If enacted, the Bill provides the scope for those measures to be expanded further. It would be a welcome tool to support the police in deterring such thefts, finding stolen goods and supporting agricultural and land workers who need that kit to do their jobs and undertake the incredibly valued work that has been discussed.

Rural crime has been a priority. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), who is a fellow shadow Home Affairs Minister with responsibility for policing, has visited a number of rural crime initiatives, such as Operation Hawkeye in Northumberland, where efforts to disrupt poaching recovered £850,000-worth of property and arrested 65 people. From my experience of my Halifax constituency, which takes in urban and rural areas, quad bike and all-terrain vehicle theft and subsequent misuse is a massive and sustained challenge.

Last month, I was frustrated to hear that Todmorden junior football club, just down the Calder valley, was subject to a serious act of vandalism. One of its pitches was left badly scarred and unplayable by someone repeatedly driving a quad bike over it. Louise Leeming, the club's welfare officer, said:

"They've completely trashed it, you can't play on it. The council spent an absolute fortune repairing it and they"—

the vandals—

have just destroyed it."

At a time when council funding is, frankly, being decimated, it is reprehensible that an individual would flagrantly seek to damage a much-needed facility for local children.

That is just the tip of the iceberg, however. Locally, in October, as part of Operation Heelfield, officers executed a section 26 warrant to arrest a Halifax man on suspicion of burglary after a recently stolen Yamaha Kodiak quad bike was found in his garage. In March, two quad bikes were seized by police after two males, who had been involved in using them antisocially, had abandoned them. That formed part of Operation Hedgeson, which was carried out by the Halifax neighbourhood policing

team to pursue, catch and convict those responsible for causing a nuisance in our communities through their antisocial and dangerous behaviour on and off the roads with such quad bikes and ATVs.

Unfortunately, such stories are not surprising and occur far too often. According to statistics released by NFU Mutual, in 2021, West Yorkshire had the third-largest number of quad bike thefts in the country. As the hon. Gentleman said, estimates suggest that nationwide, between 900 and 1,200 quad bikes are stolen every year, and many end up circulating back on to the market in some way. An NFU Mutual crime report estimated that in 2021, rural theft cost the UK £40.5 million.

I am sure that hon. Members will join me in paying tribute to our local policing teams, who work incredibly hard to try to get ahead of the criminals in getting a grip on and tackling this problem, but they simply do not have the requisite resources or toolkit to completely clamp down on such crime. The Bill, if introduced, would be a formidable starting point, but there are no two ways about it: the underfunding and under-resourcing of our police forces have undermined their capabilities for more than a decade. Analysis carried out by the Labour party, which studied the budgets of all 43 police forces in England and Wales, found that, in 2021, police budgets were £1.6 billion down in real terms on when the Conservatives came to power in 2010. In August this year, the National Police Chiefs' Council said in a statement that crime detection and charge rates had dropped following austerity measures and a fall in police numbers since 2010. Its spokesperson said:

“Detection and charge rates for a range of crimes have fallen over the past five years.”

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

The shadow Minister is talking about policing figures and theft. Would she like to join me in welcoming the fact that, since March 2010—when Labour left office—theft figures have fallen by 46%, according to the crime survey for England and Wales, from 4.99 million theft offences to 2.69 million?

Holly Lynch: I would be really interested to see the details of those figures. I am sorry to say that detection rates, charge rates and prosecution rates are all going in the wrong direction under this Government. I gave a quote from the National Police Chiefs' Council. If the Minister wants to take that up with the council, he can certainly do that. Its spokesperson said:

“Detection and charge rates for a range of crimes have fallen over the past five years... This has been impacted by austerity and the loss of thousands of police officers and staff, increasing complexity of policing and crime, growing demand related to mental ill health and impact of backlogs in the court system.”

Chris Philp: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for giving way again. I suppose she will not get many interventions from her own side, looking at the empty Opposition Benches, so I am happy to fill the gap. She mentioned police officer numbers. Would she like to join me in welcoming the fact that, come March next year—just four months' time—when the police uplift programme is completed and 20,000 extra officers have been recruited, we will have about 149,000 police officers, which is more than at any time in the country's history?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Can I just ensure that colleagues know it is important to address the Bill and not go too much wider?

Holly Lynch: I will get back to the detail of the Bill, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I quickly make the point that the Government cut 21,000 police officers. I will not be giving them a pat on the back for replacing 20,000, having recognised the detrimental impact that has had on the safety of our communities. Those pressures hit rural communities particularly hard. Interestingly, just last month, BBC analysis found that suspects are almost 25% more likely to be charged for crimes in urban areas than in the countryside. In 2021, there was a charge rate of 6.89% in rural areas compared with 8.55% in urban areas. I am sure that the policing Minister will want to have a close look at that stark difference.

I return to the detail of the Bill. I particularly welcome its provision to allow, through secondary legislation, the Secretary of State the power to expand the remit of the Bill's requirements to other types of equipment and machinery commonly used in the agricultural and construction sectors. We hope that, if enacted, secondary legislation will expand the Bill to cover a multitude of other agricultural and construction equipment. I know that chainsaws and nail guns are the types of tools and kit that are too regularly stolen from properties, or the backs of vans and other vehicles, costing hundreds of thousands of pounds each year.

Given the expertise of the hon. Member for Buckingham in this area and his contributions on the topic in the Chamber today and previously, I know that he is all too aware of the problem of theft from vans. According to research carried out by Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles, in 2021, 27% of van drivers had fallen victim to tool theft in the previous 12 months. The total cost of all lost tools and equipment is estimated to be about £15 million a year. Volkswagen estimates that the associated downtime for drivers who must replace those tools costs £550 a day per van. The Bill presents an opportunity to sharpen the tools available in the fight against this type of crime. When resources are down and geographically stretched in some rural areas, the more we can use technology to design out crime, the better.

We are satisfied that the Bill will make some progress towards that, helping to suppress theft and the antisocial use of quad bikes that is often a consequence. I again commend the hon. Member for Buckingham. We hope that the Government will allow the Bill to progress to Committee stage where Members can consider the detail, in the hope that it makes a difference when tackling this type of criminality, which blights far too many communities.

10.50 am

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): The Countryside Alliance has conducted an annual survey of rural communities' experiences and perceptions over the last calendar year. The 2021 survey revealed that 43% of respondents reported having had a crime committed against them in the last year. Of those, 32% reported having experienced agricultural theft, which was the third most reported crime. In the 2020 survey, agricultural machinery theft was reported as the respondents' top priority for police to tackle.

[Jane Hunt]

That is what the Bill deals with. However, the issue is much wider. A local farmer in Loughborough has recently been targeted, having had £2,000-worth of GPS equipment stolen from a tractor. He highlighted that it is a common occurrence and that he has already taken extensive security measures on the farm following previous thefts, including locked gates at every entrance, video cameras, motion activation sirens and locks on all sheds. However, unfortunately, often, machinery has to be left in the fields in remote locations during busy times of year, which is when criminals tend to strike. I would therefore be keen for all types of farming equipment to be included in the registration process. He is a farmer I have met on many occasions; he is very hard-working—as are many farmers across the country, but this gentleman works very hard indeed. It is wrong that he should have to think of those things and take all those measures.

The Bill gives the Secretary of State the power to make regulations that require all new all-terrain vehicles and quad bikes to be fitted with immobilisers and forensic markings, and owners' details to be registered on a database. On the first issue, the National Farmers Union has highlighted that shipping delays and the effects of the covid pandemic and Brexit are contributing to a rise in demand for both new and second-hand farm machinery. NFU members have reported that the lack of availability of ATVs has resulted in it taking three to six months to replace a stolen vehicle, and that the cost has risen dramatically.

As waiting lists grow and market values soar, thieves are seeing quads and ATVs as expensive, easily portable, hot-ticket items with a ready resale market in this country and abroad. Thefts are therefore hitting farmers twice as hard because of the difficulties in getting replacement vehicles. The financial impact of these incidents is exacerbated further at a time when energy and feed costs are soaring. Requiring that new machinery be fitted with a prominent and visible engine immobiliser should provide a deterrent effect by making it harder to steal, thereby decreasing its attractiveness to thieves. That view is supported by the NFU, which has stated that immobilisers and trackers act as a deterrent to thieves, increase the chance of police recovering the vehicle and catching the people behind these crimes, and help farm safety as the immobiliser systems have smart technology that can raise the alarm if a machine has been impacted or rolled over. Although the NFU welcomes the Bill's ambitions, it argues that its scope should be widened in secondary legislation to include other agricultural equipment.

The second part of the Bill requires that owners' details be registered on a database. That will make it easier for police to investigate thefts and return stolen goods to their owners. It will also make it easier for legitimate owners to demonstrate their title, in case that is required during an investigation into a suspected theft. That is a positive step, but more needs to be done to prevent tool theft, particularly from vans.

I would be keen to widen the Bill further to include all commercial vehicles and the equipment kept within them. In October, Tradespeople Against Tool Theft published a White Paper exploring the realities of UK tradespeople who have had their tools stolen. The paper found that 78% of tradespeople surveyed had their

tools stolen and 38.5% had them stolen from their van outside their home. Only 1% of tradespeople fully recovered their stolen tools. Some trades appear to be more desirable targets for thieves; 30% of carpenters had their tools stolen four times or more.

A highly skilled plumber in my constituency highlighted this issue at a national level a few years ago with his #noVANber campaign:

“Based in Loughborough, independent plumber Peter Booth (@PBPlumber) launched a petition last year aiming to get the issue of van theft taken more seriously. His #noVANber social media campaign calls on the Government to look at the increasing ways to protect tradespeople from van tool theft. A recent report by Powertools2U claimed that a van has its tools stolen every 23 minutes in the UK, with an average of 62 thefts per day.”

Peter Booth added:

“I got tired of seeing photos and stories from tradespeople who had their vans targeted and tools stolen, stopping them from working. I didn't think it was fair. I wanted to gather support using social media influence to try and get the Government to look at the possible ways to help make this crime less profitable for the culprits.”

The impact of equipment theft on victims can be wide-ranging, including the financial costs and the emotional and psychological impact. Financially, there is not only the cost of replacing the stolen equipment, but the potential loss of business due to the delays in sourcing new tools. The Federation of Master Builders found that over a builder's career, they will typically lose £10,000-worth of tools and six working days to tool theft. Alongside that, the FMB has reported that tool theft is causing 15% of builders to suffer from anxiety and 11% to suffer from depression. The chief executive of the FMB said:

“Decisive action is needed to tackle tool theft. Eight in ten builders report that they have had tools stolen before. This is causing mental health issues amongst builders with reports of depression, anxiety, anger, frustration, stress and even suicidal thoughts.”

Peter Booth worked on his petition alongside my predecessor, the right hon. Nicky Morgan, now in the other place, and called on the Government to consider what more could be done to tackle van theft and tool theft. The petition stated:

“The loss of a van and/or tools can severely impact on a tradesperson. Even if they are insured, sourcing replacements, organising van repairs and rebooking appointments means significant time out of work. For those who cannot find affordable insurance, this can lead to the loss of livelihood.”

While tradespeople can take preventative measures to protect their vans and tools, this only goes so far in deterring thieves. We are, therefore, calling on the Government to consider what more can be done to tackle this problem, whether it be introducing new legislation, additional sentencing guidelines or regulations on the reselling of tools. Ultimately, thieves must understand that such a crime is not profitable and that stealing a livelihood carries with it commensurate penalties.”

It was signed by 40,262 people.

The prominence of the second-hand tool market is helping to drive tool theft, as second-hand tools are more affordable and can be relatively easy to source. The market is also not currently regulated, which means sellers do not have to prove the tools were acquired legally. Research by Direct Line insurance found that nearly one third of people have bought second-hand tools at some point and six in 10 tradespeople have been approached by or have seen someone trying to sell second-hand tools that they suspected were stolen.

In April 2021, my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to require people selling second-hand tools on online marketplaces to reveal a serial number in a searchable format for each item. Making serial numbers, which are unique identifiers, searchable would help to track down stolen goods and hopefully cut off the ability of criminals to monetise their stolen items. This is an excellent idea, as it fits in well with the previous campaign of my constituent Mr Booth. I will be keen to bring these ideas forward during the passage of this Bill, should it go further.

In the meantime, a number of industry stakeholders, including the FMB, have published practical advice for tradespeople to reduce their risk of having tools stolen. An official police security initiative, "Secured By Design", has also published similar tips to prevent tool and van theft. They include removing tools from vans, installing a tool safe, alarm and new locks, marking tools, and parking strategically. We should encourage tradespeople to follow that advice, but we should not place all the onus on them. The Government have outlined several steps they have undertaken to address the issue of stolen equipment, which include the establishment of an expert stolen goods working group, collaborating with the police and the academic community to tackle the markets for stolen goods. The then Minister of State for the Home Office and Ministry of Justice, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), said:

"The group is examining ways to make property more identifiable and traceable and are working with partners to increase enforcement and encourage due diligence checks by second-hand goods traders." The national vehicle crime working group, established by the National Police Chiefs' Council, is also being used to connect the Government and the police and motor manufacturers. The Government have said that the working group has created a network of vehicle crime specialists across police forces in England and Wales. Their work includes consideration of how to reduce thefts of items from vehicles.

In conclusion, the Bill is a good framework, which will most certainly help farmers and others who have rural business vehicles, but I would like it to go wider to encompass all farm equipment and then to help, defend and support our tradespeople, who are the backbone of our economy and this country. I ask the Minister to look to include those businesses in his plans. This Bill mandates the forensic marking of farm vehicles, which is of equal importance and value to tradespeople. Let us look after those who look after our economy and our country.

11.2 am

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. May I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) on bringing this important Bill before the House today? I am delighted to be here on a Friday to support it. It was good to hear the statesmanlike manner in which he spoke on this important subject of equipment theft. It is clearly an issue that is extremely important to his rural constituents in Buckingham, and he represented them with expertise, experience, authority and understanding. Theft of equipment is also a pressing issue in my constituency, so my constituents will also be grateful to him for bringing this Bill to the House today.

The Bill seeks to prevent the theft and re-sale of equipment and tools used by tradesmen, including those in the agricultural and building trades. It is such an important and groundbreaking Bill that I would like to deal with it clause by clause. Clause 1 specifies that vehicles such as quadbikes and ATVs primarily designed for use by farmers must be fitted with an engine immobiliser. It also sets out a requirement for equipment to be marked with a unique identifier, which must be able to be easily seen and is permanent. So the clause sets up a system that is the same as the VIN system we have in cars.

Clause 2 sets out a requirement that there should be a permanent record of the details of the buyer of the equipment. That could include their name, address, phone number and email, as well as the make, model and colour of the equipment in question.

Sir Greg Knight: Does my hon. Friend agree with the comment I made earlier about the importance of ensuring through the record-keeping provision that records are not lost if, for example, a vendor goes out of business? I believe it is essential that any records be kept online.

Anna Firth: My right hon. Friend makes a crucial point. The whole point of the system is that we are setting up a permanent record. If the record is to be permanent, it must be accessible and held in such a way that people's records are not lost. In this day and age, clearly the only way is to have a proper online database.

The permanent record will also include a unique identifying number for pieces of equipment, as we have discussed in reference to clause 1. Making sure that specific pieces of farm equipment are clearly linked to a specific person or owner will ensure that when the time comes for resale, a potential buyer will be able to take the details of the person selling the equipment and check the identifying mark against the permanent record on the computer database that has been established. If they match, all is well and the buyer can carry on with the purchase; if not, that is a clear flag that the piece of equipment could be stolen and the buyer should steer well clear.

Clause 3 is equally important. It will set up an enforcement mechanism and put proper measures in place so that police and other enforcement agencies can ensure compliance with clauses 1 and 2.

By making equipment more identifiable, both physically and on the online database, we will be able to detect stolen equipment more quickly. That in turn will reduce theft because the resale market will be permanently disrupted. For those reasons, I believe that the Bill is incredibly worth while and will give huge peace of mind to our hard-working tradesmen and women all around the country. That is why the Bill has been welcomed by such a diverse cross-section of business representatives: the Countryside Alliance, which represents people throughout our rural communities, says that it "fully supports this Bill", while the insurance company Simply Business says that the Bill represents a welcome recognition that tool theft is a big problem for tradespeople of all types.

Another reason for the Bill's widespread support is quite simply that we have seen this type of action working in other areas, so I would like to focus on the efficacy of the Bill. Let us take the car industry as a case in point. Back in the 1980s, car theft was a real problem and many cars were regularly stolen, particularly desirable

[Anna Firth]

hot hatches such as the Golf GTI. By the early 1990s, car crime accounted for one in four of all crimes. Cars were sometimes stolen merely for joyrides and burned out at the end of the night, but often they were sold on. Insurance premiums for such cars skyrocketed and sales plummeted. As they were profitable types of vehicle, the car industry desperately scabbled to find a solution.

Two major solutions presented themselves. The first was to make cars more difficult to steal in the first place. One way of doing that was with car immobilisers, which were quickly adopted. In October 1998, they became mandatory in all new cars sold in this country. However, immobilisers are not a deterrent if a thief has access to the vehicle's key, because they can still steal the car, change the number plates and sell it on easily.

Manufacturers therefore started etching a vehicle identification number, or the car's registration number, on each window. It made it far more difficult for people to sell a stolen car on, because even if they forged the documents and changed the number plates, they still had to expensively change every single window. Research showed that window etching was a strong deterrent to car thieves. The Home Office's own statistics show that car thefts reduced consistently since the peak in 1992, when immobilisers and window etching became more widespread. Those facts should give Members great comfort when it comes to the efficacy of the Bill under consideration today.

It is not just the car industry that makes this powerful point. If we look at the bicycle industry, we see exactly the same thing. Denmark and the Netherlands are possibly the two biggest cycling nations in the world, but bike theft in those two countries is dramatically different. The Netherlands' population is roughly three times that of Denmark, but in 2016, extraordinarily, 30 times more bike thefts were recorded in the Netherlands. One reason is that Denmark has a system of bicycle vehicle identification numbers. Introduced in 1942 by the Danish Government, it provides that all bicycles in Denmark must have a unique code. The VIN code is a combination of letters and digits embedded into the bicycle frame.

Since 1948, it has been illegal to sell a bicycle frame in Denmark without an embedded VIN. Police check the codes of second-hand bikes that are for sale. If someone has registered a code as having been stolen with the police, that bike can be seized and returned to its rightful owner. The dramatic differences in bike thefts between Denmark, which has a VIN system, and the Netherlands, which does not, show powerfully why my hon. Friend's Bill is so sensible in seeking to extend the system of permanent marking to rural and agricultural vehicles, in order to protect them and prevent their theft.

The Bill as introduced today primarily aims to solve the issue of theft in rural and agricultural communities, which is clearly important. We know that the theft of tractors amounts to some £10 million each year. The Country Land and Business Association has said that, while much of this machinery is being stolen to order and quickly exported to markets overseas, a significant number of machines are being stolen to commit other crimes—so, a double criminal activity. The Countryside Alliance reported that 43% of farmers had experienced a crime committed against them in the past year.

Last year, in Essex, around £380,000-worth of agricultural equipment was stolen from 13 farms in just two months. Following investigations by our fantastic Essex police force, two men were convicted and have been sentenced to a total of six years and 10 months in prison.

The Bill is not just important to rural communities. I understand that it would allow the Secretary of State to expand its remit through secondary legislation to include other types of equipment. The tradesmen in my constituency of Southend West would be extremely grateful if that could happen. Southend West is the proud home of 3,500 independent businesses, and tomorrow we will be celebrating their amazing work on Small Business Saturday. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), who steers Conservative Members so well through these Friday debates, would agree with me that south Essex is the home of entrepreneurs and small tradesmen. However, too often they have to suffer from crime. A shocking 78% of tradesmen have had their tools stolen, and only 1% have ever recovered their stolen tools.

Tools theft costs tradesmen in my constituency an average of £4,470 in equipment every year, with nearly a fifth of tradesmen losing more than £5,000 of equipment and tools. Indeed, earlier this year, there was an appalling spate of thefts of tools from vans around Southend, with seven incidents in just two days. As far as I know, the thieves are still at large and the stolen items have not been recovered.

This level of theft has cost the trade industry more than £2.8 billion through lost equipment and lost work. However, that does not mention the inconvenience to and destruction of individuals' livelihoods when their tools are suddenly stolen—it takes days, if not weeks, to replace them, work is lost and income affected. I therefore ask the Minister to confirm whether the Home Office is looking to expand the provisions of the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Bill to specifically cover the theft of tools—particularly power tools—from tradesmen's vans.

I conclude by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham again for introducing this important Bill and allowing us the time to debate it. I wholeheartedly support it. It will be good for the whole country, and especially good for all tradesmen in Southend West.

11.16 am

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth). I would like to compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) on being so lucky in the ballot and congratulate him on bringing forward this Bill, which is very important indeed.

My constituency is largely focused around Barrow, which is an industrial town, but drive for 10 minutes in any direction—well, someone driving south or west will end up in the Irish sea with very wet feet, but driving in the other directions leads to very rural communities. We have the Lickle and Duddon valleys, with farms up and down those communities heading into the Lake district. When I travel around those communities with my NFU rep, the excellent James Airey, I hear time and again that this is the No. 1 issue that my constituents are concerned about. It is a pervasive issue; even if it has not happened to a particular farm, village or community, they will know someone it has happened to, and they are deeply concerned about it.

It is worth looking at some of the statistics that sit behind these crimes. The Countryside Alliance runs an excellent annual survey asking its respondents about their impressions of crime. In 2021, 43% of respondents reported that they had had a crime committed against them in the past year, with 32% of respondents having experienced agricultural machinery theft, which was the third most reported crime. In the 2020 rural crime survey, agricultural machinery theft was the top priority for police to tackle. Again, that is what I hear from my constituents and my farmers. It is something that deeply worries them.

According to NFU Mutual's 2022 rural crime report, 50% of surveyed members of rural communities said that they were concerned by rural crime, with a third saying it is a major concern. Quad and ATV thefts reported to NFU Mutual cost £2.2 million in 2021. I am sure John Longmire, an excellent farmer in my constituency, will not mind me mentioning that it is a problem that bedevils him and his neighbours.

This issue is not about farmers not looking after their kit or being reckless with it. This is high-demand equipment—it is difficult for people to get their hands on it these days. Shipping delays, the effects of covid and the snarling up of supply chains have contributed to significant demand for both new and second-hand machinery. That lack of availability is driving this problem and driving the activity of the criminal gangs that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham talked about so well. The lack of availability of ATVs has resulted in it taking up to six months to replace a stolen vehicle, and the cost to replace these vehicles has risen dramatically. We see this in the car market, as well—people simply cannot get their hands on the tools and equipment needed to build these things, let alone sell them on the market. Criminal gangs are taking every opportunity they can to step in where there is that need.

As waiting lists grow and market values soar, thieves see quads and ATVs as expensive and easily portable hot-ticket items with a ready resale market in this country and abroad. Thefts are hitting farmers twice as hard: they lose their piece of kit and cannot replace it easily because it is more expensive to do so. That exacerbates their rapidly rising feed costs—which knock on into our economy in the cost of food and living—and their higher energy costs.

Any hon. Member representing a rural area will recognise reports of criminal gangs moving around. We see them in our papers and read about them on Facebook. They suddenly move into an area, and will sweep through a valley picking up absolutely everything they possibly can and moving it out of the area as quickly as possible. Quads and other high-value pieces of kits are their target, but as hon. Members on both sides of the House have mentioned, so are tools of lower value. The Bill's provisions on the scope of items to be included in future will be important to our constituents.

The Bill does a couple of simple things. I will not rehash what has been said before beyond picking up on a couple of points. Preventing the theft and resale of stolen equipment is absolutely at the heart of the Bill. Stopping that trade—stopping what allows criminals to pick up and easily re-sell items—is what we need to do. Like all good private Members' Bills, the Bill is simple enough that it absolutely hits the right note, and I hope that it will sail through the next stages as it progresses

through Parliament. It gives us the ability to alter and amend it in future. As I have mentioned, it also gives the Secretary of State the power to consider immobilisers, forensic markings and putting owners' details on vehicles—that is absolutely key. As my hon. Friend mentioned, putting those details on an electronic database means that, if a business goes under or is acquired by someone else, that record is kept, is transferable and exists in the ether for the future.

My experience before I came to this place—to steer slightly off topic—was in fraud and financial crime. We long stood by the view that we could not simply arrest our way out of such high-value, high-volume crimes. Three or four years ago, we were seeing 300,000 reports of fraud a year. We simply do not have the skilled police resource for that, so we relied on other tools. My hon. Friend mentioned that prevention is better than cure, and that was the approach we took. We worked with industry, with Government and with law enforcement to share data to understand the motivators driving those crimes, and to use that data intelligently to track, pursue and, eventually, go after those responsible.

Rural communities feel crime; they feel exposed. When I walk around Barrow, my constituents tell me that they do not see enough police, even though there are an awful lot of police around.

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that police and crime commissioners, who set the priorities in individual areas, need to look at and take rural crime more seriously?

Simon Fell: My hon. Friend makes a very salient point. Our police and crime commissioners have an essential role to play here, and it is important that they listen. When I do rural crime surveys, I feed them straight back to the police and crime commissioner, because it is important that they are listening to these views. Even though rural areas, by their very nature, are not highly populated, their inhabitants are the people who produce the food we rely on and the cereal that feeds our children every single day, and if we do not look after them and allow their equipment to be stolen, we are in a very poor state indeed.

Just because an area is rural, that should not mean we expect there to be no police presence there at all. Similarly, we cannot flood our rural areas with police officers, first, because that would not be an effective use of resource, and secondly, because of the nature of the gangs who commit these crimes—they sweep through areas and move on, and they know that their speed and their ability to shock, pick up equipment and move on is what allows them to continue. We have to be more clever about how we go after them, and data sharing is key to this.

Sharing the VINs and having immobilisers in place is essential to ensuring that we can stop these criminals in their tracks, go after them and, crucially, go after the money. While they operate around the UK, they shift their money around the UK and are often involved in money laundering and other activities. If we can share this information with law enforcement to make intelligent, tactical decisions about how we go after them, we can make a real impact, not just for the people we represent in our communities who are being hit day after day by these rural crimes, but against these gangs, who have an incredibly successful business model that we need to

[Simon Fell]

break. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham again on bringing forward this Bill, which I fully support.

11.26 am

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): I will again declare my interest: I live on the Grundy family farm in the village of Lowton in my constituency, which is where my family have lived for over 100 years. Before that, on my father's side, they lived on farms in Astley and Tyldesley, also in my constituency, and on my mother's side, on a farm in Chirk, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes), so I can happily say that farming is very much in the bones and blood of my family. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) for bringing forward this incredibly important piece of legislation.

Some may wonder why I, as the MP for Leigh, am speaking in this debate. Many people naturally assume that Leigh is a gritty, urban constituency, but that is not the case. I am happy to say that Leigh's literal meaning is "meadow", and the Borough of Wigan, in which the town of Leigh sits somewhat unwillingly, is approximately 70% rural. The farms at the bottom end of the constituency are on the edge of the Cheshire plain, where there is sandy soil. Further north—no doubt in your constituency too, Mr Deputy Speaker—there is much more heavy clay in the soil, which makes farming much more difficult and therefore more marginal.

When it comes to farming, we have seen a number of difficult decades. I am old enough to remember going with my father in the mid-'90s to a farm in Lancashire where he was going to buy a second-hand baler—a Bamford, if I recall correctly. It was one of the old balers where you had to pick the bales up by hand and stack them Dutch bond-style, 300 to a trailer. I remember my father haggling with the other farmer for this piece of equipment, and they were haggling over whether my father was going to pay £700 or £1,000 for the baler. These days, a single part of a piece of farm equipment might cost £700.

Within the last 25 to 30 years, we have seen an incredible increase in the value of farm machinery. As a consequence, these pieces of equipment have become far more desirable targets for criminal elements, and it is not just petty thieves who opportunistically seize something left out in a farmyard or a farmer's field overnight. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South said—sorry, my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South; I nearly promoted him dramatically, deserved as it would be—criminal gangs operate across county lines in north Wales, where his constituency lies, Merseyside and Greater Manchester, where my constituency lies. We should not be surprised that they do so, and we are not surprised when criminal gangs cross county lines for the purposes of drug dealing. We are not surprised when criminal gangs steal to order prestige cars with a value of £30,000, £40,000 or £50,000; in fact, there is considerable evidence that county lines organised criminal gang operations are engaged in that sort of theft. Why, then, should we be surprised when, as a Member referred to earlier, criminal gangs cross county lines to steal a piece of farm equipment that could be worth £250,000?

Certainly, we do not realise in how many ways rural communities are affected by these sorts of issues. Organised crime increases as the value of the prize increases, and rural communities and farms are being targeted for the huge amounts that can be made simply from passing on one piece of farm equipment. It is no surprise, therefore, that the game has changed for criminal gangs. Earlier I mentioned a £702,000 second-hand Bamford baler. Twenty-five or 30 years ago—when mobile phones were a rarity and there was no internet—people could not just take a baler down the pub and fence it to the dodgy bloke who sits in the corner. If anyone wants to contradict me, I would love to hear the story, because it would be great to get it in *Hansard* for all time.

These days, with the ability of criminal gangs to operate not just across county lines but internationally, it is entirely possible that a very valuable piece of farm equipment could be stolen and perhaps even exported abroad, and the customer receiving it might not even know that it was stolen. As I described somewhat floridly earlier, we might have reached a point where the security mechanisms have not kept pace with technology and with the increasing value of farming equipment. Effectively, having valuable farming equipment without putting security measures in place is like having a house full of Fabergé eggs with no lock on the door, or with the door open. If I recall correctly, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North said earlier that he wondered whether we produce Fabergé eggs on our farm, but sadly we do not—if only farming was so profitable these days.

For the record, we are not, as some people might suspect, a wealthy and large agribusiness. My family are smallholders and have sometimes been tenant farmers in the past. For the large agribusinesses, the issues that arise from the theft of farm machinery can be extremely deleterious and problematic. For small farmers and, indeed, tenant farmers, who obviously cannot borrow against the value of the property that they work on, it can be a death blow if a very expensive and irreplaceable piece of machinery is stolen.

Ben Everitt: This is a critical point about inequality. As was mentioned earlier, accessing insurance is increasingly a huge cost for farms. Large agribusinesses with multiple farms, but with one home farm for the kit they share across them, have the buying power for insurance, but for our smallholders—the family farms that produce food for our nation and have been doing so for years as part of our rural communities—it is increasingly difficult to meet the extra costs, including insurance.

James Grundy: My hon. Friend speaks adroitly on this issue: the costs for small farmers, especially at the moment, are absolutely incredible. Indeed, I recall recently my father saying that this year the bill for fertiliser was in the many thousands. The bill for insurance can be in the many thousands—to add to that, sometimes when criminals steal farm equipment from the shed, they burn down the shed to hide the evidence and obscure any breadcrumb trail of clues. In such cases, the costs go into the hundreds of thousands, because the farmer not only loses the equipment, but the shed, which is incredibly expensive to replace. If the shed happens to contain a large amount of hay and straw, it not only acts as a serious accelerant to the fire but the farmer loses the year's crop. When a farmer brings in a crop, its price is at its low point, but when there has been a barn

fire and it needs to be replaced, it is at the top of the market. An incredibly serious series of knock-on impacts can happen from this sort of rural crime.

It is worth remembering that a wide range of organisations, including the NFU, the Countryside Alliance and others, are fully supportive of my hon. Friend's Bill. It is long before time that such legislation was brought forward, and I commend my hon. Friend on doing so. Having come third in the private Member's Bill ballot, if I recall correctly from earlier, he could have done any number of things, and it is much to his credit that he has done this.

We often talk about minority representation, and it is worth remembering that farmers and rural folk are an incredibly tiny proportion of the people in this country; it is easy to forget about them. Even in my hon. Friend's beautiful rural constituency, farmers constitute only a tiny number of his electors. He has done great good with this piece of legislation, and I commend his efforts. I fully support what he is doing, and now I will sit down, as I have spoken for some time and I understand that other colleagues probably wish to contribute.

11.37 am

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) on bringing this Bill to the House. Equipment and tool theft is a major issue, not just in my beautiful constituency of Hastings and Rye, but across the United Kingdom. The impact of equipment and tool theft should not be underestimated. In an instant, hard-working people's lives are destroyed by criminals who have no regard for their victims, and it is right that we are discussing this issue today, and I hope that we as lawmakers can make it as difficult as possible for those remorseless criminals to succeed.

Crime in our rural areas causes high levels of anxiety and disruption, and many farmers and rural residents feel vulnerable due to their isolated locations. Sleepless nights are common. We have tool theft in rural areas, and the numbers do not make for pretty reading. Research in 2019 by the Federation of Master Builders estimated that more than three quarters of Britain's builders have been victims of tool theft, with some having lost more than £20,000 worth of tools in the past 10 years. Of builders who had tools stolen between 2009 and 2019, the most common value of loss was £2,500. One in 10 builders say that they had at least £10,000 worth of tools stolen; 2% said the loss was at least £20,000. Over a 40-year working life, therefore, a builder will typically lose £10,000 worth of tools.

The crime puts a financial burden on roofers, electricians, plumbers, carpenters and builders, but it also has an impact on their mental health. The Federation of Master Builders estimates that 15% of builders suffer from anxiety and 11%—around one in 10—suffer from depression, with some reporting panic attacks and suicidal thoughts.

Equipment theft is also relevant in rural areas such as in beautiful Hastings and Rye, where residents in villages such as East Guldeford, Iden, Camber and Pett all suffer from the theft of garden and farm equipment. The Countryside Alliance's 2021 rural crime survey revealed that 95% of respondents believed that crime in their community had been significant in the past year, and 70% thought it had increased during the period.

Last year, the rate of rural crime in East Sussex cost £500,000, as the insurer NFU Mutual revealed recently; that is a 12% fall from 2020, but there are worries for the future, with the figure rising again towards the end of 2021. In East Sussex, farm vehicles remain a top target, with thieves going after Land Rovers, quad bikes and trailers. Alarming, rustling has become more lucrative for criminal gangs. The latest analysis shows that farm animals worth an estimated £2.4 million were stolen in 2021. East Guldeford in my patch is on the west Kent-East Sussex border and has suffered from sheep rustling—it is hard to think that that sort of thing happens in this day and age.

Ben Everitt: Is my hon. Friend aware that, in recent years, there have been reports of sheep being not only rustled but butchered in the fields and then taken off to wherever that dodgy meat is sold?

Sally-Ann Hart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is known to have happened in my constituency as well. Fuel theft is also on the rise. We might not think of sheep or fuel as equipment for farming and rural pursuits, but they are in many ways.

The south-east is the second-worst affected region in England after the midlands. For the sake of clarity, it is worth highlighting that legislation is in place to tackle tool and equipment theft, such as under the Theft Act 1968 and the Consumer Rights Act 2015, but that needs to go further. I agree with the Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham is bringing forward to widen the protection of many people's livelihoods.

There are many things that people can do to reduce the risk of having their tools stolen. Sussex police set up a rural crime team, because some 62% of the Sussex police area is dedicated to farming and Sussex is defined as a significantly rural area by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Last month, Sussex police had an action day to tackle burglaries in rural areas and visited many farms and small rural businesses. People were given DNA kits to mark their valuable tools, equipment and machinery, as well as CCTV posters and information on using the UK's national property register. That might be laborious and not always possible for larger equipment, but it is important for people to protect their property.

The Bill intends to prevent the theft and resale of equipment and tools used by tradespeople in agricultural and other businesses. It has much merit and deserves our support. In this period of high inflation, it is simply unfair and cruel that tradespeople and farmers live with the constant fear of having their equipment, which provides them with a livelihood, stolen and sold to others. I am glad that we are having a serious discussion about how to confront the issue and protect hard-working tradespeople and farmers across the country, particularly in my beautiful constituency of Hastings and Rye.

11.44 am

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I rise to speak in support of the Bill. Unlike my hon. Friends the Members for Buckingham (Greg Smith), for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) and for Leigh (James Grundy), I have no interests to declare. I have never ridden a quad bike, and it is probably in everyone's interest that I have not.

[Tom Randall]

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham on winning a top prize in the lottery of parliamentary life by securing his high place in the private Member's Bill ballot, on his choice of Bill and on his eloquent justification for it. I understand that he got the idea for the Bill from a constituent's comment on Facebook. It is nice to see that he has been able to harness the power of social media so positively in proposing this practical and timely legislation on the Floor of the House.

The general thrust of the Bill, as we have heard from so many hon. Members this morning, is on agricultural machinery, but I understand there is scope to extend it further. Clause 1(2)(b) speaks of

"other equipment designed or adapted primarily for use in agricultural or commercial activities."

This could extend to tradesmen and their tools. Although I recognise that agricultural theft and rural crime is a big issue in counties such as Nottinghamshire, as we are a great farming county—I have constituents who work in agriculture—I will focus on how the Bill could be extended into other areas. As Gedling is a predominantly suburban constituency, it has many plumbers, electricians and builders who would benefit from such an extension.

Equipment theft has a particularly strong impact. Having one's tools stolen obviously has a financial cost and causes disruption. I have spoken to constituents who are victims, and their stolen tools are sometimes the ones they bought as an apprentice, so there is a great deal of sentimental value attached to them. They are also literally the tools of the trade, so their work stops until the tools have been replaced.

Research by the Federation of Master Builders found that, over a 40-year career, a builder typically loses about £10,000-worth of tools and six working days to tool theft. In my preparation for this debate, I was shocked by the scale of tool theft, with 78% of tradesmen having had their tools stolen, more than 38% having had tools stolen from outside their home and 11% having had to take time off work, or having had to decline new work, while they source new equipment. Nearly a third of tradesmen are not financially compensated at all for tool theft.

At present, as we have heard, there is no regulation of the second-hand tool market. Items are sold without proof of origin, which facilitates theft, and it is a large market. Direct Line has found that a third of British consumers have bought second-hand tools at some point, with six in 10 tradesmen having been approached by, or having seen, someone trying to sell second-hand tools that they suspected to be stolen.

Of course, there is already a legal framework in place. Section 1 of the Theft Act 1968 states:

"A person is guilty of theft if he dishonestly appropriates property belonging to another with the intention of permanently depriving the other of it".

There is also an offence of handling stolen goods. Tackling these crimes is resource-intensive, as illustrated by a case in Gedling last year in which power tools were stolen in my hometown of Arnold. The theft was reported in *Gedling Eye*, which said the victim saw the stolen power tools being advertised for sale on an internet auction site. After local police officers were alerted, a plan was hatched to reel in the suspect.

The victim had urged people in the industry to keep their eyes open and their ear to the ground for any information, and he and his labourers saw that two of the stolen items were up for sale online. His wife reported it to the police, and a plan was put in place. They made contact with the seller, which led them to get an address. They arranged a time to collect the items and informed the police. The suspects got quite a shock when, instead of the proposed buyer, it was police officers who turned up to the address in Bestwood. The stolen items were recovered from nearby gardens and returned to the victims.

I think that story illustrates the wide-ranging impact of tool and equipment theft on victims and on the wider society. The victim's wife told the press:

"We were so angry and stressed as only a few weeks earlier we had tools stolen from the lorry. We were beside ourselves with worry as this was the second time my husband had to inform his employer of yet another theft."

She explained that her husband worked for a small company and,

"it's the smaller firms which are affected more by the cost and inconvenience of these sort of callous thefts."

This second incident left us feeling nervous and anxious and very vulnerable. We were incredibly upset and it makes you so angry when hard working people like us have this sort of thing happen and someone steals your belongings.

One of our elderly neighbours was also very shaken by this as her property backs out onto the private car park where the lorry was parked when this happened."

I congratulate Nottinghamshire police on their ingenuity in organising this set-up, but the example I have given is a rare one; I understand only 1% of tradesmen have had their stolen tools recovered, and such operations are resource-intensive and difficult to set up. In that spirit, I welcome the ongoing recruitment of an extra 20,000 police officers throughout this Parliament, and I know there are many working in Gedling and Nottinghamshire who have been recently appointed.

This legislation can add further steps to make the retrieval of stolen tools easier and make it less attractive to steal them in the first place. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham explained when introducing his ten-minute rule Bill, the intention could be to require online marketplaces to require individuals selling second-hand tools to show the unique identifiers of such items in a searchable format. That would close down the ways for people to turn their stolen goods into money and facilitate victims, police and insurance companies' tracking down stolen items. In the example I gave of the power tools stolen in Arnold, it would have made them far easier to identify.

I welcome this straightforward initiative and I note the parallels with the Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013, which was also brought in as a private Member's Bill and introduced a more robust regulatory regime for scrap metal dealers, reducing opportunities for metal thieves to sell stolen material. A Home Office review of the 2013 Act concluded that the overwhelming view of those who responded was that it had improved regulation of the scrap metal industry and in doing so helped to achieve reductions in metal theft.

The statistics we have heard today are quite shocking. It is fantastic that this legislation is coming before the House and I hope that, like the 2013 Act, the Bill will pass the House and have similar results.

11.53 am

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): It is a particular pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall). He gave an excellent speech that really went into the detail of how upsetting equipment theft is and how important it is that we try to reduce the level of theft for people running businesses and farms in our constituencies.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) said in her excellent speech, which went through the various different clauses, the purpose of the Bill is to prevent the theft of all-terrain vehicles such as quad bikes. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling and other hon. Members have outlined, the Bill also provides a power for the Secretary of State to extend the legislation to

“other equipment designed or adapted primarily for use in agricultural or commercial activities”,

such as the construction sector.

So there we have it. The Bill addresses not only the rural market and rural areas, but small businesses. That fits my Clwyd South constituency well, since it has both significant rural areas and urban areas where small businesses, particularly in construction-related fields, are very important. For my constituents, this Bill is an excellent step forward in protecting their businesses. As such, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) on bringing it forward. It has clearly been quite a long process. As he said, there has been a change of cast on the ministerial Bench, although it is excellent to see the current Minister in his place. He is a staunch supporter of everything we are putting forward today.

I would first like to concentrate on the second part of the Bill, which is on the protection of tradespeople. As has been mentioned, 78% of tradespeople have had their tools stolen, and only 1% is ever recovered. The Bill addresses an extremely important issue that bedevils many in our constituencies. The prominence of the second-hand tool market helps to drive tool theft across the country. Second-hand tools are more affordable and can be relatively easy to source. The second-hand tool market is not regulated, which means that sellers do not have to prove the origin of items that they are selling or evidence of original purchase. Stakeholders and those working in trades have argued that this encourages and facilitates tool theft, because it makes selling stolen equipment simple and easy. That is a major part of the problem.

Research from Direct Line insurance found that nearly a third of UK consumers have bought second-hand tools at some point. Six in 10 tradespeople have been approached by or have seen someone trying to sell second-hand tools that they suspected were stolen. That summarises the issue and the problem we are facing in the second part of the Bill.

The main part of the Bill, the beginning, looks at the farming community. My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (James Grundy), who is not currently in the Chamber, gave an excellent speech and made reference to Chirk, where part of his family come from and where I live in Clwyd South. I made reference earlier to the Ceiriog valley, which lies close to Chirk. There, we have seen clearly the problems that many Members have outlined. We are talking about small farms, and in this case livestock—mainly sheep—farming.

I must pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), who gave an excellent speech that mainly focused on arable farming. I speak as someone with some arable farming in the Maelor, but mainly livestock farming and sheep farming on the uplands, particularly in the Ceiriog valley and the Dee valley. This is the community I grew up in at Lake Vyrnwy, which lies a little way south of Clywd South, where sheep farming is crucial. For those small farms trying to look after sheep over a large upland area, a quad bike is of particular importance. The point made earlier is that small farms, some of which may be tenant farms, are particularly vulnerable. That is another reason I strongly support this Bill.

The Big Farming Survey carried out by the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution found that 38% of the 15,000 respondents said that rural crime was a source of stress. The explanatory notes to the Bill state:

“An estimated 900-1200 quad bikes and ATVs are stolen in England and Wales each year. Findings...showed only 22% of premises in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector reported to protect their vehicles as a crime prevention measure.”

Clearly, the Bill is addressing significant needs. NFU Mutual published its “Rural Crime Report 2022”, which assesses the level of rural crime and the impact that it has on communities. Although it found that rural crime dropped by 9.3% in 2021, it still cost £40.5 million in the UK.

It also pointed out that, despite that decrease,

“initial indications reveal that the first quarter of 2022 has seen thieves making up for lost time over the pandemic, with costs over 40% higher than the same period last year.”

An issue that I raised earlier—which was also raised, very eloquently, by my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh—is that of thieves coming from different areas. It is a major issue for my constituents. County lines is a problem in the drugs world, but it is a problem in this world as well. Farmers, particularly those in small upland areas, really need our support, which the Bill aims to provide. As has been mentioned, my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham introduced a ten-minute rule Bill that would require people selling second-hand tools in online marketplaces to reveal a serial number, in a searchable format, for each item. Measures of that kind are vital, helping tradespeople and protecting agricultural equipment.

The Bill will be of enormous benefit both to tradespeople and to the rural communities that characterise my constituency, and I support it strongly.

12.1 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

I thank Members on this side of the House for joining us today—the Benches opposite are disappointingly empty, I must say—to discuss this extremely important Bill. Let me begin by congratulating, strongly and warmly, my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) on the eloquent way in which he presented it and on the persistent manner in which he developed it, over a long period—indeed, as some Members have pointed out, during the time spent by several of my predecessors in this role. He has made a compelling case for it today, and I can confirm straightaway that the Government fully support it. We will do all we can do ensure that it is on the statute book as quickly as possible, and is then implemented in full.

[Chris Philp]

We believe that the Bill will provide an important additional tool to help the police to drive down crime, but of course this is by no means the only action we are taking in that regard. As I said earlier in an intervention on the shadow Minister, we are on track to recruit an extra 20,000 police officers by March next year—in just a few months’ time—when we will have about 149,000, a record number. Never in our country’s history will we have seen more police officers serving our constituents. As I also said earlier, the crime of theft has fallen by 46% since Labour left office. That is a track record of which I think Conservative Members, and the Government more widely, can be extremely proud.

This is a well-constructed Bill. It covers the theft of agricultural ATVs and equipment but also, potentially, wider categories, as a number of Members have pointed out. We expect it to lead to a significant decrease in the theft of such vehicles and equipment, as a result of, for instance, the requirement for immobilisers to be installed in newly sold ATVs and the requirement for forensic markings to be made standard. Those measures will make it much harder for criminals to sell on stolen material, and we believe they will serve as a strong deterrent.

As we have heard during the debate, the theft of agricultural vehicles from farmers can cause severe disruption to their work—work that is important not only to them, their families and their livelihoods but to the whole country, because it feeds us, our families and our constituents as well. It is therefore essential to ensure that they are protected. I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham describe the widespread support that the Bill has received from interested parties, including the National Farmers Union and NFU Mutual.

The principle of the Bill is very important. The Government expect manufacturers to play their full part in protecting items from theft. Unfortunately, my predecessors did not have as much assistance as they would have wanted from parts of the manufacturing sector, which is why the Bill is so important.

The Bill will help to mitigate the significant effects felt by the agricultural community. As we have heard, about 900 quad bikes and all-terrain vehicles are stolen every year, which is simply unacceptable. NFU Mutual’s 2022 rural crime report said that the total cost of insurance claims due to the theft of agricultural vehicles—of course, that includes more than just ATVs—last year was £9.1 million. It is therefore extremely important that we take action in this area.

My hon. Friend said in his excellent speech that despite the technological advancements made across the ATV market, the inclusion of basic security features such as those that we have discussed has been much slower, despite the exhortations of some of my predecessors. The fitting of immobilisers and forensic markings as standard is an inexpensive and straightforward measure. We have assessed the cost of those two things and it is very reasonable at under £200 per machine, which is a small fraction of the typical cost of such machines. That modest cost is far outweighed by the benefits of reducing the thefts that we are tragically seeing.

I would like to spend a moment talking to some of the points raised in the various excellent speeches made by Government Members. I should say that the shadow

Minister’s speech was excellent as well, apart from the slightly incomplete comments on crime, which has of course been going down, as the crime survey for England and Wales points out, to say nothing of the record police numbers that we will soon receive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) talked about expanding the Bill’s provisions not just to other agricultural equipment but to other equipment used by tradespeople, builders, craftsmen and so on. My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) also made that point eloquently, as did my hon. Friends the Members for Gedling (Tom Randall) and for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes).

I draw the House’s attention to clause 1(2), which sets out the kind of equipment that might be subject to the provisions that we have been discussing. In subsection (2)(a), we have mechanically propelled vehicles for use off-road. Subsection (2)(b) talks about

“other equipment designed or adapted primarily for use in agricultural or commercial activities.”

Of course, working as a builder or tradesperson would qualify as commercial activity. It will be open to the Secretary of State to make regulations in due course covering not just agricultural vehicles, all-terrain vehicles and so on, but the equipment used by builders and tradespeople that hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), have talked about.

Having heard what hon. Members said, what I can take back to the Department is that we should be looking at making regulations in those areas as well, certainly at some point. We may start with ATVs and agricultural vehicles and then move on. Those points were extremely well made, and they have certainly been heard by me and the Department.

A number of hon. Members made other good points, not least my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt)—he spoke second from the Back Benches—and for Southend West. There was also an intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight)—who I do not think is in his place at the moment—about recording and ensuring that proper databases hold information on serial numbers and so on.

Again, I draw the House’s attention to clause 2, in particular subsections (2) and (3). The regulations that the Secretary of State can make may specify the kind of information that must be recorded. Subsection (2)(c) makes it clear that that includes the markings with a unique identifier. Subsection (3) specifies not just when the information is recorded and how long it must be kept, but the form in which it must be kept. Reference was made to storing that information online, so that it survives even if the business does not or it moves on. Subsection (3)(c) is very specific that that may include an online system—that is on line 25 of page 2 of the Bill.

Having listened to what Members have said today, I can say that making sure that the regulations also specify online information storage is a particularly important point. A few points have come out of this debate that will, genuinely, influence and change the way that we think about the regulations implementing the Bill once it becomes law, which I hope will happen as quickly as possible.

I also thank my hon. Friends the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) and the Member for Leigh (James Grundy)—who talked about his family farm, the Grundy farm—for their extremely vivid descriptions of the impact that these crimes have on rural communities.

This is an extremely well-constructed piece of legislation. It clearly commands the support of everyone who has spoken on it and of the Opposition. I thank the shadow Minister for expressing her support for the Bill. Most of all, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to conclude by thanking, once again, my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham for the work that he has done in developing the Bill so carefully and so thoughtfully, through so many different Ministers in recent months. He is doing the House, his constituents and the whole country a great service by bringing this Bill forward, and I put on record my thanks to him for everything that he has done.

12.12 pm

Greg Smith: With the leave of the House, I wish to thank everybody who has spoken in this debate. It is incredibly pleasing to have secured the support of everybody who has spoken, including, not least, the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on behalf of the Opposition, as well as Members on the Conservative Benches. I will not rehash the arguments that I made earlier, other than to say that I really think that the Bill will make a difference when it comes to combatting rural crime and other forms of equipment theft into the future. I look forward to working with my right hon. Friend the Minister to make that happen and to get the Bill on the statute book.

I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) for his support and back-up on this. He has worked alongside me, not least in the discussions that we had the other week with farmers from our respective constituencies. His roll-call of equipment that he used in his farming days was insightful. I just hope that, given recent controversies, no one felt the need to google any of it during the course of the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), in her clause-by-clause analysis of the Bill, gave the perfect audition for the Bill Committee. Many other hon. and right hon. Members spoke in this debate, and I am grateful to each and every one of them for their support. To finish, from the multiple references to Fabergé eggs from my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (James Grundy), I think we know what is on his list to Father Christmas this year. I thank the House and look forward to continuing to pilot this Bill through Committee and beyond.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Congratulations, Mr Smith. Having represented an agricultural constituency for more than 30 years and had many reports of theft of equipment from farms during that period of time, I know that the farmers of the Ribble Valley will be very interested in this legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Offenders (Day of Release from Detention) Bill

Second Reading

12.14 pm

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

You will know, perhaps more than many in this place, that I am a simple man, Mr Deputy Speaker. Prior to researching this Bill, I had not spent a great deal of time thinking about the criminal justice system or how it worked. I had laboured under the belief that if someone committed a crime, served their time and paid back their debt to society, they would be afforded every opportunity to succeed on their release from prison and make a fresh start. I was disappointed to find out that often that is not the case and many people released from prison, especially those released on Fridays, are almost set up to fail from the moment they set foot outside the prison estate. They face a race against time to access statutory and non-statutory services—to meet their probation officer; visit a pharmacy or a GP; sort out their accommodation—all on a Friday, with services closing early, and with some being a distance away or even impossible to reach by public transport. Many of them therefore end up homeless, with no hope of accessing services until Monday morning at the earliest. So they have nowhere to stay, they have little support and the world is on their shoulders. Is it any surprise that up to two thirds of people released without access to accommodation reoffend within a year.

That race against the clock is maddening. With a third of all releases taking place on a Friday, this is a numbers game, and the numbers are very high indeed: reoffending costs the taxpayer £18 billion a year; and 80% of crime is committed by reoffenders. If we support people as they come out of prison, we can play a key role in reducing the significant societal and individual costs of reoffending, leading to fewer victims of crime and fewer communities dealing with its impact. This Bill is an important step towards doing that. By making a simple change, by varying the date of release for vulnerable people by up to 48 hours, we can relieve that time pressure and give people the opportunity to make a fresh start. This small but significant change would build on existing Government funding and support for people coming out of prison, including the funding of temporary accommodation for prison leavers at risk of homelessness. We need to end the practice of Friday releases for the most vulnerable, so that they have the vital extra hours and days they need to get support in place before the weekend arrives. This move is supported by charities, the third sector, those working in prisons, the probation service and the Local Government Association, and by former offenders who have been through the system. If the House will indulge me, I will pepper this speech with examples from a few of them.

Last month, I was fortunate enough to visit Wormwood Scrubs in London, to see Governor Frost and her team. It was a fascinating and eye-opening visit, and I am grateful for the time she and her team, and the brilliant third sector organisations, such as StandOut, afforded to accommodate me and answer some of my banal questions. Entering a prison, certainly one such as Wormwood Scrubs, feels very final indeed. You walk

[Simon Fell]

through a set of remarkable Victorian buildings and the first thing you notice is how solid the place is. There are big, thick walls, and heavy, metal doors. Everything is contained and segregated by keys. Each door is opened ahead of you and closes behind you, with a click. Your choices are limited to the space you have access to. The outside world, even though you can see it above and through the windows, feels maddeningly far away. As Governor Frost explained to me, when you leave a prison like the Scrubs, setting foot outside the estate for the first time, you face the

“first independent choice you can make in a while.”

If someone is released on a Friday, they have precious little time to make those choices and if they choose poorly, they may well find themselves back in prison. Some would rather see their family than comply with appointments, for some their addiction takes priority and others simply do not have time to make their appointments, with no chance of getting from point A to point B in the remaining hours of the day. When someone resides in Wormwood Scrubs at His Majesty’s pleasure, is released at 3pm on Friday and then has to see their parole officer in Cambridge that same day, what chance do they realistically have of making that appointment before 5 pm?

I have spoken to prison leavers who were released from custody on a Friday. Some were lucky and managed to get support, but the majority were left facing severe issues with access to key resettlement services. Some ended up on the streets over the weekend while waiting for housing services to reopen on the Monday. Even worse, some people I have spoken to were greeted at the prison gates by the smiling face of their drug dealer. Criminal gangs know just how hard it can be for people to work through their release checklist, meet their parole officer, sort their housing, go to the pharmacy and so on, so they offer a handout—one that comes at a very steep cost. So the merry-go-round continues: the person is recalled to prison, and it all begins again.

I am on the Select Committee on Home Affairs, which is undertaking an inquiry into drugs. In Middlesbrough earlier this year, we spoke to addicts and people in recovery about their life stories. The same issue came up time and again. Their experience is addiction, prison, release, shoplifting and other petty crimes, and imprisonment again. At no point does the process help them, their family or those who work in criminal justice. Nor does it help society. In my constituency, I have spoken to Cumbria police and the amazing Well Communities and have seen these issues time and again.

The nature of unstable releases means further addiction and ripe pickings for drugs gangs involved in county lines—the exact opposite of the outcome from imprisonment and rehabilitation that we might hope for. The chair of the Local Government Association’s safer and stronger communities board, Councillor Caliskan, says:

“With staff limitations at the weekend across a range of services, delays in accessing accommodation and a lack of early intervention from support services, vulnerable prison-leavers are at considerable risk of reoffending. In bringing release dates forward, this will ensure prison-leavers have enough time to access the right help and support to prevent them heading back towards previous criminal activities.”

I could not agree more.

If we want safer streets, we have to start by making access easier to vital services that reduce offending. If people do not have the support structure, including housing and healthcare, that they need in place on release, we simply risk depositing vulnerable people back in the hands of those who encourage harm over good. When I visited Wormwood Scrubs, the governor and her amazing team made that point again and again.

If the House will indulge me, I will read the testimony of Stanley, which was supplied by the fantastic charity Nacro. These are Stanley’s words:

“The biggest problem is not having a roof over your head. So many people come straight out of prison with nowhere to live and go straight on the streets. They have nowhere to go, nothing to do and end up doing something stupid just to go back inside.

When you come out, there’s nothing. No phone, no money, no ID, and if you don’t have someone helping you—you’re alone.

Me—I’d lost weight in prison. My jeans don’t fit and I don’t have a belt. It was freezing and I had no jumper. Yet I couldn’t get my advance payment because I didn’t have any ID. They told me to come to the job centre to sort it out on the Monday, but what am I going to do over the weekend? And I’m supposed to start work on Monday, and that’s not a good look, making excuses on your first day. We’re being set up to fail. 99% will go back to prison because they have no choice.

I came out of prison homeless. They’ve known I’d be released homeless for months. Yet, released on a Friday, it’s getting late in the afternoon, and I still have nowhere to go. And the housing officer has now gone for the weekend. No wonder people reoffend.

I’ve got an appointment with substance misuse services, but they can’t see me until Monday. But I’m supposed to start my job on Monday. And I can’t get an advance payment for UC because I don’t have any ID. They told me to come and see them on Monday instead. So now I’m faced with the weekend, with just the discharge grant to my name. I need to buy myself some winter clothes—it’s freezing—and I need to eat.

I’ve got hospital appointments. I take 6 different types of pills. I’m starting a job on Monday and can’t go to the job centre on my first day of work. This is what people have to deal with all the time.”

This is a comment from the Nacro resettlement worker who met Stanley:

“The holding cell on a Friday is rammed as such a high proportion of people in prison are released in Friday. It’s made worse by those whose release dates were set for the weekend, and are being released on a Friday instead. The pressure on the prisons and resettlement services is incredible. Yet, so many are being released without any support. Nothing. They don’t know who their probation officer is. Where they need to go. What they need to do. And on a Friday, it’s a race against the clock before services close.

“Unfortunately, for those without housing, the only option on a Friday is emergency accommodation if that is available. And then that person will have to through the whole process again on the Monday, all the while trying to get to a whole range of other appointments. And UC throws up another obstacle. Anyone who has been in and out of prison and has claimed an advancement payment after a previous release, is no longer eligible for another advance payment. Released on a Friday with just the discharge grant, those impacted are faced with a long weekend with just £76 pounds to their name.”

For many offenders, the day of release from custody is a realisation of a long-awaited goal: a chance to turn their backs on crime for good. But the reality for those released on Friday can be fraught with practical challenges to surmount. Those who need access to multiple support services before they close for the day, including local authority housing and mental health services, can face a race against the clock. Many services close early and are then shut over the weekend. Approximately a third of all releases fall on a Friday, so those services are under considerable additional pressure.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent speech. In the light of all his research and discussions to prepare his private Member's Bill, why does he think these principles have not been adhered to before? The points he is making are so clear and obvious, so why, given all the attendant problems that come from Friday releases, is there a particular emphasis on them?

Simon Fell: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South for his comments—I did well there; I do not usually get the constituencies right. The honest answer is that I do not know. Certainly, in the data that was brought out during covid specifically, we saw the impact of that. StandOut and a number of other good charities have raised this issue since then, and Nacro—the charity that supplied some of the case studies I have been using—has done some really effective campaigning on it. Like many of the things we see in this place and in our daily jobs representing our constituents, we often need to make maddeningly small changes to systems all over the place to improve people's lot. This is one of those changes, and for that reason, I hope we can get it through.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): As a barrister myself, I am aware, as other Members may be, that a sentence is calculated in days from the date on which it is given. If the date of release happens to fall on a Saturday or Sunday, it is then brought back to the Friday, which explains why Friday has ended up being the most popular day in the week. Does my hon. Friend agree that he is seeking to correct an unintended consequence and right an obvious wrong?

Simon Fell: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. This is a factor of people's releases falling on weekends or bank holidays and compressing almost a third of releases to Fridays. That is a real problem, as I have outlined.

As I have said, the reoffending rate for adults released on a Friday is higher than for any other day of the week. Those without stable accommodation on release are almost two thirds more likely to reoffend. Let us take the example of Simon—I am not referring to myself here. Simon was released from a London prison in April 2021. He has had a history of poor mental health and alcohol dependency. Owing to his complex needs, he met the threshold for priority housing. On the Friday when he was released, he received a phone call at 3 pm saying that no accommodation could be provided, despite the fact that his resettlement worker repeatedly chased the local authority housing department. It was agreed that Simon would travel to stay with his brother in Ipswich, but he did not make the journey. Simon's resettlement worker rang several times that Friday evening, and it sounded as if Simon was with people, drinking on the streets. The resettlement worker was later advised that Simon had been recalled to prison shortly afterwards.

Then there is the example of Patrick, who was released from a two-year sentence in prison. He had an ankle injury and was supplied with crutches upon his release, which limited his mobility and therefore his ability to navigate multiple appointments across the area he was in. Although he was able to access his temporary accommodation that day, he was unable to address his other support needs on the day of release, such as his substance misuse issue. As a result, he had to wait until

the following Monday to access support, which put him at significant further risk of reoffending. Patrick did not engage with services the following week and was recalled to prison shortly afterwards for failing to attend probation appointments.

By removing these barriers that a Friday release can create, we can ensure that custody leavers have a better chance to access the support they need to reintegrate into the community, so that the victims and the public are protected. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) said, the law currently mandates that offenders due to be released on a Saturday, Sunday or public holiday must be released on the preceding Friday, providing it is a working day. While that avoids releases on days when services are completely closed, the result is a bunching of releases on a Friday, with almost double the number on any other day of the week.

The Bill seeks to amend the law to provide the Secretary of State for Justice with a discretionary power to bring forward the release date of an offender by up to two eligible working days where that release date falls on a Friday or the day before a bank holiday. Such a power will promote law-abiding reintegration into society by ensuring that those leaving custody can access the support services they need upon release.

In practice, this power will be delegated to the prison governor or an equivalent official, with the provision targeted at those most at risk of reoffending. To be clear, we are not talking about dangerous or high-risk offenders, and there will be strict security screening of eligible prisoners. The Bill is aimed at helping vulnerable individuals with complex needs who may need additional support to help them make the transition back to life outside prison.

There is a fleeting window of opportunity for people on release from prison, and we simply must not allow those who are serious about making a positive and meaningful change in their lives to fall by the wayside. We should not be setting people up to fail. This is not about softening sentencing; it is about making sure that the right support is in place at the right time to prevent them from immediately falling through the cracks.

Evidence suggests that a Friday release day has a disproportionate impact on those with complex needs, those who have greater distances to travel upon release or those with substance or mental health needs, who face an increased risk of homelessness. Ministry of Justice research has shown that the release date can make a 5% difference in the likelihood of reoffending, with 35% of those freed on a Monday reconvicted within a year, compared with 40% on a Friday. Let us not forget that each of the individuals in that 5% represents a further unnecessary strain on the already stretched capacity of the prisons estate. More crime means more victims, and each of these instances of reoffending represents lost opportunities for reform after people have served their time and should be able to demonstrate their ability to rejoin and fully contribute to society.

Here is another example from Katie, a reducing reoffending officer from Nacro:

“In the past I have worked with many offenders who have been released on a Friday. Essex is a big area that includes 14 local authorities. HMP Chelmsford is a local Cat B resettlement prison, we have many prisoners that are in and out of custody on a regular basis.

[Simon Fell]

Recently I worked with a man that has been in HMP Chelmsford approximately 7 times since I started the job in April 2019. This time he was released on a Friday. He has addiction issues and had been homeless for several years. Due to short prison sentences, we have been unable to do any meaningful work with him. My client had a probation appointment at 2pm in Colchester, a scripting appointment for his methadone at 3pm and a housing assessment that had to be completed over the phone at 2.30pm. At some point he also needed to make his Universal Credit claim, again over the phone due to Covid. He was released with his mobile phone that he had when he was brought into custody. No charge and no credit.

Luckily he made his probation appointment, which took over an hour as he had a new probation officer, that he had not met before. He missed both his scripting appointment and his housing assessment. Most probation officers are mindful of other appointments on day of release, and will offer some leeway if they are aware of conflicting appointments, but this involves our service users speaking out, and some aren't too good at making their voices heard, especially when they are fearful of upsetting their probation officer and being recalled.

Friday releases often require our clients to prioritise their appointments and what is important to them. Unfortunately they don't always prioritise the right thing. Some would rather see their family than comply with appointments, for some their addiction takes priority."

For under-18s, a Friday release may mean a child going for two or even three days without meaningful contact with support services when they are at their most vulnerable. That is why the Bill applies to both adults and children sentenced to detention and will ensure the same provisions exist across the youth estate. This overdue change will bring consistency across the youth estate and, in respect of secure children's homes, correct a long-standing omission. It is worth remembering that 15% of under-18s are imprisoned more than 100 miles from their homes, with 41% more than 50 miles away. It goes without saying that this poses an additional, significant challenge for some of the most at risk who leave detention.

I recognise that the Government are doing fantastic work to reduce reoffending and protect the public—work that will benefit all custody leavers. Several new roles, including housing specialists, prison employment leads, banking leads and neurodiversity support managers—that's a mouthful—are being implemented, which will further benefit individuals to prepare for release by ensuring they have a roof over their head, meaningful employment or education in place and access to essentials such as a bank account or identification.

Simon Baynes: Picking up on my hon. Friend's point, I am pleased to hear that the Government have introduced a number of key measures to reduce reoffending. From his research, the conversations he has had and his position on the Home Affairs Committee, does he feel that the range of services on offer to people immediately after they come out of prison are in themselves correct and of a good standard? Is the issue we are debating today therefore the actual access to those services on a Friday, or is he concerned that more could be done to improve the services for those coming out of prison?

Simon Fell: Once again, I thank my hon. Friend for a very thoughtful intervention. He tempts me to go far beyond the bounds of this Bill. My view is that there are multiple challenges here. Just as people are infinitely complex and different, the services that exist in local authorities and on the prison estate around the country

vary significantly. They could all be resourced more and better. That is a challenge that, sadly, I cannot quite meet in this Bill, but it is one we need to address. The key point that has come through my research is access to accommodation. If we can stop people being street homeless on release, we can really make a positive impact on their lives. If someone has the basics in place when they need them, they are less likely to reoffend, which means fewer victims of crime and safer communities.

It is worth considering what the wider pressures are on the system on Fridays. While prisoners are being released, others are being prepared for court. Later in the day, higher numbers of people are released due to those court appearances. Already pressurised housing services, offender managers, GPs and pharmacies face a surge in the closing hours of the closing day of the week, but all of this is avoidable.

By supporting this Bill, the House has the opportunity to provide offenders with vital extra time to meet their probation or supervising officer and access healthcare and other services ahead of the weekend, helping to cut crime and, ultimately, making our streets safer. The Bill will help to safeguard the public by taking away a large part of the driver that leads to reoffending, driven by these cliff-edge releases. I sincerely hope the House will agree that by making the simple change proposed by the Bill—varying the date of release for vulnerable people by up to 48 hours—we can relieve that time pressure, take away that cliff edge and give people the best opportunity to make a fresh start.

I will draw to a close with a quote from my good friend John Bird, the founder of *The Big Issue*, who was kind enough earlier this year to take the time to come to Barrow and pay a visit to The Well Communities, which is a fantastic local charity that faces the sharp end of many of these issues. Lord Bird said:

"I know from when I was homeless the deep and interconnecting link between prison and the streets. We need to break that link to have any hope of stopping this endless cycle of releasing people homeless and seeing them go back into prison. Ending Friday releases, with the linked increased risk of homelessness, is one positive move towards that."

I find that my life is always easier when I listen to John, so I suggest it is a worthwhile thing for other Members to do. It seems to me that if we are serious about justice, about helping people to rebuild stable and rewarding lives, about relieving prison capacity, about improving outcomes and about reducing reoffending, passing the Bill is an important step in the right direction.

12.40 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell), who gave an absolutely fantastic justification for the Bill. He was so articulate and measured in the way he put forward his argument that it makes it nigh on impossible not to support the Bill, given his efforts. I pay tribute to him for his work in this area, and for his work on the Home Affairs Committee. I know he has been a doughty voice on this issue for a considerable amount of time, and today we have seen the culmination of a considerable amount of work by him.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness for bringing the Bill forward, and he really hit the nail on the head when he talked about

what it is. It is a technical and quite minor change to the existing legislation, and it does not require significant spend from the Treasury. Having reviewed it, I do not think the Bill requires a money resolution at all, so it seems a very straightforward piece of legislation, but it will have a considerable impact, which, ultimately, is what this is about.

Although the Bill might be a somewhat technical change, as we say, to existing legislation, it will have an absolutely profound impact on the broader society, on our communities, on the people we are here to serve, and on those who perhaps want a second chance more than anything else. From that perspective, it makes absolute sense for the Bill to pass its Second Reading. As Members can probably tell from my comments, I will support the Bill wholeheartedly as it passes its stages in this place, but I will talk a bit more about its impacts.

I, too, met representatives of Nacro last year and had a really interesting discussion about the impact of Friday releases, particularly on youth offenders. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness touched on the issue in his comments, and I wish to bring it to the forefront of the debate. I cannot compute what that impact feels like for the 15% of incarcerated or imprisoned children who are held 100 miles away from where they live. More often than not, they find themselves in that situation because of other underlying factors in their life. They are often a young person with real vulnerabilities, who has effectively been left to society. Unfortunately, as a result, they have found themselves in horrendous situations that have ultimately led them to break the law and end up in custody. I cannot compute how much the longer-term impacts on a child are compounded by this situation. Some Members will have children of a similar age—I am not a parent, but imagine having a child who is 100 miles away from home, who has been through the system for two or three years, or even longer, on their own. Let us not brush this under the carpet: it is a tough environment for someone to come out of and effectively feel like they are on their own. More often than not, the young people who are going through the system—my hon. Friend touched on it, but I will tweak that a bit—are not being met at the gate by a familiar person with a loving smile ready to take them somewhere. They are on their own, or they are having to go back through the system.

That leads me to a broader question: what are we really trying to achieve in our criminal justice system? Within the confines of the Bill—I am not going to opine philosophically on that, Mr Deputy Speaker—one point springs to mind that could address what opponents of the Bill might say, although I cannot see that there would be many, if any, given how straightforward and practical it is. There is a balance between, on the one hand, the perception that that individual has served their time and, on the other hand, having a system that practically works.

Effectively, we are talking about tweaking things by a matter of days to ensure that we do not just throw someone out into the world without a support mechanism. If we truly want to see the readmission into society of people who know that they have broken the law but who have gone through our prison system as a result, served their punishment and done their time, and if we want them to become proactive members of society, surely we have to give them a chance on day one to start in the right way. That is common sense.

If they need access to a probation officer, that means making sure that they can access one. They might also need an advance payment so that they can get new clothes. My hon. Friend gave a vivid example that highlighted the problem of an individual whose clothes no longer fitted them when they came out, and it was cold and they needed to figure out where they were going to go and what they were going to do.

More often than not, when we are debating in the comfort of this Chamber, things can become quite abstract and we forget that we are talking about human beings and people's lives. We have to remember that these people often want to reintegrate into society, but they need practical support to do that. Many of them are not asking for us to sort them out. They want to contribute, to go to work, to pay it back and to get on with their lives, but if we have a ridiculous situation where they are effectively thrown out on the street at 3 o'clock on a Friday afternoon and told, "Right, get on with it," how on earth can we realistically expect them to have a chance? What my hon. Friend is trying to achieve with his Bill, therefore, is at the core of what all hon. Members believe: let us at least give someone a decent chance to have a go and an opportunity to make a start. Again, that is common sense.

I will touch on the practicalities in prisons, particularly on a Friday. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), who practised as a distinguished barrister for many years, knows the intricate nature of the system full well, as will many other hon. Members. The administrative pressures in prisons on Fridays are acute. Often, there are people being prepared to go to court. If there are people who have hearings in front of judges, either the following week or sometimes over the weekend, they would be held there in preparation for those hearings.

On top of that, the situation is compounded by the pressure of significant numbers of people being processed for release on the same day. What we have effectively in that process, therefore, is almost like a pressure cooker. It builds up and up, and there is no way realistically to properly track how things are being monitored and managed. Staff have to effectively get people out because there needs to be turnover in the system. That is not to be seen as a criticism in any way, shape or form of the hard-working people in our prison system—they have to work with the systems and processes they have—but if we can alleviate the pressure on them with the small minor change that this legislation seeks to achieve, it makes perfect sense to do that. We know that, when people are under that amount of pressure, it is impossible to know exactly who is where, who is collecting who and how that impacts on so and so and to link with those agencies. The volume and pressure they are dealing with are so impacted and compounded, it is just not possible.

The other point I want to make on support relates to older offenders. When someone is coming out of prison after a significant amount of time, it is into unfamiliar surroundings and a system, a world and, in many respects, probably a society that have totally changed. That impacts not just on the practicalities of getting from A to B, but on them personally and their mental health. It might sound straightforward to say to someone who has perhaps come out of prison after 15 or 20 years, "Begone, get on the train to see your probation officer at 3 o'clock", but it is not. That is particularly so when

[Shaun Bailey]

we add the fact that they are being released on a Friday, when these support services are not there, so any hope that this person may be able to get some degree of support is reduced—not eliminated, but reduced—and that again adds to the pressures.

From the perspective of ensuring reintegration, which is the overarching angle of the point I am trying to make, it is so important that we enable people to at least have a chance to access our support services and meet their own obligations, too, particularly the need to meet a probation officer or support officer, or any other condition attached to their release. If there are conditions attached to release, by releasing individuals on a Friday, we are not even giving them a chance to meet those conditions in the first place. From that perspective, the idea of fair play—as in, this person has done their part, so the state needs to do its part, too—is just not there in the current system, and that is another thing that the Bill seeks to address.

The other key perspective from an administrative point of view is how this power is delegated. In the legislation, that power would sit with the Secretary of State and would then flow through. Practically, it is likely that governors of prisons and directors of private prisons would be the ones exercising the power on a day-to-day basis, and that is absolutely right, because within the broader prison system and organisation, it is exactly those people who know the prisons. It comes back to my earlier point, which is that we are dealing ultimately with human beings. It is vital, therefore, that we leverage the existing relationships that prisons have with their prisoners, utilising the knowledge and skills of those who know them best to ensure that we can tailor release dates that work for them, clearly in line with the sentences handed down.

Having the practical function of this power executed and managed by prison governors, with the prison staff underneath them feeding into that process, is absolutely right. It will enable us to ensure that the process is dealt with through the people with the best knowledge to manage it and ensure that individuals are identified in the right way. From that perspective of the Bill, it is absolutely right that we handle this in that way.

Of course, the overarching theme of my contribution is about giving people a fair go once they have left prison, and to me that is the core of the Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness touched on substance misuse as a real driver of reoffending and made the vivid point about people often being met at the prison gate, not by someone they know or a family member, but by their drug dealer.

The broader point about linking with support services—Nacro does an amazing job there, and I really commend its work—is a vital thread of this legislation. By enabling discretion on the timings of release, it allows us not only to mitigate exactly what my hon. Friend talked about, but to stand up the services to tackle the problem of substance abuse. I know from my own experience in my communities in West Bromwich West that that has been a real driver of crime and offending rates, particularly short-term offending, which is acutely impacted, in the research I have seen, by the issues the Bill seeks to tackle.

The Bill will enable us to ensure that, from a pragmatic point of view, we are eliminating—or at least making our best efforts to eliminate—the scenario of someone being met by their drug dealer at the gate, by enabling the discretion for their release to be timed in the right way. It at least gives that person a chance. It may sound as though I have portrayed a land of milk and honey here, so let me be clear: this legislation would not eliminate reoffending completely. There is always a degree of personal responsibility. It will also not entirely eliminate Friday release, because there may be good reasons why a prison governor allows it, or a sentence expires on that day and it works out in practical terms.

To be abundantly clear, I am aware that a technical change will not suddenly solve all the problems of reoffending, but to me, this is a vital but understated part of the broader machinery for dealing with them. I have just said it will not eliminate reoffending; there is a degree of personal responsibility and broader societal issues, which are outside the scope of the Bill, but which we must continue to work on. However, at least this Bill is an opportunity to give people a fair go and eliminate a technical construction that has exacerbated those issues.

To sum up, I think this Bill is pragmatic in what it seeks to do. It seeks to address an issue that may be understated, but none the less has an acute impact on prisoners affected by Friday releases. It enables people to access vital services, to start the road to reintegration and to get the support they need—or at least it provides the opportunity for that, and that is so important.

As I said, the Bill will not solve the broader issues with reoffending rates, but it is a part of that patchwork that we need to keep developing. It is part of the broader conversation we need to have. It is absolutely right that the mechanics of the Bill allow its application to be pragmatic, which I very much support. The people who know prisoners best are those who work with them during their time in prison.

At the heart of the Bill is giving a fair chance to people who want to turn their life around, which is something we can all wholeheartedly get behind.

1 pm

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) on his articulate speech. He did not use notes, which I will try to replicate.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) on introducing the Bill. Before I came here on the train, I looked at the Bills on the Order Paper, and it occurred to me that this Bill might seem simple, but who knew that releasing prisoners on a Friday has the unintended consequence—my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) mentioned unintended consequences—of a greater chance of reoffending? That surprised me.

I fully support the Bill, and I hope the Government do, too. The comments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West resonated with me on a personal level. I am not an offender, but I grew up in quite a deprived area of Batley and Dewsbury. I had a friend from an early age who, as a late teenager, committed quite a serious crime that, unfortunately, led to his imprisonment. We went our separate ways. He spent

quite a number of years in prison. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West spoke about giving people a second chance, and prison gave this friend a second chance. He turned his life around, but it astonishes me that, had he been released on a Friday, it might not have happened. That is an important point about this Bill.

This friend is now a member of the same gym as me, The Muscle Pit in Dewsbury—“Muscle Pit” is obviously a contradiction in terms as far as I am concerned. My hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) and for West Bromwich West are both gym members.

Ultimately, we need to give offenders every chance we can. It is a problem if releasing them on a certain day of the week does not help. That problem has been well addressed today, for which I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness.

There are statistics on reoffending, and my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West alluded to the fact that not everyone will stop reoffending if we release them on a Monday instead of a Friday, but we should do everything we can to help the statistics. There are resources available to support people released from prison in reducing their risk of reoffending.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness has been working with Switchback, an award-winning resettlement charity in London, and it has highlighted the Ministry of Justice data showing that more than 50,000 people are released from prison each year, and of those 40% are reconvicted. That is 20,000 people, which is far too many. Just one in 10 gains work, which is 5,000. What happens to the other 25,000? Reoffending costs society and the taxpayer an estimated £18 billion a year. Switchback found that, in London, two in three were released homeless. One in four had no ID, bank account or phone, so they were out of the system.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that, in supporting the Bill, Lord Bird has commented that the link between prison and homelessness is critical and that the Bill is a step towards breaking that link?

Mark Eastwood: I was not aware of those specific comments, but obviously we do not want people sleeping on the streets or rough sleeping. I pay tribute to Kirklees Council and its rough sleeping team. If the Bill alleviated the problem, that would be a benefit, so it should be brought forward. I thank my hon. Friend for that.

Nacro, which has campaigned on this matter since 2018, has also called for an end to Friday releases. It suggests that more than a third of prison leavers are released on a Friday, which piles pressure on to offender managers, responsible officers, local housing authorities, accommodation providers, Jobcentre Plus officers and other community services. I suggest that the impact is wider than just the public sector and those offering such services.

I would like to name-check a number of charities that also want to help offenders. The Blast Foundation equips offenders, ex-offenders and their families to prepare for reintegration into lawful society through mentoring and training. Choices is a counselling service for those facing unplanned pregnancy and child separation. Moving

on from what was said by my hon. Friend, HTB shelter and night shelters provide a safe place for rough sleepers in London. Mind provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing mental health problems. One in Four supports people who have experienced child sexual abuse and trauma, and Prison Fellowship works through its volunteer members to support prisoners in a number of ways. Prisoners and offenders need access to those services as they come back into society. If they cannot have that on a weekend, of course they are more likely to be stood at the prison gates and tempted by the drug dealers and people who want them not to rehabilitate themselves—obviously, from a financial point of view, that would not help them.

A final organisation that I have much admiration for when it comes to prisoners and rehabilitation is Timpson, which does dry cleaning. It does my dry cleaning, although my suit probably needs to go back there next week—you will be pleased to know that I will bring in another suit next week, Mr Deputy Speaker. Timpson does great work with offenders—it has been known to meet offenders at the gates. It may not do that on a Friday—obviously it works on a six-days-a-week basis—but it is there to help stop reoffending.

Shaun Bailey: My hon. Friend is making a characteristically articulate speech, so I want to say well done for that; it is fantastic. He has mentioned a number of charities and third-party organisations. Does he agree that one of the good things about the Bill and the practical use of its discretion is that, as I touched on in my contribution, it enables a bit of forward planning? If we could enable further engagement with those organisations, we could plan a proper release strategy for prisoners, to at least try to mitigate some of exactly what he is articulating.

Mark Eastwood: Absolutely. These organisations are fully prepared to help people to reintegrate into society. Finally on Timpson, I have talked to people who work in its high street shops, and they do great work in this area. The only thing that they do not train offenders in is key cutting—for obvious reasons.

We have mentioned that Fridays are busy days in prison, which often results in delayed release. There is a higher volume of prison leavers, and those going to court are prioritised over those due for release, leading to later releases. There is less time to contact support services, as has been mentioned. That can lead to homelessness, which has a special impact on women and young people. Women are held, on average, 63 miles from home, but many are held 100 miles away or more. Eleven per cent. of children in custody are held over 100 miles from home, and 35% are held more than 50 miles away.

Services in the community may offer reduced services on Fridays, and reduced or no services over the weekend. That means that the window for prison leavers to obtain support from those services is incredibly limited on a Friday. Delays can mean that those people cannot access the support they need. That obviously leads to an increased risk of reoffending and sets them up to fail. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West alluded to, everyone should be given a second chance. We do not want people to fail and go back into the prison system. The high number of releases on Fridays puts unnecessary pressure on services, especially on bank

[*Mark Eastwood*]

holidays, which we have not mentioned. If someone has a Friday release and the Monday—or, on certain special occasions, Tuesday—is a bank holiday, the prisoner is left to their own devices and at risk. That needs to be taken into account in this Bill.

In conclusion, we need to support the Bill to help those who genuinely want to re-engage with society, to enable them to access the support available and to reduce the risk of reoffending due to lack of support and, therefore, reduce pressures on criminal justice services, so that they can adequately support more people. Finally, I congratulate the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness on presenting this Bill. He has my full support.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The shadow Minister has indicated that she would like to speak next, and I am more than happy to comply with her wishes.

1.12 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) on introducing this important Bill. I thank Nacro for its campaigning work on this issue and the vital support it provides to prison leavers. As the hon. Member outlined, the Bill will allow the earlier release, by up to two days, of people in prison with high resettlement needs who are due to be released from prison on a Friday or the day before a bank holiday.

It will be no surprise to the Government that Labour supports the Bill wholeheartedly, not least because we tried to legislate for this last year. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) tabled an amendment to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 that would have provided this much-needed flexibility for Friday releases, but the Government at the time refused to support it. I am glad that they have now seen sense and recognise the value in Labour's proposals—because let's us face it, these proposals are common sense.

As the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness explained, prisoners released on a Friday face an almost impossible race against the clock to get all the support that they need in place before the weekend. In many cases, they are simply unable to access the same support as those released earlier in the week, because many crucial resettlement agencies run a reduced service on Fridays and no service over the weekend.

That means that prison leavers might end up sleeping rough or in unsuitable housing. They may be left for the weekend, unable to access important medication and health support, such as in the case of M, who was released on Friday before a bank holiday weekend after serving a year in custody. He had an addiction to heroin but, when released, was not given the prescription charts from the prison that were needed to determine the dose of methadone he needed. He was also not given a bridging prescription. As it was late afternoon on Friday, the GP from the substance misuse service had left, and M and his resettlement broker were unable to get his medication. He was vulnerable and entitled to priority housing, but the local authority did not deem him to be in priority need because it was a Friday afternoon. He did not have time to gather the further evidence that was needed to prove what he had said before the weekend.

He spent the weekend sleeping in a known drug house and ended up using heroin. As part of his licensed conditions, he was required to give a blood sample and, lo and behold, he tested positive for drug use. Had he been released earlier in the week, he would have accessed the housing and medical support that he needed to help in his resettlement.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) has noted previously in Committee, Members of this House will be especially familiar with this matter. I am sure that many of us have experienced the same difficulties in getting the necessary support for our constituents in need last thing on a Friday, just as agencies and services are closing for the weekend. Indeed, very recently, I went with a constituent in housing need to my local town hall just to ensure that they were given the services that they needed. From my earlier life as a criminal practitioner who both prosecuted and defended, I can tell Members of the cases that were heard on a Saturday in the emergency court of people who had been released from prison and were back in court again because they had nowhere else to go. It was better to commit a minor offence, be arrested and be kept in a prison cell where they at least had a warm bed and three square meals. That was a better option for them.

We know that around 400 people continue to be released from prison, every month, directly into homelessness. Only 30% of people receiving treatment services while in prison are successfully transferred to the community on release. I hope that the changes proposed in the Bill will contribute to improving those worrying numbers. There is a window of opportunity for people when they are released from prison. That is when they are keen to move on and rebuild their lives outside prison. We should be seizing that opportunity by making the transition as easy as possible to give them the best chance of success and thus decrease the likelihood of their reoffending as much as possible.

The Government conceded in the summer that, under the current system, Friday releases can end up with ex-offenders spending their first days on the streets with little in the way of support, increasing the likelihood that they will commit further crimes, and they committed to legislate when time allows. However, under this Government, reoffending rates have remained stubbornly high, and the refusal to legislate for this change until now, and doing so through a private Member's Bill, is evidence of how far this has fallen down the priority list of the Ministry of Justice.

The chaos and ministerial musical chairs that has been going on across Government over the past number of years has meant that, in the intervening months, thousands more prisoners have been released on Fridays and have been set up to fail. We are glad that the changes are coming and are pleased to support them, but it is a shame that the Government took so long to listen and to act.

On a final note, the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who replied to the previous debate, made what I would call a really gratuitous political statement about how few Labour Members were present for today's debates. The reason for that is that we agreed with the first Bill debated today and we agree with this Bill. The reason why there are so many Members on the Conservative

Benches is that they are trying to talk out the last Bill that will be reached today. I do not think that Members should be making those comments.

Shaun Bailey: I agree with some of what the hon. Lady has said. However, on the point about participation, I get what she is saying, but, surely, if Labour Members were so enthusiastic, they would be here in the Chamber. The hon. Lady is here because she clearly supports the Bill. Where are her colleagues?

Yasmin Qureshi: My colleagues have no objections to these Bills. The reason that Government Members are taking so long on this issue is that they are trying to talk out the last Bill listed for today.

Shaun Bailey *rose*—

Yasmin Qureshi: That is it. I will take no further interventions.

Shaun Bailey: I take real exception to what the hon. Lady is saying. I have seen at first hand the impact of this in my own community, and I have spoken to a number of charities. [*Interruption.*] Let me take the heat out of this. This is a common-sense Bill. We all agree on that. We have all seen the impact of this. Regardless of the back and forth—although, Mr Deputy Speaker, my contribution was not included—let us just agree that it is a great Bill; it makes sense, so let us just get on and support it. It is as simple as that. Does she not agree with that?

Yasmin Qureshi: I agree. Indeed, I started off by saying that we support the Bill. Not only do we support it today, but we have been supporting it since last year, when we tabled an amendment on this.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Has the shadow Minister completed her speech?

Yasmin Qureshi *indicated assent.*

Mr Deputy Speaker: In which case, I call Mr Baynes.

1.20 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to speak on Second Reading in support of the important Bill brought to the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell). In making my remarks, I am very mindful of the fact that HMP Berwyn is in the next-door constituency to mine, that of my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton). As the neighbouring MP, who also represents half of Wrexham County Borough Council, let me say that HMP Berwyn is of great significance and importance to my constituents as well, not least those who work in the prison. Last year, I had the honour of going round the prison with some fellow MPs from north Wales and I saw the excellent way it is run. It was established relatively recently, so some far-reaching and innovative ideas have been able to be implemented on how we lead prisoners back into a rehabilitated life after leaving prison, which is of course at the core of why we are debating this issue today.

I would also like to make the point to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who is sitting on the Opposition Front Bench, that Conservative Members take this issue seriously, as we did the previous private Member's Bill. This is an opportunity for Back Benchers, as opposed to Front Benchers such as her, to express our concerns and those of our constituents. I am sure that she would support our having a vibrant democratic approach to the life of this Parliament and this Chamber.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness has articulated so well, Friday releases come with a range of complications for those who have completed their custodial sentences. When somebody leaves prison, they should ideally have the following things in place: somewhere to live, a point he made particularly eloquently; financial support; access to the basic essentials; access to healthcare and mental health or substance misuse services; and support and someone to turn to. In an ideal world, all those services should be in place. If they are in place or largely in place, the risk of reoffending will be substantially reduced. As has been discussed in this debate, about one in three offenders currently leaves prison on a Friday. Releasing prisoners on a Friday, as is common, reduces a released offender's access to all those basic principles I have outlined, with those things often delayed until Monday of the following week. Significantly, adult offenders without stable accommodation on release from prison are almost 50% more likely to reoffend and it is clear that access to accommodation is important. Probably, as my hon. Friend said, it is of paramount importance in helping offenders to access both employment and training opportunities, which may support their rehabilitation.

Friday releases demonstrably threaten the likelihood of an offender's release to stable accommodation and a smooth transition back into society. Currently, section 23 of the Criminal Justice Act 1961 provides that detained offenders who would otherwise be released on weekends, bank holidays or public holidays are to be released on the preceding day—a Friday or the day before a bank holiday or public holiday. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) discovered from her career as a criminal barrister, there are, to an extent, unintended consequences involved in this. Offenders would have only the rest of the day to access services and arrange accommodation, given that the providers of services and accommodation would probably be closed on non-working days. They would have to wait until the next working day, which might be in several days' time, especially in the event of a public holiday.

Fridays are often busy days in prisons. On Fridays, as on other days, prison staff need to prepare outgoing prisoners for court in the morning, and also need to process the larger numbers of people being released. Owing to performance indicators, prisons will prioritise those being prepared for court over those who are due for release, which can mean that people who are released later in the day have limited time to present themselves to service providers before the weekend. Those being released may also have to travel significant distances to reach the areas in which they are being resettled, arriving late in the day, which makes it less likely that they will secure all the support that they need. That point, too, has already been made eloquently by other Members.

[Simon Baynes]

It is particularly relevant to women and young people, owing to the configuration of the prison estate and the possible distance from their home area.

Gaining access to timely support on release can therefore be particularly challenging on a Friday, because of the number of different services—both wider Government and third sector services—that will need to be accessed, because of the limited time available before services close for the weekend, and because of the additional pressure on support services caused by an increased number of releases. Approximately a third of releases fall on a Friday, almost double the number on any other day of the week, and failure to access vital support on a Friday, or the day preceding a public holiday, can increase the risk of reoffending.

Adult offenders released on a Friday from sentences of less than 12 months are known to have had a reoffending rate within two weeks of release of 14.8%, slightly higher than the average reoffending rate—13.2%—of those released on other days of the week. As was mentioned earlier, challenges are more apparent among older offenders, those released from establishments located far from their home address, and those with substance misuse or mental health needs, who face an increased risk of homelessness.

The data clearly shows that releasing prisoners on a Friday creates insecurity for them. That may be due to an inability to access accommodation, or they may have just a few hours in which to arrange a bed for the night, register with a GP and sign up for job support to keep them on the straight and narrow before services shut down for the weekend. My hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood) spoke eloquently about the rehabilitation of offenders, which lies at the heart of our justice system, at the heart of our debate and at the heart of the Bill. We support that strongly, and this is one practical way in which we can help the process.

The Bill will give the Secretary of State a discretionary power to bring forward the release date of an offender by up to two eligible working days, when that release date falls on a Friday. In practice, that power will be delegated to the governor, the director or appropriate officials in youth establishments—those who know the prisoners we are talking about—and guidance on eligibility criteria to target those most in need will be set out in a policy framework. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) rightly said, that is a sensible and pragmatic way of approaching things.

As was mentioned by, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness, Lord Bird, founder of *The Big Issue*, has come out strongly in favour of the Bill. My hon. Friend quoted his words, so I will not quote them in full now, but I will repeat the last sentence of my hon. Friend's quotation:

“Ending Friday releases, with the linked increased risk of homelessness, is one positive move towards that.”

The Bill has my full support. It provides for changes which—as will be clear in the data that my hon. Friends and I have discussed—reduce reoffending and offer those on release more stable prospects as they reintegrate into public life.

1.29 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I also rise to speak in support of the Bill, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) on bringing it forward and on his quietly passionate and very persuasive speech outlining the reasons for it.

Any of us who read *The Spectator*—and given the Members who are in the Chamber today, I think everyone here is probably an avid *Spectator* reader—will know Rory Sutherland's “Wiki Man” column. As an advertising man, he writes a fortnightly column explaining how small changes in design or behaviour can have far-reaching implications, and this Bill is a very good example of that.

As my hon. Friend explained, the current legislation, which is from the 1960s, says that one will be released from prison on a Friday if the release date is at the weekend or on a bank holiday. I should say at the outset that I believe in prison. I believe that people who commit serious offences and also some minor offences should go to prison. I also hold the view, which I think is still fashionable, that more people should be in prison for longer.

Aside from a small group of people, everyone who is in prison will be released at some point, so the question arises: how should we bring them back into society? How should we begin to rehabilitate them? We have heard from the speeches today that Fridays in prison are pretty much like those in any workplace—there is a rush to complete things before the weekend, when things effectively shut down for two days, and tasks need to be finished.

A third of releases are on a Friday, which is double the number on any other day. One might be released from prison a very long way from home, with a little bit of money in one's pocket, as support services are winding down or closed. In that context, it is no surprise that offenders who have been released might end up in the pub or worse, rather than accessing the services they need. As we have heard today, adult offenders released on a Friday from sentences of less than 12 months have a slightly higher reoffending rate within two weeks of release than those released on other days. My hon. Friend clearly illustrated the issues, or more particularly, Stanley, who he referred to in his speech, articulated the problems that can be encountered.

This Bill will go a long way, particularly when seen in the context of other measures. For example, I welcome the recent introduction by the Government of employment advisory boards, which will bring together local charities, local authorities and others to help ready ex-prisoners for the workplace. My hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards) and I are sitting in on the meetings of the board that exists in Nottingham. I have my first meeting next week, and I look forward to using those meetings to get feedback from those on the ground about how decisions being made in this place are actually working, and if they are not working, why and what can be done to improve them. He has been mentioned already, but I congratulate James Timpson, chief executive of the Timpson group, whose brainchild the employment advisory boards are, and I look forward to seeing those developed.

This is a measured Bill. The personal circumstances of the offender will be taken into account, to ensure that public protection is maintained. By bringing the release

date forward by one or two days, the sentence is not shortened by any meaningful amount; it is only a matter of days. Those who support prison and believe in prison can support this measure as a way of ending the prison process, as the prison population is rehabilitated and returned into general society. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness on bringing forward the Bill, and I look forward to supporting it and seeing it come on to the statute book.

1.34 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Campaigners have said in support of the Bill that a move to end Friday prison releases would help to stop freed inmates walking straight back into the arms of criminal gangs. I welcome the Bill and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) on introducing it.

As many Members have said, former prisoners who are let out of prison on a Friday face a race against the clock to access housing, benefits, healthcare and other services before the weekend, which leaves some of them temporarily homeless and increases the risk of reoffending. The Bill would give prison governors discretion to release those most at risk up to 48 hours earlier to ensure that they can receive assistance. The changes are expected to result in significantly fewer crimes each year, meaning fewer victims, less crime and safer streets.

Currently, about one in three prisoners leaves prison on a Friday. That gives them very little time before everything shuts for the weekend to find a bed for the night if they are unable to go back to their home, to register with a GP or to sign up for job support to keep them on the straight and narrow. When people come out of prison, they need secure housing first and foremost, as well as employment. Currently, section 23(3) of the Criminal Justice Act 1961 provides that detained offenders who would otherwise be released on weekends or public or bank holidays are to be released on the preceding day. That gives offenders only the rest of their day of release to access services and accommodation.

Failure to access vital support on a Friday, or the day preceding a public or bank holiday, can raise the risk of reoffending. From July 2016 to September 2020, adult offenders released on a Friday from sentences of less than 12 months had a slightly higher reoffending rate within two weeks of release—14.8% compared with the 13.2% average reoffending rate of those released on other days of the week.

Challenges are more apparent for older offenders, those released from establishments located far from their home address, or those with substance misuse or mental health needs, who face an increased risk of homelessness. I welcome the news that, after careful consideration, the Ministry of Justice is supportive of the Bill, following the announcement in June that it was seriously considering introducing changes to curb Friday releases. As we are all arguing, legislation is urgently needed.

When prisoners are released, they face a challenging environment that can actively deter them from becoming productive members of society. With alarming prevalence, many former prisoners are re-arrested within a short time of release. Reoffending harms the families of inmates and society in general. Taxpayers continue to support a broken system that sets up ex-offenders to fail once they are released. Former prisoners need housing and work,

but it is more difficult for them to find rewarding employment—or any at all, in fact—when compared with the general population. It is also difficult for them to find safe and secure accommodation and to function in society generally. Significantly, adult offenders without stable accommodation on release from prison are almost 50% more likely to reoffend. Access to accommodation is important in helping offenders to access employment and training opportunities that may support their rehabilitation.

Ex-offenders seem to be punished for their crimes beyond the term of imprisonment—that is wrong. Whatever we wish to call it—punishment, rehabilitation redemption, forgiveness or salvation—when a person has served their punishment, he or she deserves a second chance, and everyone needs to move on. Former prisoners face challenges at every level when they come out of prison, from finding a job to finding that their family relationships have changed. Sometimes, even their own expectations are challenging for them to deal with, too.

Family relationships are vital. If ex-offenders can return home, they are dependent on family members and must often overcome years of limited contact, potential resentment and a change in the household dynamic. Many ex-offenders think that they can slip back in and things will be how they were, but that is not always the case, and many former inmates find it more difficult than they expected. It is not always easy for family members either: they, too, need to readjust and often have to carry the financial burden of a dependent adult.

Studies have shown that prisoners who maintain consistent contact and connection with their family during their sentence have a lower risk of reoffending. Far too many men, and unfortunately some women, miss out on their children's formative and critical years. In prison, unfortunately, there are inevitable obstacles to maintaining consistent contact with family. That creates challenges post prison.

To make it easier for former prisoners to get back into the swing of life, we need to consider the best time for ex-offenders to be released from prison. That is not on a Friday or before public holidays, when it can be virtually impossible to access services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) says, the Bill

“just gives people that breathing room and ability to plan, ability to access statutory services, and should also limit the ability for organised criminal gangs and others to basically pick up people who have nowhere else to turn at that time.”

Government figures show that one in three offenders leave prison on a Friday. According to campaigners, 35% of those who are freed on a Monday are reconvicted within a year, compared with 40% of those who are freed on a Friday, so it is vital that Friday releases be looked at again. The Government have acknowledged that Friday releases

“can end up with ex-offenders spending their first days on the streets with little in the way of support—increasing the likelihood they will commit further crimes”,

and have committed to legislation.

I agree with Jo Rogers, former senior manager at Brighton Housing Trust, a housing association and homeless charity that does fantastic work in beautiful Hastings and Rye. She said:

“An important aim of the Fulfilling Lives South East project was to challenge and change systems, and we are delighted that the government has announced this change to Friday prison releases.

[Sally-Ann Hart]

It is the result of a lot of hard work by ourselves and others in highlighting this issue as an additional barrier for people trying to access support after being released from prison... This policy change will make a real difference to vulnerable ex-offenders for whom the first few days out of prison are crucial in accessing valuable community support to avoid getting trapped in a cycle of repeat offending."

Fulfilling Lives South East was a project based across Brighton and Hove, Hastings and Eastbourne that aimed to improve the systems that support people with multiple and complex needs. It was led by BHT Sussex and its work from 2014 to 2022 was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. Its work is not over; there is still much more to do. I expect that the Government's Changing Futures programmes is picking that up: Sussex was one of 15 areas chosen for that Government initiative, after a joint bid across East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton and Hove.

The Bill, which would apply to England and Wales only, would give the Secretary of State a discretionary power to bring forward the release date of an offender by up to two eligible working days where that release date falls on a Friday. That is really important. The Bill would also help to promote positive reintegration into society by ensuring that those who leave custody access the support services that they need on release. The Bill has much merit, and it has my support.

1.44 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship for the second time today, Mr Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) on his Bill; he spoke with great compassion, wisdom, experience and authority. It would be remiss of me not to mention the incredible work of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) to bring the Bill into the good position that it is in today.

An awful lot has already been said about the Bill. It is fundamentally about correcting an unintended consequence of the Criminal Justice Act 1961, whereby it was laid down that, when a sentence is passed, the release date is the date where it falls unless that is the weekend, in which case the date would be brought back to the Friday. That is why more than a third of release dates end up being on a Friday. As has already been explained, if we continue the practice of releasing prisoners on a Friday, we are often condemning them to go back into exactly the same situation that they had been in and that resulted in them offending and going into prison in the first place.

The Bill goes to the heart of what it means to be a compassionate Conservative. Those of us who had the delight of studying law at any time in our academic education know that there are four aspects to sentencing. Only one of those is about rehabilitation, but in many ways, that is the most transformative and that is the one that we have been talking about. It is a shame that, despite much being said by Opposition Members about Government Members not being compassionate, the Opposition Benches are not full of people supporting this compassionate measure. I recommend it wholly and it has my full support.

1.46 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am also a borough councillor, as I was in 2010 and 2011 when I chaired a series of panels on reducing reoffending. We identified, with the help of the police and others, that leaving prison on a Friday is an absolutely terrible idea, and hopefully we will be able to deal with that today. I am thrilled to speak to the Bill, which I thoroughly support, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) for bringing it forward.

I absolutely believe that criminals should serve their sentence and be seen to serve their sentence, but they must also be given every opportunity to make a change once they are released from prison, and the Bill is a good way to do that. The cost of reoffending is £18.1 billion, so if it makes the slightest change to that, it would be great news. It would be even better news, however, for those who no longer reoffended.

I particularly thank HMP Leicester, which I visited and observed a few months ago. Given the work that staff do to try to make sure that people do not reoffend, it must be disheartening to see people leave on a Friday knowing that it creates a problem and that they are likely to come back. I also thank Leicestershire police, who are superb, and a number of charities in my area that support ex-offenders in particular.

1.48 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) and to speak on this hugely important legislation. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) on bringing the Bill forward. There is so much in there, particularly with regard to its impact on reducing reoffending, but I will talk specifically about the impact on reducing homelessness, which is close to my heart.

Leaving prison is a hugely significant transition for offenders. Once they are out, it takes them a long time to adapt, so starting on the right foot is important. It is therefore vital to get people into stable accommodation. In 2022, two in three of those released from prison were released homeless. Those who are released and are immediately homeless are more likely to reoffend, so that cycle continues.

I welcome the Government's new accommodation service, which is being rolled out across England and Wales and will support thousands of prison leavers at that crucial time of their life and give them the foundation to work on to rebuild themselves. It is critical that we end the cycle of leaving prison and becoming homeless. On that note, I support the Bill.

1.49 pm

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) for bringing forward this tremendously important legislation. Speaking as someone who has served for 13 years as a member of my local authority, I understand exactly the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt). It can be incredibly difficult to access services on a Friday in a timely manner. Even when someone can access them, it can be

extremely difficult to get a resolution when raising complex issues, as has been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt). I understand that some will want to get to their feet on other matters, so, with that, I will bring my comments to a close. I absolutely commend the excellent work my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness has been doing on this matter.

1.50 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) on bringing forward this important Bill. It is a simple change, but the measure he has brought before the House today will, through its passage through this place, be a landmark reform. He spoke powerfully and made a very effective case by talking of real people and their case studies. He has been so effective that I have scored through large parts of my speech, in which I intended to illustrate a number of those points, so I thank him doubly. I also acknowledge and thank our hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) for the role that he has played in bringing the Bill to this place.

The Bill will ensure that those most at risk of reoffending will no longer need to be released on a Friday, or the day before a bank holiday. It will do so by providing the Secretary of State for Justice—in practice, the governor or director of a prison, or the appropriate equivalent officer in a youth establishment—with a discretionary power to bring forward the release date by up to two eligible working days. That will mean that certain offenders will no longer face the race against the clock that my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness so evocatively set out to find accommodation and access to medication and financial support before those services close for the weekend. That, of course, can be particularly problematic for those with multiple complex needs, such as drug dependency and mental health issues. He described it as a fleeting window of opportunity. I think that sets out the issue very well.

By removing the barriers that a Friday release can create, we can maintain public protection by ensuring custody leavers have a better chance to access the support they need to reintegrate and turn their backs on a life of crime. Ultimately, it will result in fewer victims and less crime. The Bill applies to both adults and children sentenced to detention. Despite the various safeguards and legal duties that exist for children leaving custody, it is still the case that being released on a Friday would mean going at least two days without meaningful contact with a supervising officer when they are at their most vulnerable.

I want to respond to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi). It might come as a surprise to many to discover that Members, certainly those on the Government Benches, are only supposed to turn up in Parliament if they disagree with something, but she asked me to clarify the statistics on reoffending and I am pleased to be able to do so. This Government have made tangible progress in tackling the still huge £18 billion annual cost of reoffending and protecting the public. Data show that, over the past 10 years, the overall proven reoffending rate has decreased from 30.9% in 2009-10 to 25.6% in 2019-20. Of course, that is still too high and we must drive it down further by tackling the drivers of

reoffending, strengthening the supervision and monitoring of offenders in the community and protecting the public from becoming victims.

The Government are, of course, investing substantial sums in doing so. It begins with helping prisoners to get off drugs, supporting them to maintain or rebuild family ties and providing quality education and training to get them job-ready for release. We know that getting prison leavers into jobs can reduce the chance of reoffending very significantly, with those who get jobs within a year of being released up to nine percentage points less likely to reoffend. This means that individuals can not only support themselves and their families, but start to repay society by contributing to our economy, which is another important reason to support my hon. Friend's Bill. We want ex-offenders to get into the rhythm of job search straightaway, which will be much easier if prison leavers do not have to cram all their appointments, including their first visit to Jobcentre Plus, into a Friday afternoon.

I am pleased to say that the proportion of prison leavers employed six months after release has seen a marked positive trend over the last year. With the number of vacancies that we have in the country now—around 1.25 million—an increase in prison leavers getting jobs is also good news for our economy as a whole, but there is more to be done, including through the New Futures Network, the Prison Service's network of employment brokers that works with 400 organisations to get prison leavers into work. I commend all the employers and companies engaged in that programme.

I was delighted to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) that he and our hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards) will be attending the employment advisory board in Nottingham. Of course, all of us as MPs can play an important role in creating and promoting some of the links with business which are so important for our whole community.

We are recruiting new banking and identity administrators to ensure that when prisoners leave custody they have a bank account and ID, so that they are ready to work. The work on those administrative requirements will be complemented by the Bill to smooth out somewhat the leaving pattern of prisoners engaged in those administrative activities.

We are also making significant investments in improving prison leavers' access to accommodation. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness used the word "paramount" in referring to accommodation; it was also referred to effectively by our hon. Friends the Members for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) and for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt). A settled place to live is key to reducing reoffending, and probation practitioners are much better able to robustly supervise an offender if they know where they are living. That is one of the reasons why last July we launched the transitional accommodation service in five probation regions, providing up to 12 weeks' accommodation on release, with support to move on to settled accommodation.

To support prison leavers with substance misuse and health needs, we are recruiting 50 health and justice partnership co-ordinators across England and Wales. The co-ordinators will liaise between prisons, probation, local authorities and health partners, improving links between services and supporting continuity of care for prison leavers with health and substance misuse needs.

[*Damian Hinds*]

I turn briefly to some of the other contributions to what has been a high-quality debate, with colleagues drawing on their personal experiences and constituency experiences, including the brilliant work by voluntary and third-sector organisations in our constituencies in support of this important Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) spoke effectively about the impact of distance—whatever else you may have to do, first, you have to get there. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) spoke about the challenges facing children, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood) spoke about women. Of course, they are absolutely right. There has been great success in reducing the number of women in custody and, even more so, children in custody, but there are relatively few places around the country, which means that the average distances for those people, who may have particular vulnerabilities, is even greater. That makes the Bill all the more important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury summed up the issue, and what we are all here for, well: we need to give people all the chance we can. If what is getting in the way boils down to a day of the week, it really ought to be relatively straightforward to address. Of course, it will not address everything, but it is an important enabler.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) talked about the fact that this is about correcting unintended consequences, and our hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) encapsulated the situation well by saying that people must do their punishment, but then we must try to give them the maximum chance. She also made an important point when she talked about the effect on staff of knowing that somebody released on a certain day of the week would perhaps have a lesser chance.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South accurately enumerated all the different things that need to be in place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (James Grundy) reminded us that it is not just a question of turning up and doing something straightforward, because in some cases the issues for individuals will be particularly complex. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West spoke about how for many prisoners, even those who have not been in prison that long, the world may have changed, thinking about technology and so on. Closer to home, my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye spoke about how people's family circumstances and the home itself may have changed.

The measures I have outlined, and many more that there is not time to cover, should help to improve resettlement opportunities for all offenders and reduce reoffending. However, they cannot fully address all the practical challenges, especially for those released on a Friday. Through this Bill, we have an opportunity to provide such offenders with the best possible chance of living law-abiding, productive lives in the community and hence an opportunity to cut crime, making our streets safer and protecting constituents.

In closing, I reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness for bringing this

Bill before the House, and to everyone who has made this such a rich and productive debate. I confirm with pleasure that the Government will be supporting the Bill, and I look forward to seeing its passage through this House.

2 pm

Simon Fell: With the leave of the House, I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this debate and supported the passage of this Bill. In particular, I recognise the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey), who spoke with righteous fury about youth offenders and the many injustices they face in the system. His passion is well felt. My hon. Friends the Members for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood), for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) and for Southend West (Anna Firth) spoke about the power of a criminal justice system that works to turn people's lives around. That is absolutely the objective we should be aiming for. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury for the evocative term "Muscle Pit", which is unfortunately stuck in my head for the rest of the day.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on the Opposition Front Bench spoke gracefully about why these measures matter, and I thank her and her party for their support. My hon. Friends the Members for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes), for Leigh (James Grundy) and for Gedling (Tom Randall) showed compassion and fairness in what they said; their contributions in this place are always marked by those qualities. My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) could, I am sure, have spoken for much longer on this subject. Her passion is heartfelt and her experience is long, and what she brings to this area makes her a credit to the House.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt)—there he is, right behind me—spoke with passion about tackling homelessness. He is absolutely right, and I hope these measures will go some way to achieving those ends. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for his kind and thoughtful words at the Dispatch Box, and thank him and his team at the Ministry of Justice for their graciousness in affording me time to learn about the subject, to kick around ideas with them and to talk about the issues that the Bill seeks to tackle. Their passion to improve the system is heartfelt and real, and it burns very bright indeed.

I owe a debt of thanks to the hon. Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson), who passed this Bill on to me. Truly, he is the Pete Best to my Ringo, but I am incredibly grateful to him. The Bill will make a real difference, and I am grateful to everyone who has contributed and spoken on it, and for the support from both sides of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Congratulations, Mr Fell, on your achievement.

Dyslexia Screening and Teacher Training Bill

Second Reading

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): This is the third Bill of the day—I note that you appear to be making a habit of coming third these days, Mr Hancock.

2.3 pm

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind): I am not quite sure what to make of that, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I am honoured to be third today. Let us see how it goes. It is a pleasure to be here, and to be clean and well fed.

I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

“The best way to spread opportunity and reduce inequality in society is by providing every person with a world class education”.

Those are not my words but the words of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I passionately agree that this should apply to all, and my Bill represents the next step in turning those strong words into action.

I am delighted that the Bill has cross-party support. Indeed, its gestation had support from both sides of the House, including from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), and indeed from the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), who has sat on both sides of the House since the Bill was first drafted.

I firmly support the Government’s approach to increasing rigour and improving standards in our schools, which is at the heart of this Bill. That drive over a decade is raising standards, and with raised standards comes raised opportunity and increased hope for children. We have especially seen improvement in the most deprived parts of our land.

The Government’s explicit goal is now even greater literacy. Earlier this year, the then Secretary of State for Education—I think he was the last Secretary of State but four, but I have slightly lost count—put 100% literacy at the heart of the schools White Paper and the special educational needs and disability review, and he was right to do so. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed the Government’s continued support for these two incredibly important planks of education policy: the schools White Paper and the SEND review.

There is a gaping hole in the Government’s literacy drive because, shockingly, just one in five dyslexic children is identified at school. Those are the Department’s own figures. When I found that figure in the Rose report of more than 10 years ago, I asked the Department, through parliamentary questions, for the updated figure, because I thought one in five was so shockingly low, but I found that it has not changed over the past decade. Only one in five dyslexic children is identified at school.

Without early identification, we will never reach full literacy. Success in driving up literacy requires us next to support those who have the most difficulty in increasing their literacy. The next stage of the education revolution under this Administration must be to improve opportunities for dyslexic children and for children with other neurodivergent conditions.

It is estimated that around 10% of people in the UK are dyslexic, but if we do not know who is dyslexic at school, how can we possibly help them and equip them with what they need to deal with the challenges life throws at us? Having been Health Secretary, I draw this analogy: if a person does not know they have a heart condition, they cannot get the support to sort it out. That is at the heart of what we need here, to ensure that we have early identification. Screening is a standard and valuable medical intervention. It helps people to live healthy, improved lives, and so it is with dyslexia.

My Bill would result in every child being screened for dyslexia at primary school, and it would give teachers adequate training to teach dyslexic children properly. It is an outrage that, although every teacher is a teacher of dyslexic children, teachers currently do not need to be trained to support dyslexic children. That needs to change, as it leaves thousands of dyslexic children without the world-class education they have been promised.

The fact that only one in five children with dyslexia is identified at school means that many leave school not knowing they have a specific condition that affects how they translate the letters on a page into sounds in their head. Instead, dyslexics up and down the country are called lazy or stupid. The worst is that that undermines their self-esteem, and the problem with that is that they label themselves. I was once told, “We don’t want to label children as dyslexic because they might feel downtrodden by that,” but I can tell the House from personal experience that once someone has found out, as a dyslexic, what the problem is, they can get the support. In my case, when I was identified as dyslexic aged 18—after I had left school—I then got the support to essentially relearn how to read, and that allows me to stand here reading from a little piece of paper while speaking it out in a way that I simply would not have been able to before I got that support.

However, it is not only the practical support we need; we also need to ensure that we know what the problem is. I know, and dyslexics who have that dyslexia identified know, that the problem is a specific neurological one of the translation of letters that wobble around slightly on the page into how that sounds in your head. It is not that someone is bad at languages or stupid in some way, and there are still thousands of children who have labelled themselves as that because they do not get the identification that they need. That has got to change, and it is wrong to say that labelling children is a mistake. On the contrary, ensuring that children know what the problem is gets them support and helps to improve their self-esteem.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Is it right that some people who have been identified as dyslexic are able to get particular help—extra time, for example—in taking their exams? If they are not identified as dyslexic, they will not be able to take advantage of that.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend brings me immediately on to the next page of my speech, and I know that he is extremely experienced in work on these private Members’ Bills on a Friday—so much so that he can anticipate precisely the next point I was going to make.

The current system is broken, because identification as dyslexic requires expensive tests that only a few children do, and there is a strong correlation between

[*Matt Hancock*]

being able to access those tests and the means of one's parents, the result of which is a much higher rate of identification in the private school system than in the state school system. In the state school system, 2.2% of people are identified as having a special learning need. In the private school system, 18% have an education and healthcare plan. The divergence between those two figures cannot possibly be explained by a difference in the nature of the children; it is all about access.

In this country for more than 100 years, we have had universal access to schooling—quite rightly; it is the basis of a fair society and equality of opportunity—but we do not have equal access to identification for dyslexia and other neurodivergent conditions, and as a result it is not just that we have a problem accessing the extra time that might be appropriate, but we have an essentially unfair system of allocating that extra time, because if someone can afford to get the identification, they get the extra time, and if they cannot afford to, they do not, and that is a social outrage.

It is not only an issue of morality but an issue of social and economic justice. I gently make the point, which relates to the previous Bill, that more than half of prisoners are thought to have dyslexia, and more than half of successful entrepreneurs are thought to have dyslexia. If someone is dyslexic, their life can go two ways. If they get the support they need and become successful, they often are more creative. There is more lateral thinking among dyslexics, not least because we think around problems like how to read something on a page. People who do not get the support, however, can end up too often in a life of crime.

The 2012 “Dyslexia Behind Bars” programme found that when prisoners were taught to read, the reoffending rate dropped by 5.9% within four years. Sadly, as Ofsted and His Majesty's inspectorate of prisons reported earlier this year, there has been no progress in literacy in prisons over the past decade, and the report was one of the most upsetting I have ever read. A dry Government document should not be as upsetting as that, and it describes precisely the problem caused by failing to put in place the measures in this Bill.

It is not all doom and gloom, though; there is also a massive opportunity. Dyslexic people tend to have skills that jobs increasingly need and future jobs need: creativity, lateral thinking and enhanced communication skills, especially in oral communication. Computers increasingly do the boring straight-line thinking; dyslexics have brains fit for the future. It is no wonder that progressive employers such as GCHQ, Universal Music and Deloitte proactively hire neurodivergent people. But if dyslexic people do not know that they have those talents—if they are not identified and they do not get the support they need—they cannot make the most of those advantages.

I have one further point on why there might be objections to the Bill. I have heard some people say that we do not want more false positives and to over-identify children who are not dyslexic. The Bill is carefully written to take that into account. It is calling for screening for all—it is not calling for all to take a formal test—with the purpose of the screening to get better data. We have an excellent phonics test in primary schools, which is good at identifying how good children are at turning

phonics symbols on the page into sounds in their heads, but the measure of a dyslexic brain is the gap between that capability and capability at languages.

Most dyslexics are good at oral languages. They have got the gift of the gab—a bit like me, you might say, Mr Deputy Speaker. If they are good at that and poor at the phonics test, that identifies a different problem from being bad at the phonics test and bad at languages, which requires a different type of support. I am trying to address that gap. By having a test of language ability alongside phonic ability in primary school, we will find those who we know have the intellectual capability and wherewithal but have just got a specific neurological problem that means that they need support to get through this barrier. The Bill would help to address that problem. It would ensure that the Government have what they need to implement a system that takes the literacy that we need to see to the next level. If 10% of children are dyslexic, there is no way that we can reach full literacy without measures to find out who those children are and addressing that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I thank him for shining such a bright spotlight on this area and setting out the opportunities for neurodivergent people. Increasing educational and employment outcomes is a huge priority for me, and I know that he is a passionate campaigner. I want to put on the record my gratitude to him and willingness to work with him further on this issue.

Matt Hancock: I am grateful for that willingness—passing the Bill would be a good starting point. The Minister is also right that there is good work ongoing, especially in the SEND review. However, the critical point is early identification and rejection of the false argument put to me, including by some in her Department, that it is a bad idea to identify problems. We need more data in the classroom to know how children work. The best outcome would be that some children would have dyslexia identified, be given support and therefore close the gap between their phonic ability and their language ability just as my gap was closed and I can now read long words off a piece of paper and read perfectly effectively to be able to hold down a half-decent job.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): May I say how much I admire the right hon. Gentleman's campaign on dyslexia? Could he say a little bit about what happened at the age of 18 from his own point of view? Why did he not get the support that he needed before that age? What sparked that? I think that would be of interest to people.

Matt Hancock: I am incredibly grateful for that question. I know that others want to speak about the Bill, but I was fortunate in that I was okay at maths, so I got to university on my maths. I specialised in maths-based subjects—maths, physics, computing and economics—at A-level. I arrived at university to do an essay-based degree and, by the end of my first term, my tutor, Dr Michael Hart, at Oxford, took me to one side and said, “You can talk, but you can't get it down on paper. You should go and get identified.” I was lucky because I was at one of the best universities in the world, and it had a brilliant education department that essentially retrained my brain in how to read. It took me back to

the phonics, and now I learn each word and look at a word essentially as a picture, which means that I can read normal words quite well. I am not that good with brand-new words and have to concentrate hard to learn them. That gave me the ability to prosper at university and to succeed afterwards.

It did not stop all the screw-ups—I have some terrible stories of errors, including when I wrote an election address for the former Member for Guildford in the 2001 election, and managed accidentally to write in very large letters across the front, “I want to untie the community”. I intended to say, “I want to unite the community”. Unfortunately, we only discovered the error when the election address had landed on the 40,000 mats. The former Member for Guildford, who is here no longer, is still my friend. My dyslexia has continued to cause some problems for me—it caused a problem for him, but I hope that he has forgiven me.

I want to put on record my thanks to the British Dyslexia Association and to Made by Dyslexia, which campaigns to explain the benefits of dyslexic thinking, and to Neurodiversity in Business, which campaigns for businesses to open their minds to people who think differently. These are superb campaigning organisations, but more needs to happen. The choice is very simple. We must not leave generations of dyslexic children without identification or the support they deserve. We can back this Bill and end systemic discrimination against neurodivergent children in our education system. If hon. Members, like me, care about every child actually receiving a world-class education, there is no good reason to reject this Bill.

For decades, Governments of all colours have failed dyslexic children and put this issue in the “too difficult” box. Today we have the opportunity to right that wrong. This Bill will improve literacy, increase economic growth and reduce crime. Now is the time to stop talking and start delivering.

2.21 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Let me start by saying how good it is to see the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) here in the flesh. He may have felt at home in the last few weeks among late-career pop stars and soap legends, but what he is hoping to do here is far more important. I thought he was very cool in channelling his inner Arnie, although I am not sure that he’ll be back—that may be one for the Government. In all seriousness, I know that the topic of this Bill is close to his heart. He has campaigned long and hard to raise awareness of dyslexia and neurodivergent conditions. As was made clear earlier, his campaign is as much a personal one as a political one. For that, I commend him.

The British Dyslexia Association, as the right hon. Gentleman said, estimates that between 10% to 15% of UK people are dyslexic, while around 6% suffer from dyscalculia. We are all committed to ensuring that neurodivergence should not hold children back from achieving their potential. With early intervention and the right support through their education, children with dyslexia can succeed at school. Yet, all too often, lack of access to diagnosis and support creates multiple problems. An estimated four in five young people leave school with dyslexia unidentified, thinking that they just find reading and writing hard. That can hold back pupils’ grades, particularly in exam-based assessment, and affect

their confidence and mental health. We need to prioritise earlier intervention and quicker support, as the right hon. Member said.

Those with dyslexia clearly feel different from their peers. Many dyslexic children show strength in lateral thinking and creative skills. It is vital that those skills are nurtured and encouraged alongside the additional support that children need with their reading and writing. Steve Jobs, Stephen Hawking and Abraham Lincoln were all recorded as having dyslexia. Their individual contributions were immense, despite being outliers and often going it alone.

Teachers and school staff across the country work hard all year round to support their students, but a staggering 59% of teachers believe that there is no appropriate training in place for all teachers to support pupils with SEND. I understand the right hon. Gentleman’s efforts to try to change the statute book to address this glaring deficiency in our education system for neurodivergent children, but I wonder if additional legislation is necessary in this form. I sense that, perhaps with more engagement with Opposition Members and with the Department for Education, he could have sought to focus his energy on reforming the system as it stands, but more broadly.

Labour is just as committed to this agenda as the right hon. Gentleman is. Indeed, our national excellence programme, funded by ending the tax breaks for private schools, would provide a £210 million teacher development fund. It would ensure that teachers have access to appropriate ongoing training for SEND, including dyslexia, at every stage of their career, through existing channels. Although Labour supports the underlying thrust of this Bill and sympathises with its aims, we believe that this is better delivered through trainee teacher continuous professional development programmes. That will allow trainee teachers to develop an understanding and awareness of a range of neurodivergent conditions, not just limited to dyslexia. With that in mind, and without wishing to delay the House further, it is worth asking the Minister what steps she is taking to ensure that the principle behind the Bill is noted in the improvement plan for SEND Green Paper. As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members will be aware, the Government had committed to publishing the improvement plan by the end of the year but have since delayed it until after the new year. So will the Minister indicate when she expects it to be published, given the stresses that many parents of SEND pupils have to cope with in the current SEND system?

Many of the harrowing cases I hear about in my constituency surgeries—this is weekly—involve people who are worried about the SEND system as it currently operates. We should all feel an imperative to break down the administrative hurdles making the lives of parents and neurodivergent children and pupils harder. For that reason, although I admire the right hon. Gentleman’s attempts to bring this legislation through—like him and so many others, my brother suffered greatly through a lack of early diagnosis—I do not believe this Bill is the answer in the way it currently sits. What is needed is better diagnosis across all education and all neurodivergent conditions. We believe that that can be done through continuous professional development.

[Matt Western]

So along with my Labour colleagues, I look forward to seeing how the Bill develops and to hearing from the Minister.

2.26 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It is with great pleasure that I rise to support this private Member's Bill from my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock). When I had the pleasure of serving with him in the Department of Health and Social Care, we had a shared objective of making services deliver better for people with neurodiverse conditions. We still have a long way to go on that journey, but I say to the Minister that this Bill will go a long way to helping do that. We have heard that as many as 10% of the population are dyslexic, but only one in five of them is diagnosed. For the other four in five, every day in school is a misery. They are made to feel stupid because their brain does not work the same as everyone else's, yet their education is completely driven by everyone else's experience. That misery leads them to fall out of school. As he has said, half of the prison population is comprised of people who have suffered with dyslexia, yet with diagnosis they can be equipped with the tools that enable them to realise that they are not stupid and that their brain just works differently from everyone else's, and they can get on and become a great success. They have other skills and the fact that their brain works differently means we can better utilise their skillset. I will say no more, because we have just got time to say yes to this Bill. So please, Minister, give us all an early Christmas present and back this Bill.

2.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): I am over the moon to be here discussing such important issues. As the Minister for special educational needs, and having served briefly as the Minister for disabled people, I want to start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) on introducing a Bill on this important issue. Having heard from people from across the House, I think we can agree that we have to work tirelessly to improve the outcomes for children and young people with SEND. I want to make sure that the decisions we take are well-informed and evidence-driven. I was asked about the SEND Green Paper. We have set out our ambition to respond to that early next year, and I am very committed to doing so. We will be looking at some of the questions we have talked about today, to make sure we can get the early identification right, so that people are getting the help they need when they need it; to make sure we are getting the teacher training right, so that people are getting the right support from the right teachers; and to make sure that we are setting out a series of standards so that at each point of the process those children, their families, and their teachers and schools can see what they should be getting and how they should be helped. We are incredibly ambitious about literacy and making sure we can achieve the targets that we have set out, and we will be working to do so not only through the measures in the Bill but throughout the Department. I shall be happy to work with my right hon. Friend on this issue. Now we can ensure that all our ambitious programmes are working together to deliver for young people with dyslexia—

2.30 pm

*The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).
Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 3 March 2023.*

Business without Debate

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

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

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION (OFFENCES) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

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

MISCARRIAGE LEAVE BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March 2023.

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 9 December.

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 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 9 December.

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 9 December.

**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 9 December.

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 9 December.

**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 9 December.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Friday 9 December will be a very busy day.

**Assets of Community Value:
Black Horse Pub**

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

2.32pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): I am very glad that the subject of my first Adjournment debate is such a popular and important pub in the middle of Greenford, in the heart of my constituency. The Black Horse pub, which dates back as far as 1726, is a place where families, workers, and regulars from all parts of the local community come together. The pub sits in Oldfield Lane North alongside the Grand Union Canal, with the canal not only providing the setting for the beer garden, but bringing the pub extra customers who have moored their boats nearby. It hosts live music events, sporting events, quiz nights and fun days, and I have heard that it used to host a weekly karaoke night. I am told there are plans to bring the karaoke night back, and I hope very much to be there for that—parliamentary business allowing.

One reason I am telling the House about what the Black Horse has to offer is, of course, my wish to encourage people to visit it whenever they are in the area, but I also want to help the House to understand the role that it plays in the local community, and why there was such deep concern about rumours that its owners, Fuller's, were considering selling it off. Just across the road from the Black Horse thousands of new flats are being built, so when rumours began to circulate that the pub's owners might be considering selling it for housing, people feared the worst. I therefore wrote to Fuller's in June last year to ask about its intentions, and I have to say that its response was concerning. That response stated:

"It has been interesting to see the development in Greenford and the recent sale of The Railway",

another pub nearby. Fuller's went on to say:

"if we can see a strong future, particularly around strong local community engagement, we like to invest for the long term. If not we do look at alternatives."

Frankly, that reply sent alarm bells ringing, so I launched a petition to show Fuller's how strongly people feel about the importance of protecting the Black Horse for the future. In less than a week, the petition had attracted well over 1,000 signatures, more than three quarters of which were from either the UB6 postcode area, where the Black Horse is located, or from one of the postcode areas immediately nearby. Fuller's put out a press statement in response to the petition saying that, at the time, it had "no plans to close it",

but it did not go further in setting out its commitment to the pub, and the careful wording of its response did not provide the reassurance we sought.

It was clear that local people wanted greater protection for such an important local asset, so in March this year, I was very glad to call a public meeting in the pub to formally create the new Protect the Black Horse group. Over 80 people came to this meeting to agree the constitution for the new group, hold our first annual general meeting and appoint our management committee. This public meeting established Protect the Black Horse as a constituted, not-for-profit community group set up

[James Murray]

to support efforts to protect the pub. I am very pleased that today, in the Public Gallery of the House of Commons, are fellow members of the committee Sarita, Brian, Sindy, Mel and James.

Over the last six months, I and the other members of the committee have been working together to apply to Ealing Council to try to get the pub listed as an asset of community value. We know that being listed by the council as an asset of community value does not provide absolute protection for pubs, but it does mean that if Fuller's tried to sell the Black Horse, we would be able to block it from doing so for six months. During that time, we would have the chance to put together a community bid to buy the pub instead. We also know that being listed as an asset of community value would help to keep the Black Horse as a pub, whoever owns it. That is because being listed as an asset of community value can be an important consideration in deciding planning applications, therefore making it harder for anyone to get permission to change it from a pub into flats.

I owe a great debt of thanks to the Co-operative party for all its support and advice in our efforts to make the asset of community value application as strong as possible. I also pay tribute to CAMRA, the Campaign for Real Ale, for its invaluable advice. One of my first meetings as an MP, on an evening barely a month after I was elected, was in the Black Horse with the local West Middlesex branch of CAMRA, so we have long had a shared interest in protecting the future of this pub.

After our application to make the Black Horse an asset of community value had been submitted to Ealing Council, I became aware that the council had received a legal letter from Fuller's lawyers, Freeths, objecting to what we were seeking to do. This 17-page legal letter pressed the council to consider the application invalid. The letter cautioned that

"listing of a property can have severe and far-reaching consequences for the owners of listed properties".

It went on to warn—perhaps even, implicitly, to threaten—that the listing of a property as an asset of community value

"can also have serious consequences for listing councils, who are placed at risk of the requirement to compensate affected owners where an inappropriate nomination is accepted".

However, we were not deterred. We pressed on, strengthened the application and waited for Ealing Council to come to its determination. I am very glad to report that, in August this year, Ealing Council took the excellent decision to approve the Black Horse's listing as an asset of community value.

I mention the letter from Fuller's lawyers, Freeths, for two reasons. First, I felt it was a rather heavy-handed and lengthy letter from a company that genuinely had no plans to sell the premises, so I consider the fact that it was sent to be some evidence of Fuller's true intentions. Secondly, and more importantly for this debate, I aim to draw the Minister's attention to the fact that some owners may try to deploy such legalistic tactics, perhaps in an attempt to discourage applicants and councils from pursuing potential listings as assets of community value.

This seems to be an approach that CAMRA is well aware of. In its guide to the asset of community value process, CAMRA points out that the process of nomination ought to be straightforward. It explains that

"Judges have confirmed that the legislation sets the bar very low in terms of what should be registered."

However, CAMRA also recognises that the process can sometimes become less straightforward. In CAMRA's view, in some cases this is a result of "pressures brought to bear" on councils by owners who have "reasons for resisting" asset of community value registration. I would welcome the Minister looking into the use of such heavy-handed legal approaches to try to undermine the asset of community value process and consider what steps the Government can take to discourage such tactics from being deployed in future.

I also encourage the Minister to consider other ways in which the process of protecting assets of community value can be strengthened, as my colleagues in the Opposition have suggested. At the moment, if the Black Horse were put up for sale, we in the community would only have a right to bid alongside others. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), the shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, has set out, we believe that there should be a new community right to buy, so that rather than being one bidder among others, the community would have first refusal on buying the asset. We also propose that such a move should sit alongside a doubling of the current six-month moratorium period on a sale to 12 months to help communities to find time to acquire finance.

Local people across the country want greater control over important local assets being sold off and lost to the community. Over the last year and a half, local people in Greenford have made their view clear that they want to protect the Black Horse from being sold off and turned into flats. The comments and actions of the pub's owners have given us cause for concern, so I am grateful to Sarita, Brian, Sindy, Mel and James—my fellow members of the "Protect the Black Horse" committee—for their help in applying to Ealing Council to get the pub listed as an asset of community value.

We are glad to have been successful in getting the Black Horse listed, but our experience has exposed some of the difficulties that others may face in making a similar application. We are also aware of the limits to the protection that such a listing offers, so I urge the Government to give people in Greenford and across the country greater control over what happens to pubs and other important places in our local communities.

When the Minister responds, I would be grateful for his comments on the use of heavy-handed legal tactics, such as those I described, from asset owners, which are against the spirit of the asset of community value process. I would be grateful for an undertaking that he will consider the ways in which communities can be given greater control over important local assets in future. Finally, I would be grateful if he joined me in congratulating all those who have helped to get the Black Horse listed as an asset of community value. I hope to take the members of the Black Horse committee for a drink later to thank them for coming to the House of Commons for this debate. I close by making it clear that the Minister, and you, of course, Mr Deputy Speaker, are more than welcome to join us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you very much.

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to respond to the debate and I thank the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) for securing it. He raises a number of important issues that are particularly pertinent to local communities when they see up front the challenges of protecting assets and community places, which are important. “Assets” is an impersonal word to use, but these places are the hearts of communities where people have come for many centuries to congregate, talk, and exchange ideas and views. That is why hon. Members on both sides of the House would agree that pubs, although we cannot protect them in all instances or support everything that people would like to do, are an important part of the community.

What the hon. Gentleman and his fellow committee members have done is to be commended. I put on record my thanks to Sarita, Brian, Sindy, Mel and James—I am not technically supposed to turn away from the Dispatch Box, but I can see them in the Gallery—and everybody who has worked hard to ensure that the Black Horse can be put on the register. I hope that gives some peace of mind to the community in Ealing North and Greenford that the asset is here to stay and will remain an important part of the community in the years and decades to come.

We have brought forward changes in the last decade or so to recognise exactly the kind of points that the hon. Gentleman has made: pubs are important, they make a difference to our community and they are valued. All right hon. and hon. Members receive regular communication directly from CAMRA to highlight the importance of this agenda and these protections. CAMRA is also good at ensuring that local residents get in touch with us on a regular basis, often in the lead up to the Budget, to highlight the importance of pubs. We wholeheartedly agree with that.

Pre-covid, the rate of pub closures had happily started to slow and it looked like a stabilisation was occurring within the sector, but obviously there is more work to be done. From my experience in North East Derbyshire, I know that it is immensely sad when we see pubs leaving. Some 10, 20 or 30 years ago, many communities had many more pubs, but the number of pubs has slowly reduced. We need to see what we can do and where it is reasonable and proportionate to protect them, if communities wish to do that.

I am glad to hear that, in this particular instance, the group was able to use the assets of community value scheme. That was introduced in England in the Localism Act 2011 and provides, as the hon. Gentleman said, communities with a route to nominate any building or land that furthers social wellbeing in the interests of the community. We accept that community assets play a vital role in creating thriving neighbourhoods. I am grateful for the feedback that he has provided through the debate today.

On the experiences that the hon. Gentleman and his fellow committee members had, the good ones included the fact that the pub was able to reach the register. Some were less positive, or more concerning. I am sorry to hear about the potential challenges that were caused by the document that was received from the owners. Although,

obviously, I have not seen the document myself, that does not sound within the spirit of the intention of the 2011 rules. I would be happy, on behalf of the Department, to receive any further information on that, so that we can consider what happened in this instance and look at that for the future.

The hon. Gentleman, rightly, pushed the Government with regards to where to strike the right balance to ensure that individual owners of property—the basic principle of capital—can do as they wish with that, within the law and the boundaries of what is acceptable, while still recognising that there are certain assets, certain uses of capital, that are particularly important for the community. That is why the Localism Act introduced the assets of community value scheme in 2011. I accept that there is a valid discussion to be had about the length of time for consideration and, equally, about exactly where we draw the lines on what should be done, how it should be done and in what order. The general view is that what we did 10 years ago was a big step forward in making sure that we can protect assets such as this, or give the opportunity for assets such as this to be protected. We know that it does not work in all circumstances. A couple of years ago, there was a public house in Eckington in my constituency which we were unable to save despite the community looking into that in detail.

I will certainly pass back the comments of the hon. Gentleman and his fellow committee members with regards to potential changes to the Localism Act. It is about striking the right balance. It is a difficult one to take an absolute view on, but I thank him and his colleagues for their representations. I will ensure that they are considered in the future, as and when and if we look into this policy area again.

I wish to touch on the slightly broader context and some of the things that the Government are doing to help when these type of instances arise. We know that assets of community value are increasingly being used, not just in Ealing, but across the country. One way in which we are trying to augment the approach—the hon. Gentleman requested that we look again at the criteria—is through things such as the community ownership fund. I know that that is appropriate in some circumstances, but I accept that it will not be appropriate in all circumstances. None the less, that is £150 million over the course of the last few years and in the coming years, and it is explicitly to support communities in saving assets at risk.

Since July 2021, community groups have been able to bid for up to £250,000 of match funding to help to buy or take over local assets at risk of closure. Of course, the owner has to be willing to enter into those kinds of discussions, which I accept is a challenge the hon. Gentleman has posed. Equally, I hope that those who have an interest in the matter and are following this debate recognise that the Government have taken another step forward in trying to support local communities to be able to take ownership. In the first bidding round, we have awarded more than £10 million to 38 bids from across the UK, from community centres and heritage buildings to pubs and sports clubs. The community ownership fund has, for example, enabled the Old Forge Community Benefit Society to raise funds to buy the

[Lee Rowley]

Old Forge pub on the Knoydart peninsula in northern Scotland. The Old Forge reopened in March and will be run by the local community.

Right at the other end of the UK, the fund has enabled the Friends of the Newtown St Martin Pub in Cornwall to raise funds to save the Prince of Wales pub after it closed during lockdown. The pub's reopening party was just last month, and I am told that it attracted huge crowds and that the pub has been well supported since. There are options not just to protect through the asset register, but to raise funding should sales come up. There are many other excellent examples of successful bids and I wish them all the best of luck.

To conclude, I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the matter, which is an incredibly important part of the community discussion. Pubs are an incredibly important

part of community life and I absolutely concur with him that we should protect them where we are able to do so. I am grateful for his feedback. I will absolutely look further into the letter and the statements that he highlighted. I wish him and all members of the Save the Black Horse committee all the best in ensuring that the Black Horse, which has been part of the community for the last 350 years, is saved for another 350 years.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you, James, for the offer of a pint, but with a heavy heart, I have to rush for a train.

Question put and agreed to.

2.50 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statement

Friday 2 December 2022

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water Company Fines: Environmental Improvements

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): On Wednesday 30 November, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced that future funding from fines handed out to water companies that pollute our rivers and seas will be invested in schemes that benefit our natural environment.

At present, money from fines imposed by Ofwat and those arising from Environment Agency prosecutions is returned to the Treasury. Under the new plans, ringfenced funds will be invested directly into environmental and water quality improvement projects.

Further details on the plans will follow next year.

Since 2015, the Environment Agency has concluded 56 prosecutions against water and sewerage companies, securing fines of over £141 million. DEFRA is bringing forward proposals to raise the civil penalty for water companies that pollute the environment.

We are going further and faster than any other Government to protect and enhance the health of our rivers and seas. Our new Environment Act puts in place more protections against water pollution than ever before.

The Government have also launched an ambitious plan to tackle sewage discharges from storm overflows. The storm overflows discharge reduction plan will require water companies to deliver the largest infrastructure programme in water company history, a £56 billion capital investment by 2050.

[HCWS408]

Ministerial Correction

Friday 2 December 2022

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Saudi Arabia: Death Penalty and Spike in Executions

The following is an extract from the Urgent Question on 28 November 2022.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Minister says that we are trying to understand what is going on and that Saudi Arabia is committed to reform. It is pretty clear what is going on: Mr al-Kheir was hung upside down and beaten on his hands, his stomach, his head and his face in order to extract a confession for which he is now at risk of execution. The Minister also knows that we have repeatedly heard how the Saudi authorities use torture in order to prove guilt. I have a very simple question that does not require the Minister to understand further what is going on: do the Government accept

that Saudi Arabia uses torture, as all the international non-governmental organisations that have reported on the matter have said? If so, what do they propose to say about that?

David Rutley: We have already expressed our concerns, particularly about Mr al-Kheir's case, in which clearly torture was used. We find that abhorrent. We have raised that issue at the highest level and will continue to do so, not just in his case but in other cases in which that might be happening as well.

[Official Report, 28 November 2022, Vol. 723, c. 673.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley):

An error has been identified in my response to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

The correct response should have been:

David Rutley: We have already expressed our concerns, particularly about Mr al-Kheir's case, **in which torture has been alleged. We have raised that issue at the highest levels** and will continue to do so, not just in his case but in other cases in which that might be happening as well.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Friday 2 December 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>
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Saudi Arabia: Death Penalty and Spike in Executions	11MC

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**not later than
Friday 9 December 2022**

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