

**Friday
15 March 2024**

**Volume 747
No. 67**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Friday 15 March 2024

House of Commons

Friday 15 March 2024

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

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

Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill

Second Reading

9.34 am

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Pets are a part of our family. They provide support and companionship when we need it most. In time-honoured Friday tradition, I would like to name my own pets, from my childhood cat Perdita through to Phoebe, who I adopted while I lived in the States, my yellow Labradors Harry and George, and my current much-adored fox red Labrador, Henry.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Has the hon. Lady ever owned a ferret? If so, what was that ferret's name?

Selaine Saxby: That is an excellent intervention. I will come to ferrets, but unfortunately I have not had the pleasure of one at home myself.

The companionship of pets was highly valued during the covid pandemic, when there was a surge in demand for puppies and kittens, which unfortunately led to even more upsetting cases of pet smuggling in the UK. During covid, legal commercial imports of dogs rose by nearly 60% to more than 70,000 dogs in 2021, and trends in illegal imports could be expected to be similar.

Puppy and kitten smuggling came on my radar as an MP shortly after the first lockdown began in March 2020, when I was one of those people trying to find a new pup, which were hard to find. I am grateful to my great dog-loving friend Bethany Sawyer for her advice not to see the cute puppy that was the wrong age without both parents available in the advert. While Henry, my fox red Labrador was not smuggled into the country—I met his mum and dad at their farm just above my North Devon home—I understand how the emotions in adopting a new pet and companion often leave some of the rationality and questioning behind. Prices for specific dog breeds doubled, and the UK market struggled to keep up. With huge profits to be made, that imbalance provided ample opportunity for people acting illegally and irresponsibly to import puppies and take advantage of innocent pet buyers, who may not have known that their furry friends were suffering. YouGov polling shows that 83% of the public want the Government to crack down on puppy smuggling.

I was the Parliamentary Private Secretary on the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill Committee, and I am delighted to be flanked by my Whip from that Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler) and other members of that Committee who are supporting this Bill. Just this week alone, more than 100 colleagues have dropped in to see the Dogs Trust and support the Bill.

When the kept animals Bill was withdrawn and divided up, I made a commitment to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Dogs Trust that if I came high up in the private Member's Bill ballot, I would take part of that Bill through. As I am not a regular raffle prize winner, I was more than a bit perplexed to find myself come sixth. I looked at Henry—I am still not sure whether he fully understands all the media attention—and explained that we were going to be helping puppies for many months to come. I am delighted that I have been able to keep that commitment here today.

As a dog owner myself, I find it horrific to hear stories of puppies and kittens being smuggled across the border and the poor conditions they have to endure. Pets are more than just property; they are family. The Bill will ensure that pets are not sold or traded as objects.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): This is such an important Bill, which my hon. Friend is bringing forward with passion and eloquence. Does she agree that the Government must put in funding at the border to deal with the problem and stop the smuggling of puppies, kittens and, indeed, ferrets? It is a worry that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has reduced, or proposed to reduce, biosecurity funding at the port of Dover and in the Dover area. Money must be put behind this important initiative.

Selaine Saxby: My hon. Friend is a huge advocate for her constituency and the port of Dover. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, is indeed looking at some of those matters. The Bill will deliver a manifesto commitment to crack down on puppy, kitten and ferret smuggling by closing loopholes exploited by unscrupulous commercial traders.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the passionate case she is making for her Bill, which I think we all support. Her legislation relies quite extensively on regulations. Does she have a sense of how quickly those regulations will come forward once the Bill hopefully passes?

Selaine Saxby: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I hope that the Minister can provide guidance on that at the end of the debate.

The Bill will ban the import of puppies and kittens under six months and dogs and cats that are mutilated or heavily pregnant. It will also address the abuse of non-commercial rules that compromise animal welfare and biosecurity by making it more difficult and less profitable for traders to fraudulently import animals for sale under the disguise of owners travelling with their pets. The Bill also addresses the issue of commercial imports being disguised as non-commercial movements

[Selaine Saxby]

by amending the rules that govern the non-commercial movements of dogs, cats and ferrets into Great Britain from third countries.

The puppy trade has become a multimillion-pound, transnational industry, with UK sales of up to 2 million puppies annually and a value of £3 billion. However, 50% of the industry is either illegal or unlicensed and off the enforcement radar. Of that, half originates from animals coming from outside the UK.

According to the Animal and Plant Health Agency, in 2023, more than 500 landings of dogs and cats were intercepted at the port of Dover and found to be non-compliant with import requirements. Of those, 116 puppies and kittens were quarantined for being below the legally required minimum age for import. That data does not include animals detained at airports or found inland. We cannot know the true extent of puppy smuggling operations, so those figures likely capture only a small proportion of the animals smuggled into the country.

Ferrets are included in the Bill, because dogs, cats and ferrets are in the same category for rabies risk. I have not had strong representations from the ferret community, but I would like to mention on the record the ferret of the right hon. and learned Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who was the Minister for the original Bill. Her gorgeous ferret, Roulette, is no longer with us, but I know that the now Attorney General has previously ensured that references to many of her much-loved pets are recorded in this place, and I am delighted to remember Roulette today.

While not many ferrets have made my inbox, I have done much to support the work of our fantastic animal welfare charities on puppy and kitten smuggling, so I will focus on their travel arrangements. Pet animals can be brought into the UK from EU member states through two different schemes. One is for the travel of owners with pets and the other is for the commercial import of pet animals. Under the EU pet travel scheme, or PETS, vaccinated and microchipped dogs, cats and ferrets are allowed to travel between EU countries for non-commercial reasons, as long as they have a pet passport and have complied with all the requirements of the scheme, which include a rabies vaccination.

The current pet travel scheme is designed to allow a maximum of five pets to travel with their owner rather than for the commercial movement of animals intended for sale as pets. Under the scheme, pet owners must fill in a declaration confirming that they will not sell or transfer the ownership of the pet. An approved transport company must be used for the travel of the pets, unless travelling between the UK and Ireland, where a private boat or plane can be used.

Although I understand that the pet travel scheme was created to make it easy for owners to take their family pets on holiday with them, the system has been abused by unscrupulous traders. Traders have taken advantage of the scheme's simple set-up to illegally import thousands of puppies for sale, making a huge profit at the cost of welfare. The most common method of attempting to smuggle puppies into Great Britain is by bringing them in under the pet travel scheme when they are, in fact, being imported for commercial sale and should instead be subject to the requirements of the Balai directive and the Trade in Animals and Related Products Regulations 2011.

Most of all, I highlight the great work that the pet charities have done to raise this issue. Dogs Trust exposed the cruel puppy smuggling trade in 2014 and has been pushing for changes to the law to help stop it ever since. The Dogs Trust puppy pilot scheme was set up in 2015 to aid the interception of illegally imported puppies by APHA at the ports and to provide care and rehabilitation for them until they find loving new homes. Since then, it has cared for more than 2,000 puppies.

As part of the Dogs Trust puppy smuggling taskforce, I first experienced the documentary and identity checks that currently operate at the border. I saw for myself the tactics that smugglers employ to avoid detection. I thank Dogs Trust for all its hard work in campaigning on this issue and for working with me on the Bill's progress, through the roundtable and the event this Wednesday to discuss their recent "Tragic Tales and the Decade of Delay" campaign, which featured four real-life case studies of dogs who have been helped by the puppy pilot. Special thanks goes to my local Dogs Trust site in North Devon between Ilfracombe and Braunton, which does exceptional work to rehome dogs locally.

I also thank the RSPCA for its work on this issue and for its #ForPupsSake campaign, especially during the pandemic when interest in getting a puppy sky-rocketed. The campaign called for a stop to illegal puppy imports and highlighted how smuggled puppies can cost the owner more than they think. On behalf of the fluffy, furry kittens, I would like to thank Cats Protection, which published its 2023 "Cats and their Stats" survey. It found that 3% of the cats obtained in the 12 months preceding the survey were from abroad, equating to 50,000 cats. It is unclear what conditions those cats were subjected to during travel.

There have been significant changes in the cat market in the past five years, with a big rise in pure bred and pedigree cats. Of the cats obtained in the past 12 months, 42% were pedigree and pure bred cats, compared with 17% five years ago. It is likely that many of the imported cats are pedigree. Having had a cat while I was living overseas, I know that cats are extremely stressed by transportation over long distances, which in turn can suppress their immune systems so that their risk of infectious disease and other stress-related illness is markedly increased by importation.

Vet charities, such as the British Veterinary Association, have also raised directly with me the significant threat posed to biosecurity by the large number of smuggled puppies entering the UK. Although it is not in scope of the Bill, I hope that raising the issue is a first step and that the Department will take forward those concerns. Other charities, such as Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, FOUR PAWS and the Kennel Club, have all done invaluable work to campaign on the issue. I thank them all today.

Moving on to the Bill and the measures that will be enacted through primary legislation, clause 4 will reduce the number of animals that can travel under non-commercial rules from five per person to five per vehicle, or three per foot or air passenger. The charities would have preferred three animals per vehicle, as their research shows that over 97% of pet owners have three or fewer dogs. However, the reduction is a significant and welcome step to tackle the illegal smuggling of pets. The non-commercial rules are intended to make it easier for genuine pet owners to travel. Unscrupulous traders

fraudulently claim ownership of several pets that they are actually importing for sale. They do that because the requirements for owners travelling with pets are less stringent. The Bill reduces the number of dogs, cats and ferrets that can be brought into Great Britain non-commercially. Reducing that number is proportionate and takes into consideration other pets owned by the household that may also travel.

Article 5A in clause 4(5) ensures that when a non-commercial movement of a dog, cat or ferret is carried out by an authorised person, it may only take place within five days of the movement of the owner. There is evidence that the ability for a pet to travel with an authorised person under the non-commercial rules is being used as a loophole to bring in animals that should be moved under the commercial import regime, and therefore subject to more stringent requirements for sale or transfer of ownership. The new measures will ensure that pets are moved under the owner's direct responsibility or, where the pet animal cannot be moved at the same time as the owner, under the responsibility of a person authorised by the owner and within five days of the movement of the owner. An authorised person is one who has authorisation in writing from the owner to carry out the non-commercial movement of the pet animal on their behalf. This will also ensure that only an owner of a pet can sign a declaration that a movement is non-commercial. This will stop non-commercial routes being used as a loophole by traders. Movements that are not within five days will require the dog, cat or ferret to be brought in as a commercial import, rather than a non-commercial movement.

On the measures to be enacted through secondary legislation, the Bill contains an enabling power to make regulations on the bringing of dogs, cats or ferrets into the United Kingdom for the purpose of promoting their welfare. The first regulations that can be made in relation to dogs and cats in Great Britain under that enabling power have been outlined on the face of the Bill to provide reassurance of the Government's intention to lay the measures through secondary legislation. The enabling powers provide the opportunity for the Government to gather further evidence and discuss the proposals with stakeholders and the public in order to develop the new restrictions effectively. The powers will enable the Government to tackle low welfare imports dynamically. They will allow us the flexibility to address known issues quickly, but also act to close down emerging practices, including those attempting to circumvent previous restrictions.

The Government will use that power alongside the other powers in the Bill. Subsections (2) and (3) to clause 1 introduce prohibitions that restrict the commercial import and non-commercial movement into Great Britain of puppies and kittens under six months. We are still seeing high volumes of smuggled puppies—dogs under six months which do not comply with current animal health rules and are landed in Great Britain for the purpose of commercial sale—as well as other low-welfare movements and imports of pet animals.

I understand the Kennel Club's concerns about genetic diversity and rescue dogs that are brought into the country at the age of four months. However, the need for a six-month minimum age is due to the practicalities of identifying the age of a dog or a cat that can come into the UK: at six months old, the majority of puppies

and kittens will have a full set of permanent incisors, canines and premolars, and can therefore be aged more accurately. The measure will enable the identification of puppies and kittens that are being moved at young ages and are thus at risk of low welfare.

The prohibition is intended to prevent the import of under-age puppies and kittens by increasing the minimum age from 15 weeks to six months. To illustrate the importance of that, I want to talk about Bruce, who is available after today's sitting for photos in room W3, if you would like to meet him, Mr Speaker. Bruce highlights the need for a change to the minimum age. He is a French bulldog who was seized at the border at just 10 weeks old alongside three of his siblings, who had all endured a journey in cramped and squalid conditions over thousands of miles from Bulgaria in 2018. Ten weeks is well under the 15 weeks that puppies must have reached to legally enter the UK.

Bruce and his siblings were found in a poor condition, infested with worms and severely underweight. All four of the dogs weighed roughly 2.8 kg, which is half the expected weight of French bulldogs of their age. Their passports were faked, with at least three claiming that the dogs had been wormed before they were even born. The dishonest traders claimed that Bruce and his siblings were all their own pets. Upon seizure, however, Dogs Trust staff were able to find evidence of all four dogs being advertised for sale online. Fortunately for Bruce, the Dogs Trust was able to take him in and care for him until he could find his forever home. Bruce has now been rehomed responsibly through the Dogs Trust. He is a very cute French bulldog.

Some of these dogs are bred for fashion, and the Kennel Club, along with other animal charities and vets, has highlighted the health and welfare issues that can be associated with such breeds. Although the issues of breathing and flat-faced dogs are about genetic mutilation and are therefore not in scope of the Bill, I would like to highlight the need still to safeguard dogs of this type that are already in the country. We must look at what else we can do to help with genetic mutilations, which cause our pets to suffer.

Last week, it was reassuring to hear about Crufts's respiratory function grading—RFG—scheme for brachycephalic dogs, such as French bulldogs, pugs and bulldogs. It was great to meet Dr Jane Ludlow, the vet who has devised the scheme, which assesses dogs with a stethoscope. The dog exercises for three minutes, and the process is then repeated. We saw at first hand that the test is quick and straightforward, and it assigns an RFG rating to each dog. Those with the lowest grades should not breed.

Far too many flat-faced dogs have brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome, known as BOAS, which can chronically impair the ability of the dog to breathe normally and carry out everyday tasks. All the dogs at Crufts had the option of being tested, which becomes compulsory next year, and all those that win are tested to ensure that the breed retains high health standards. I hope that my highlighting this issue today will ensure that more potential pet owners ask questions about the health of the parents of their future pet.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I am really glad that the hon. Lady has brought up this issue. I do not know whether she has seen the number of brachycephalic

[Sarah Champion]

dogs that are going to Battersea because pet owners cannot afford to have the operation. The charity has seen an exponential rise in these dogs being dumped. Does she agree that much more needs to be done?

Selaine Saxby: I have indeed been to Battersea, which is what really triggered much of my interest in this particular area. Like the hon. Lady, I was deeply shocked by what I saw, which is why it was such a relief to see the new system come into effect at Crufts. It gives people the opportunity to find out whether their dogs are unwell—ideally, before they have been adopted as puppies.

Cats Protection has highlighted the issue of under-age kitten smuggling. Nala was smuggled illegally into the country when she was around eight weeks old. She had been with her owners for eight days when they brought her into the UK from Germany without a pet passport and appropriate vaccinations. They became concerned for her health and took her to a vet, who realised that she had arrived without meeting the requirements of the pet travel scheme and reported the matter to trading standards. The pet travel scheme—PETS—allows pet cats, dogs and ferrets to enter the UK without quarantine as long as they are microchipped, have a pet passport and a rabies vaccination, and have waited 21 days after the vaccination before travelling.

In addition to breaking the terms of PETS and been facing prosecution, Nala's owners were also unable to pay for the costs of seven weeks of quarantine, which came to £1,500, so they signed her over to feline welfare charity Cats Protection. It ensured that the tiny cat was appropriately quarantined and received vet care before being taken into its Ferndown adoption centre. Despite being removed from her mother at about seven weeks old, a week earlier than is advised, Nala was a lively, energetic kitten, and a suitable home was found for her.

Clauses 1(3)(b) and 1(4)(b) introduce prohibitions that restrict the commercial import and non-commercial movement into Great Britain of heavily pregnant dogs and cats—those that are more than 42 days pregnant. There is an emerging trend in the import of pregnant dogs, but there is a strong consensus to tackle that, with Dogs Trust polling showing 79% support for a ban on the import of heavily pregnant dogs. The prohibition in the Bill is intended to ensure the welfare of pregnant dogs and cats by lowering the gestation limit to prohibit the movement into Great Britain from a third country of dogs and cats that are more than 42 days pregnant—and so within the final third of the gestation. That aligns with clear markers in pregnancy, and therefore pregnant dogs and cats under that limit can be more easily identified. In addition, we expect that traders will respond to an increase in the minimum age for importing puppies and kittens by increasing the number of pregnant dogs and cats that they import. This measure is needed to prevent that anticipated increase in imports of low-welfare dogs and cats from producers with unacceptable welfare standards.

The tragic case of Snowy, the heavily pregnant bichon Maltese, shows how important this measure is in this Bill. Snowy was seized at the port of Dover in May 2023, after being illegally transported into the UK. Before she was intercepted, Snowy had travelled to the UK from an EU country. Snowy was 56 days pregnant

when she was seized—in the final 10% of her pregnancy, when it is illegal to transport dogs. Just days after she was seized, and despite her ordeal, Snowy gave birth to four healthy puppies. Snowy and her puppies have all now been responsibly rehomed through the Dogs Trust. The disturbing trend of transporting heavily pregnant dogs into the country in the later stages of pregnancy causes significant suffering and health implications to both mum and puppies. Not only will importing one dog attract less suspicion at the border, but as responsible buyers will ask to see the puppies with their mother, this tactic allows criminals to give the impression of being legitimate breeders, and thus avoid being reported to trading standards.

Clauses 1(3)(c) and 1(4)(c) introduce prohibitions that restrict the commercial import and non-commercial movement into Great Britain of dogs and cats with non-exempted mutilations, for example, dogs with cropped ears or docked tails, and declawed cats. From my previous meetings with pet charities, I know there is a clear consensus among the charities about a ban on dogs and cats with cropped ears and declawed cats, and I am delighted that it has been taken forward. The intended approach to the prohibition of mutilated animals is set out in further detail in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs consultation “Commercial and Non-Commercial Movements of Pets into Great Britain”. The summary of responses and the Government response to that consultation are due to be published in due course, and I am very much looking forward to seeing the consultation response.

The ban on cropped ears mutilations would have helped six-year-old Maisie, who came into RSPCA care in October 2023 due to welfare concerns. She was incredibly malnourished and underweight. She is a sweet and gentle girl who absolutely loves playing with a football, chasing tennis balls and eating sausages. She arrived in RSPCA care with a docked tail and cropped ears. She has a passport from overseas, so the RSPCA believes she was imported having already been cropped and docked. Unfortunately, it is not just dogs that are mutilated. Many kittens are subjected to declawing, an extremely painful and distressing procedure that prevents cats from exhibiting normal scratching behaviour, and is the equivalent of amputating a human fingertip at the first knuckle. Although it is already illegal for cats to be declawed in the UK. Cats Protection, the RSPCA and Battersea have been campaigning hard to ensure that cats with this mutilation are included in the Bill and banned from importation. That is both to deter any market or interest in declawed cats, and to keep in line with ensuring that the highest standards of cat welfare are consistently maintained in the UK. The PDSA “Animal Wellbeing Report 2022” states that

“alarmingly, 5% of cat owners who got their cat from abroad, equating to 31,000 cats, told us that they chose to get their pet from abroad because they wanted them to be declawed.”

Clause 1(2)(b) delivers relevant exemptions to the prohibitions, for example, for recognised assistance dogs or military or service working animals. The enforcement measures and exemptions for the Bill will be delivered through secondary legislation. As with the exemptions, delivering the enforcement measures through secondary legislation will enable us to work closely with enforcement bodies to develop guidance and ensure they have the correct tools to deliver these measures effectively.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this Bill. The legislation we pass in this place is only as effective as the enforcement that follows from it. A 2014 Dogs Trust investigation found that two of the authorities involved in enforcing breaches of existing regulations in this area—the Animal and Plant Health Agency and trading standards—had no officers on active duty at ports of entry over weekends. Does she agree that, as well as passing this welcome piece of legislation, we need assurances from the Minister about the resourcing and capacity of those agencies to ensure the Bill is properly enforced?

Selaine Saxby: Although I agree that we need to ensure enforcement, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), I believe we have an opportunity today to highlight the need to educate people who are about to adopt a puppy or kitten. They need to ask those questions. If illegally imported animals are not adopted, the trade will dry up. I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but I also think we have an opportunity today to extend knowledge about the process of adopting—I have learned so much in developing this Bill.

The measures will be enacted through secondary legislation in order to refine the scope and detail of the policy and take on the views of the public and key stakeholders. The Bill provides that the prohibitions must be enacted the first time the enabling power is used in relation to dogs and cats in Great Britain to show commitment to delivering these measures. I have been assured by the Department, which I thank for its help in getting the Bill to this point, that it will lay secondary legislation as soon as possible following Royal Assent, and DEFRA officials are already working on developing it. That will ensure that the Bill is future-proofed and that it responds dynamically to smuggling practices.

As is the nature of organised crime, the illegal pet trade is unpredictable and ever-changing. These enabling powers will ensure the Government can tackle low-welfare imports dynamically. They provide the flexibility to address known issues quickly, and ensure that we can act in the future to close down emerging practices whereby people try to circumvent previous restrictions.

Finally, let me set out how this will be applied as a GB-wide Bill, and the extent and application involving the devolved Administrations. Clause 3 sets out the meaning of “appropriate national authority” regarding the devolved Administrations. Clause 8 sets out the territorial extent of the Bill and describes the jurisdictions in which the Bill will form part of the law. The territorial extent and application of the Bill is England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, except clauses 4, 5 and 6, which extend and apply only to England, Wales and Scotland.

The Bill relates to animal welfare, which is a devolved matter in Scotland and Wales, including in relation to the regulation of movement of animals for the purposes of protecting animal welfare. In Northern Ireland, animal welfare is generally a transferred matter, but the subject matter of this Bill means that the reserved matter in schedule 3(20) to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is engaged. I thank my DUP colleagues, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who are unable to join us today but have written to support the Bill.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech about this really important Bill, which I fully support. It is good to see it coming forward. As she outlined, we are still waiting for a consultation response from the Government, but does she agree that it is deeply disappointing that the Government dropped their Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, which would have looked at these issues more carefully? We need greater action from the Government on animal welfare. Even though this Bill will help, we need more.

Selaine Saxby: This Government have done more on animal welfare than any previous Government, and we will continue to do so. Like everyone else, I was disappointed that that Bill collapsed, but that was due to amendments that changed the nature of the original Bill. I very much welcome the cross-party support for this Bill.

The amendments to the non-commercial pet travel scheme rules and related measures, which include the maximum number of dogs, cats and ferrets that can be moved into Great Britain within five days of the owner's movements will extend to England, Wales and Scotland. The Bill does not apply to the domestic movement of dogs, cats and ferrets within our United Kingdom, so travel between Northern Ireland and Great Britain will not be affected.

Many colleagues and hon. Friends are in the Chamber to support this Bill, and I know that some may think that we have not gone far enough, but we need to be pragmatic with this Bill and do not want perfection to be the enemy of the good. I believe that, as it stands, it will do a lot to safeguard the welfare of the thousands of puppies, cats and ferrets that come into Great Britain from overseas each year. It will also prevent the heartache and unexpected cost to families who unknowingly buy young and ill pets that often come with hidden health conditions.

The measures I have outlined aim to make vast animal welfare improvements to the current pet import rules. With secondary legislation, the measures will go further than the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill to ensure that loopholes are tightened. I again thank all the charities and interested groups that have shared their views about the Bill. I hope that the Bill has met some of the expectations and illustrated the positive steps that we are taking to stop this cruel trade. We are a nation of animal lovers—a Parliament of pet lovers—and this legislation will ensure that the UK is leading the world when it comes to animal welfare.

10.5 am

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in today's debate on the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill. Cestrians are certainly fond of animals and animal rights, and I have received hundreds of items of correspondence from constituents regarding the Bill and asking me to contribute to the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on bringing forward the Bill.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and many of my constituents, I was disappointed by the scrapping of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill last year—a manifesto pledge on which the Government stood—so I am pleased that

[*Samantha Dixon*]

some of the key issues from that Bill are addressed in this Bill. Again, I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): As important as this Bill is, does my hon. Friend agree that its provisions could have been on the statute book by now if the Government had not blocked Labour's efforts to revive the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill last year?

Samantha Dixon: Yes, indeed. I agree with my hon. Friend.

The Bill is a declaration of our commitment to compassion and responsibility towards our furry companions. It seeks to address several pressing issues concerning the importation of these animals, ensuring their safety, health and wellbeing.

My constituency has always cared for animals and led the way on animal rights. Chester West and Chester Council was one of the first authorities to permanently ban the practice of trail hunting on council-owned land. The National Trust soon followed suit. The changes introduced by the last Labour Government have left an indelible mark on British history and have stood the test of time, from the bans on fox hunting and fur farming, to the action to stop experimentation on great apes and the testing of cosmetics on animals. We must ensure that we do not stop there. We should lead the way on animal welfare, and this Bill is another step forward and is long overdue.

Puppies, kittens and other animals continue to be illegally imported into the UK on an industrial scale, alongside increasing numbers of heavily pregnant dogs and cats, and animals with mutilations, such as cropped ears. Every year, thousands of puppies are illegally imported into the UK to be sold to unsuspecting dog lovers, having been transported thousands of miles with little or no food, water or exercise. I am concerned that there is widespread abuse of the pet travel scheme to smuggle animals illegally, often under age, unvaccinated and in poor welfare conditions.

Dogs, cats and ferrets can enter the United Kingdom in one of two ways: as non-commercial pet travel movements or as commercial imports. More stringent requirements apply to commercial imports than to non-commercial movements. Evidence has shown that commercial movements are frequently being described as non-commercial movements to avoid the more stringent requirements.

In 2023, more than 500 landings of dogs and cats were intercepted at the port of Dover and found to be non-compliant with import requirements. Of these, 116 puppies and kittens were quarantined for being below the legally required minimum age for import. That data does not include animals detained at airports or found inland. We cannot know the true extent of puppy smuggling operations, so these figures likely capture only a small portion of the animals smuggled into the country.

According to Dogs Trust, since the relaxation of the pet travel scheme—PETS—in 2012, the number of dogs entering the country via PETS has increased exponentially. Dogs Trust has conducted five investigations, which have exposed smugglers using PETS as a cover to illegally import dogs into Great Britain for sale. In 2015, Dogs

Trust set up the puppy pilot through which it funds the quarantine cost of illegally imported puppies seized at the border and then rehomes them responsibly through its network of rehoming centres. Since 2015, more than 2,256 illegally imported puppies have been cared for by Dogs Trust through the puppy pilot, which, if sold to unsuspecting members of the public, would have made more than £3 million for the illegal importers. As many as 75 dogs coming in through the Dogs Trust puppy pilot have had their ears cropped, despite this cruel mutilation being illegal in the UK and the EU.

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend is making an interesting contribution. From her research, has she any idea to what extent the regulations are enforced to crack down on ear cropping, which is already illegal in Britain, but which we know still goes on? It is all very well not bringing in dogs that have had their ears cropped, but what does she think is happening to enforce the current law?

Samantha Dixon: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. As my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) said in his intervention, the Government need to commit to enforcement if they accept this important piece of legislation in order to tackle serious issues like ear cropping. I thank Dogs Trust and other animal welfare charities, such as Cats Protection and the RSPCA, for the important work they do to support the wellbeing of our beloved animals.

Talking of the RSPCA, I thought that I would take the opportunity to talk a little more about ferrets, which do not seem to have been mentioned much during this Session of Parliament. With the obvious exception of the right hon. and learned Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), I do not think we have talked about ferrets in this place at all—we have been more likely to talk about reverse ferrets than actual ferrets.

I am grateful to the RSPCA for its fun factsheet on ferrets, to which I shall refer. I have learned a great deal about ferrets in doing research for this debate. Apparently, ferrets—or *Mustela putorius furo*, which translates as stinky, raging thief—are a close ancestor to the European polecat and, because of their charming and cheeky characters, have become popular pets.

Ferrets have a number of characteristics, which the RSPCA draws out. Ferrets enjoy exploring and are very curious. They are obviously predators, which is a characteristic for which they are more widely known, but they are also very sociable, which is probably why they have risen in popularity as a pet. They are playful and they also like sleeping. Apparently, they can sleep for between 18 and 20 hours a day, which is quite a feat.

Ferrets use a range of methods to communicate. They use a smell to hunt and they are also very vocal, which made me think—in a particularly vocal debate—about how they communicate. An excited ferret will make a “dooking” noise, which is also called chuckling. They can also produce a bark-like sound, and sometimes do that if they are afraid. Continuous screaming is an indication that they are highly alert in the presence of danger. Ferrets are flexible, colourful and can catch cold. They sound like a fascinating animal and I am so pleased that the debate of the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) covers ferrets as well.

Let me return to the Bill and welcome some aspects of it. I welcome the fact that it will ban the import of puppies and kittens under six months old, and dogs and cats that are heavily mutilated or heavily pregnant. It will also address the current abuse of non-commercial rules that compromises animal welfare and buyer security, by making it more difficult and less profitable for traders to import animals for sale fraudulently in the guise of owners travelling with their own pets.

At its core, the Bill seeks to establish comprehensive regulations and standards for the importation process for dogs, cats and ferrets. By implementing stringent health checks, vaccination requirements and documentation procedures, we can effectively safeguard against the spread of diseases and prevent the introduction of infectious agents into our communities. These measures are essential not only for the protection of the imported animals, but for the welfare of domestic animals and the public at large.

Furthermore, the Bill advocates the humane treatment of animals throughout their journey. From the moment they leave their country of origin to their arrival at their destination, animals deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. We must ensure that they are transported in safe and comfortable conditions, free from stress, fear and unnecessary suffering. Additionally, the Bill seeks to combat the cruel practices associated with the illegal trade of dogs, cats and ferrets by cracking down on unscrupulous breeders and traders who exploit these animals for profit. In that way, we can protect vulnerable species from exploitation and abuse.

The Bill goes further on the importance of responsible pet ownership. Owning a dog, cat or ferret is not merely a privilege; it is a responsibility that requires commitment, care and compassion. On behalf of my constituents in Chester and the many animal lovers across the country, I once again congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon on this important and long-overdue Bill.

10.16 am

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a huge pleasure to speak in the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on promoting this legislation.

Just from looking at the text of the legislation, hon. Members can see quite how complicated it is to amend a variety of bits of law on something we would have hoped would be straightforward. The reason we have got to this place is, frankly, that criminals are abusing the rules we have in place. They have been smuggling dogs, cats and ferrets to such an extent that more than 500 instances of non-compliance were found in Dover alone just in 2023. Given people's concerns, it is right that we update the law. This single-issue Bill is the right way to make that happen.

During the debate on the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, there was understandably considerable concern about mutilation. I am pleased that the Bill addresses that. As was said by the right hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle)—I used to live in Garston at one point—mutilation is already against the law in this country, but too often people say, "Oh well, the dog came from abroad," to try to get around the law. It is important that we address those specific issues.

Concerns have been expressed about the number of pets that can be brought over and what will be considered a non-commercial arrangement. For what it is worth, I think that a sensible compromise has been reached, but will the Minister answer a question about proposed new paragraph 1A in clause 4(4)(a)? Someone can bring in five animals if they are in a car, but only three in any other form of transport. I wondered what the situation was for someone on the train—on Eurostar—but not in a car. I think going through Eurotunnel is covered. If the Minister wants to think about that, I do not need an answer today, but I think it is worthy of consideration.

We must ensure that the Bill works across the United Kingdom, so it is important that there is the ability to give powers to Ministers in the devolved Administrations. During the Bill's progress—which I hope is rapid—I would like to probe further the different times at which different clauses will come into effect. It is good to see that clauses 1, 2, 3 and 7 will come into effect straightaway on Royal Assent. It would be useful to understand a little more why clauses 4, 5 and 6 will take longer. I appreciate that there might be a transition, but at the moment the Bill says six months.

I guess that the most important thing of all is that we go further in Committee and on Report so that a deadline is put on the introduction of the regulations—certainly as far as the powers of UK Ministers allow. At the moment, the Bill provides the power to make regulations, but I think it is better, especially as we are trying to take this legislation through the private Members' Bill route, to give ourselves a fixed deadline for getting the regulations done.

To that end, I am very conscious of other primary legislation. Consultation must often happen for regulations, and we know that that can take some time, so I would be grateful to hear whether the Minister has already started preparing regulations to bring clause 1 into effect. That is a very good point in the Bill to ensure that the first regulations must be about the specific issue of smuggling. I welcome that.

I am conscious that plenty of people would like to speak today. I know that the Bill will be welcomed by many pet owners who believe that they are doing the right thing. I am conscious that a lot of people, when they are on holiday abroad, will see animals and try to bring them back—through conscience, if that is what they feel—but that is not always very wise. We have to be careful about the sorts of diseases that can be brought into the country, especially in feral animals. Of course, we are well known around the world for our love of animals, and we do not like to see them in distress or just abandoned.

I encourage people who are considering taking on a pet to go to one of our brilliant charities and give an animal a second home. I can say from personal experience that it can be very positive; it can also be a bit of a nightmare dealing with some of the behavioural elements, which, later in life, can be a bit challenging to correct. However, a rescue cat, a rescue pet—I have never experienced a rescue ferret—will love you forever. It is a vital part of animal welfare to ensure that they are going to good homes and are not in the hands of criminals. The Bill will address the loopholes that exist today.

10.22 am

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): It is an absolute privilege to speak in support of the Bill and better health and welfare standards in our dog, cat and ferret import industry. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on introducing the Bill. I admire the work that she done to tighten our importation regulations and advance animal welfare standards for some of our most loved pets. Her work is even more important given the absence of any Government legislation to introduce such measures.

Many of my constituents, and many people in the country more broadly, will be heartened by the hon. Member's dedication to improving the welfare of our imported pets. With National Pet Day on 11 April fast approaching, the debate is timely. National Pet Day celebrates the contribution of pets to our lives, and highlights the care and welfare requirements of our animals. Just a week earlier, National Ferret Day will be marked on 2 April, celebrating the estimated 100,000 pet ferrets in the UK. The contributions that cats and dogs make to our lives will be celebrated on their namesake days, on 8 and 26 August respectively.

That shows and proves that we are a nation of animal lovers—and one that holds particular affection for cats and dogs. Like many other Members, I am sure, I grew up with dogs—mainly Lancashire heelers. That is, sadly, a dying breed, but they are wonderful dogs that are particularly special to my West Lancashire constituency, where we have two kinds of heeler: the Lancashire heeler and the Ormskirk heeler. We had Scamp, who was a vicious little beast but was loved nevertheless, as well as Pal, Beauty, Becky 1 and, sadly, Becky 2, Tilly, Tiny and Pippin. Everybody in the family was involved in naming those dogs, and they were very much a part of our family life growing up. As an adult, I have always had cats. Unfortunately, we most recently lost Colin to a congenital heart disease.

Research from the World Population Review this year revealed that the United Kingdom is home to about 12 million dogs—the sixth largest population of dogs in the world. Research from various organisations including the PDSA puts the percentage of UK households home to a dog at between 29% and 31%, which is huge. As of 2023, the number of cats owned is almost as high as dogs, with 11 million cats across the United Kingdom.

To the many people across this country with a dog, cat or ferret, these animals are not just pets, but valued members of our families. For others, a dog or cat can offer the much-needed companionship they may not otherwise have. We saw the social and personal benefit of animal ownership throughout the pandemic, when 3.2 million pets were purchased during the periods of lockdown. Lacking social interaction and instead facing social isolation, individuals and families alike sought the great companionship that pets can provide. With this nation's love and affection for our feline and canine friends in mind, I believe the Bill's provisions will be welcomed by many of our constituents.

To understand the importance of the Bill, it is essential to understand the current issues around puppy, kitten and ferret smuggling. Currently, these animals can enter this country in two primary ways: under the non-commercial rules of the pet travel scheme, or via the commercial importation regime. Pet travel rules

have made travelling with pets both cheaper and easier for owners. However, these non-commercial rules have been abused by puppy and kitten smugglers, particularly those who care not for the health and welfare of these animals, but for the financial reward from this exploitative practice. Traders have fraudulently claimed pet ownership of numerous puppies and kittens to import these animals under the non-commercial rules of the pet travel scheme, yet these puppies and kittens are commercially sold upon importation.

Requirements for owners travelling with a pet are less stringent than those for commercial import, and rightly so—that is perfectly understandable. Smugglers have therefore sought to abuse the pet travel importation route to circumvent more stringent health regulations for their animals. It is the health and welfare of puppies, kittens and ferrets that is frequently compromised when these pets are illegally smuggled into the United Kingdom.

As I suggested when I outlined the sheer number of these pets in this country, the demand for cats and dogs is extremely high. The demand for young puppies and kittens from high-value breeds is similarly high, as is, sadly, the demand for animals with certain mutilations. Cropped-ear dogs and declawed cats are both in demand, despite the illegality of both mutilations in this country. The sheer demand for dogs and cats of all types, coupled with the demand for dogs and cats with illegal mutilations under UK law, has encouraged the abuse of our animal importation rules. With less stringent regulation, pet importation has been feigned, and the health and welfare of imported animals has suffered. In 2021, almost 1,000 dogs and cats were detained for being non-compliant with existing animal health and welfare legislation, and that is just the number of identified imported animals. As with any illicit industry, the true figure could well be far higher.

It is with those issues in mind that I welcome the Bill's provisions, which will offer far greater protection for the health and welfare of dog, cats and ferrets imported into this country. The measures outlined are eminently sensible. To address the abuse of non-commercial importation rules, it is my understanding that the Bill will reduce the number of animals that can travel under the non-commercial rules from five per person to five per vehicle, or three per foot passenger or air passenger. Right now, smugglers are benefiting from non-commercial pet importation rules, so reducing the number that any one person can claim as a pet when travelling will impinge further on the fraudulent use of this importation route and the associated health and welfare costs of puppy smuggling under this system.

More broadly, the Bill's provisions will put in place higher health and welfare standards for imported puppies and kittens. Banning the import of puppies and kittens under six months of age seems very reasonable because separating puppies or kittens from their mothers too early carries a risk of illness or even death for those young animals. We know that the separation of puppies from their mothers is not advisable at all before eight weeks for exactly those reasons.

In the United Kingdom, it is illegal for a licence holder to sell a puppy as a pet or to permanently separate it from its biological mother before eight weeks; and for those who may choose to sell a litter from a family pet, there is a consensus among many welfare and veterinary organisations, such as the Animal Welfare

Foundation, the Blue Cross, the PDSA and Dogs Trust, that puppies should not be separated until this age. The emotional and physical distress experienced by both the mother and the puppy can be immense, and if not fatal, it can have behavioural consequences for these animals throughout their lives. Each week a puppy spends with its mother is crucial for its social and behavioural development. Bite inhibition and gentle play are taught in this environment and are essential before a puppy is rehomed.

The recognition of harm to kittens separated from their mothers at a young age is also already recognised in legislation. In this country it is illegal for a licensed breeder to sell a kitten under the age of eight weeks of age. In recent months this place has shown great concern about the possession of dangerous dogs that pose a risk to public health. Ensuring a suitable age for imported dogs and the welfare of these animals should therefore be an equally high priority in this House.

To prevent the proliferation of a dangerous dog population in the UK, we need to prevent the importation of animals at higher risk of displaying dangerous behavioural traits. This should include prohibiting young puppies without the behavioural maturity and bite inhibition that they learn from their mothers. That is why this Bill's provision to ban the importation of puppies, kittens and ferrets under the age of six months can only be a positive step towards greater animal welfare standards and towards reducing our population of dangerous dogs that may pose a threat to public health.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent, thoughtful and well-researched speech. Does she agree that there is a need for greater public information and education, as previously mentioned in the debate, to reduce the risk of young age puppies being sold?

Ashley Dalton: I thank my hon. Friend for his considered intervention and agree wholeheartedly that we need to make sure that public information and education is improved. Many people do not understand the impact and possible implications of taking a young puppy or kitten so early. They often do this out of the goodness of their heart, and with the best intentions of wanting to look after a young puppy or kitten or get one for their children, but we need to ensure that people are aware of the long-term and often permanent damage that can be done to young puppies and kittens in this way. By removing the ability to import puppies and kittens under the age of six months, we can likely remove the incentive for these animals to be stripped from their mothers at a critically young age and thus reduce the numbers of puppies and kittens suffering from the health and welfare consequences of premature separation.

We should also prohibit the import of dogs and cats that have been mutilated, which several Members have talked about. Those animals have often suffered the trauma of unnecessary procedures such as ear cropping and tail docking. Such mutilations have no health benefits; they are abusive practices recognised in UK law as illegal. They offer only emotional and physical trauma to the animals on which they are inflicted. Preventing the importation of animals with these traumatic mutilations

will also prevent the importation of animals which, as a result of the physical and emotional trauma caused by the mutilations, can develop behavioural changes.

Dogs with cropped ears or docked tails may be recognised by certain members of the public as being more aggressive or dangerous. We hear that regularly—or at any rate I do, in my surgeries. If people keep their own pets away from these animals, which they often do for fear of aggression towards them or their dogs, the animals will suffer further from a lack of socialisation and their behaviour will worsen further. Similarly, the banning of imports of dogs and cats with mutilations will protect puppies and kittens from harmful practices, and will hopefully instigate a decline in demand for pets with certain physical characteristics. If it is illegal to import a puppy with cropped ears, it is common sense that the incentive to crop that puppy's ears at its location of origin will be diminished. If it cannot be imported and sold legally in the UK, it is logical to conclude that that characteristic will lose the value that it once had to the importer.

We may also hope that the criminalisation of certain mutilations will reduce the demand for these practices from the consumer, along with the education referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda). In this place, I frequently hear the argument that the criminalisation of any activity may increase the attractiveness of engaging in whatever is being criminalised, but in the case of animal welfare I do not find that argument particularly convincing. We are a nation of animal lovers, and I believe that following the criminalisation of certain mutilations, those wanting to buy a puppy or kitten may understand better the harm associated with these practices and choose to shun the imported animals. We ban them because of the mutilations and because they are damaging, not just because this is a fashion that we do not like.

As for those whose conscience does not prohibit them from requiring a mutilated puppy or kitten, the recognition of their pet's becoming illegal in the future might. We can hope that both the importer and the consumer will be discouraged from mutilating and acquiring mutilated animals respectively. The legal importation will all but disappear, and we may hope—optimistically—that the illegal smuggling trade will face several disruptions, with the broader recognition of the harm that mutilated animals have endured.

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that although many of us have learnt a great deal about these practices, courtesy of the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), the wider public are not aware of some of the consequences? Could the Government not do much more to inform the public of these practices and support the wider provisions of the Bill?

Ashley Dalton: I entirely agree. The wider public are not necessarily aware of that or the wide range of existing legislation, let alone the provisions that will be introduced by the Bill if it proceeds successfully. By engaging in this debate we are helping to raise awareness, and I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon on enabling that by presenting the Bill.

[Ashley Dalton]

The proposed banning of the import of heavily pregnant dogs and cats is another provision that will help to protect animal health and welfare. The plans of those seeking to circumvent new rules limiting the number of animals imported under non-commercial rules would be scuppered. Those seeking to abuse our laws will always try to find new ways in which to sustain their exploitative operations in any which way they can, but the Bill, well thought out as it is, offers great two-layer protection for puppies and kittens. Let us imagine a scenario in which a puppy smuggler wanted to import several puppies or kittens, under the guise of the animals being their pets. The limit to the legal importation of these animals under non-commercial rules on an aeroplane would now be three. Cognisant of that limit, a smuggler could have sought to import a heavily pregnant dog or cat which would then give birth in the UK to numerous puppies or kittens which could then be sold. This practice would be limited, with the further provision banning the import of heavily pregnant dogs and cats. A puppy smuggler could not simply travel with a heavily pregnant dog or cat under the guise of pet ownership for the animal then to give birth as a commercial opportunity in the UK.

Crucially, the Bill will also support the health and welfare of pregnant cats and dogs, who are our pets and can suffer greatly from international travel when heavily pregnant. The physical and emotional upheaval of long-haul travel can prompt early labour without the necessary veterinary care, and therefore carries risks of harm or death for both the mother and the puppies or kittens involved.

In reviewing the specifics of the Bill in preparation for the debate, I was astonished to find that some of its provisions were not already enshrined in legislation. These are sensible and considered measures for which I can see little downside, and they are well supported by others outside this place. The support that the Bill has garnered from animal welfare stakeholders and charities demonstrates the benefit its provisions could have for the health and welfare of puppies and kittens in the UK.

The RSPCA, the Dogs Trust and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home all support measures in the Bill, and they supported them when they were introduced in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. Those stakeholders are the experts in the field, and their endorsement has reassured me that the measures are well considered and likely to positively impact the health and welfare of cats and dogs.

In fact, the importance of supporting the Bill has grown greater since the Government abandoned the kept animals Bill in May 2023. The Prime Minister rode back on the commitment he made during his ill-fated leadership election in which he pledged to retain that Bill in the Government's legislative agenda. It was left to Opposition Members to try to revive that Bill in an Opposition day debate on 21 June last year. I spoke then in defence of greater regulation to ensure the welfare of animals imported into this country. Despite voting in favour of Labour's motion, Government Members rejected our best attempts to revive the Bill.

I have since pressed the Government in this place on their failure to support better animal welfare standards. In January, on the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports)

Bill, I pressed the Minister about the Government's plans on puppy smuggling and ear-cropping legislation. However, as the title of that Bill suggested, the Government were concerned there not with the importation of domestic pets but with the exports of livestock. The absence of legislation in this area is exactly why I was keen to speak today in support of this Bill.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): The banning of live exports is one of the real benefits of our leaving the European Union. Were we to have stayed in, we would not have been able to give that benefit to our livestock. Does the hon. Member not agree that that is a real benefit to animals in this country?

Ashley Dalton: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. It was unfortunate that, even at that point, we still had not managed to bring anything forward around the importation of pets, and it was disappointing that the kept animals Bill was abandoned. We were told in the House that the Government expected such measures to come forward through private Members' Bills, and I wholeheartedly congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon on her Bill. I am delighted that what I considered to be something for the birds at the time has come about, and I am delighted on this occasion to have been wrong.

If the moral arguments for the Bill—greater protections for the health and welfare of domestic animals—are not compelling enough for Members across the House, the biosecurity threat posed by a poorly regulated and exploited importation industry should be. That is of particular relevance to my constituents in West Lancashire, which is also a farming community and so relies significantly on biosecurity.

Puppies, kittens and ferrets imported into the UK illegally pose a significant risk of parasitic disease. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee took oral evidence on its puppy smuggling inquiry in October 2019, but the written evidence submitted to that inquiry and published for all Members of the House to read was particularly interesting. Dogs and puppies illegally landed in the UK were recognised as presenting a significant biosecurity risk. The pet travel scheme requires microchipping, rabies vaccination, a mandatory pre-travel waiting period and, depending on the country from which the pet is travelling, tapeworm treatment and a rabies antibody test result to create a pet passport.

The commercial importation scheme has greater requirements, as I referenced earlier, and has all the conditions of the pet travel scheme alongside a pre-importation veterinary examination, an animal health certificate and pre-notification to the authorities to ensure welfare during transportation. The illegal smuggling of pets, where there is not compliance with PTS or commercial importation standards, leaves our residents' pets, animals and us at risk of infectious diseases that may spread to other animals or, in some cases, people in the UK.

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend is making points that others have not made, so this is a very valuable contribution. Will she say something about how animals coming in that perhaps have not had those vaccinations, or that are not properly certificated as such, can cause devastation to farming communities like hers, because the diseases

they carry do not necessarily stick to one individual species? This can be a real issue for an entire community. It is all very well having a law, but enforcement is the key to stopping these problems arising.

Ashley Dalton: I thank my right hon. Friend for recognising how important this is in farming communities such as mine. This is crucial, and we have legislation in place, some of which many farmers find quite onerous, to protect the biosecurity of their livestock and land. It is particularly relevant in my constituency, which has wetlands and bird sanctuaries.

Some protections are difficult to put in place, and I have had long discussions with chicken and wildfowl breeders in West Lancashire about the things they have to do to protect our nation's biosecurity. We need to ensure there is continuing awareness of the legislation because, obviously, parasitic infections take no notice of borders.

Selaine Saxby: As I said in my speech, this is not covered by the Bill, and the British Veterinary Association is quite comfortable that it is not fully included and that the EFRA Committee is continuing its work in this area.

Ashley Dalton: I thank the hon. Lady for that welcome clarification.

The provision in the Bill to reduce the number of animals that can be claimed as personal pets, and that can therefore be imported under the pet travel scheme regulations, will help to address this biosecurity risk. Reducing the number of puppies, kittens and ferrets that can be admitted to just three will help to reduce the numbers that a smuggler can import under these less stringent biosecurity rules.

Proposed new article 5A of the regulations should further help to limit abuse of the pet travel scheme. Under this article, the movement of a cat, dog or ferret would not be classed as non-commercial unless the animal is accompanied by its owner, or unless the movement occurs within five days of its owner arriving in the country. This change would help to prevent abuse of the non-commercial importation regulations and limit the awful feigning of commercial animals as pets to circumvent the requirements for commercial imports.

Alongside that reduction, the Bill would place an emphasis on greater enforcement mechanisms, which we have talked about at length. I would welcome any further detail that the hon. Member for North Devon can provide to ensure that this sensible and worthwhile legislation is able to be enforced.

Having looked at the Bill with great interest, and having considered the specifics of each measure carefully, I am proud to support the hon. Member for North Devon in the passage of the Bill. Along with many millions in this country, I hold our pets in the highest regard. They make the lives of families and individuals up and down the country fuller and brighter. It is with the societal benefit of cats, dogs and ferrets and their welfare and health in mind that I am proud to support the Bill. Its measures will protect the welfare of our domestic animal imports and protect our animals and public health at home.

I also support the Bill because, as I said, we sadly lost our cat, Colin, to congenital heart disease just after we had moved house. We are looking forward to getting a new cat—yet to be named—and hopefully a new dog, which I am insisting will be called Kenneth. It is really important to me that legislation is in place to ensure that anybody buying a new cat, dog or ferret as a member of their family can be reassured that it has been treated properly. After the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon), I am seriously considering also getting a ferret. My father has always wanted one.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for North Devon and congratulate her on picking up what the Government have hitherto refused to advance. This is a necessary, important and common-sense piece of legislation that I urge all Members who are present today to support.

10.51 am

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): It is a joy to follow that incredible speech. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on introducing the Bill. Not only does it help the Government to continue to fulfil the commitments in the Conservative manifesto on animal welfare—an area of great concern for a vast number of my South Derbyshire constituents—but crucially, it directly and effectively legislates against those who might attempt to illegally smuggle puppies, kittens and ferrets across our border. I am sure that colleagues across the House can support that sentiment and will want to get on with this. I have received many letters from my constituents about the Bill, all asking me to pledge my support, and I submit to do that on the record now.

This illegal trade is appalling. The puppy trade in the UK, as has been noted, is valued at £3 billion, with around 2 million puppies—a phenomenal number—being sold annually. The numbers are staggering and when one considers that as much as 50% of the trade is illegal or unlicensed, the enormity of the issue is really brought into focus. In any industry or trade where the numbers and profit margins have the potential to be as large as these are, we can always predict that there will be a degree of exploitation. On an issue such as this, however, which involves the welfare and treatment of puppies, kittens and ferrets—in some cases, barely weeks old—it is incredibly important that we act. Again, I commend my hon. Friend for bringing this issue to the Floor of the House.

The criminals who perpetrate this trade are motivated purely by greed. In most cases, these poor animals are either pregnant or newly born and are kept in conditions of squalor and filth until they are then subjected to the cramped conditions of their smuggling. They are subsequently sold to unsuspecting owners without any knowledge of the hardship that their new pet has undergone. Madam Deputy Speaker, I have taken a large chunk of my speech out to make sure that colleagues can get in.

Towards the end of last year, I visited Daisy Brook boarding kennels in my constituency. The owners of the business frequently and legally transfer pets from the UK and Europe across our border and have had plenty of run-ins with those who smuggle puppies and kittens

[Mrs Heather Wheeler]

illegally. They told me that the smugglers have a staggering lack of regard for the animals they are smuggling. These young puppies are nothing more than future profit and any thoughts of the welfare of these animals are non-existent.

The Bill is crucial to restricting smugglers, and it will prove yet again that we are a Government for whom the welfare of animals is a top priority. We left the EU so that we could make our own decisions on these issues.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Member is obviously very passionate about this issue. Does she have any thoughts about enforcement? There is widespread support around the House for the measures in the Bill, but the issue of enforcement is key to ensuring that we really do stamp out the puppy smuggling trade.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the right hon. Lady for that intervention, and I know the Minister will reply fully later.

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer) *indicated assent.*

Mrs Wheeler: The Minister is nodding as I say that.

The stipulations in this Bill are clear and will be effective. It will ban the import of puppies, kittens and ferrets under the age of six months, ensuring that they are not taken from their mothers too young and, crucially, that they are old enough to travel safely, potentially for long distances. It will ban the import of heavily pregnant dogs, cats and ferrets, to which the same concerns apply. It will ban the importation of dogs and cats that have been mutilated by having their tails docked or ears cropped or, in the case of cats, by having been declawed, all of which are extremely painful procedures. Most crucially, it will reduce the number of animals that can travel under the non-commercial rules from five in the vehicle to three. That closes a loophole currently being exploited by many unscrupulous traders—[*Interruption.*] I am nearly finished, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Bill will significantly disrupt the methods of pet smugglers and their activities, and will help prevent low animal welfare breeding operations from supplying the Great Britain pet market. It will give owners the assurance that the dogs, cats and ferrets they are buying and allowing into their families have not been sourced illegally nor treated inhumanely. That is undoubtedly a good thing and should be celebrated.

What is crucial is that the Bill removes the suffering of those animals; it must never be allowed to be turned into profit by those who are breaking the law. The situation is tragic, and I fully commend the Bill to the House. I hope all colleagues on both sides of the House are willing to do the same. If we wish to maintain our position as a leader on animal welfare, which we pride ourselves on, it is crucial that this Bill becomes law as soon as possible. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon for introducing it. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me so early. It is much appreciated.

10.56 am

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): Animal welfare is a top priority for my constituents. I regularly get hundreds of emails a month from concerned residents who want to see action on a raft of animal welfare issues, from puppy smuggling to cat declawing and animal testing. As the husband of a veterinary surgeon, I completely concur with my constituents on the importance of this hugely significant policy area. It would of course be remiss of me not to mention my own pet cat, Frank, and the unfortunate recent passing of my cat, Smudge, and my dog, Roger.

I fully concur with the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby): pets are indeed part of our family, and are missed as much as family members. I am sure Mr Speaker will concur with that. I have yet to meet Attlee the cat—I do not know whether you have, Madam Deputy Speaker—but I hope to do so at some point in time.

Many of my constituents have written to me about the abhorrent practice of ear cropping. As colleagues may know, in 2022 the RSPCA recorded a horrifying 621% increase in the number of dog ear cropping reports it received over the previous five years. Of course, ear cropping has been illegal in this country since 2006. The previous Labour Government made sure of that—I will come to Labour's animal welfare achievements shortly. The RSPCA has real concerns that an increasing number of dogs are being sent abroad for ear cropping to circumvent UK law. Let me be clear that there is absolutely no evidence that ear cropping is necessary or has any medical benefits for dogs. Innocent dogs' ears are clipped, often simply because their owner wants their dog to look scarier—for cosmetic reasons. Most horrifyingly of all, far too often the procedure is carried out by amateurs with basic DIY tools and no anaesthetic for the dog. We must be clear that ear cropping is mutilation—it is cruelty.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) for her very interesting insight into the world of ferrets. And just to broach the inevitable question from my family when I return home, no we cannot have a ferret.

I am immensely pleased to see such an important Bill receive parliamentary time. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Devon for all her hard work in securing and bringing forward the Bill. She is a powerful campaigner on ecological and environmental issues, and on animal welfare. I have immense respect for her. But I have to say that it is a damning indictment of just how far this Conservative Government have given up on governing. They have their own MPs legislating from the Back Benches via private Members' Bills, because Ministers refuse to pass an equivalent Bill in Government time.

The Tories repeatedly promised to progress the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, but failed to do so, abandoning ship after two Second Readings despite it supposedly being a key manifesto priority for those on the Tory Benches. Colleagues may recall that Labour attempted to revive the Bill last year. How foolish we were to assume that, just because it was in the Tory manifesto and promised repeatedly during the last election and by Tory Ministers countless times since, the Government would actually stick to their word. I am glad the

Government seem to be content with the Bill progressing, but it seems bizarre that they have to be reminded of a key plank of their own manifesto from one of their own MPs. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed), the shadow Environment Secretary said, it is as plain as day that the Conservatives have simply bottled it.

In contrast with this Tory Government, I am immensely proud of the contribution the previous Labour Government made to animal welfare. In 1997, Labour banned the practice of experimenting on great apes and introduced a ban on testing cosmetics on animals, extended to include cosmetic ingredients in 1998. Labour then passed the groundbreaking Fur Farming (Prohibition) Act 2000.

Maria Eagle: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way on that point, because it was my private Member's Bill that led to the 2000 Act. Although it was talked out on Report by then Opposition MPs who did not like the word "prohibition", it was adopted by the Labour Government and passed into law, which was a very good thing and led to a European-wide ban on fur farming.

Simon Lightwood: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention, and for all the work and effort she made to make that possible.

Labour passed the Hunting Act 2004, which banned the hunting with dogs of foxes, deer, hares and mink. We banned the use of drift nets in fishing, freeing dolphins, sea birds and other sea creatures from painful and cruel ensnarement. Labour's Animal Welfare Act 2006 saw, for the first time, animal owners responsible for ensuring that the welfare needs of their animals were met. Labour has a proud animal welfare legacy and it is a privilege to represent a constituency that continues to take these issues so very seriously.

This Bill will finally make provision for restrictions on the live importation of dogs, cats and ferrets, as originally attempted in the failed Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. I am pleased the Bill has the support of many others, including Pets at Home and Vets for Pets, who have long supported action on this issue and whom I recently visited. The conditions on importation set out in the Bill are vital for efforts to continue to drive up animal welfare standards in the UK. The Bill's banning of the importation of kittens and puppies under the age of six months, and dogs or cats that are more than 42 days pregnant, or which have been mutilated by ear cropping, declawing or tail docking, are welcome provisions that will bring a wave of relief to my constituents in Wakefield who care so passionately about this issue.

Touching briefly on cat smuggling, I am pleased that the Bill has the support of Cats Protection. Its research found that 50,000 cats were obtained overseas in 2022-23. Without stronger restrictions on import conditions, there is very little that we can do to ensure that these cats get the veterinary treatment they need for legal entry into this country. Without stronger laws, there is very little that we can do to ensure that a cat's travel conditions or point of origin were not traumatic, which is so often the case. Stress from long journeys is well documented and, as my husband has attested, can cause cats painful cystitis. It is critical for animal welfare that we get this right.

I particularly welcome the provisions for the regulation of the number of cats, dogs and ferrets that can be imported at a time per vehicle or foot passenger before it is deemed a commercial import. This is a vital part of the Bill that will go some way towards addressing the scourges of puppy and kitten smuggling and of animal mutilation, both of which blight our animal welfare reputation and actively harm the welfare of hundreds of animals every year.

I welcome the Bill, and I sincerely hope that the Government provide the parliamentary time for its progression.

11.5 am

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): It is a privilege and an honour to speak in this vital debate. I declare my strong personal and professional interest as a veterinary surgeon and a fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. I strongly support the Bill.

I have had to frantically rewrite the introduction to my speech, having heard my colleagues name-check their pets. I know that my two lovely dogs, Poppy and Juno, are following the debate closely, so I now have to name-check them. They would never forgive me if I did not, and I am sure that they would punish me by rolling in something unspeakable.

We are a nation of animal lovers. Animals provide us with so much companionship, and help our physical and mental wellbeing. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for driving forward this important Bill and colleagues across the House for supporting this important area of legislation over many years. I also commend many charities, institutions and organisations. The British Veterinary Association, Dogs Trust—I mention specifically Paula Boyden, its veterinary director, who has done so much work on this issue—Cats Protection, Blue Cross, Battersea, the RSPCA, Four Paws, the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation and the veterinary surgeon Marc Abraham have done so much on this issue.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has taken a close interest in this area for many years, and we have run various inquiries in recent years. One was about moving animals across borders, and we have a current inquiry on pet welfare and abuse, which deals with a lot of the issues that we are discussing today. We had an emergency special session this week on issues facing the veterinary sector, and we looked at biosecurity and animal welfare as well.

I welcome the fact that this Bill is about dogs, cats and ferrets, because it is important that we encompass all those animals. I also welcome the fact that the Bill will increase the minimum age on importation to six months. I note that some measures are not in the Bill, but also that we want to get this legislation on the statute book as soon as possible. I hope that the Government will bring in secondary legislation to add things as and when necessary. We need to keep the option open for future secondary legislation to include things such as reinstating the rabies titer checks and increasing the post-rabies vaccination wait time to 12 weeks. Such measures would help to reinforce the increase in the minimum age to six months.

I hugely welcome the change to the policy on heavily pregnant animals. On the EFRA Committee over the last few years, we have taken harrowing evidence of the

[Dr Neil Hudson]

awful trade in heavily pregnant animals being shipped into this country to give birth and then shipped back out again, sometimes with fresh suture wounds. It has been awful and harrowing to hear that evidence. Since 2019, Dogs Trust has taken in 168 pregnant dogs that have been transported. Currently, it is not permitted to transport dogs and cats in the last 10% of pregnancy. It is difficult to assess when that is, so including the last third of pregnancy in the ban is a very important step.

We need to keep a watching brief on whether unscrupulous traders are flipping between the non-commercial and commercial movement of animals, and whether we need to act on the commercial importation of pregnant animals as well. We have taken evidence showing that there are bad people shipping animals in. Over recent years, these unscrupulous traders have been switching between commercial and non-commercial movement, and when the authorities move one way, they move the other. We need to keep a watching brief on this.

I welcome that clause 4 states that a movement is not non-commercial if there are more than five animals per vehicle. That is very important. Many institutions and charities wanted the figure to be three per vehicle, but five per vehicle is an awful lot better than 20 per vehicle, because people were picking up passengers and saying, “These pets are with these passengers on board.” The five animals per vehicle rule will be a game changer.

It appears to me that clause 5 will allow Ministers to bring in secondary legislation, so we do need to keep a watching brief and to allow secondary legislation. When previous laws have come in, unscrupulous people have found loopholes that were not predicted by the legislators drawing them up, so we need to be able to act to close the loopholes.

There has been a lot of discussion today about the mutilation of dogs and cats, and the Bill will do much to tackle that. To be clear, ear cropping is an absolutely horrific practice that has no role in a civilised society. There is no medical or clinical benefit to the animal in having its ears cropped. As has been discussed, a lot of this is about how the dog looks—it makes them look more formidable or ferocious. There has been an upsurge in the prevalence of dogs with cropped ears; when we are walking around, we see these dogs now.

The Select Committee has also taken harrowing evidence on this practice. It is illegal in this country to crop a dog’s ears, but we have evidence that it has been taking place here. People are doing it in horrific circumstances, potentially in their back garden sheds. Looking online, we see that the situation is horrific; there are online ear cropping kits. We need to stamp that out as well. This law is important and it will help address that; it will close the loophole.

We must look at popular culture as well, including popular animated films. One of my favourite films that I watched with my children was the Disney Pixar film “Up”, which we all absolutely love, but if you look closely at the dogs in that film, you will see that many of them are cropped. If people are going to the cinema with their kids and seeing this on the big screen, it looks normal, and that is wrong. In the last couple of years, there was another hugely successful animated film, the “Super-Pets” movie. Again, the lead character was an

ear-cropped dog. Many people in our country who love their animals do not realise that ear cropping is not normal and want their dogs to look like that. Unfortunately, there is a popular and celebrity culture as well. We need to educate people that these dogs have been horrifically mutilated. The Bill will close that loophole.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon raised the important issue of brachycephalic dogs: dogs with very short faces that have real difficulty breathing. That is so important, because they are lovely and wonderful dogs but they have a lot of clinical difficulties. We need to do work to make sure that in the future breeding of these dogs, their noses become longer again so that they can breathe more easily. Again, this appears in popular culture and in the advertising of products. I will not name them, but a lot of major products use images of brachycephalic dogs in their advertising. We need to be very cautious about that.

Sarah Champion: May I draw the hon. Gentleman back to his previous profession? When a vet sees a dog that is unsuitable for breeding, does the hon. Gentleman think that the vet, instead of facilitating the breeding process, has a responsibility to say, “No, we’re not letting this go forward”?

Dr Hudson: I can give the hon. Lady a categorical reassurance that the veterinary profession is strongly looking at the issue very closely. It also has a role in educating the pet-owning public about where to source their dogs responsibly and to ensure that those dogs have a good and happy life. But yes, the veterinary profession is looking at this closely. What comes into frame with ear-cropped dogs is an upsurge in the past few years of unregulated canine fertility clinics, where acts of veterinary surgery are being performed by people who are not qualified. In future, we need to ensure that we strongly clamp down on those practices as well.

I am absolutely delighted that the Bill includes cats. The mutilations include those cats that have been horrifically declawed. There is no benefit to the cat in being declawed. The Bill will help an awful lot of cats.

In future, we need to look at whether secondary legislation is needed. We will ban the import of ear-cropped dogs, but we need to think, too, about banning the onward sale of those dogs in this country. However, I hope that the Bill will stop the importation, so that that may not be necessary. Again, we need to keep a watching brief.

Many colleagues today have talked about diseases. The importation of animals presents a risk to not only animals in this country, but people. One major disease that we are concerned about is canine brucellosis, caused by *Brucella canis*. There were 143 positive cases in dogs from 2020 to 2022 and 160 positive cases in 2023. There have been two laboratory-confirmed cases in people. This is a disease—zoonosis—that can be transmitted from dogs to people.

The Bill will ban the importation of heavily pregnant dogs. One of the main exposures to brucellosis is when a pregnant dog comes into the country and whelps here—the birthing fluids are a potential risk for people. Vets, nurses and practitioners on the frontline are at risk, as are owners. As I said, two people in this country have contracted the disease.

Brucellosis is an unpleasant disease for the dog. Treatment is not recommended; the prognosis is poor and often euthanasia is recommended. It is also an unpleasant illness in people, especially in vulnerable and immunocompromised people. It is a salient point to make that we need to be cognisant that laws like this will help the situation, because we have seen an increase of dogs coming in that have such diseases.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Given his experience as a vet, to what extent does he think that enforcement is an issue? I think that there is widespread support around the House for the provisions in the Bill, but enforcement is key. Does he think that that is getting better or worse?

Dr Hudson: Enforcement is pivotal. I chaired the EFRA Committee this week, in the Chair's absence, and we had a special session on issues facing the veterinary sector. We looked closely at biosecurity, animal health and welfare, and things like the Animal and Plant Health Agency. It is about being vigilant about diseases and monitoring them. Later in my speech, I will touch on how we can do more in that area.

On the importation of dogs, as we have said, in the UK people love their animals. A lot of people think that they are doing the right thing by importing and rescuing those dogs. We have seen a surge of dogs coming over from the continent of Europe—from eastern Europe, Macedonia and so on—and some of those dogs have had diseases like brucellosis and leishmaniasis, and that is where we need to be careful. People think that they are doing the dogs a favour, but unscrupulous people are probably rounding up street dogs to bring them over, when that does not benefit the dog in its own country. At the same time, we need to remember that we have animal welfare charities in this country absolutely full of lovely dogs that need to be rehomed. People in this country can do a better thing by seeking their dogs, cats and other pets from such charities.

May I give a huge shout out and say thank you to all those animal welfare charities and shelters that do so much to rescue these animals? We have seen a real upsurge in pet ownership through the pandemic—people talk about pandemic puppies. People took on animals in different circumstances, and now many have gone back to work and cannot deal with them. Many of these animals were not socialised. In the EFRA Committee inquiry, we have seen an increase in behavioural issues, with animal welfare charities picking up the slack. I pay tribute to those charities; they have a really important and stressful job, and we are very lucky to have them.

We need to keep vigilant when it comes to biosecurity. We should think about introducing secondary legislation on pre-importation checks for dogs, so that we can check them for brucella canis when they come in.

In 2012, the EU stopped the mandatory treatment against ticks and tapeworms in some animals coming in. Now that we have left the European Union, we have the opportunity to reinstate that mandatory treatment. Let me illustrate how that could be important. Madam Deputy Speaker, just up the road from your constituency in Epping Forest is Harlow. A few years ago, a dog picked up babesiosis on a walk in Harlow. The dog had never been out of the country, so had picked up that disease from a tick in a field in Harlow, Essex. Obviously,

a dog had gone out of the country, or come back in, and had not been treated, dropped the tick and a dog here got that disease. That illustrates how a simple change through secondary legislation could protect dogs in this country. That is something that we need to consider.

We have talked a lot about biosecurity, and we have mentioned today the Animal and Plant Health Agency, which does fantastic work in keeping our country safe. It has dealt with incredible threats in recent years: it has been tackling avian influenza; it is working closely on bovine tuberculosis; and now there is the increasing threat of bluetongue, which the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) is looking at very closely. As the midge season approaches, this virus will put everyone under pressure. Again, I pay tribute to those people on the frontline who are trying to do so much to keep the animal and plant health of our nations safe and, indirectly, human public health as well.

The Minister knows where I am going with this. We had the chief veterinary officer in front of the EFRA Committee this week, again reaffirming the importance of upgrading and doing a full refurbishment of the APHA headquarters in Weybridge. It needs a £2.8 billion refurbishment, which is a lot of money when we are financially constrained as a country, but that money needs to be spent because it will save a lot of heartache and money in the future. I urge the Government to move forward on that; we need to be prepared.

Now that we have left the European Union, there has been much talk about enforcement and checks of animals coming in. Prior to our leaving the EU, these animals were coming in with no checks at all, so we have a real opportunity now to strengthen our biosecurity. There is now the border target operating model, which has been the subject of many questions. Our Select Committee is taking a close interest in that, so we have been down to Dover. As I said, we have an opportunity now to strengthen our biosecurity and we must get it right. We must fund it right and staff it properly. We need to make sure that we inform these bad people—the unscrupulous people who will try to unpick this legislation and find loopholes—that there will be random checks on ports to make sure that, if they are coming in on a weekend, on a different day or through a different port, they could be detected. That will protect animal health and welfare in this country.

I digress a little, but we have talked a lot about animal health and welfare and cropped dogs, so let me mention the XL Bully dog, which has had an awful lot of ear cropping. The Government have now introduced, in my view, the necessary legislation to protect people and other animals from some of those dogs. Some are fine, but some are really very dangerous indeed. I am very appreciative of the Government, including the Secretary of State and Ministers for listening to me, the BVA and the EFRA Committee on extending the neutering deadline for young dogs under seven months at the end of January this year. The neutering deadline has been extended to June 2025. That might seem a small point, but it is important for exempted registered XL Bully dogs. There will be health benefits—if they are spayed or castrated too early, they have clinical difficulties—and this will relieve pressure on the veterinary sector moving forward.

[*Dr Hudson*]

I am glad to welcome the legislation. The Conservative Government have a strong record on animal welfare, as we: passed the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022; instituted the Animal Sentience Committee; introduced the Sentencing Act 2020, which increased sentences for cruelty to animals; introduced compulsory microchipping of cats; and banned the keeping of primates as pets. We also have further Bills coming in, including on pet theft and livestock worrying.

We are a nation of animal lovers. We have the highest animal welfare standards in the world. With Bills like this, we can be a beacon to the rest of the world. Animal welfare unites us in humanity and across the House. As a Member of Parliament and a veterinary surgeon, I welcome the Bill, which has my full support.

11.26 am

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for introducing the Bill. I join everyone else who has spoken in support of it.

People in Croydon love their pets. We are lucky enough to be one of the greenest London boroughs with beautiful parks, as people will know. We have thousands of animal lovers and pets in our borough. As has already been mentioned, during the covid pandemic, there was a big increase in the number of people deciding that they wanted a cat or a dog. Croydon has seen a large increase in the same way. We need to ensure that, when people get a cat or a dog—or, indeed, a ferret, about which we learned much from my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon)—things are done in the right way, and they are not buying an animal that has been illegally smuggled into the country.

Other Labour Members have pointed to the Labour Government's record on animal welfare. My right hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) herself introduced legislation. In 1997, I was working for a Labour MP, and we were introducing the banning of foxhunting. I remember that we received literally hundreds of handwritten letters—we did not really use email back then—from people who were desperate to see an end to foxhunting, cosmetic testing and all the other things for which legislation was introduced under the last Labour Government.

I join colleagues in their disappointment that the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was not passed. We are grateful to the hon. Member for North Devon for bringing in some measures that we can all support. Like other Members, many of my constituents have written, asking me to support the Bill. Jan, a big supporter of Cats Protection who writes to me often, says that according to the Cats Protection stats of 2023, 50,000 cats were obtained from an overseas source in the 12 months preceding its survey. Of course, it is unclear what condition those cats or kittens were subjected to during their travel.

When I was shadow Policing Minister, I would talk to senior police officers up and down the country about crime in their areas, and I heard increasingly about the smuggling of pets. I remember talking to a senior police officer in the north-east who said that they were dealing with very serious and large criminal gangs, with

a presence across multiple countries, who would smuggle people, drugs, vapes and pets—it was big business. Of course, there was not much enforcement to stop that practice from happening.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case. If someone smuggling drugs or arms is caught, the penalties are severe. For smuggling kittens or puppies, the penalties are virtually non-existent, let alone the enforcement.

Sarah Jones: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. If someone is caught smuggling drugs or people, they face years in prison. From the information I have looked at, if the police do a sting—they do so sometimes, although not often, because they do not have the resources—and manage to catch someone who has been smuggling pets into the country illegally, that person will be looking at a couple of months' imprisonment as a maximum, and probably not even that. For a criminal gang managing the risks, it is a worthwhile crime to introduce the puppies into this country, particularly given that their cost can run into several thousand pounds each. We need to do more to get rid of and stamp down on this practice. I welcome the Bill's provisions, but, as other Members have said, I think we need to go further on enforcement and other measures.

I want to briefly touch on my journey trying to buy and getting a pet. During the covid pandemic, my children were pushing me to get a dog, while my husband was very against it, which I think is not uncommon in families. My children finally won the argument, and we decided to get a dog. I had not bought an animal before and I realised that the whole situation was a bit of a minefield. The first thing I did was to go online, where there are hundreds of websites selling pets, and I had no idea where they had come from or what their quality of life had been so far, nor whether they had been brought into this country legally or not. Pets4Homes is a big site; and Gumtree sells thousands of pets, as do puppies.co.uk and foreverpuppy.co.uk.

I looked on many different sites and did not know what I was looking for, nor how to avoid doing something I should not. I looked at some charities, which provide really useful information on what to do and what not to do; Dogs Trust has particularly good information about what to avoid. I found out that I needed to see good pictures of the animal with its mother, and to ring up the person who was selling it and have a conversation with them. I then needed to go and see the animal, make sure its mother and father were there, and look at the surroundings. On several occasions, that meant I was able to pick up on something slightly dodgy. I reported several cases because I could not see the animal's mother or its background, and the owner was not asking me anything about my background; it did not feel right. I also reported a seller when I went to visit some puppies in a flat, because the flat was immaculate and there was no evidence that anyone was living there—there was just a crate of puppies and a man. I was just not comfortable that the situation was what it should have been, so I reported the situation.

Samantha Dixon: Is my hon. Friend aware of a recent "Coronation Street" storyline on precisely this issue? It involved the indomitable Evelyn, who is, of course,

played by Maureen Lipman, and covered the issues around puppy farming. It was a strong, educational storyline in a well-watched and much-loved soap opera, and illustrates my hon. Friend's point exactly.

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent intervention. "Coronation Street", like all the soaps, does quite a good job in helping to educate us about some of these issues.

I had to look online for information to ensure I was making the right choices. We ended up finding somebody who had brought a rescue dog over from Ukraine and had realised that the dog was pregnant, which they had not known at the time. The dog gave birth to only one puppy, which is quite rare and often means that the dog has had some maltreatment. We adopted that puppy, who was born in this country, with the mother having been brought over from Ukraine.

Lots of constituents have been in touch about this issue and lots of Members have given statistics showing why it is important that we take action. We are talking about a multimillion-pound industry across countries, with UK sales of up to 2 million puppies annually and a value of anything up to £2 billion. Some 50% of the industry is illegal or unlicensed. As the illegal trade has changed, so have its production systems. We were given many helpful briefings, from many organisations, for this debate. One from Battersea tells us that

"farms breeding puppies on an industrial scale are just as likely to be found in urban tower blocks, or warehouses in Eastern Europe, as they are in ramshackle, shivering cold, and filthy cages in sheds and shacks on repurposed smallholdings."

A Four Paws report on the illegal puppy trade in the UK found that more than 30% of imported puppies were from Romania alone. According to respondents to Cats Protection's "Cats and Their Stats" 2023 survey, 3% of the cats that were obtained in the 12 months preceding the survey were from abroad, which equates to 50,000 cats—there was no clarity as to the conditions.

As has been said, puppies and kittens that are imported too young face a much higher risk of developing illnesses or suffering an early death. I should have congratulated the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), who made an excellent speech and knows much more about this and the impact that these things can have on our animals. I listened with great interest and learnt a lot during his speech. Raising the age minimum in this regard will allow animals to grow older and it will protect them a bit more from travelling long and stressful journeys. It would be welcome and would stop a lot of the sales of those very young pets; we do see that online and it is easy to find, with multiple adverts where young puppies or kittens are being advertised as four, five or six weeks old and ready for homing.

As I have said, puppy smuggling is an unchecked criminal activity, which causes suffering to animals and heartache and financial cost to their owners. It helps fund wider organised crime and presents an evidenced disease transmission threat. My constituents are very pleased with the hon. Member for North Devon for introducing this legislation. We have talked a lot about enforcement and the concerns that a piece of legislation is only as good as the enforcement that goes with it. The enforcement of existing laws and regulations is not adequate, so I have significant questions about enforcement.

However, the Bill is a step on the journey in the right direction, and, on behalf of the dog, cat and ferret lovers in Croydon, I welcome it.

11.38 am

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Let me start by giving many congratulations to my dear and good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on introducing this excellent Bill. I know from the hundreds of emails I receive every year on this subject that my constituents are animal lovers who are passionate about animal welfare. In line with the tradition observed this morning, I will name the three dogs I own: Lucky, who was a rescue dog, is otherwise known as @lucksthepatterjack on Instagram and has more followers than I do; Lulu, a retired guide dog and the most intelligent dog ever; and Brooke, our adopted dog, who is possibly the most loving and placid of dogs, so much so that she continues to wag her tail while throwing up on the carpet. As the proud owner of those three dogs, I share the views of my constituents and so welcome the ambitious reforms that the Government have introduced since 2010, including the mandatory microchipping of dogs and cats, and the modernisation of the licensing system for dog breeding and pet sales, to name just two.

The low-welfare movement of dogs, cats and ferrets from abroad to the UK by unscrupulous people seeking to maximise their profits at the expense of the animals is horrendous and must be stopped. Sadly, the trade is big business. A joint briefing I received from Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Cats Protection, the Dogs Trust, FOUR PAWS UK and the RSPCA said:

"the puppy trade has become a multi-million, trans-national industry, with UK sales of up to two million puppies annually at a value of anything up to £3 billion. However, as much as 50% of this industry is either illegal or unlicensed and off the enforcement radar, and half of that originates from outside the UK."

More concerningly, animal smuggling is part of a much wider web of criminality. The charities confirm that

"within the trade, other criminality converges, including drug dealing, money laundering and even people trafficking."

I was therefore pleased to stand on a manifesto at the last election that committed us to cracking down on the illegal smuggling of animals, and I welcomed the repetition of that commitment in the Government's 2021 action plan for animal welfare.

This Bill will enact the Government's commitment and restrict the movement of dogs, cats and ferrets into the UK on grounds of animal welfare—for example, if they are under six months old, are mutilated, such as by having their ears cropped, or are heavily pregnant. That is essential, as many of those animals are bred and reared in appalling conditions. That was highlighted by a number of my constituents, who raised the abhorrent practice of ear cropping. They said:

"The RSPCA has experience that shows that this has been done on puppies without any veterinary intervention or anaesthetic, which can result in long term pain and trauma. Cutting a dog's ears can also harm their ability to communicate, meaning their social skills are impaired for life. After everything they've endured, a dog's behaviour can also be impacted."

Rightly, the Bill also addresses the issue of commercial imports being disguised as non-commercial movements, which allows breeders to avoid complying with the more stringent requirements in place for commercial

[Jane Hunt]

imports. I am very pleased that clause 4 sets out the restrictions, and I am grateful for the number of dogs allowed, as I occasionally take my dogs to France, where my mother lives.

No one should be able to profit off the distress of animals. Combined, these reforms will go a long way to safeguard vulnerable animals and disrupt a supply chain that helps fund serious criminal activity. It will also cement the UK's position as a country with some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world.

I welcome the fact that the Bill not only has the support of the Government but the backing of a number of important animal welfare charities, including the Dogs Trust, which I have had the pleasure of visiting in my constituency. I add my support to the Bill, and I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon—and Henry the dog—for bringing forward the Bill and speaking so passionately on the issue.

11.42 am

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on bringing forward this important bill.

Feltham and Heston is a community of animal lovers, and animal welfare is one of the issues that is constantly prevalent in my inbox—I am sure it is the same for colleagues. Constituency-level polling shows that two thirds of my constituents feel that animal welfare should be a priority for political parties. I thank my constituents Judith Ross, Brenda Pugh, Elaine Fogarty, Shirley O'Leary, Jacqui Meades and many others for their consistent championing of animal rights.

The hon. Lady made a very strong case for reform in support of animal health and welfare, and to tackle the exploitation of very vulnerable animals. Changes introduced by the previous Labour Government left an indelible mark on British history and have stood the test of time. They include the bans on fox hunting and fur farming and the action taken to stop experimentation on great apes and cosmetics testing on animals. The belief in protecting animal welfare, shared by the Labour party and colleagues from across the House, is a matter of principle and conviction.

My constituents were rightly appalled that the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, a 2019 manifesto commitment, was shelved by the Conservative Government and that Conservative MPs also voted against Labour's plan, which I supported, to ensure that the Bill had parliamentary time last June. It is important that we are now having this debate and I am proud to have attended this week's Dogs Trust event, which was sponsored by the hon. Member for North Devon. That highlighted its decade of work on ending puppy smuggling. I thank it for all that it does.

Although I congratulate the hon. Member on introducing today's Bill, which clearly has cross-party support, it is puzzling that it is the responsibility of Back Benchers to bring in this important legislation. It can hardly be said that we have a crowded legislative agenda in the House. There should be enough Government time to necessitate this. These issues were also raised by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in 2016, 2019 and

2021. Given that the Government have been so enthusiastic about taking advantage of Brexit bonuses when they relate to sacking striking nurses, scrapping consumer rights or undermining environmental protections, it beggars belief that it has taken so long for us to have proposals on much-needed and uncontroversial tweaks to the EU pet travel scheme.

The Bill will close three important loopholes in the pet travel rules that apply to non-commercial movements to prevent unscrupulous traders from exploiting the rules. Puppy, kitten and ferret smuggling is a significant problem that causes immense pain and huge distress to the animals affected. It is a widespread and horrifying practice.

In 2019, Dogs Trust told the EFRA Committee that as many as 450,000 puppies each year come from unknown sources. Investigations conducted by Four Paws have revealed that almost a third of surveyed classified ads related to puppies illegally imported from eastern Europe. These puppies are often bred in puppy farms, removed from their mothers before they turn eight weeks old, and subject to horrific mutilation practices such as ear cropping or docking tails. Dogs Trust told that story again so powerfully this week. They may also be subject to abuse in transit, with puppies sometimes as young as four weeks imported into the UK, often travelling across Europe in cramped conditions without food, exercise or toilet breaks and minimal water. They are then sold to unsuspecting owners, making huge profit for the smugglers. Given the poor condition in which these dogs are raised, many then face serious and chronic health problems and socialisation issues.

The Bill will ensure that smugglers cannot subject puppies to mutilation practices, further cracking down on these cruel practices that are illegal in the UK and the EU. I acknowledge the powerful contributions that have been made today, which include points about the illegal trade and, importantly, the awareness of where the mothers and fathers have come from and their welfare, as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) said. There were also important contributions from the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) about diseases that come with illegal importation. We are all indebted to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) for her discussion of ferrets, including her challenging some of the myths and highlighting the character and companionship of ferrets.

I also want to speak to some broader issues that are important to consider in the context of the Bill. I particularly want to mention XL Bullies, because I have had representations from some very concerned constituents. I will mention some of the issues that they have shared with me. It has been suggested that the Government dropped the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill because there are wider issues that need to be considered, and individual reforms cannot always be considered in isolation. All animals deserve to live high-quality lives, and it is important that we have open and honest debates about the challenges that we still need to address. The fact that animals have a right to live high-quality lives is the reason why the last Labour Government passed the landmark Animal Welfare Act 2006, which was led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Dame Margaret Beckett).

On XL Bullies, there have been calls to review the implementation of changes to the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and breed-specific legislation. Written evidence was submitted in October by the Dog Control Coalition, which comprises Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Blue Cross, the British Veterinary Association, Dogs Trust, Hope Rescue, RSPCA and others. It recognises the importance of taking action and the deep concern about recent dog-bite incidents, their horrific consequences, and the injuries and deaths that have occurred. There is a clear need to tackle that issue, but there are concerns that simply banning a breed, for which there may be limited verifiable evidence, will not necessarily tackle the root causes of such incidents.

There is acknowledgment that the larger the breed, the greater the capacity for harm if the dog displays aggressive behaviour. However, there can be a false assumption that all other dogs are safe, when the reality is that any dog could have the capacity to be dangerous if irresponsibly bred, reared and socialised. The Dog Control Coalition has raised concerns about the potential consequences of breed-specific legislation, which could impact on far more dogs and owners than intended, and lead to many thousands of dogs that are behaviourally and medically sound being put to sleep, as they would be included in a broad standard, even if they are cross-breeds. The coalition also raised concerns about the enforceability of a ban, and about the surge in demand for the involvement of police, local authorities, veterinary clinics, and rescue and rehoming organisations.

Maria Eagle: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Before the right hon. Lady intervenes and the hon. Lady goes further down this route, let me say that I have a personal, passionate interest in this subject. I am paying great attention to what the hon. Lady is saying, and she has rather moved away from the context of the Bill.

Maria Eagle: Does my hon. Friend agree that many XL Bully dogs are imported illegally? That is one of the reasons why what she is saying is in order. I hope you agree, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Seema Malhotra: My right hon. Friend is correct, and it is important that these issues are considered more widely.

Illegal breeding means that we cannot be sure about the safety of pets that people may purchase in good faith, and there will be challenges with how they have been bred and looked after. You may be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we have much by way of illegal, backstreet breeders, and that is not just in the UK. There ought to be more regulation of breeding. Backstreet breeders in this country can breed three litters a year without a licence, so could end up with 30 pups a year being sold at £5,000 each, with those dogs reared to be aggressive. In fact, in the light of the recent ban, how it is being reviewed and how it is being enforced, other, more aggressive dog breeds are being bred through backstreet breeders.

My constituents have raised some concerns on what we know about pets and where they may have come from. They have also raised the devastating impact of having a pet—a member of the family—at risk of being

put down. I have had constituents in tears who say they have come under the scope of the legislation and can no longer transport their dog in their car if they are driving alone, and they live alone with their dog.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to have to interrupt the hon. Lady. There is a great deal of meat in this Bill, which she and I both understand very well indeed, but she really is going very wide of the subject. Could I please bring her back to the subject of the Bill under discussion this morning?

Seema Malhotra: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was going to conclude my remarks there. I wholeheartedly welcome the Bill and the opportunity to look at the wider issues. When the Bill passes, as I hope it will, we must ensure that it will be successful in achieving its goals as well as being a catalyst for addressing the wider issues in this context.

11.57 am

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be called to speak and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on this vital animal welfare Bill. As a proud patron of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation and a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group, this issue is very close to my heart. Twelve years ago, I was duped and sold dogs by what I now realise were clever puppy smugglers. I want to highlight what happened to me to show how the work that the Government have done since has really made a difference.

I had lost my beloved rescue dog—in my lifetime, we have rescued a couple of dozen dogs, often having three at a time—who was killed in a traffic accident in the country. I was in bits. My mother found another ruby cavalier online—it looked legitimate—and took me to go and see this young puppy. On arriving, we were greeted by two men, who told us that their mother, a responsible breeder, was upstairs and sadly about to pass away. The whole cottage we were in was set up like an elderly lady's home—it had pictures, chintz and all those homely surroundings—but I did notice that the dogs were not happy; they looked distressed.

We went to see a ruby cavalier who was eight weeks old—he looked quite ordinary—but another dog there, who was six months old, was catatonic. He was staring at the floor, did not react and did not interact. However, when either of the men went near him, he shook and was visibly terrified. My mother and I left with both dogs. When someone tells you there is a terminally ill elderly lady upstairs, you do not ask questions about seeing the mother or make those ordinary checks. We were suspicious but wanted to believe that we had not been duped.

Months later, I met someone else with cavaliers who had been told exactly the same story by those people four years before. This clever scam had evidently been going on for some time. It took perhaps three years for the catatonic dog to be able to interact when out on walks. I cannot imagine what he had gone through while being smuggled and taken away from his mother. It is an horrific trade.

I campaigned for Lucy's law before I was a Member, and I met Lucy the cavalier and her owner, Lisa. I commend their campaigning, and the campaigning of

[Jane Stevenson]

so many other rescue dog owners, to clamp down on this abominable trade that has upset so many dogs and so many owners. My constituents in Wolverhampton North East send me so many emails about dog and cat welfare—less so about ferret welfare, but I am sure that ferret lovers across the land will be reassured by this Bill.

The recent campaigns about which my constituents have written to me include greyhound racing. Monmore Green stadium in Wolverhampton recently closed its motorcycle speedway in order to accommodate more greyhound racing, and I urge the Minister not to let Wolverhampton become the home of UK greyhound racing, which is driven by online betting in the far east that has no benefit to my constituency but promotes some questionable welfare practices.

I will not speak for long, because I know that so many Members want to talk in this debate. This Bill will clamp down on evil puppy smugglers who transport pregnant dogs across borders. I have been told that often, if it is a profitable breed, smugglers will ship over a pregnant dog and then take her back abroad, before starting again. These poor female dogs are being used to create mountains of money for unscrupulous people. The price of dogs rocketed during the pandemic, and we know that pedigree dogs can fetch thousands of pounds—the price has increased tenfold in some cases.

I thank everyone, especially the hon. Member for North Devon, for their contributions. We are all united on animal welfare. I commend the Minister for the Government's work, and I urge him to push even further by supporting the many private Members' Bills on animal welfare. My Glue Traps (Offences) Act 2022 will thankfully come into force this year, and we all want the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill to be adopted and on the statute book as quickly as possible.

12.2 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to speak in support of the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill.

This Bill, and the issues that it seeks to tackle, is very important to many of my constituents in Ealing North. Since I was elected, I have been contacted nearly 900 times about specific campaigns to strengthen our country's animal welfare legislation, including on the Bill before us today and other important pieces of animal welfare legislation, from the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill to the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill.

Passing this legislation is an important priority for many of my constituents. I am therefore glad to be here today to speak in support of the Bill, which includes measures to raise the minimum age of imported dogs and cats to six months, as well as banning the importation of dogs and cats that are more than 42 days pregnant or that are mutilated. In this context, mutilation means, for example, dogs that have had their ears cropped or tail docked, and cats that have been declawed.

I have long supported a ban on the importation of cats and dogs under the age of six months or over 42 days pregnant. Like many other hon. Members, I had hoped that the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill,

introduced in 2021, would address these issues. That Bill included provisions to limit the number of dogs, cats or ferrets that can be moved on a non-commercial basis, and to set restrictions on the condition of animals that can be brought into the country. As we know, the Bill was carried over into the subsequent parliamentary Session, but the Government announced in May 2023 that the Bill would not proceed further in its current form. Like many of my constituents, I was very disappointed when the Government dropped that Bill. I supported an Opposition motion to bring it back to Parliament, as drafted, but the Government voted it down. That decision was not what I wanted, nor what my constituents and our dedicated animal welfare charities wanted, and it delayed the introduction of legislation. However, it is welcome that this Bill is being debated here today, with support from Members on both sides of the House, and I am pleased to be here to support it.

I know that my constituents are far from alone in wanting to see legislation such as this in place. Many Members have expressed that view today, and data from a 2023 survey conducted by YouGov on behalf of Dogs Trust showed that 83% of voters believe that the UK Government should

“crack down on the illegal smuggling of dogs into the UK”.

We know that the importation of cats and dogs is a problem on a significant scale: in 2020, the Government reported that some 6,768 cats and 66,952 dogs had been commercially imported into the UK. The Bill seeks to address the problem by enabling the national authorities in each of the UK's four nations to make regulations that would help to protect the welfare of dogs, cats and ferrets by imposing conditions on their importation into the UK.

As we have heard from the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), whom I congratulate, the regulations introduced under the Bill would prohibit the importation of puppies or kittens under six months old, and that of dogs or cats that are more than 42 days pregnant or have been mutilated. Furthermore, the Bill would address the problem of commercial imports being disguised as non-commercial ones by limiting the number of dogs, cats and ferrets that can be imported to five per vehicle or three per foot passenger.

I understand that a key difference between this Bill and the kept animals Bill that the Government dropped last year is that this Bill specifies what the regulations must include—namely the prohibition of the importation of animals that are less than six months old, more than 42 days pregnant, or mutilated. The kept animals Bill enabled those limits to be determined when the regulations were made, and I am pleased that this Bill makes the provisions more explicit at this stage.

I am pleased to be here to support the Bill, because strengthening our animal welfare laws is a priority for me and many other Members. However, beyond the important legislation that we are debating now, I believe that there are many other aspects of animal welfare that need to be addressed through the introduction of stronger laws. Let me give an example of the context in which the Bill sits. I believe that there should be measures to prevent the theft of cats and dogs, and I therefore welcome the Pet Abduction Bill, which was introduced in 2023. It would create offences of dog abduction and cat abduction, and it includes powers to make similar provision for other pets.

Although dogs and cats are now sentient beings under the law, there is no specific offence of pet theft; because animals fall under the definition of property, the offence is treated in much the same way as the theft of an inanimate object. I find it worrying that, while sentencing can take into account the emotional impact on the human victim, the financial worth of the dog or cat is the biggest factor. In my view, the punishment does not come close to fitting the crime or to acting as a deterrent. Pet theft is not a simple matter of theft of an item, nor should it be treated as such by the law. I know that losing a pet can cause great emotional pain. I declare an interest: I think of how I would feel if our cat at home, Orna, were to be stolen. I firmly support the Pet Abduction Bill, as well as measures to improve it—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I have to impress on hon. Members that the Bill under discussion is concerned with the legal importing of puppies, kittens and ferrets. Will the hon. Gentleman please stick to the subject under debate?

James Murray: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Having given that contextual example, I will return to the main subject of the debate.

I know from my constituents how important it is for all aspects of animal welfare to be addressed. In my home borough, we are lucky enough to have the annual Ealing animals fair, which took place for the 45th time earlier this month. I was very glad to be able to attend, and I want to thank all those involved, particularly Dr Marion Garnett, for putting on such an important event year after year. I know that those at the fair would be among the first to say that the Bill is much needed, and also that many other aspects of animal welfare legislation need attention.

I am pleased to be playing my part today in supporting the Bill, and I look forward to its making progress as swiftly as possible and becoming law.

12.9 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I strongly welcome the Bill, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on introducing it. By banning the importation of puppies and kittens that are under six months old and that of dogs and cats that are mutilated or heavily pregnant, it will improve animal welfare. It will also address the abuse of non-commercial rules that compromise animal treatment and biosecurity. The intentions behind the Bill are endorsed across the House and by my constituents, and tackling this illicit trade is a manifesto commitment.

As a cat owner, I know the joy that pets bring. As my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) said, owning a pet became a lot more popular during the pandemic. But why are imported pets so popular? Gangs promote fashionable breeds, buyers are misled about the animal's background, and many buyers are seemingly unaware of the hidden risks involved, which often lead to animal abandonment. The RSPCA has reported that such abandonment incidents are up by nearly 50% on three years ago. My local RSPCA rehoming centre has many pets up for adoption, and I was reading my local *Lynn News* this morning and two cats are featured, Finley and Joshua, who are looking for a new home, and there are many dogs too. I

encourage anyone looking for a pet to explore the rehoming centres near them; my cat Hetty is a rescue cat, and I firmly encourage people to do that.

We urgently need to introduce the powers in this Bill to reduce the number of pets illegally coming into the country and to minimise animal suffering. Four Paws, the RSPCA, Cats Protection, Dogs Trust and Battersea found that as many as 30 puppies being sold online had been illegally imported into the UK. Cats Protection's "cats and their stats" survey in 2023 found that 50,000 cats had been imported. Bringing in puppies and kittens at such a young age means that their immune system cannot withstand infection.

It is time to end this abusive trade. I pay tribute to all the pet charities who campaigned long and hard for this legislation and again commend my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon for bringing the legislation forward today.

12.11 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): This Bill is deeply welcome and I particularly support the measures to prevent pet smuggling, although I fail to understand why the Government pulled the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill and instead are using precious private Members' Bills to pass the same necessary legislation.

The puppy trade has become worth up to £3 billion in the UK with the sale of up to 2 million puppies annually, and as much as 50% of the industry is illegal or unlicensed. I also want to speak on the issue of cat and kitten smuggling; I apologise to my right hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) but I will not be talking about ferrets in this part of the speech. I strongly believe that cats and kittens must be given parity with dogs from the outset in any new legislation.

Cats Protection's 2023 report highlights that an estimated 50,000 cats acquired in the 12 months preceding the survey came from an overseas source. The charity says that it is unclear whether any health and welfare checks were done on those cats or what conditions they were subjected to during travel, meaning that some may have arrived in the UK in an extremely poor state of health or carrying infectious diseases that they could pass on to other cats. Many felines also become very stressed during long journeys, leading to related illnesses such as cystitis.

Cats Protection believes there is a heightened risk of kitten smuggling due to the increasing popularity of high-value pedigree breeds, which can be sold for thousands of pounds, and this demand is rising. According to its report, there has been a significant rise in pure breed and pedigree cats; 42% of the cats obtained in the last 12 months were pedigree or purebred, compared with 17% more than five years ago. Higher prices and increasing demand make these cats an attractive target for illegal importation by those wishing to make a quick profit.

I add at this point, both to Members and to everybody listening, that our rescue cats need homes. Many have said that I am a she-cat, and I am mother to Stanley, who came from Cat-CHING, a Rotherham and Sheffield charity, and to Mia Cat and Sue from Cats Protection. Rescue cats are fantastic pets and they need our support; owners do not need to spend a fortune on them and they get the support of the charity.

[Sarah Champion]

Let me change the tone and speak about the horrific mutilation of declawing cats. The kept animals Bill included positive steps to limit the importation of dogs with mutilations including ear cropping, but, concerningly, cats with mutilations were not included in the proposals. The most notable omission was the vile declawing procedure, which is extremely painful and distressing and prevents cats from exhibiting normal scratching behaviour. It is basically the equivalent of amputating a human fingertip at the first knuckle, and it is already illegal in the UK. I therefore give credit to the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), as her Bill prohibits the importation of dogs and cats who have been mutilated.

I strongly support the Bill, as I believe that it will go a long way to protect our beloved dogs and cats from pet smugglers looking to exploit them for profit. I commend the hon. Member for her commitment to that cause.

12.15 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I will speak for only a short time today. Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on all her campaigning and her championing of this Bill. She has been fantastic all the way through, and the Bill will help us to meet our manifesto commitment to crack down on the illegal smuggling of dogs and puppies.

I also put on the record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) for all the incredible expertise that he has shared over the two years that I have been in this place. Like many other colleagues present, I have learned a great deal from his veterinary experience.

The United Kingdom and this Conservative Government can be proud of our record on animal welfare. We have some of the strongest protections in the world. Colleagues are right to highlight the excellent progress that has been made and, while we have been in government, we have already made microchipping mandatory for dogs and cats, helping to reunite lost pets with their owners; protected service animals by introducing Finn's law; and tightened the sales of puppies and kittens with Lucy's law. We have also introduced tougher sentencing for animal cruelty, an issue that many of my constituents are passionate about. We have banned the use of wild animals in circuses, and introduced one of the toughest bans in the world on ivory sales. However, we can and must go further.

Since being elected to this place, strengthening animal welfare protections has been a priority of mine. Indeed, I made my maiden speech during the passage of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 on this issue, which is a priority of mine not only as an animal lover, but because of the great passion that many of my constituents in Old Bexley and Sidcup have for their pets. Over the course of my two years in this place, I have received well over 3,000 emails from constituents on animal welfare and related issues. That is almost four emails every single day. From the range of animal welfare charities that I work with, as well as from the thousands of constituents who continue to contact me, I know that they are increasingly concerned about the

emerging markets, which involve the importation of heavily pregnant dogs and cats, and those that have been mutilated.

Of course, we would all have liked to see the Bill sooner, but I am glad that it has the support of the Government, as well as mine. It aims finally to end that barbaric practice and trade. The Bill will rightly ramp up the fight against the cruel puppy smuggling trade and will bring an end to the suffering of the countless dogs caught up in it, which often come from eastern European countries.

Since 2014, Dogs Trust—a brilliant charity that I have met multiple times—has been doing fantastic work to advance the protection of dogs in particular, and it has been exposing the widespread abuse of the pet travel scheme. The scheme was designed for those taking their own pets on holiday with them, but instead it has been used as a cover for those who smuggle puppies across borders. Luckily for many of those poor dogs, Dogs Trust has taken care of more than 3,000 illegally imported puppies, which, if they had been sold to unsuspecting members of the public, would have made approximately £4.5 million for criminal importers.

From my own visits and from my work outside this place, I know that Battersea Dogs & Cats Home in London also does fantastic work in this area. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), who is sat in front of me, talked about the importance of rescues, and we should always try to take a rescue whenever we can.

We can all list the many brilliant veterinary groups and charities in this area, such as Battersea, Cats Protection, Four Paws, the RSPCA and of course the brilliant Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation. Rather than continue to list them all, Mr Deputy Speaker—I know you have a particular interest in this area from your fantastic work over the years—I would instead say thank you to each of them for the wonderful work they continue to do in raising awareness in this place and across the country for those animals who need our protection. Whether it be in Old Bexley and Sidcup or North Devon, across the United Kingdom we are a nation of animal lovers.

I am sure that many of my constituents would agree word for word with my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon when she says that pets are family, not property. It is horrific to hear stories of puppies being smuggled across the border and the poor conditions they have to endure. That is why, on behalf of my constituents in Old Bexley and Sidcup, I welcome the Bill and will continue to support it at every stage of its journey on to the statute book.

12.19 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on bringing the Bill forward and on coming up in the private Members' Bill ballot. That is not easy—it has only happened to me once in 26 years—so she has done well.

The hon. Lady has picked an issue that is very important to many Members from across the House. I can say for sure that over the years I have been a Member—as I say, it is now 26 years—the postbag I have received, either by letter or more recently by email,

text and social media, has been overwhelmingly dominated by those constituents who write to me about improving animal welfare. I suspect my experience is not dissimilar to that of many other Members, and that we all get a big postbag from our constituents raising animal welfare issues. We are indeed a nation of animal lovers, so she has done well to select this issue. I am not being unpleasant to her if I say that she seems to have had some help with the drafting. Given the issue's complications, that is probably a good thing. I am sure the Government have improved on the drafting of the more comprehensive animal welfare Bill that they withdrew, which included some of these issues.

I can compliment the hon. Lady on one other thing, before I move on to the substance of the Bill, which is that she is implementing a manifesto commitment of her party. That is more than the Government have managed to do so far from their own Front Bench, so she should be congratulated on that too. It is not a usual or easy thing to do. The only issue is whether this Parliament will last long enough for her to get the Bill all the way on to the statute book. Obviously, it has to go through the other place and its remaining stages here. If the Bill passes Second Reading today, there are a few Bills ahead of it, so there is a bit of a queue in Committee. My advice to her, as somebody who sort of managed to get a private Member's Bill on to the statute book by forcing the Government to do it later, is to not stop fussing behind the scenes: do not stop pressing and pushing them to make sure that if the Bill passes Second Reading, and it looks very much as if it will—

Selaine Saxby: I thank the right hon. Lady for her kind words, but she clearly does not know me very well; I never stop pushing.

Maria Eagle: I am very glad to hear that, because it certainly gives her a better chance of making sure the Government do not go soft or slack when it comes to doing the necessary things to ensure the Bill ends up on the statute book. She would be congratulated by many from across the House if she managed that. Obviously, the regulations will have to be written and consulted on. The Bill has to go through the Committee and Report stages in this House. There is a concertina effect on when private Members' Bill Fridays are coming up, so she will have to get the Bill through Committee fast. That would be my other little bit of advice: there is a queue of Bills ahead of her that have passed Second Reading, so she needs to keep pushing in the right direction.

The Bill takes up some of the provisions that were in the more comprehensive Bill that, as I recall, the Government withdrew in 2023. They have been trying to legislate on this issue since the 2019 election, when it was in their manifesto, so I think it is a good thing that the hon. Lady is bringing forward these provisions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray) said, there is a little extra detail in this Bill than was apparent in the original legislation. That is also a good thing. It is not correct, as is the modern fashion in legislative drafting, to leave everything to the regulations; sometimes it is a good idea to have the provisions in primary legislation. That might make me a bit old fashioned, but I do think that there is something to be said for it. I congratulate the hon. Member for North

Devon on getting a few more details on precisely what is going to be done into primary legislation. That holds to the feet of whatever Government are then trying to implement the legislation to the fire, and there is something to be said for that.

The change in the law that the hon. Lady is seeking to make is good in respect of dogs and cats, as has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members. Currently, the lower age limit to import a dog or cat is 15 weeks. Pregnant dogs and cats may be imported—as the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), who has extra knowledge of these things, mentioned—until the last 10% of their pregnancy. Up to five dogs or cats can be imported per person, and the owner can authorise somebody else to travel for them. The changes that are being made to those limits can only be entirely good, for the reasons that have been made by other Members during the course of this debate and that I will not repeat.

Ferrets are included in the short title of the Bill. The hon. Member for North Devon was kind enough to respond to me when I intervened on her, saying that the reason that ferrets had been included is that they can get rabies, so there is something desirable to be said about controlling the import of ferrets. That, for me, is a good enough reason to include them in the short title of the Bill, but I have noticed that we do not seem to have had a lot of representations about ferrets, or examples of the abuse of ferrets in the way that we have in respect of dogs and cats. Perhaps the Minister, when he comes to reply, can let us know whether ferrets are there purely as a rabies control measure, or whether there is evidence that there is abuse in the importation of ferrets? I do not have a wide knowledge of that, so I would be interested to know whether the issues facing ferrets are similar to those of dogs and cats, or whether the fact that they are in the short title of the Bill is simply to do with disease control. To my mind, that is a good enough reason, but I wonder whether there should be further provisions on the safety of ferrets that are not set out in the regulations so far. I would be interested to hear what the Minister has to say.

Sarah Champion: I am interested that my right hon. Friend is keenly mentioning ferrets at every opportunity that she can in this debate, so let me just put it on record that my brother had a ferret called Oscar.

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend now has that on the record. I do not really know what else to say about that, except that I am sure that Oscar brought her brother great joy. That is what pets do. I am sure there are many other ferret owners who might attest to the same thing. My interest in ferrets is purely because they are in the short title of the Bill, yet there does not seem to be any evidence that there is abuse. That is why I keep raising the issue of ferrets. I am sure the Minister will be able to enlighten us when he comes to reply.

The other issue that I particularly wanted to raise—I have raised it a number of times in my interventions—is that this legislation has been taken in part from the old, comprehensive legislation, but there are no provisions in the Bill about penalties. It is all very well for us all to object to the cruel and appalling way in which animals have been abused and treated in great numbers by those seeking to make profit out of their misery, but the only

[*Maria Eagle*]

way we can make sure that that ceases is by having good, effective enforcement and by ensuring that those who seek to profit in this way are made an example of through the courts.

I know that the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021 increased the sentences for animal cruelty from a maximum of six months to five years, but it is not totally apparent to me—the Minister might be able to enlighten us, if he is listening—whether that Act provides the enforcement and penalty regime for this Bill. Will breaches of this legislation be punished through the provision of that Act, or is that to be done by some other regime of punishment and penalty somewhere else? Obviously, in a comprehensive Bill the penalties would probably be included with all the provisions. Given that the Government, with the help of the hon. Member for North Devon, have chosen to slice and dice their approach to animal welfare legislation and bring forward separate Bills, I hope the Minister will be able to explain where the penalties are written and what they will be. Are they being increased? Can they be increased by regulation? What penalties and punishments might he expect those who fall foul of this improved legislation to meet if they continue in their nefarious activities?

That brings me to the other point I wish to raise, which is about enforcement. I have raised this in a number of interventions during the debate, and the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border had something to say about it too. Having the law on the statute book is a good first step, but it does not stop abuse of the law—it is enforcement that does that. So will the hon. Member for North Devon or the Minister say something about enforcement? Since the 2021 Act increased the maximum penalties for animal abuse, has the number of prosecutions increased? Have people gone to jail? Have they gone to jail for more than six months, which was the previous maximum term? This is a lucrative trade and those who smuggle puppies can make hundreds of thousands of pounds, so the enforcement, penalty and punishment regime needs to match the scale of that potential profit. If it does not, the law will sit there and not work in the way in which its supporters in this House, who come from across the Chamber, wish it to work.

I welcome the Bill very much. I congratulate the hon. Lady on choosing it, when she fortuitously came up in the ballot in the way in which she did. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure its supporters from around the Chamber—very many of us have spoken in support today—about precisely what will happen on enforcement and what the penalty and punishment regime will be. It is all very well getting the law right, but if we do not then enforce it by catching the perpetrators and pursuing them through the law to the maximum available opportunity, these lucrative trades will continue and we will still have problems with animal welfare in this country.

That having been said, let me finish by congratulating the hon. Lady on bringing forward this piece of legislation. She said she is tenacious and she will have to be to get all this done before the Prime Minister calls a general election. I know that she will stick at it, and let us hope that we will then be able to get this Bill on to the statute book and do some of the good that it purports to want

to do. This will work only if the Government can reassure us that they are going to get on with the regulations and get this working as soon as possible. They have spent the whole of this Parliament saying that they are going to do this without managing to do it yet. Perhaps, at the end of this Parliament, the Minister will be able to stand up and say that he actually managed to do this and got it right to where it needs to be, and perhaps he will be able to reassure us about enforcement and punishment.

12.34 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for introducing the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill as her private Member's Bill, and congratulate her on her very good speech.

I have had an incredible number of emails regarding the Bill, which shows the strength of feeling on the topic. The deep levels of concern around the welfare of pet animals brought into the UK was shown in a YouGov poll from 2023, which revealed that 83% of the public think that the Government should crack down on puppy smuggling. As Conservatives, we care deeply for our environment and for animal welfare. We are a nation of pet lovers. Our pets are part of our families, stopping loneliness and getting people out of the house, in the case of dog owners. In the spirit of the day, may I mention some of my pets? My dogs are Marcus, an English bull terrier, and Toby, an English pointer; my cats are Sulekha, a Siamese, and Cassio and Othello, who are very nice English moggies. My cats and dogs came from homes that could no longer keep them, so I have been lucky enough to know where they came from. However, not every animal has had the same background, which is why I am so pleased that this Bill has been presented.

Ending the smuggling of dogs, puppies, cats and ferrets was an important part of the 2019 Conservative manifesto on animal welfare commitments, and the Bill will fill the gaps in current legislation that pet smugglers are abusing. We know that for smugglers, this illegal business model is highly lucrative. It was estimated to be worth around £150 million in 2021, with the prices of dogs ranging from £500 to £7,000. In 2021, 843 cats and dogs were seized at the port of Dover, with 500 seized in 2023, and found to be non-compliant with import requirements. Puppy farms in places such as Romania, Hungary and Poland breed dogs and separate them from their mothers while too young to travel, meaning their immune system cannot withstand infections.

Smugglers are disguising the commercial movements of pets as non-commercial to avoid the more stringent requirements with a pet passport. The pet travel scheme is being abused. Pets that are smuggled are unlikely to have had any veterinarian input, including rabies vaccinations and parasite treatments necessary for legal entry to the UK, making these poor animals a health risk for humans and other pets. The criminals then deceive unsuspecting buyers, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson), and lead them to believe they are acquiring a pet from a professional breeder by presenting the mother together with their offspring. The mother may have been brought in heavily pregnant.

I am pleased that the Bill will establish regulations raising the minimum age of imported dogs and cats—presumably ferrets, too, although I am not quite sure about that one—to six months, and ban the import of dogs and cats that are more than 42 days pregnant or mutilated. The Bill will amend for England, Scotland and Wales EU rules assimilated into UK law to limit the number of cats and dogs imported to five per vehicle, or three per foot passenger.

Pets are regarded as family members, and it is time to protect them as such. The steps proposed in the animal welfare Bill on the movement of pets across borders into Britain are desperately needed. The Bill provides a clear pathway to end the suffering of these innocent animals. The cruel business of pet smuggling cannot be allowed to continue any longer. The Bill is our chance to fulfil our 2019 commitment, implementing a future where pets are safely and ethically brought into the UK. As an animal lover, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon for raising this issue of great importance. I know that her persistence will ensure that the Bill goes into law very shortly. I am fully supportive of the Bill, and I look forward to seeing it proceed through this House.

12.38 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for bringing forward such an important Bill. I rise to speak not just on behalf of my constituents in Norfolk, who are huge animal lovers, but because I have always tried to champion animal welfare issues and speak on these matters each and every time they have come to the House. I have personally invested a lot of time and care in to this area, particularly by looking after rescue animals my whole life. I cannot therefore go away from this Chamber without mentioning my beloved pets: my rescue cat, Clapton, who sadly passed last month; our rescue guinea pig, Pickle, which my children would never forgive me for not mentioning; and the rescue chickens, which we saved from a battery farm and gave a good life.

Peter Gibson: My hon. Friend has prompted me to mention that I have three rescue chickens—Honey, Rosie and Lola—and they continued to lay for another three years after we got them. I commend him for his efforts to save chickens.

Duncan Baker: I say “Well done” to my hon. Friend, too, for his efforts to rescue chickens and for giving them that good laying—they can often lay for many years afterwards. We in this place should be proud about our collective efforts to lead the world in raising animal welfare standards. We are doing that again today.

Cats are very important to me. As I mentioned, my family lost our beloved rescue cat, Clapton, to cancer last month. The cancer in his mouth meant that he was unable to eat, so he became very thin and unfortunately it was time to say goodbye. I used to take him to the vet’s down the road. Every time Clapton Baker was called into the room, it got a slight giggle from constituents who knew and recognised me. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) said, our pets are loved forever. My children certainly loved Clapton.

There will be another rock star-named rescue cat in my family one day. We just need to decide whether it will be a Meat Loaf Baker, a Mercury Baker, a Springsteen Baker or even a Jagger Baker—that is one of my favourites.

This is an important debate. During the pandemic, North Norfolk saw a huge spike in pet theft, particularly of dogs. My area is well known for its elderly demographic and 52 miles of coastline, and dogs are everywhere. It is almost unheard of to be retired in North Norfolk without a pet dog. Theft was a huge problem during the pandemic. I was proud to be a part of the pet theft taskforce.

I will keep my remarks relatively short. The hon. Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) spoke earlier—quite a few hours ago now—about how not many people in the Chamber had had much to do with ferrets in their previous life. I will disappoint you, Madam Deputy Speaker, because, country bumpkin that I am, I kept ferrets 30 years ago with a friend of. We did our civic duty. School allowed us to keep some ferrets behind the garages, and every lunch time, we would go out to the hospital grounds next door and catch the rabbits that were ruining the hospital lawns and grounds. We were entrepreneurial: the local butcher paid us 50p per rabbit, and £1 for a buck. The only reason we had to stop our entrepreneurial hobby was that the teachers would complain that we smelled so bad. Equally, my parents said, “Look, Duncan, you need to give up this hobby. You smell so terrible.” Ferrets, as Members might know, do not smell particularly good.

There is a serious point to today’s debate. It is awful that, in the 21st century, puppies and heavily pregnant dogs endure such terrible long journeys, as well as mutilations such as cropped ears. Declawing cats is not only abhorrent and painful, but takes from them something that is part of their DNA—getting up in the morning and scratching their scratch post. Until only a couple of weeks ago, we still had Clapton’s scratch post in the corner of the kitchen. He is no longer with us, but it would have been absolutely appalling to have his claws removed, preventing his natural instinct.

All credit should go to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon for introducing the Bill—this is her day. She has been widely praised by many institutions, including the RSPCA. For what she has done, I thank her and say, “Well done.”

12.44 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing this debate and introducing this Bill on animal welfare. I will keep my speech short because I know the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) would like to get to her Bill, and others—certainly Government Members—would like to give my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) time for her important Bill. She also got a place on the ballot, but Labour Members are keen to talk out that Bill because they have no interest in safeguarding children against extreme trans ideology and are frit about any debate on that issue.

It is vital that we push our legislation further to close the gaps that allow for the harm and exploitation of dogs, cats and ferrets. The Government have already taken essential steps to protect our beloved animals. It

[Sally-Ann Hart]

is an offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to crop a dog's ears, and since 2021 anyone convicted of that offence may receive a prison sentence of up to five years and/or an unlimited fine.

The puppy pilot scheme set up in 2015, and massively pioneered by the Dogs Trust, has allowed for the rescue of more than 3,100 illegally imported puppies. Furthermore, the introduction of Lucy's law in 2020 means that any new puppy or kitten in England must be bought directly from a breeder or adopted from a rescue centre. The action plan for animal welfare was introduced in 2021 with the goal of tackling puppy smuggling through changes to import rules, introducing compulsory microchipping for cats, cracking down on pet theft through a new Government taskforce and banning remote controlled training e-collars.

Like me, a significant number of my constituents care deeply about animal welfare, and have contacted me to express their enormous support for this Bill. I want to highlight the dedicated work of my constituent Jayne Band on Finn's law and Finn's law part 2, and her consistent campaigning for animal rights. Finn's law was passed in 2019, and Finn's law part 2—the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021—was passed in June 2021. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) secured that legislation as a private Member's Bill, and I happily supported it. Those were all necessary steps to help protect the lives of domesticated animals. Through this Bill, I also hope to see the protection extended to imported and smuggled animals.

Individuals who mutilate animals and illegally smuggle them into this country lack compassion and are very bad people. Improvements must be made to stop innocent animals enduring illegal and unnecessary journeys and procedures. We must also take efforts to ensure those criminal activities do not go unpunished. This Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon and these animals deserve our support.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

12.47 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on bringing forward this important private Member's Bill. As we have heard from Members across the House, it is overdue. It is extremely welcome and it has cross-party support.

I congratulate Opposition colleagues who have participated. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) said that we rarely talk about ferrets in this House, and that is true. My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) reminded us—or told us for the first time if we did not know—that 2 April is National Ferret Day. I suspect not many of us knew that, and I hope she will get the ferret she seems to have set her heart on.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) asked very pertinent questions of the Minister, who will be responding shortly, about the risk of rabies from illegally imported ferrets and the great threat to biosecurity in this country, which we

should all be very concerned about. My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood) talked about the absolute horrors of ear cropping—a mutilation that is often carried out without any anaesthetic at all, to the torment of the animal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) talked about the cruelty of illegal puppy farming. My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), talked about how, when going out to buy a new family pet, it can be difficult for families to identify a legitimate breeder, and how many people are concerned because that journey is so difficult. Families do not want to support the illegal importation and breeding of animals, but it is far too difficult to find out which animals have been bred legitimately and which have been subjected to abuse, including illegal breeding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray) raised his constituents' concerns about the Government dropping the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill after two years of development, and he urged the Government to do more to focus on animal welfare in the time remaining before the general election, whenever it comes. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) talked about the importance of rescue cats.

We heard some fine speeches from Conservative Members, too. I will leave it to the Minister to go through them in detail, but the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) made an outstanding, incredibly persuasive speech, with insights clearly drawn from his great professional experience.

I successfully introduced a private Member's Bill in 2018, so I know very well the perils and pitfalls of steering such legislation through Parliament, and I again pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Devon for her success in building such widespread support, as is clear from this debate, for the important measures she aims to bring into law.

My private Member's Bill, which became the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act 2018, also won support on both sides of the House, but six years later, very disappointingly, it has still not been brought fully into force. I hear what the hon. Lady says about the need to keep pushing and, if her Bill progresses, I urge her to keep pushing. I wish her more success than I have had with the current Minister for mental health, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who does not seem interested in carrying out the wishes of this House, as expressed in the unanimous passage of my important Bill. Other Health Ministers have taken much more interest and have helped to push the legislation forward, so I hope she will reflect on why she has not followed the will of this House, as expressed in a free and democratic vote, by ensuring that the law comes fully into force as soon as possible.

Animal welfare is of the highest concern to the British public, as we have heard from both sides of the House. I make it clear that the Opposition are pleased to support the Bill. We believe its measures are long overdue, and it has been very interesting to hear the personal testimony of Members on both sides of the House. Members have

spoken of their experience of owning and buying pets, and of wanting to make sure that the animals they buy have been well treated and properly bred.

Other Members have mentioned their pets, and it would be remiss of me not to mention mine. I had a rescue cat called Tigger, who we sadly lost after 18 years in 2010. I have more recently had two rescue cats, Smudge and Pixie. We sadly lost Smudge last year to kidney disease, but the House will be pleased to hear that Pixie is still alive and well. They both achieved a modicum of fame when I entered them into the Battersea Dogs & Cats Home competition to elect the “Purr Minister”, becoming the first cats to be jointly elected. This is a matter of great pride to our family, although not so much to my partner, who is now the only member of our household never to have been elected to anything.

Our ownership of companion pets gives us an insight into how pets can be an important part of a family. We have heard about the horrible abuses of declawing, cropped ears and docked tails. That cruelty is brought home all the more because so many of us have experienced owning and loving a companion pet ourselves, as have many members of the great British public, which is one of the reasons why people are so concerned about these issues.

Puppy and kitten smuggling is an absolutely horrific abuse and legislation is required to prevent it from happening. That is why we are so pleased the hon. Member for North Devon has brought forward her private Member’s Bill today. Cracking down on the illegal smuggling of dogs and puppies was a commitment that appeared in the 2019 Conservative party manifesto. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield said, it is hugely regrettable that the Government did not in the end fully pursue their own legislation—Government legislation—to meet that commitment. I fully understand, and I am sure the Minister will repeat this when he is on his feet, that they are supporting the private Member’s Bill today, but those of us familiar with Friday sittings and private Members’ Bills know how uncertain that route can be. It is all too easy for a lone Member who is hostile to the proposed legislation to use procedural tactics to block the Bill from proceeding, even in circumstances where the vast majority of Members are fully in support of it.

My private Member’s Bill was talked out by a Conservative Member, for instance, despite having almost universal cross-party support. I was immensely grateful to Government Whips who later found time for it to come back, but despite that strong support from the Government, the legislation has still not been fully commenced. So I repeat that there are real concerns about whether and how the Government pursue private Member’s Bills even when they are enacted, which is why we would have preferred to see this Bill brought through as Government legislation rather than being subject to the vagaries of Friday sittings and private Members’ Bills.

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend is right to raise the procedural issues of the private Member’s Bill process being a threat to a Bill getting all the way through. Does he agree that because many Bills have already got through Second Reading in this Session, there is going to be a pile up in Committee which will make it difficult

to get this Bill through Committee in time to get it back for the Fridays that give priority to Report and remaining stages? That is also a concern, is it not?

Steve Reed: I am grateful for that intervention. Of course my right hon. Friend has experience herself of pursuing a private Member’s Bill through the House, and she is absolutely right. We have over 30 private Members’ Bills on the agenda just today, so it does look like we are going to have a big backlog, and we certainly need the Government to be prioritising Bills they want to support, and I hope we will hear from the Minister today that this Bill will secure Government support and will be a priority for getting Royal Assent and getting on to the statute book.

The Bill before us today started out as part of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill introduced by the Government in 2021. It contained measures to crack down on puppy and kitten smuggling but, regrettably and incomprehensibly to many campaigners—they voiced this articulately themselves—the Government abandoned that Bill. It is hard to understand why they did that given the strong public support for the measures contained and the fact that the Government control legislation as it moves through this House—they control the business of this House. The full Bill was a golden opportunity to improve the health and welfare of millions of animals. The proposals had very wide public support, and animal welfare charities had worked hard to help shape the Bill before the Government regrettably abandoned it.

Members on both sides of the House and many of our constituents—I am sure we have all had letters about this; I am not unique in this House in having had hundreds of emails about the Government abandoning the kept animals Bill—deeply regret that the Government chose to ditch such a significant and important piece of legislation. As a result of that decision, countless animals have suffered needless pain and distress through the unscrupulous practice of puppy and kitten smuggling and through the export of live animals for fattening and slaughter in countries where animal welfare standards are far lower than in this country.

As has been expressed many times this morning, there is real gratitude to the hon. Member for North Devon for her efforts to bring back important measures that were part of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, including those on puppy and kitten smuggling. The provisions that have been brought back today are important because there has recently been a shocking—indeed, a sickening—increase in the number of animals imported into the United Kingdom, with pitifully little attention paid to their welfare, either during transportation or, often, in how and where they were bred. The horrific reality is that the puppy trade has become a multimillion-pound transnational industry based on the abuse of living, sentient creatures and on the deception of well-meaning individuals who want to buy a family pet.

Two million puppies are sold every year in the UK alone. It is a trade with a total value of £3 billion. Battersea Dogs & Cats Home estimates that up to 50% of that trade is either illegal or unlicensed and takes place outside any oversight from regulation or enforcement. Half the animals involved originate outside the United Kingdom, often in completely unknown circumstances, with all the risk that that implies for low standards of animal welfare and animal health.

[*Steve Reed*]

It is less well known that criminals who are involved in the illegal trade in puppies are often also engaged in other forms of cross-border crime. That includes drug dealing, money laundering and even people trafficking. The European Union's "Strategy to tackle Organised Crime" recognises the illegal trade in companion animals in Europe as an ongoing concern with severe implications for human and animal welfare.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester pointed out that the Government's decision to abandon the kept animals Bill delayed the much-needed clampdown on this vile and illegal trade. The delay has left criminals feeling emboldened during the intervening period. A recent report published by the charity Four Paws on the illegal puppy trade in the United Kingdom found that more than 30% of imported puppies were from Romania alone. That is simply unacceptable. How can it be that criminals have been able to bring so many vulnerable animals into this country from conditions over which there is little, if any, welfare or health supervision or control?

Maria Eagle: Does my hon. Friend agree that cracking down, with proper enforcement, and having tough penalties that are enforced is a way of not only tackling this vile trade, but getting the additional benefit of taking some serious criminals off our streets?

Steve Reed: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Indeed, the prosecution and punishment of those responsible for any crime, let alone these particular vile and heinous crimes, is essential to deter others who want to profit from the same exploitation of animals and people that we see in this vile trade in puppy and kitten smuggling. Nobody wants to see that, but we could have had more focus on this, and sanctions, had the Government pursued the original legislation, rather than delaying it and then supporting it coming back—in part at least—as a private Member's Bill.

The circumstances in which animals are bred are also changing. A growing number of puppies are bred not only in vast, industrial-scale puppy farms, but in sheds, repurposed smallholdings, urban tower blocks and warehouses. We have seen images of these poor, desperate creatures tied up, often left shivering in the freezing cold, in filthy cages, covered in their own excrement, and sometimes reduced to eating their own excrement. It is distressing beyond words to see any of these images and videos, so thank goodness we have this Bill before us today. But what a crying shame it is that the Government have done so little about this vile trade until now and then abandoned the original legislation that could have brought in measures far sooner to save countless defenceless animals from abuse by the most unscrupulous traders and criminal gangs.

The RSPCA is the world's oldest and largest animal welfare charity, founded here in England in 1824. It has been at the forefront of raising public awareness and concern about puppy smuggling. I pay tribute to the RSPCA for its many years of campaigning on this and so many other animal welfare issues. The RSPCA has highlighted that many dogs smuggled into this country to be sold on the underground puppy market

have long-term health problems, as well as behavioural issues because of their breeding and negative experiences early in life.

We are talking about puppies like Dobby, a 19-month-old French bulldog who was taken in by the RSPCA's Mount Noddy animal centre in West Sussex. Dobby, who had been trafficked into the UK from Lithuania, was plagued with severe and painful health problems, which eventually required significant surgery. The RSPCA points out that importing sick puppies with zoonotic diseases into the UK not only poses a risk to public health, but can lead to the very sad outcome of the animal needing to be euthanised after enduring a short, wretched life of pain and suffering.

What about mutilation, which has been by hon. Members across the Chamber? Mutilation includes horrific acts of cruelty, such as tail docking, ear cropping and the declawing of cats. Ear cropping has been illegal for over 20 years in England and Wales—thank goodness—but the RSPCA reports a 1,243% increase in incidents of ear cropping in dogs between 2015 and 2021. That is such a staggering figure it is worth repeating—a 1,243% increase in incidents of ear cropping in dogs. How despicable! No wonder so many animal rights campaign groups have been pleading with the Government for so many years to bring forward measures to curb this cruel trade.

The RSPCA tells us that the current loopholes in the law that permit the importing of dogs with cropped ears offer a defence in court for those responsible for illegal ear cropping here in the United Kingdom. That helps them to avoid prosecution for abuses of dogs that were made illegal in the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Dog lovers across the United Kingdom are desperate for this horrific practice to be stopped once and for all.

Kitten smuggling raises further welfare concerns that I suspect will distress Members across the House. Cats Protection is the UK's largest cat welfare charity. It provides administrative support to the all-party parliamentary group on cats, which I was proud to co-chair for many years before I was appointed to the shadow Cabinet by my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition. The charity has produced a most helpful briefing paper on the Bill before us. It notes that its 2023 survey found that 3% of cats purchased in the United Kingdom over the previous 12 months had been sourced from abroad. We have no idea what conditions those cats or kittens were subject to during travel, but the long journeys they are forced to endure can cause them significant pain, fear and distress. That is not something anyone would wish to impose on a beloved family pet, or indeed on any animal, where it can be avoided.

The Bill is an important opportunity to prevent so much needless suffering. The Bill will crack down on puppy and kitten smuggling by closing loopholes in the law that have been mercilessly exploited by dishonest and criminal commercial traders. The Bill reduces the number of animals that may enter Great Britain in a motor vehicle during a single non-commercial journey to five. That will help stop smugglers who pretend larger cargos of animals are their own pets, when in reality they are intended for sale in this country. For similar reasons, the Bill reduces the number of animals that can be brought into the country by means other

than a motor vehicle to just three. That will be of huge benefit in reducing the level of kitten and puppy smuggling into the United Kingdom.

The RSCPA has found criminal gangs using routes like this to smuggle animals into the country. The gangs then hire short-let properties, such as Airbnbs, to trick buyers into believing their puppy or kitten comes from a good home and has been well cared for by the animal's mother. The animal's new owners are incredibly distressed when they find out that their new pet may have a serious illness, an infection or behavioural problems caused by being removed from its mother far too young. It can even cost the new owners thousands of pounds in vet bills as they try to care for their animal. Of course, in many cases, the animal dies.

Sarah Champion: On that point, I have had a constituent get in touch with me because they went to get a dog—they thought it was a legitimate one—but when they got it home they found it had many complications. However, the children had already bonded with it, so they ended up having to take out a loan to cover all the vets' fees. Surely more needs to be done to prosecute those people who are causing so much cost to the pet owners, who are innocent victims.

Steve Reed: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. Through that example, she makes the most compelling case for why the Bill is necessary and why it should be brought in as soon as possible. Families who go out to buy a family pet are aghast, appalled and distressed when they get home and find out that that animal is not the healthy, well cared-for pet they thought they were buying, but has been subject to abuse. The animal may have behavioural or health problems that cost them thousands of pounds. It is simply unfair.

The Bill gives the authorities in different parts of the United Kingdom—including those with devolved Governments—the power to prohibit or restrict the transport of dogs, cats or ferrets into the UK for the purpose of promoting the welfare of the imported animals, since that, too, has often been used as cover for the illegal importation of ill-treated or sick animals for sale as pets. The Bill requires regulations to be made covering England, Scotland and Wales to prohibit the importing of dogs or cats that are below the age of six months, are more than 42 days pregnant, or have been mutilated through declawing, ear cropping, tail docking or other such methods. These are extremely important measures that will give a significant boost to animal welfare.

There has been a huge increase in the importation of heavily pregnant dogs and cats, which have often been stolen from their loving owners in continental Europe and smuggled into the UK in the most appalling conditions. The criminal gangs' intention is to sell the puppies or kittens as quickly as possible after they are born. They do not care that the animals may have been made sick by the conditions in which they were transported, or even if the animals are born prematurely as a result of trauma inflicted on the mother. It is purely and simply a criminal money-making operation that needs to be stopped as quickly as possible.

Jane Stevenson: I am one of the most passionate people about animal welfare in this place, and it is lovely to see some new converts on the Labour Benches

discussing animal welfare—[*Interruption.*] And on the Labour Front Bench. However, I would also be interested to hear the hon. Gentleman's thoughts on Labour's determination to prevent single-sex spaces being discussed today, because that issue is also important to my constituents.

Steve Reed: I am very disappointed indeed that the hon. Member has attempted to politicise an important point. We are talking about the welfare of animals.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that there was a lot of noise, so I did not hear exactly what the hon. Lady said, but, for the sake of clarity, we are discussing this Bill and only this Bill.

Steve Reed: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. Labour Members consider animal welfare to be important, and it is important that the Opposition can make these points on the record so that we can influence the Bill and, if possible, strengthen it. We think that the Government have been slow to the point of negligence in bringing forward these proposals that will ensure the welfare of animals. I welcome these provisions, but few such measures have been introduced in recent years.

Maria Eagle: Does my hon. Friend agree that, if the Bill is to be a success, it is important that there are enforcement and punishment measures? Will he press the Minister, as I did, to be clear in his response about what those are and how they will back up the measures in the Bill to ensure that we put a stop to these evil trades?

Steve Reed: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for making those points. I can see that the Minister was listening carefully to what she had to say, as I was. I look forward to his response.

Few measures introduced in recent years have as many parallel benefits for animal welfare, human beings and wider socioeconomic stability as this Bill. The third-party ban introduced in 2021 sought to address many animal welfare concerns about domestic breeding through tighter licensing obligations on breeders and a ban on third-party sales. However, it was full of loopholes, which allowed unscrupulous breeders to continue their activities with far too little change. The law proved so weak that not a single prosecution has taken place under it, and fresh legislation is urgently needed to close those loopholes and bring that abusive trade to an end.

If the United Kingdom is to maintain its position as a world leader in animal welfare, in the face of emerging threats and concerns, and in line with the wishes of the British public, this Bill must become law as quickly as possible. Puppy smuggling is a despicable criminal activity, which causes suffering to animals and heartache and financial cost to their owners. It helps to fund organised criminal enterprises, which exploit human beings as well as animals, and presents a significant threat of disease transmission, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood pointed out.

Labour is proud to support the Bill as it progresses through this House, and we will seek to make it stronger, just as we did with the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill before the Government abandoned it. It is of course regrettable that the Government have taken so long to act on these issues, and while I have congratulated the

[*Steve Reed*]

hon. Member for North Devon on her private Member's Bill, it is disappointing that the Government chose not to include the measures in a Government Bill, which might have proved a more secure way of ensuring that the legislation was passed swiftly and intact.

Other animal welfare measures are being presented to this House as private Members' Bills, instead of as Government legislation. The Pet Abduction Bill, introduced in December last year, is another example, and we should not forget about all the other animal welfare commitments made by this Government that appear to have disappeared into thin air.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree with me about the mess that we have made of the XL Bully dog process, where we have ended up banning breeds of dogs, rather than actually regulating—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has not been here all morning, so perhaps he has not picked up that the Bill is narrow, and it does not include the subject that he has just raised. In this winding-up speech, it is necessary that we stick completely to the Bill. I know that he will understand.

Steve Reed: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I think that he has made his point.

Looking at animal welfare, what about the Government's promise to protect our hard-working farmers from low-welfare imports produced using methods that would be illegal if they were used here in the United Kingdom? The Government cannot claim to be interested in animal welfare if they sign trade deals that permit lower welfare standards for animals outside this country. It is not fair on the livestock involved, and it is certainly not fair on UK producers and British farmers. Simply put, the Government are wrong to ignore the interests of farmers, consumers' expectations of higher animal welfare standards and the wellbeing of the affected animals in the decisions that they have taken.

Similarly, many campaigners are asking what has happened to the proposed consultation on banning cages for farmed animals. That was promised by the Government nearly three years ago in their action plan for animal welfare back in May 2021, but there has been no consultation and no ban. Members want to know why not. We were promised action on imports of fur and foie gras. The action plan for animals stated that the Government are committed to building a—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. When the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) intervened on the shadow Minister, I explained that we must stick to the narrow confines of this Bill. My ruling applied to the hon. Gentleman, so it obviously applies to the shadow Minister as well.

Steve Reed: I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was merely countering the claim made by Members on the Government Benches that the Government have been promoting animal welfare, when in fact they have been doing the opposite. I was merely putting forward the Opposition's case in response to the points that they

have been able to make. The measures in this private Member's Bill were originally included in the manifesto on which the Conservative party was elected, and it does the reputation of politicians across this House no good at all if a Government, once elected, simply ignore their manifesto.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood) pointed out how proud he is that, when Labour was last in government, we implemented landmark animal welfare legislation, including banning cosmetic testing on animals, stopping fur farming and ending hunting with dogs. That is a proud track record on animal welfare, but the work has to continue, because there is still so much more to do. The measures in the private Member's Bill before us are part of that. If our party earns the trust of the British people at the next general election, we will bring forward further and comprehensive legislation to strengthen animal welfare and animal rights.

In the meantime, we are proud to stand alongside the hon. Member for North Devon and the proposals that she has put before us today in her private Member's Bill. They are sensible, humane and practical, and they deserve the full support of every Member right across this House.

1.21 pm

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): May I first congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) and thank her for bringing forward this important Bill for Parliament? I hope that Members from across the House will agree that the UK has some of the highest welfare standards anywhere in the world, and that we have a proud history of being at the forefront of protecting animals.

I am confident that Members of all parties will agree that animals have been of great support to individuals and families, particularly during covid-19, when my pets were certainly of great support to me. Pets often help to keep people sane when they are under pressure in their everyday pursuits, so it would be remiss of me not to put on the record the names of my three dogs, Tessa, Barney and Maisie, and the name of my cat, Parsnip. There has been a proud tradition this morning of mentioning various pets, including: Harry, George, Henry, Bruce, Snowy, Maisie, Scamp, Becky 1, Becky 2, Tiny, Tilly, Pippin, Kenneth, Roger, Poppy, Juno, Lucky, Lulu, Brooke, Lucy, Marcus and Toby, who are the dogs; and not forgetting Perdita, Nala, Colin, who is sadly no longer with us, Frank, two Smudges, Attlee, Orna, Hetty, Stanley, Mia Cat, Sue, Sulekha, Cassio, Othello, Clapton, Tigger, who is sadly no longer with us, and Pixie, who are the cats.

Peter Gibson: Earlier, I omitted the names of my own dogs, which I would like to put on the record: Clemmie, Peppy and Ebony. As we all know, Clemmie came third in the Westminster dog of the year show in 2022.

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend has corrected the record.

There were two ferrets mentioned, one of which has passed away: Roulette and Oscar. Of course, the House will want to advise my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) as he thinks about naming his next cat after a rock star; I put it to him that the name Chesney was not on his list.

Over the years, the number of owners travelling with their pets has increased significantly, with the number of non-commercial pet movements into the UK rising from approximately 100,000 in 2011 to over 320,000 in 2023. The number of dogs, cats and ferrets imported under the commercial rules has also increased significantly in recent years. In 2016, more than 37,000 cats, dogs and ferrets were imported into the UK, but by 2023 the figure had risen to 44,000, the vast majority of which were dogs. Alongside that growth in genuine pet movements, there is an increase in the number of unscrupulous people who are abusing the pet travel system to import dogs and cats illegally.

The Government take the issue of puppy smuggling and other illegal imports and low-welfare movements of pets very seriously, because it is an abhorrent trade that causes suffering to animals. Measures to tackle puppy smuggling were originally included in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, but in May 2023 the Government decided to withdraw that Bill because its scope had been extended beyond the original manifesto commitments and the action plan for animal welfare. At that time, we committed ourselves to ensuring that all the measures in the Bill would be delivered through other means, and I am therefore pleased to announce that the Government will fully support this Bill today. I am also delighted to say that this is the last legislative measure within the kept animals Bill to be brought forward, fulfilling the promise made when it was withdrawn less than a year ago.

This Bill will go further than the kept animals Bill. It will crack down on pet smuggling by closing loopholes in the current pet travel rules. It will reduce the number of dogs, cats and ferrets that can enter Great Britain under the non-commercial pet travel rules from five per person to five per vehicle and three per foot or air passenger. That will lead to a significant decrease in the volume of animals with which one person can travel, and will also help to prevent deceitful traders from cramming their vans with tens of dogs.

Maria Eagle: I hesitate to say “ferrets” again, but the Minister may recall that I asked him whether there was an issue of abuse with ferrets, of the same kind that we see with dogs and cats. This might be an opportune moment for him to tell the House about that.

Mark Spencer: I was about to come to this point, to try to satisfy the hon. Lady’s curiosity. I am tempted to say that ferrets were included purely because of the love for them expressed by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), but the honest truth is that they were included simply because they are at risk of carrying rabies.

The Bill will also ensure that the movement of dogs, cats and ferrets into Great Britain must be linked with the movement of the owner to fall under the non-commercial pet travel rules. To move under the pet travel rules, the pet and its owner must travel within five days of each other. The Bill will make it more difficult and less profitable for traders to bring dogs, cats and ferrets fraudulently into Great Britain for sale under the guise of owners travelling with their pets. It will also provide further powers to tackle the problem of low-welfare imports of dogs, cats and ferrets into the United Kingdom, and will ensure that those powers will be used to ban the bringing into Great Britain of puppies and kittens under six months old, and dogs and cats that are heavily pregnant or mutilated.

Introducing these measures through secondary legislation allows the Government time to work with industry, enforcement bodies and stakeholders to develop robust measures with appropriate exemptions that can be enforced effectively. The right hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) made a number of points about that. The Government are committed to delivering the secondary legislation as soon as possible following Royal Assent, but I hope the right hon. Lady will be assured that, as introduced by this Government, the maximum sentence for abuse of animals has risen to five years in prison, which is a huge deterrent for those who would abuse animals. Those working in Border Force and our ports—championed regularly by my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke)—will do all they can to stop those imports and ensure that we are in the right place.

Let me thank my hon. Friend the Member from North Devon again for introducing this important Bill. I look forward to seeing it progress through its remaining stages in this House and the other place.

1.29 pm

Selaine Saxby: I thank the Minister and my right hon. and hon. Friends who have spoken today. I also thank my team for all the work that they have put in behind the scenes to get to this point today, including Tara Benniman, Emily Gordon and Alice Richards, who is on maternity leave, watching at home with baby Luke and cat Beany. I also remind Members that Pixie the one-eyed spaniel and Bruce the French bulldog will be available for media engagements in W3 at the end of today’s sitting.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Public Procurement (British Goods and Services) Bill

Second Reading

1.30 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am delighted to bring this important but focused Bill to the House. It would make minor amendments to both the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 and the Procurement Act 2023 to encourage greater uptake of British products in UK Government contracts.

The Bill aims to increase transparency and raise the importance of the origin of goods and services, animal welfare standards and environmental impact, and the standard of employment in procurement decisions. It achieves this by requiring the contracting body to publish its data, demonstrating how these areas are met in the contracts awarded. In 2014, my ten-minute rule Bill on publishing the gender pay gap for organisations employing more than 250 staff made a similar obligation. First blocked, then adopted by the Government, it has revolutionised transparency and equality within those businesses. I hope that the Government will be similarly pragmatic when it comes to this Bill and give it a safe passage.

Every year, the UK Government spend more than £300 billion on public procurement, which accounts for almost a third of all public expenditure. However, despite this huge figure, the Spend Network's analysis found that big corporations win 90% of the contracts that are deemed suitable for small and medium-sized businesses. As a result, SMEs are missing out on around £30 billion-worth of public contracts annually. That is £30 billion that could be going to British businesses.

SMEs are the beating heart of our economy, accounting for 99% of businesses in the UK and 61% of employment, which equates to 16.7 million jobs. It is therefore shocking that they are consistently missing out on so many suitable public procurement contracts. In addition, a worrying number of contracts are awarded to foreign suppliers. Research from Tussell found that in 2020 alone the public sector spent £18 billion with overseas suppliers rather than supporting their UK counterparts.

The Public Accounts Committee's report, "Competition in public procurement" published in December, concluded that the Government

"has not demonstrated that it has consistently used its purchasing power to support local and national policies and objectives, or to drive healthy and competitive markets, including buying from SMEs."

It also found that the Government have

"not been fully capturing data on procurement, much less using analytics from collected data to draw insights on how competition in public procurement is operating within government and give context to purchasing decisions."

That has to change, and my Bill can do that.

In its report "Public Sector Procurement of Food" from April 2021, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee rightly stated that public procurement "has the potential to create significant business and growth opportunities through increased participation for small and medium-sized enterprises"—as well as—

"improving the public sector's access to SMEs' creativity and innovation".

However, crucially, it noted that SMEs have long faced difficulties in accessing public procurement opportunities.

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr Steve Baker): The hon. Lady makes a very good case, and I think she knows that the Government have quite a lot of common ground with her policy intent. She may know that officials in the Cabinet Office are preparing for a new national procurement policy statement to set out the Government's strategic priorities. May I offer her and her task group, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), in relation to food, an opportunity to meet officials and, if necessary, the Minister? I would be very grateful if she took up that opportunity, because we would like her expertise and that of the group. As we have only recently legislated, it is difficult for the Government to support her Bill, so I hope she will take up the offer of that meeting.

Sarah Champion: The Minister, as ever, is trying to find a solution which benefits us both—that is what I am trying to do with the Bill—so I absolutely take up his offer and thank him for it. I will talk more about the working group at the end, but I have brought together a group of industry professionals. We all want to see British businesses getting a fair slice of the £300 billion pie, because we want our businesses to flourish, so I thank him for that offer. I have one more Select Committee report, this time from the Defence Committee in July 2023, which simply stated that the UK defence procurement system is

"broke—and it's time to fix it".

I welcome the Minister's offer.

To tackle these long-recognised issues within the UK Government procurement system, my Bill aims to: back British businesses for public contracts; champion the UK's world-class manufacturing and food production; increase the visibility of British food procured by the public sector; encourage investment and jobs created in towns and cities across the country; improve transparency around contracts awarded to small and medium-sized enterprises; and, just as importantly, recognise and reward good employment practices.

Let me give some context to demonstrate the need, right now, for the Bill. The UK is in a recession and has experienced years of stagnant economic growth. The number of companies going bust in 2023 hit a 30-year high. More than 25,000 UK company insolvencies were registered last year. Those figures show that one in 186 active firms went bust in 2023. That grim economic outlook is compounded by the fact that many SMEs feel shut out of the public procurement system. Taxpayers' money is being spent with big multinationals and foreign suppliers, when as much as possible it should be spent on supporting British businesses and jobs, as other countries do with their own industries.

The Government have long argued that the EU had rules preventing them from prioritising British businesses. Many saw Brexit as an opportunity for more taxpayers' money to be spent with British suppliers. We were told that British businesses would be first in the queue for UK Government contracts once we left the EU. The 2019 Conservative party manifesto even stated, with regard to food procurement:

“When we leave the EU, we will be able to encourage the public sector to ‘Buy British’ to support our farmers and reduce environmental costs.”

This has simply not happened. Now is high time for some of the benefits voters were promised from Brexit to come to pass. My Bill, if the Government accept it, would deliver more contracts to British businesses.

This is not a new issue. Since my election in 2012, I have been continuously highlighting how the UK Government need to do more to support British steelmakers through public procurement. The UK steel industry employs almost 40,000 people directly, with another 50,000 jobs supported through the supply chain. It also directly contributes £2.9 billion to the UK economy and adds £3.8 billion indirectly through supply chains. My constituency of Rotherham is a hub for steel production. We are incredibly proud of that heritage. Liberty Steel employs 900 people locally and supports the employment of many more workers throughout the steel chain. We make unique, speciality green steel much valued around the world, especially in aerospace. Despite this expertise and the high-quality steel that Liberty and other steelmakers produce, our steel industry still needs Government support. Let me be clear that I am not talking about handouts; I am talking about public contracts. UK Steel analysis of the 2023 steel pipeline report found that of the £603 million-worth of steel procured by government in the last financial year, 2022-23, only £365 million-worth was UK-produced. Furthermore, the British Constructional Steelwork Association analysis of steel used in the HS2 project found that only 58% of steel contracts were awarded to British suppliers, despite the British steel industry having the capacity to have carried out 100% of the work.

I welcome the recent introduction of the UK steel safeguards and the fact that UK Government Departments are now required to report past buying and future purchase pipelines of UK-made steel bought by the public purse. Those measures, particularly the reporting of where the steel is procured from in projects, are designed to encourage the uptake of UK-produced steel. The mandatory reporting model is a good template for other industries and Departments, and I welcome it. My Bill takes that mechanism and seeks to use it to achieve similar results across the economy, compelling contracting authorities to publish where they are procuring from, and to encourage the uptake of goods and services from British suppliers.

Let me give another example. I am sure hon. Members are aware that the public procurement system is failing our great British farmers. I strongly believe we must support our local food producers by ensuring that we buy, sell, make and grow more of our food, entrenching Britain’s reputation as a beacon for quality food, high standards and ethical animal treatment. The UK public sector spends about £2.4 billion a year procuring food for organisations such as schools, hospitals and the armed forces. That accounts for approximately 5.5% of UK food sector sales. Despite that level of spending, there is no accurate measure of how much food the public sector procures from British farmers. My Bill will address that.

The British public support buying British. The online supermarket Ocado reported that 87% of its customers considered it important to support British farmers, with searches for British produce on its website up by 77% year on year—

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): The hon. Lady conveniently mentions the addition of the “Buy British” button on Ocado. Will she pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) for leading a fantastic campaign, bringing in that “Buy British” button on a number of supermarket websites? Will she also join my call for all the others to catch up and do the same?

Sarah Champion: The hon. Gentleman has had a premonition, as that is my next line. The hon. Member for Bosworth should indeed be commended for the “Buy British” button and we absolutely should roll it out across all websites, across all suppliers. Every supermarket and local shop should be proud to say that they stock produce that was made in Britain and made as locally as possible. That helps us on so many levels, particularly the environmental one. It also supports our workers, who are doing an amazing job in a very tough environment. I absolutely support the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) and the hon. Member for Bosworth for the work that they have done and are doing on this.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend rightly points out, people in schools and hospitals have no choice as to what provider they go to, because they are in an institution, as we are; the choice is made by the institution on their behalf. Where consumers do not have a choice, the reporting requirement under the Bill would apply pressure to ensure that the choice made on their behalf is the right one.

Sarah Champion: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Nobody who procures with taxpayers’ money wants to do a bad job or waste money; the highest possible scrutiny is imposed. My Bill asks them to publish their decisions, in the hope that if Ministers follow up that data, they can see why decisions are made and how much of the procurement is from British suppliers. On his specific example, parents would love to know the trail of the food their children are eating. A recent poll by Deltapoll backs that up. It found that 81% of 4,000 people polled said that being able to buy British food was “very” or “fairly” important, while 94% of people said that support of farmers was “very” or “fairly” important. Despite overwhelming public and cross-party support for buying British, let us be honest that our farmers are struggling. The Office for National Statistics reported that over 6,000 agricultural businesses have closed since 2017. Meanwhile, the National Farmers Union reports that business certainty and confidence within British farming is at an all-time low.

Alongside the obvious economic and social benefits of buying more British food, such as boosting the economy and creating jobs, there are also ethical reasons for wanting more British food to be procured. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has long raised the issue of procuring authorities buying food from overseas that is produced to lower standards than in the UK, such as battery eggs and sow stall pork. Our animal welfare standards in the UK lead the world. Through my Bill focusing on buying British, we will also contribute to cruelty-free procurement becoming the norm.

[Sarah Champion]

My Bill will require contracting authorities to publish what proportion of food procured originates from suppliers in the UK. That will finally create an accurate measure of how much food the public sector procures from British farmers.

Peter Gibson: The hon. Lady is being incredibly generous with her time. I had the privilege of sitting on the Procurement Bill Committee recently. That was a lengthy Bill dealing with a whole panoply of procurement legislation to make our procurement system fit for the future. Will she make some remarks about why it is important for her Bill to progress today when measures in the Procurement Bill have not yet come into force, so we have not seen the results of that work?

Sarah Champion: I thank the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for their work on that important Bill. I am trying to aid the process of that roll-out because, if my Bill passes, procuring authorities will have to publish what they are procuring. That will probably be the only data available to see whether the cross-party intention, as set out in the Procurement Bill, to try to get more British businesses supported through our procurement processes, is working. If it is not working, Ministers would have the information to make the updated guidance bolder. That data would enable Ministers to give procurement money to British businesses if they wished, and if that was not breaching any laws. I see my Bill as a help; I do not see it undermining what is happening because of measures in the Procurement Bill.

There is something going on—the hon. Member for Darlington has anticipated my next point. Importantly, the Bill does not require public procurement professionals to take any specific action beyond reporting what has been procured and how that benefits the local environment. Such an obligation cannot reasonably be seen as compromising the UK's international obligations, which is a concern the UK Government previously had with “Buy British” policies. The measure will benefit UK food producers on the principle that what is inspected is generally delivered. I am proud that the NFU, the Countryside Alliance and the RSPCA all helped me to develop the Bill, and they support it.

It feels as if the Government, and particularly the Minister, support it. I welcome the recent announcement of an independent adviser, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), to support the ongoing work to improve public sector food procurement. The areas of the review are strikingly close to those I seek to address with the Bill, so I am incredibly grateful that the Minister has offered the time of the hon. Member for Colchester, and hopefully the time of civil servants, so that we can work together towards those common aims.

I turn to another key driver behind the Bill, which is enabling small and medium-sized enterprises to access public contracts. SMEs make up 99% of UK businesses and account for 61% of employment. Despite being the beating heart of our economy, research from the Federation of Small Businesses has found that SMEs are effectively shut out of the public procurement system. Only one in five SMEs has bid for a public sector contract in the last

three years. In the construction industry, a sector heavily reliant on SMEs, only two in five SMEs have bid for a public sector contract in the last three years. Of SMEs new to public sector opportunities—those with experience of between one and nine bids—49% have failed to secure a single contract in the last three years. The lack of transparency means that they do not know why they have failed. Submitting a tendering application is a resource-heavy process. If an SME keeps getting knocked back, the stats show that it will eventually stop trying.

The National Federation of Builders, a trade association representing the interests of small and medium-sized house builders, told me that one of its members had not successfully bid for a public sector contract for over a decade, even though it is well qualified to deliver. Sadly, this situation is replicated across most sectors. Of course some SMEs are rejected for good reasons, but there is clearly a cultural issue in public contracts being awarded to large, often multinational businesses over SMEs.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Smaller companies are often put off because the cost of tendering for such contracts is so high that failing to win the contract could have a really detrimental impact on the business as a whole.

Sarah Champion: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that chilling effect is having a negative impact on all our SMEs. The working group debated dividing bigger contracts so that local SMEs are more inclined to go for them but, unless SMEs know why they have failed and unless they know that the door is actually open to them, why would they waste their precious resources on bidding for something that they see as utterly futile? That is what we have to change.

There is clearly a cultural issue, which is demonstrated by the fact that 90% of contracts deemed suitable for SMEs are awarded to large corporations. Data from the British Chambers of Commerce found that, in 2016, 25% of public sector procurement spending was awarded directly to SMEs. As of 2021, this figure had dropped to 21%. Only just over £1 in every £5 spent by the UK Government on public services is going straight to SMEs, which is in stark contrast to their 2022 target of spending £1 in every £3 with SMEs.

The national chair of the Federation of Small Businesses said in August 2023:

“Meeting procurement targets isn’t just a bureaucratic milestone—it’s an affirmation of trust in our small business community.”

He is right. SMEs offer so much expertise and innovation, and they must be awarded more suitable public contracts. Frustratingly, when they get a bite of the cherry, it is usually as a subcontractor, with much lower remuneration than if they had been the lead, and of course without the public credit. An example of this led me to introduce this Bill.

A Rotherham business that leads not only the UK but the world with its innovation was grateful to deliver a £1 million Government contract. However, it was actually a £10 million contract that had been delivered to a multinational that then subcontracted it down to my business, having done nothing other than the packaging and the marketing around it. Had my business known that it could apply, even if it was paid £2 million, it would have meant that the business did not have to do it at cost for what it hoped would be a way in to Government

procurement. The business could have done it, made a profit and kept going, but the business is currently facing a tough time.

By amending section 1(3) of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, my Bill seeks to add an obligation for contracting authorities to consider how procuring from small and medium-sized enterprises might improve their area's wellbeing. Clause 2 will require contracting authorities to report how they have complied with this obligation. It is hoped that these changes will increase the importance of SMEs within social value tenders and will encourage the public sector to award more contracts to them.

As I mentioned, billions of pounds of public contracts are awarded to foreign suppliers every year. The most recent data shows that a substantial number of contracts are awarded to foreign suppliers both directly and indirectly—indirectly being when a foreign supplier controls the successful applicant for a contract. Of public contracts valued below £200 million, 2.3% were awarded directly to foreign suppliers, but this rose to 17.6% when indirect awards were accounted for. The story is similar for contracted values over £200 million: 2.1% were directly awarded to foreign suppliers whereas 31.5% of contracts were indirectly awarded to foreign suppliers.

An example of such a contract is the £1.6 billion Royal Navy contract awarded to a Spanish-led consortium in 2022 over an all-British one. Analysis shows that at least 40% of the work, worth £64 million, will go abroad and be carried out in Spain. To compound this issue, there have been no concrete answers as to whether there is a limit on how many jobs will be created in Spain and why there are no targets for UK steel in the contract.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for making such significant and poignant points, and I am sure she has given much thought to this. Why does she think the Government have allowed so many procurements to foreign suppliers over British small and medium-sized enterprises?

Sarah Champion: My hon. Friend asks an impossible question and she might want to ask it again to the Minister. In developing this Bill, I had conversations with the relevant Minister and he has been very open, and I know the Minister who is due to reply is also very open to this. I think the block is hesitancy in terms of the legislation and finding a way through, which is why my Bill is terribly modest in that it is just looking at transparency around where those contracts go, with the hope that that will do enough to influence where they actually land, which we would like to expect might be British businesses. So my answer to my hon. Friend's question is, "Who knows?" And it is a question the British public are asking all the time, particularly when a local business goes bust as a consequence.

On the £1.6 billion contract I was talking about, the all-British bid would have generated over 6,000 good UK jobs and supported a full onshore build of the ships. This bid also promised an investment of £90 million in UK shipyards and a further £54 million in training, apprenticeships and improving the UK skills base. Had social value to the UK been prioritised, as my Bill would encourage, surely it would have won the contract. Instead a sizeable proportion of the work will go abroad

at the expense of British jobs and supporting British businesses. My Bill raises the level of importance attached to the origin of goods and services in procurement decisions by increasing transparency around how public sector contracts are awarded and encouraging the uptake of British-originating products.

My Bill also seeks to highlight good employment standards within procurement. When developing the Bill, the TUC shared with me the dire state of employment standards and working practices within public procurement. To be clear, most employers treat their employees well, but it is common for outsourcing to have a detrimental effect on wages and conditions, with outsourced workers more likely to work longer hours, receive less pay and be on insecure or temporary contracts.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Is it not also a particular problem when procurement is given to a foreign company who will be using workers with different standards and different collective bargaining, which is totally unfair to the British businesses that have to follow British laws and British agreements with trade unions? Providing this data will give a level playing field to businesses who will know where they are being undercut.

Sarah Champion: Again, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. If companies pay people appallingly low wages, they can then undercut British businesses that want to pay people well and give them the terms and conditions so that work is fulfilling economically as well as psychologically. Yes, we are losing hand over fist in the current situation.

My Bill would therefore require contracting authorities to consider how they might act to support good employment standards and working practices. My Bill defines good employment standards and working practices as including, but not limited to, compliance with national and international obligations in the field of environment, social and labour law, and collective agreements. The Bill also requires contracting authorities to include reasonable details about how they have complied with their obligations to meet such standards in a contract award notice.

My amendments to existing legislation raise the importance of good work within public procurement, and encourage contracting authorities to award contracts to good employers by attempting to replicate regulation 56 of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015, which relates to excluding suppliers who are not compliant with international and domestic social, labour and environmental laws. It is designed to stop bad employment practices being tolerated within public procurement, such as fire and rehire or contractors refusing to implement the annual uplift of the real living wage.

Great care has been taken in drafting the Bill to avoid including measures that would threaten the UK's international obligations with respect to trade rules and the agreement on Government procurement. It is also important to note that my Bill would place the responsibility on the contracting authorities, not on the suppliers or UK Government, to publish data on their compliance with the relevant provisions under clause 2.

I hope that my Bill will also influence the conversation on reforming the public procurement system, so I am grateful that the Minister has offered me and the working group the opportunity to meet the civil servants and

[Sarah Champion]

perhaps the Minister to make changes, if needed, to the national procurement policy statement. Published in June 2021, the NPPS argued that the “huge power” of public procurement expenditure

“must support the delivery of public sector policy priorities, including generating economic growth, helping our communities recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, and supporting the transition to net zero carbon.”

It goes on to outline how:

“Public procurement should be leveraged to support priority national and local outcomes for the public benefit... Contracting authorities should consider the following social value outcomes”

when procuring such goods and services. My Bill seeks to cover all those, but I would be a little stronger on the “should” becoming a “must”. Aside from that, I think we are absolutely on the same page.

To conclude, my conversations with Rotherham businesses and national industry groups have made it clear that the changes I am proposing are welcome and overdue. I defy the Minister to find anyone in the UK who would not see this as common sense. Implementing the changes will increase transparency and encourage more public contracts to be awarded to British suppliers. By supporting this Bill, the House has an opportunity to demonstrate their support to British manufacturers, builders, farmers and SMEs. I thank the Labour Front Benchers for their support, and I am grateful to the members of the working group who helped me to develop it—the TUC, UK Steel, National Farmers Union, the RSPCA, the YPO, the Countryside Alliance, APSI, Bloom Procurement Services, the National Federation of Builders and Jonathan Davey—for all the help, support and guidance they have given me to date.

2.3 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on her Bill, which flies the flag for British business. I am a firm believer in supporting businesses and in ensuring that we do all that we can to embrace support and to expand British business. Indeed, on the topic of buying British, as I mentioned in my intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) has done some fantastic work in encouraging our supermarkets to add a “Buy British” button to many of their websites. He needs to be commended for that fantastic work.

The hon. Member for Rotherham has brought forward in her Bill some important points and a focus on British businesses, which is important. We must be flexible in our procurement processes, but we need more focus on ensuring that small and medium-sized enterprises have the chance to succeed and are not discriminated against. I admire her intentions, which I do not disagree with, but before I can support her Bill, we need the measures in the Procurement Act 2023 to proceed and progress, given the work that was done on it.

2.5 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who has laid out a good reason why we need to develop these measures.

It was a pleasure to serve with the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) on the Procurement Bill Committee in the last Session, where Labour tabled a number of amendments to further the cause of ensuring that we evaluate social value in contracts. Whether something is British is clearly a key social value for contracts. With British contracts, taxpayers’ money returns into local economies, there are Exchequer benefits, and we tend to have higher and better-quality standards in workers’ rights and environmental rights.

There is, in my view, a real problem with the current process. We introduce standards—be they environmental or workers’ standards—and quite rightly demand that they are high. Then, we say to companies, “Don’t worry. Get around it; ignore it all. Just offshore your production.” In fact, through those standards, we become a great champion not of increasing standards but of destroying jobs in this country.

Some Government Members—not all, but some—would say, “Well, that is an example of why we need to deregulate. That is why we should embrace our Brexit freedoms to ensure that we never get to a place where we are anti-competitive compared with the rest of the world.” The problem is that that is a race to the very bottom. First, it is a race to get below EU standards, then it is a race against standards from Turkey, and then it is a race against standards from China or countries in Africa. Our population ends up poorer and our environment more degraded.

The European Union and the US have implemented carbon border adjustment mechanisms to ensure that a tax is put on to adjust for the saving that a company would make by offshoring. The Government have rightly moved towards adopting the carbon border adjustment mechanism—although it is quite late, I am afraid—but they have not gone far enough. In America and now in Europe, there is an understanding that open procurement, in which we ignore the conditions of bidding companies, is a road to ruin. They have introduced Acts to focus on buying American or European. Despite the naysayers, that has not led to those countries being hauled up before the World Trade Organisation in relation to the agreement on Government procurement. Of course, we are a signatory to that agreement, but the fact that other signatories are able to implement a priority to buy from their own country shows that we should be less concerned about that agreement and more concerned about British jobs, British workers and British companies.

There is a small organisation in my constituency for which we tried to table an amendment to the Procurement Act. It would have meant that non-profit and small organisations could be given a leg-up in public procurement. It would have meant that if a contracting party had already developed a local relationship with such an organisation, it could bypass certain public procurement measures. I am afraid that it was rejected by the Government, but in Brighton we have an example of why it was needed.

Only a few years ago, RISE—Brighton’s specialist domestic violence service, which is one of 180 members of the network of Women’s Aid organisations and provides local expert holistic services for women, children and LGBT survivors of domestic abuse—was defunded when it lost its public procurement bid to an international consortium. It was set up 50 years ago and became a registered charity 30 years ago. It argued for and successfully

got the first all-women's refuge in Brighton. Sixteen years ago, it set up the first LGBT service for domestic abuse survivors in the country, and three years ago it lost its public procurement and had to start from scratch.

The reality is that that procurement did not take into account the social value and whether the terms and conditions negotiated through trade unions would be included. That has meant that a large number of people do not have the service they expect. Surprise, surprise, the contractor running the women's refuge—a nice, very good housing association, but not a women-led specialist organisation in this area—was not able to offer the wraparound services, and the council had to provide additional emergency funds to RISE so that it could go into the refuges and provide the wraparound services that the women needed. The procurement process defunded a local women-led organisation and cost the council more because it had to provide additional funding to that organisation. It is a loss for women in my city and for the council, which has had to pay more money, all because there is not a proper framework for the council to evaluate the situation and ensure that, rather than just having this neoliberal public procurement—a blind process—we work with and nurture communities.

What is the end result? The next time the procurement comes around, RISE, which was a strong, healthy organisation, will be a weak, diminished organisation that will not be able to bid competitively against a national or international body. In the end, there will be fewer providers in this space, and of course anyone who did their basic GCSE or O-level economics, like I did, knows how the market works if there are monopoly providers: the price will be higher, councils will have fewer options and the taxpayer will lose out. We need to start turning that around.

Unfortunately, as a result of the loss of the bigger bid from RISE, and thanks to the cuts that we are being forced to implement in Brighton and Hove as a result of the continuing austerity and the failure to support local councils, this year it has not been able to bid for £129,000 of additional services, including £5,000 from the third sector grant and £99,000 of new burdens funding for the LGBT dispersed refuge, meaning that we will have no specialist LGBT refuge support in the city. That will put pressure on the women's refuge, in which we have maintained good separate but equal services—that is how it should be—and that is now under threat. There is also a threat to the therapeutic wellbeing service for women and children. In these uncertain times, if we had started the process differently, we would have ended up with a flourishing local community.

In December, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, on which I sit, produced a report in which we found that the Government have not demonstrated that they have consistently used their purchasing power to support local and national policies, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham said earlier. The big problem we found is that there is no data. Without data, we cannot provide policy, and without policy, we cannot correct the problem. We see that problem happening all around us—we see local communities losing out—but we cannot get the data that is needed.

A number of the international agreements that we have signed, such as the Australia trade deal, had revolutionary clauses around gender, for example, but if

we are not monitoring some of these issues, we will not be able to put clauses in future trade deals, and we will bind ourselves in. The only reason that we could include the clauses on gender and trade was the fantastic work that my hon. Friend did to ensure that the data was collected.

The Bill is the next step towards strengthening the hand of British Trade Secretaries when they are negotiating around the world. It is about ensuring that we say, “Yes, we want free, fair and open trade, but we also want trade that levels up, not levels down.” Government Members understand the words “levelling up”, but I am not sure they have managed to deliver on the concept, so understandably, they would struggle with it in international treaties. The Bill starts to build on that process.

We need look only at the real problems we have seen with shady contracts under this Government to see that we need public procurement reform. I do not believe that the Procurement Act 2023 did that successfully enough, and this Bill is needed to fix some of those issues. I am delighted that the Government have agreed to meet my hon. Friend, and I know that when Labour is in government, we will start to fix some of the messes into which this Government have led us.

2.16 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I rise to support the aim of this private Member's Bill, which is more commonly known as the “Buy British Bill”, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). We have the Bill because the Conservative Government have failed to properly reform the procurement system and to support British businesses, which means that they have failed to bring well-paid jobs to communities up and down our country.

The British Chambers of Commerce found that, in 2021, small and medium-sized enterprises received a relatively smaller amount of direct Government procurement money than they did five years previously. I therefore ask the Minister: why are SMEs being sidelined from access to public procurement under this Government, and why do they prefer to procure from foreign suppliers? That is how it seems to me.

A Labour Government would cut red tape, ensure that every small national contract includes an SME at shortlisting, and streamline the bidding process. Meanwhile, the Conservatives have failed to take opportunities to reform the procurement process to support British businesses and communities. When the Procurement Act comes into force later this year, it will do nothing to address the wasteful approach to emergency contracting rules that we saw during the pandemic. That approach saw friends and donors of the Tory party being given the first bite of the cherry, while decent, skilled local businesses were denied the same opportunities.

One of those donors is Frank Hester, who, as we know, was abusive, racist and misogynistic. Even more shockingly, he spoke about ending an MP's life. I take that incredibly seriously. He is also the sole director of the Phoenix Partnership, an IT company that has been paid nearly half a billion pounds by central and local government and the NHS since 2016. I would like the Minister to reflect on that because the Government have to change course.

[Janet Daby]

Turning specifically to the Bill and British food procurement, the Government's food strategy from nearly two years ago stated:

"Public sector food should be healthier, more sustainable and provided by a diverse range of local suppliers. Locally produced food with reduced distance between farm and fork can provide societal benefits".

I would like the Government to put those words into action, and I wholeheartedly support my hon. Friend's Bill.

2.19 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for bringing this Bill forward. I know that she has worked incredibly hard on it, and done an enormous amount of work consulting with a wide range of stakeholders on the need for it and its scope.

In Newham, adding value to procurement decisions is seen as a priority, but, as I am sure hon. Members will appreciate, it has been made extremely difficult with 14 years of austerity having left Newham Council reeling while massively increasing local need. The real impact of funding cuts is hard to quantify because each cut has a social and economic impact, but Newham's general fund has been cut by about 18% and its population has increased by 16%. Of course, we cannot fix all of that through procurement, but we can address some of it through community wealth building in the long term. I want to be really honest about this: it is a really difficult thing to achieve, but that is what the council is working towards, and I believe it deserves our full support.

Like many councils, from Manchester to Darlington, Newham has gone further: it has decided to focus on the many ways we can build a community's wealth. To me, community wealth is about creating a resilient and inclusive economy for the benefit of the local area. That means harnessing the economic and social power of locally rooted institutions, including our councils, schools, police, universities, health boards and housing associations. One way in which Newham Council is building community wealth is through increasing the proportion of its local procurement spend.

The council has also provided support to local businesses so that they can more easily reply to their tenders. A few years ago, Newham had a significantly lower proportion of resilient businesses than some other areas of inner London, with only 48% of businesses in Newham assessed as resilient in 2018, compared with 69% in inner London as a whole. For some of those businesses, being awarded longer-term local contracts helps them not only to survive, but to thrive and grow in a sustainable way. In the Royal Docks, the council has worked with partners to create London's first living wage zone, with every single employer encouraged to pay the London living wage of £13.15 an hour.

More than 100 local employers have signed up to the council's voluntary community wealth building pledge, which includes a commitment to pay the London living wage. The pledge also includes a wide range of steps that the council encourages employers to take to help build community wealth—for example, buying local, prioritising sustainability and supporting local residents. Those include having at least two Newham suppliers within their supply chains or committing to seek out

quotes from Newham businesses when procuring new services and products. They also pledge to reduce their carbon footprints.

Businesses are encouraged to switch to a renewable energy provider or to implement a scheme to encourage their staff to cycle or get public transport to work. They are encouraged to invest in staff and young people. Businesses can create lots of opportunities for Newham's massively talented young people through apprenticeships, and the council seeks to encourage that. Businesses who sign up to the pledge can choose to be linked to the council's Newham work service to make it easier to hire local people. Businesses can also choose to be linked up with local voluntary projects that need their support.

All that means that businesses and employers become more invested in and embedded in our community. Equally, the emphasis on community wealth building has to involve connecting good local businesses with one another, supporting networks and harnessing the creativity of our small business leaders, because we all know that local Government officers do not have all the answers for how the local economy and society can prosper.

For most participants, the pledge is obviously voluntary, and the role of the council is to encourage and support good practice, not to impose it. There is a clear benefit for businesses, both for their reputation and in having a more secure network of partners around them. There is a clear benefit for businesses, both for their reputation and in having a more secure network of partners around them. Ultimately, we should see procurement for social value as one component in a larger strategy of shaping the local economy, so that the prosperity we create is more widely shared and better sustained over time.

When it comes to procurement, the council has a commitment to use its processes to ensure that contractors, as well as the council itself, pay the London living wage in full. That is clearly of massive importance given the continuing impacts locally of the cost of living crisis. I am sure that all Members present understand that our local areas having thriving businesses means better jobs for our communities and higher standards of living, and we all want that. Newham Council recognises the value of smaller local businesses and the value of good employment standards. Surely that is the kind of encouragement and offer of partnership we should be giving to entrepreneurs and business people across the UK.

Let me give one last example. Populo is Newham Council's wholly owned housing company, which is building homes for rent—including a significant proportion of genuinely affordable homes—in order to tackle the housing shortage, which is impoverishing so many people in Newham. It is currently building hundreds of new homes in Newham, aiming for 7,000 by 2040. Because it is wholly owned by the council, Populo can embed higher standards in procurement, planning and design so that our wider social and economic goals are met, as well as delivering more of the homes that are so desperately needed locally. There is much more that I could say on this subject, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I want to give my Front-Bench colleague the opportunity to speak as well.

2.26 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on her success in the ballot for

private Members' Bills, and on bringing forward a Bill that could benefit the small and medium-sized enterprises not only in her own area, but right across the UK. My hon. Friend has long recognised the importance and huge contribution of small and medium-sized businesses in her area and has stood up for them, as well as campaigning rigorously for the steel industry. She has put considerable effort into preparing this Bill, including setting up a working group with a whole range of organisations, including the TUC, Rolls-Royce, UK Steel, the National Farmers Union, the National Federation of Builders, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Countryside Alliance, Bloom Procurement Services, YPO and the Association for Public Service Excellence.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on an excellent speech, in which she revealed some shocking facts showing how, time after time, small and medium-sized enterprises are missing out to foreign suppliers or to big multinationals that are manufacturing abroad. Whether it is naval ships or construction, a huge range of industries are missing out. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) and for West Ham (Ms Brown) and the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) for their contributions today.

The UK is a party to the World Trade Organisation's agreement on Government procurement and other international free trade agreements, which, for procurements over a certain value threshold, legally require contracting authorities not to discriminate against suppliers from other countries that are also signed up to one of those agreements. Nevertheless, procurement policy can still do plenty to support British businesses, such as using stretching social, environmental and labour clauses in contract design to ensure that British businesses are recognised for the very high standards that they meet.

As was mentioned earlier today, people may well ask why it is that my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham is bringing forward a Bill on procurement when only last year the Government brought forward their own Procurement Bill, which will come into force this October. The fact of the matter, quite simply, is that the Government's Procurement Act 2023 was a wasted opportunity to reform procurement. Unfortunately, despite our attempts to strengthen and improve that Bill with our amendments, when the Procurement Act comes into force in October it will allow the same wasteful approach to emergency contracting rules that we saw during the pandemic, with friends and donors of the Tory party given the first bite at the cherry, while decent, skilled local businesses are denied the same opportunity. Billions of pounds of public money will be wasted, which excellent small and medium-sized businesses such as BCB International in my constituency—

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is being reported in the media that Conservative Members are “talking out” the next Bill, the Health and Equality Acts (Amendment) Bill. That is clearly not the case; it is Labour Members who are preventing discussion of the Bill. In what ways can I make that clear?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know that that is not a point of order for the Chair. It is abundantly plain to

anyone watching the debate that the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) is on her feet, speaking from the Opposition Front Bench.

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).
Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 22 March.

Business without Debate

HEALTH AND EQUALITY ACTS (AMENDMENT) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

CHILDREN NOT IN SCHOOL (REGISTERS, SUPPORT AND ORDERS) BILL

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

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE (CONSULTATION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

PUBLIC LIABILITY (COMPULSORY INSURANCE) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June.

EMPLOYMENT EQUALITY (INSURANCE ETC) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June.

SUPPORT FOR INFANTS AND PARENTS ETC (INFORMATION) BILL

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

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

VETERANS (NON-CUSTODIAL SENTENCES) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 29 March.

NUCLEAR VETERANS (COMPENSATION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 19 April.

MINERS' STRIKE (PARDONS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 19 April.

LICENSING HOURS EXTENSIONS BILL

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be considered on Friday 22 March.

HIGHWAYS ACT 1980 (AMENDMENT) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

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 22 March.

**STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS ACT 1946
(AMENDMENT) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

**DANGEROUS DOGS ACT 1991
(AMENDMENT) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

**EXEMPTION FROM VALUE ADDED TAX
(MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

**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 22 March.

**CARAVAN SITE LICENSING
(EXEMPTION OF MOTOR HOMES) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

**NHS ENGLAND (ALTERNATIVE
TREATMENT) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

**BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION
(PRIVATISATION) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

**CHILDREN'S CLOTHING
(VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

REGULATORY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

BARNETT FORMULA (REPLACEMENT) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

**RULE OF LAW (ENFORCEMENT BY
PUBLIC AUTHORITIES) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION (OFFENCES) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

**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 22 March.

CARAVAN SITES BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

MULTI-STOREY CAR PARKS (SAFETY) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**DOMESTIC ENERGY
(VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

**CONVERSION PRACTICES
(PROHIBITION) BILL**

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (1 March),
That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 22 March.

CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If I may, I will take a moment to recognise that the United Nations has made today International Day to Combat Islamophobia. The Government condemn anti-Muslim hatred, just as we condemn antisemitism and all forms of racism and hatred, and I would like to put on the record that it is a matter of profound regret to us all that people are still judged by their identity, when they should be judged by their conduct and their character.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As the Minister will understand, that is not a point of order for the Chair, but he has put his point on the record.

PETITION**Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry**

2.37 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I rise to present a petition concerning infected blood. I do so on behalf of my constituents, because it is simply unacceptable that the Budget failed to provide for compensation for those affected. I hope the Government will now take action to fulfil the will of this House, as expressed in the Victims and Prisoners Bill.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of West Ham,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain etc.

[P002928]

Thames Water: Contingency Plans

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

2.38 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for granting me the opportunity to have a debate on this important issue.

Since 2020, Thames Water has dumped over 72 billion litres of raw sewage into rivers in London, polluting our waterways and damaging our natural environments. It has done so while accruing billions of pounds of debt and increasingly failing to provide basic services to the nearly 25% of the country it supplies, including my constituents in Richmond Park. Despite this, Thames Water executives have paid themselves almost £8 million in bonuses over recent years, lining their pockets while the company they run continues to pollute our rivers and streams.

For my constituents in particular, the name Thames Water has understandably become a byword for poor quality, slapdash repair work, damaging environmental practices, and barely concealed contempt for its bill payers.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way. My constituents have suffered quite seriously from similar issues, including interruption to water supply to a large part of Reading recently and, indeed, considerable sewage discharges in the river, which, outrageously, are sometimes visible to passers-by who use our bridges and walk by the riverside.

Sarah Olney: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about sewage discharges. We have had a recent one in Teddington lock in my constituency, causing a great deal of distress to local people.

During my time as the MP for Richmond Park, I have received dozens of reports of Thames Water's negligence. In 2020, more than 1,200 homes in Richmond were left without central heating or hot water for five days when water from a burst pipe ingressed the gas network. Last year, a burst water main on the Manor Circus roundabout went unattended for days, delaying the completion of roadworks that were causing chaos in the area. My residents in north Kingston have had to make their peace with constant congestion caused by an unending series of emergency repair works—all because this failing water giant cannot get its act together. That is just a mere snapshot of the chaos that Thames Water causes for my constituents every day.

To add insult to injury, Thames Water is now planning to build a pipeline across a nature reserve in my constituency. The controversial Teddington direct river abstraction project will allow Thames Water to take water from the Thames and replace it with treated sewage just above Teddington lock. The pipeline's construction will put a rare and valuable ecosystem under threat and subject my residents in Ham and north Kingston to years of building work. This project is only necessary because Thames Water is losing hundreds of millions of litres of water a day through leaks in its system.

My constituents are yet again suffering, because the company has spent years paying out hundreds of millions of pounds in dividends to shareholders, instead of investing in its infrastructure. They have to live with the congestion on the streets, the threat of major construction in their

parks and the sewage running through their river. Now, they are picking up the tab for Thames Water's total mismanagement of its finances. I was recently contacted by a constituent who has seen his water bill rise by just over 60% between 2020 and 2024. Every year, more and more of my constituents' income is going towards propping up a company that shows an utter disregard for them and their community.

It was therefore infuriating to see recent reports in the *Financial Times* that Thames Water has been lobbying the Government and the industry regulator, Ofwat, to let it increase bills further, pay dividends and face lower fines as it seeks to avoid financial collapse. This is despite Conservative Ministers already bending over backwards to avoid cracking down on polluting water companies. It is extraordinary that the country's largest water company could be allowed by this Government to give its executives millions in bonuses while failing to fulfil its basic functions, but that is the situation that has been allowed to occur for far too long.

Over the past few weeks, I have therefore been calling on Conservative Ministers to publish their contingency plan, Project Timber, for what they will do if Thames Water goes bust. Frustratingly, my demands have continually been refused, with the response being that "it would not be appropriate" to publish the plan. This is despite what is now overwhelming public interest to do so.

With the news this week, however, that Thames Water was the only water firm that had refused to contribute to a new £180 million anti-pollution fund, the alarm bells became deafening about its financial status. And when I asked the Prime Minister at PMQs this week whether he could confirm that this broken company will still exist by the end of the year, he was unable to answer. That is why, today, I stand here to call not only for the publication of Project Timber, but for further, more drastic action.

Last month, the Government passed new legislation, which allows the High Court to appoint a special administrator to take over a failing water firm. With Thames Water clearly unable to pay its debts and with its latest refusal to contribute investment to combat sewage, I believe the threshold has now been met for the Government to take this as a course of action.

That is why I now speak on behalf of the Liberal Democrats in calling on the Government to put Thames Water into special administration. Under these new proposals, the taxpayer would not be liable for any debts, and the special administrator could restructure this failing firm into a company for the public benefit. That would ensure no interruption in service for millions of households across the capital and the south of England, while allowing the company to be stabilised—no longer relying on its failing board. Further, by enacting those special measures, Thames Water could restart efforts to stop harmful sewage discharges into rivers and lakes. This would also guarantee no further executive bonuses are paid, following the near millions which have been paid to senior officials in recent years. We therefore face two options: to continue allowing Thames Water slowly sink into financial ruin, or to act now to restructure this failed company and start getting it working again for the public benefit.

To conclude, after years of letting Thames Water pollute our rivers, fail to perform basic functions and charge customers higher and higher bills, enough is enough. Rather than continue to let the asset strippers

run Thames Water into the ground, the Liberal Democrats are clear: we cannot let this situation continue. Thames Water is no longer a functioning company, and the Government have a choice: either bail them out with taxpayer money, or listen to our calls to put it into special administration to then be reformed into a company for the public benefit. After years of Conservative Ministers refusing to take action, this vital step is needed to safeguard customers, steady the ship and get our country's largest water company functioning again.

2.45 pm

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. I am delighted to respond on behalf of the Government.

Water is what makes life possible on our planet. It is essential for our health and wellbeing, our economy, the production of food and, of course, clean energy. I want to make it clear from the outset that no matter the individual circumstances of their water or waste water company, the public will always continue to receive those vital services. The Government are committed to ensuring that water companies deliver the performance and environmental outcomes bill payers expect and deserve. Our plan for water will transform our management of the water system, delivering cleaner water for nature and people, as well as securing plentiful supply. The plan is delivering more investment, stronger regulation and tougher enforcement, with water companies investing £7.1 billion in environmental improvements between 2020 and 2025, and an estimated £60 million in capital investment by 2050 to meet storm overflow reduction plan targets.

I want to reassure the House that the Government are prepared for a range of scenarios across all our regulated industries, including across all water companies, as any Government should be. The Government's key priority is the ongoing provision of water and waste water services. There are plans in place to ensure that there will be no disruption to customers' water or waste water services, and that any incidents that may occur will continue to be quickly addressed, no matter the financial situation of one's water or waste water company.

Regarding contingency plans as they specifically relate to Thames Water, as noted to the House previously, Ofwat monitors the financial position of all water companies, including Thames Water, and takes action when water companies and their investors need to strengthen their long-term financial resilience. However, it is important to make clear that it is for the company and its investors to manage the company's financial resilience within the context of its licence and broader statutory obligations. The Government are confident that Ofwat, as the economic regulator of the water industry, is working closely with all water companies, including Thames Water, and ensuring that action is taken when financial resilience needs to be improved.

Although a wide range of options is available to water companies, such as the injection of new equity when they are required to strengthen their financial resilience, I know that both Parliament and the public will want reassurance that should the worst happen regarding any water company, water and waste water

services will continue to be provided. Should a water company become insolvent—when it is unable to pay its debts, or when its liabilities are greater than its assets, or when a company is in such serious breach of its principal statutory duties or an enforcement order—it would enter special administration following a court application. Should a special administration order ever be needed for any water company, the statutory purpose of the order would be to ensure that the company continues to operate and that customers continue to receive their water and waste water services.

The existence of the water industry special administration regime is not a secret. It is set out in statute, and there are similar regimes in place for other regulated sectors such as banking and energy. These powers were agreed by Parliament over 30 years ago in the Water Industry Act 1991. I hope the existence of the water industry special administration regime will provide reassurance that, no matter the circumstances of their water company or waste water company, customers will continue to receive these vital public services.

Sarah Olney: The Minister says it is not a secret that these regulations exist, but what is currently a secret is Project Timber, which I understand is a contingency plan should Thames Water be unable to operate. Could he say a little more about that?

Mark Spencer: I do not want to be drawn into the specific cases of specific companies because there are market sensitivities, but it is clear that these regulations exist for all bodies that provide us with energy, banking, water and all those vital services that our constituents expect not to fall over. The Government have a plan to support those vital sectors in moments of distress. The Government's priority is the ongoing provision of water and waste water services.

Matt Rodda: Can the Minister advise me on the course of action where a water company appears not to be offering compensation where there has been an interruption in supply? Will he perhaps write to me on this matter? A large number of my constituents—several hundred people—have recently had a supply interruption. I inquired with Thames Water some weeks ago as to whether it will pay compensation, but I have not yet had a reply. We are in some distress about this matter. Many residents were affected for two days and were unable to have a shower, do their washing or perform other domestic tasks.

Mark Spencer: I am aware of the distress that being without water will have caused to the hon. Gentleman's residents. Of course, I will write to him formally to set out what he can do.

I hope that I have been able to reassure the House that Ofwat continues to work closely with the water companies and their investors. Where it has been determined that financial resilience needs to be strengthened, a wide range of options is available to all water companies.

By highlighting the existence of the water industry special administration regime, I hope that I have provided reassurance that the Government have a transparent plan and are prepared for all eventualities when it comes to the provision of vital public services.

Question put and agreed to.

2.52 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 15 March 2024

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Arts Council England: Public Body Review

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): Today we are announcing that the second stage of the public body review into Arts Council England is under way.

The public bodies review programme delivers against the commitments made in the “Declaration on Government Reform” to increase both the effectiveness of public bodies and departmental sponsorship, making Government and public bodies work better in service of the public. Public body reviews will be underpinned by broad minimum requirements covering efficiency, efficacy, accountability, and governance. The review will follow guidance published in April 2022 by the Cabinet Office: “Guidance on the undertaking of Reviews of Public Bodies”.

Arts Council England is an executive non-departmental public body, and was established by Royal Charter in 1946. It is one of the Government’s primary vehicles to support the arts and creativity in England. Its role encompasses funding and investment, research, support and advice to the sector, and partnership promotion.

The Government are proud of the work they have undertaken with Arts Council England, providing increased investment in arts and culture through its most recent funding portfolio, and spreading opportunity across the country to a record number of organisations.

The Department has agreed to commence a full-scale review into Arts Council England, and Dame Mary Archer has been appointed as the independent lead reviewer. She will work with a review team composed of officials from the Department and an advisory board of people with a range of experience in the arts and culture, detailed below.

Dave Moutrey (Chair)
 Sir Damon Buffini
 David Butcher
 Tony Butler
 Leila D’Aronville
 Nathaniel Hepburn MBE
 Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall
 Sir Simon Robey
 Gurvinder Sandher MBE DL
 Professor Katy Shaw
 Sarah Staniforth CBE
 Jo Verrent
 Dr Sharon Watson MBE DL
 Sue Williamson MBE

The terms of reference for the review have been drafted following consultation between the lead reviewer, the Department and Arts Council England, and the review will broadly look at the following areas:

Arts Council England’s delivery model and whether it is correct to deliver effective outcomes for the public;
 Arts Council England’s grant monitoring procedures and overall efficiency;
 Arts Council England’s statutory functions;
 Departmental sponsorship; and
 Arts Council England’s accountability to the Department, respecting the importance of the arm’s length principle and the Arts Council’s responsibility as custodians of public money. In conducting the review, officials will engage with a broad range of interested parties in the arts and creative sectors across the UK.

As set out by the Cabinet Office guidance, the review will report to the Government, and the Government will publish the conclusions of the review and any Departmental response in due course.

[HCWS347]

DEFENCE

Single Source Contracts: Baseline Profit Rate 2024-25

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): Under the Defence Reform Act 2014, the Secretary of State for Defence has a legal obligation to announce whether he will accept the Single Source Regulations Office recommendation for the baseline profit rate to be used in single source defence contracts for 2024-25. He must make and publish this decision by 15 March 2024.

In making its recommendation, the Single Source Regulations Office must aim to ensure that good value for money is obtained in Government expenditure on qualifying defence contracts, and that suppliers who are party to qualifying defence contracts are paid a fair and reasonable price under those contracts.

This year, I, the Minister of State for Defence Procurement, on behalf of the Secretary of State, have agreed with the recommendation from the Single Source Regulations Office.

Therefore, today I am announcing that I have set the baseline profit rate for single source defence contracts at 8.24%, in line with the rate recommended by the Single Source Regulations Office. This is a decrease of 0.05% from 2023-24. I have accepted the methodology used by the SSRO to calculate these figures. The underlying rate has fallen 0.35 percentage points from 8.44% to 8.09%. A full explanation of the SSRO methodology is published on its website.

I am also announcing the capital servicing rates and the removal of the SSRO funding adjustment as recommended by the SSRO, which can be found at table 1 below. These rates have been published in the *London Gazette*, as required by the Defence Reform Act.

All of these new rates will come into effect from 1 April 2024.

Table 1: Recommended rates agreed by the Secretary of State for Defence.

Element	2023-24 rates	2024-25 rates
Baseline profit rate (% on contract cost)	8.29%	8.24%
Baseline profit rate to apply to contracts between the Secretary of State and a company wholly owned by the UK Government and where both parties agree (% on contract cost)	0.038%	0%

Element	2023-24 rates	2024-25 rates
Fixed capital servicing rate (% on fixed capital employed)	2.9%	3.26%
Working capital servicing rate (% on positive working capital employed)	1.67%	3.1%
Working capital servicing rate (% on negative working capital employed)	0.51%	1.61%
SSRO funding adjustment	0.038%	N/A

[HCWS345]

EDUCATION

Childminders: September Childcare Entitlement Expansion

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): This Government are delivering a brighter future for Britain, with long-term economic security and opportunity: where hard work is always rewarded; where ambition and aspiration are celebrated; where young people get the skills they need to succeed in life and where families are supported.

In March 2023 the Chancellor announced transformative reforms to childcare for parents, children, the economy and women by vastly increasing the amount of free childcare that eligible working families can access. These reforms also included measures to make it easier for providers to deliver their childcare provision, including changing the staff:child ratio for two-year-olds in England and updates to the early years foundation stage framework. This is the largest expansion of childcare in England's history.

From this April, eligible working parents will access the first 15 hours of funded childcare each week for their two-year-olds. In September, they will be able to access 15 hours each week for their nine-month-olds. From September 2025 all eligible parents will have access to 30 hours free childcare for children aged nine months all the way until they start school.

In this spring Budget, the Chancellor announced that the hourly rate childcare providers are paid to deliver the free hours offers for children aged nine months to four years would increase in line with the metric used at spring Budget 2023 for the next two years. This is an estimated additional £500 million of investment over two years. The sector has welcomed this certainty on future funding and the additional confidence it creates to expand.

We continue to make good progress supporting the sector to ready to provide parents with the places they need.

We launched our new “Do something BIG. Work with small children” national recruitment campaign in February. Already thousands of people are visiting the campaign website every week to find out more about early years and childcare careers. The website also directs users to search for roles on the Department for Work and Pensions’ “Find a job” platform, where there are now thousands of vacancies to explore.

As we had hoped, parents are enthusiastic to take up the new support from Government, with over 100,000 entitlement codes now issued to families of eligible two-year-olds. We recently announced that based on our latest projections, we expect at least 150,000 children to benefit from this by April, collectively saving parents over £500 million in childcare costs.

During February we updated the wraparound programme handbook (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wraparound-childcare-guidance-for-local-authorities>) for local authorities and published new guidance for schools and trusts (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wraparound-childcare-guidance-for-schools>), setting out our expectations of schools in providing wraparound childcare. We have also updated the “right to request” guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wraparound-childcare-guidance-for-schools/responding-to-requests-for-wraparound-childcare>) so it is clear how parents can exercise their right to request childcare from their school and how schools should manage these requests.

Applications for September 2024

We have announced today, 15 March 2024, that applications for the second wave of the largest ever expansion of Government-funded childcare will open on 12 May 2024.

From 12 May eligible working parents of children from nine months old will be able to register to access 15 hours of Government-funded childcare a week from 1 September 2024, with many receiving support with childcare costs for the first time. We are encouraging parents to apply as early as possible within the application window from 12 May and they can find out more information on www.childcarechoices.gov.uk.

Childminder consultation launch

Childminders make up an important part of the early years sector, and provide high-quality, flexible and more affordable childcare for parents. We have taken action to support them, through the uplift in funding for early years, new wraparound funding and the new flexibilities provided for by the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023. In November 2023, we launched our £7.2 million start-up grant scheme, worth up to £1,200 for childminders who registered on or after 15 March 2023, and we have introduced new flexibilities for how many other childminders and assistants they can work with, and how much time they can spend working from non-domestic premises.

Today, we have launched a new consultation to improve childminder recruitment and retention. The proposals in this consultation address some of the issues that childminders have told us are important to them. This includes simplifying the registration process for new childminders, offering flexibilities to childminder agencies, and ensuring local authorities pay entitlements funding monthly where this is the childminder's preference. Depending on the outcome of the consultation, we will also consider extending this final measure to ensure all early years providers are paid entitlements funding monthly, if they request it.

The consultation also seeks to further understand the property barriers childminders face, the best ways to support childminders to remain in the profession, and

what more we can do to help childminders to deliver the new entitlements and provide more wraparound care. These proposals form part of our ongoing work to support the sector in continuing to deliver a fantastic standard of childcare and helping to deliver our transformative expansion of childcare.

Experience based route consultation

Last year the Government consulted on proposed changes to the EYFS, including the introduction of an “experience based route” for staff in early years settings to be included in ratios following a period of supervised practice. Following the supportive responses to this proposal, the Government intend to proceed with this change to introduce an experience-based route for practitioners. We will continue to monitor the needs of the EY workforce as the new entitlements begin to roll out and will use this to inform how we develop the route

and when it will be introduced. We will provide more information in due course. Implementing these changes will help early years practitioners to continue to deliver their invaluable, high-quality education and care to millions of children each day.

Safeguarding consultation

The safety of our youngest children is our utmost priority and I have seen at first hand the excellent practices that early years providers have in place to keep children safe. We continually monitor and review safeguarding within early years settings. As part of this ongoing work, it is my intention to consult on changes to the early years foundation stage statutory framework to ensure the safeguarding requirements are strengthened for the youngest children as entitlements roll out.

[HCWS346]

Petition

Friday 15 March 2024

OBSERVATIONS

DEFENCE

Defence Equipment and Support site in Beith

The petition of residents of the constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran

Declares deep concern about the ongoing industrial dispute at Defence Equipment and Support in Beith, North Ayrshire (an arm's-length body of the Ministry of Defence); further that this strike, for improved pay and conditions is unprecedented; notes that non-craft workers preparing arms for shipment at the depot face discrimination in the payment of bonuses, relative to craft workers who assemble munitions; further that the petitioners reject the fact that retention payments are made to managers and craft workers, while non-craft workers earning less than £21,000 per year have been excluded from retention bonuses and stands with the workers in rejecting a two-tier workforce.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and urgently intervene to ensure a fair resolution to the industrial dispute.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Patricia Gibson, *Official Report*, 15 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 800.]
[P002898]

Observations from the Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge):

The Defence munitions site at Beith is involved in the processing and outload of multiple complex weapons systems in support of a range of operations, including Operation SCORPIUS—support to the Ukraine.

The GMB union submitted a collective grievance on 1 December 2022, citing the exclusion of some staff at the Beith site from a series of retention measures brought in in 2022, leading to industrial action on a number of dates from July 2023. The GMB's first mandate expired on 16 December but, following a second ballot, it has a further six-month mandate for strike and action short of strike.

The retention bonus in dispute was set up to address the high attrition rates—39%—in the craft fitter and engineering manager roles, which presented an unacceptable

risk to operational outputs. This bonus was to be paid for two years, along with an additional local allowance. These arrangements reflect the skills, capabilities, experience and qualifications, as well as the different levels of responsibility and accountability, of the staff in these roles who undertake different work and are at a different pay grade from those taking the action. It is normal practice, in both public and private sectors, to have differing rates paid for workers with different skills and qualifications. DE&S has investigated the issues raised in the grievance and concluded that there were no grounds to support making the signatories eligible for the retention measures as attrition in these roles was and remains low.

I note that the petition states that non-craft fitters earn less than £21,000. I can confirm that from 1 April 2023 the minimum full-time salary for non-craft fitters was £21,971. This was raised again from 1 August to £23,500 for operatives, and to £25,200 for supervisors, with many staff earning in excess of these minimum rates.

A generous pay offer remains on the table, which would significantly improve the pay of the workers in dispute. This is beyond the recent 2023 pay award, which has already significantly uplifted base pay for these specific workers, alongside over £4,000 in bonuses in 2023. As part of those one-off bonuses, in January 2023 an award of £1,500 was delivered specifically to recognise and thank these non-craft fitters for their ongoing work to support critical operations.

DE&S has confirmed a commitment to implement a new capability pay model in these roles in April 2024, ahead of the rest of the organisation. This will ensure that the pay of all individuals who do their job to the expected standards and behave in a way that is commensurate with DE&S values will increase by 37%—and it will increase by up to 43.5% for those that go above this—within a two-year period from April 2022.

Unfortunately, GMB demanded a lump sum payment of £11,650 (50% of base pay) now, with a further £4,000 (17% of base pay) annually going forwards, which is neither affordable nor appropriate, given local market conditions. The GMB met with DE&S's chief executive officer, Andy Start, on 1 February as part of the dispute resolution process. The outcome of this meeting is expected to be issued to the union in the near future.

It is disappointing that GMB members have voted to continue industrial action. However, DE&S officials remain open to talks on a constructive basis with the GMB.

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Friday 15 March 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	29WS	EDUCATION	31WS
Arts Council England: Public Body Review	29WS	Childminders: September Childcare	
		Entitlement Expansion	31WS
DEFENCE	30WS		
Single Source Contracts: Baseline Profit Rate			
2024-25	30WS		

PETITION

Friday 15 March 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	3P
Defence Equipment and Support site in Beith	3P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Friday 22 March 2024**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Friday 15 March 2024

Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill [Col. 549]
Motion for Second Reading—(Selaine Saxby)—agreed to Read a Second time

Public Procurement (British Goods and Services) Bill [Col. 611]
Motion for Second Reading—(Sarah Champion)

Petition [Col. 630]

Thames Water: Contingency Plans [Col. 631]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 29WS]

Petitions [Col. 3P]
Observation
