

**Friday
4 July 2025**

**Volume 770
No. 166**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Friday 4 July 2025

House of Commons

Friday 4 July 2025

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

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

9.34 am

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House divided: Ayes 1, Noes 33.

Division No. 253]

[9.34 am

AYES

Brickell, Phil

**John Grady and
Mike Reader**

Tellers for the Ayes:

NOES

Ali, Rushanara
Brandreth, Aphra
Bryant, Chris
Chambers, Dr Danny
Cross, Harriet
Dalton, Ashley
Fox, Sir Ashley
Garnier, Mark
Gilbert, Tracy
Gould, Georgia
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Hardy, Emma
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Jardine, Christine
Kane, Mike
Lamb, Peter
Madders, Justin

Mohamed, Iqbal
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Morgan, Stephen
Murray, James
Pollard, Luke
Russell, Sarah
Sackman, Sarah
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Jeff
Stafford, Gregory
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Turmaine, Matt
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Wrigley, Martin

Tellers for the Noes:
**Kate Dearden and
Taiwo Owatemi**

The Deputy Speaker declared that the Question was not decided because fewer than 40 Members had participated in the Division (Standing Order No. 41).

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

Third Reading

9.48 am

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am delighted to present this Bill for its Third Reading. I begin by stating how grateful I am to all the Members from across the House who have engaged with this Bill, especially during the Public Bill Committee. It became quite clear very quickly how passionate every Committee member was about animal welfare, and we had a huge amount of contributions, with many taking the opportunity to name check their own pets from home. I thought I had heard every cat name during my

years in clinical practice, but I have to say that I was really impressed by the imagination of the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter), who revealed that her cats were named Clement Catlee and Mo Meowlam.

My many years in veterinary practice, working both in Winchester and in Romsey—in your beautiful constituency, Madam Deputy Speaker—as well as around the rest of country, have shown me just how deeply the people of this nation care for their pets. They are companions, and they are sometimes sole companions to people who live alone. I have lost count of the number of times, especially during covid, that we were treating animals and someone would say, “I haven’t seen anyone else for months, and my dog or my cat is my only companion.” Pets are absolutely vital for many people’s mental health, especially when we have an epidemic of loneliness. Pets are sometimes part of the antidote to that.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): My constituency is the home of Canine Partners, the organisation that provides canine companions for individuals with disabilities. I just wanted to reflect on the positive effect those dogs have on the people who care for them.

Dr Chambers: There are so many fantastic organisations like Canine Partners. Another one is the Cinnamon Trust. If a person ends up going into hospital for an extended period of time, the Cinnamon Trust will take care of their pet for them and give it back to them when they are discharged. That takes away so much of the worry.

My partner Emma and I have two dogs: Frank and Moose. Frank has been mentioned before in Parliament, because I managed to wish him a very happy 15th birthday recently. He is a pug cross border terrier. I think the best way to describe how he looks, with his undershot jaw and his big buggy eyes, is quirky. I admit that he gets a mixed reception; one Liberal Democrat Member saw a picture of him and called him ugly, which I was horrendously offended by. [HON. MEMBERS: “Shame!”] It was awful—shame! We were at one of my friends’ houses for dinner recently, and one of their children looked at Frank and said, “Frank is really ugly.” The other child said, “You shouldn’t say that, because he might have been in an accident.” It was possibly a genetic accident, but I want to make clear on the record that beneath his appearance, he is a gentle and loving companion, and he brings a smile to the face of everyone who sees him.

I know that many other Members, as well as people across the country, will feel as strongly about protecting animal welfare as I and other vets do. Pets like Frank and Moose have such profound impacts on our everyday lives and happiness, and it is crucial that we do all we can to ensure dogs like them are protected from the cruel practices involved in pet smuggling. All of the pets who have been mentioned in this Chamber, and others who have not been, are close to our hearts and serve to remind us of the importance of this Bill. Although my pets and yours, Madam Deputy Speaker—Alfie and—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Alfie and Luna.

Dr Chambers: Alfie and Luna. They are cockapoos—I am sure they keep you very fit. Although our pets, and all the pets of the other hon. Members who are in the Chamber today, are well cared for and have loving homes, that is not the case for all cats and dogs in the UK.

As a vet, I have seen the devastating consequences of puppy smuggling. It is unimaginably cruel to separate puppies and kittens from their mothers at a very young age and then bring them across borders in substandard conditions, where they are sold for maximum profit by unscrupulous traders who prioritise profit over welfare.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for introducing this Bill, which I know means a lot to the great number of my constituents who have contacted me. They are particularly concerned about the conditions that puppies are smuggled in, but also that many animals coming into this country illegally bring conditions that we have eradicated here, or have cropped ears and tails. They are very keen to see my hon. Friend's Bill pass, but can he assure us that more can be done in future to make sure, in particular, that we stamp out those illnesses?

Dr Chambers: I very much appreciate that intervention from my hon. Friend. Yes, one important part of this Bill—which I will come on to—is biosecurity. There are a lot of diseases that we do not see in the UK that can affect humans as well, such as rabies and *Brucella canis*. There are also diseases such as distemper that affect other dogs; we do not see those diseases in the UK, but there is a risk of them coming in and becoming endemic. My partner Emma, who is here today, is an epidemiologist at the University of Surrey, studying diseases such as rabies in dogs and the risk of them transferring across borders. It is a very live issue.

Those who purchase an animal are often completely unaware of the smuggling process, which is devastating. When people go to buy a puppy, they are completely unaware that there is a reasonable chance that it has been smuggled in from abroad.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): My hon. Friend is laying out clearly the need for change. A number of my constituents, including Ann from Bredbury, Shannon from Marple and Ashley from High Lane, have been in touch to ask me to support him in his endeavours. People are staggered that some of these practices are not yet outlawed. Does he agree that some of his proposals in the Bill are closing loopholes that people already expect to be closed?

Dr Chambers: That is an insightful intervention from my hon. Friend. Yes, most people are shocked at the sheer scale of puppy smuggling. The Dogs Trust did a study looking at one of the online platforms with puppy adverts, and up to 50% of those adverts turned out to be for puppies that had possibly been smuggled in from abroad. In the last 12 months, one in five vets said they had treated animals that they believed had been smuggled from abroad. This is not a niche issue; it is a systemic issue within the pet trade, and these loopholes need to be closed.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for introducing this fantastic Bill, which does important things for animal welfare. Sadly, my constituency

has a problem with dog-on-dog attacks, which are truly distressing to their owners. The overwhelming majority of dog owners in my constituency are incredibly responsible and keep their dogs under control at all times, but a tiny minority are doing a great deal of damage. Does the hon. Member have any thoughts on what we could do about that?

Dr Chambers: Dog-on-dog attacks are a huge issue. It largely comes down to socialisation when they are puppies. It was made a lot worse during the covid pandemic when people could not attend normal puppy training classes, and puppies could not walk and meet other dogs or have normal training regimes.

I will also come on to the problem of dogs having illegally cropped ears—when their ears are cut off—because dogs communicate by body language, and part of their body language is ear position. If they cannot move their ears, they cannot communicate in normal ways to other dogs that they are not a threat, and they are more likely to get into fights and difficulties. It is the same if their tails are cut off and they cannot show whether they are happy, sad, angry or confident.

When owners buy a new puppy, often they do not realise that it has been smuggled and taken from its mother far too soon. That can cause a lot of medical issues and other diseases, such as parvo virus. It is not unusual for someone to buy a new puppy and, within the first week or two, have to go to the vet repeatedly with a very sick animal, whose problems are often quite hard to diagnose. Sometimes these diseases are fatal. There are few things more heartbreaking than a family who, within a few days of ownership, not only have an expensive veterinary bill but have lost their new puppy.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for introducing this important Bill, which I support. He talks about the impact of diseases that puppies might have when they are brought in. Does he agree that there are also diseases that have potential impacts on human health, often for the veterinary surgeons or nurses who are looking after them? For example, diseases such as *Brucella canis* could lead to miscarriage for a lady if she is looking after one of those puppies while pregnant.

Dr Chambers: I know that the hon. Lady speaks with authority as her husband is a vet. I thank her for sitting on the Committee and for pushing the Bill through. She also has a private Member's Bill on animal welfare. She makes an important point that has been consuming the veterinary profession for the last couple of years. A lot of dogs brought in from abroad have a disease called *Brucella canis*, which can affect humans. It can cause infertility and miscarriages. Obviously, if a dog has been illegally smuggled in, owners might not be aware of the risk because they assume it has been born in the UK. It is a huge human health risk as well.

Just last night, I was still receiving messages from veterinary colleagues about treating animals that they strongly suspect have been smuggled in because of the type of illnesses that they are seeing. That is why we are striving to end those practices by delivering the measures in the Bill.

The Bill closes loopholes in our pet travel rules that are currently exploited. It does so by reducing the number of animals permitted per non-commercial

movement from five per person to five per vehicle—including vehicles on board a train or ferry—and to three per person for foot or air passengers. Careful consideration has been given to setting these limits, balancing the need to disrupt illegal trade with minimising the impact on genuine pet owners. To underpin this, only an owner, not an authorised person, will be permitted to sign a declaration that the movement of a dog or cat is non-commercial.

Crucially, the Bill places a duty on the Government to use these regulation-making powers to deliver three key measures: a ban on the import of puppies and kittens under six months old; a ban on the import of heavily pregnant dogs and cats that are more than 42 days pregnant; and a ban on the import of dogs and cats that have been mutilated. Raising the minimum age at which dogs and cats can be imported will ensure that very young animals are not taken from their mothers too soon. Separating a puppy or kitten from its mother too young has huge implications for its health and welfare.

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for bringing forward this very important Bill. The point about very young animals is really pertinent. In my family, we have two kittens. They were brought into our house at an appropriate age, and we can see the importance of their first relationships after birth.

One of my constituents owns ferrets, and I met both those ferrets at civic events in my constituency of Watford. They clearly have personalities, and it is really important that this Bill seeks to protect them.

Dr Chambers: Yes, ferrets are some of the most quirky and engaging creatures you can ever meet—great personalities. I have to say I hate them coming into the consult room, because you can smell that they have been there for several hours afterwards, but they bring a lot of joy and pleasure to the people who own them.

We anticipate that traders may 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. The evidence from stakeholders suggests that even at present, traders are importing very heavily pregnant dogs and cats in order to benefit from their trade as soon as the puppies and kittens are born, because it is much cheaper and easier to bring in an animal before it gives birth than to try to move a whole load of puppies. We know that some dogs are being taken back and forth; they get pregnant again, and then are brought back to give birth. It really is abuse of these bitches. They are basically puppy factories.

The transportation of heavily pregnant dogs and cats is dangerous to the health and welfare of both the mother and the offspring, especially in heatwaves, given the heat inside vans when they have a few pregnant dogs in the back, so it is paramount that we remain on the front foot and use the Bill to prevent this practice becoming commonplace.

The Bill will raise the minimum age at which cats and dogs can be imported to ensure that very young animals are not taken from their mothers too soon, and that we can age puppies and kittens more accurately. Currently, the minimum age is technically 15 weeks, but it is very hard even for vets to accurately age animals. By the time they get to six months old, they have lost all their deciduous teeth—their baby teeth—and have mostly adult

teeth, so we can be much more confident about their age. Raising the minimum age will be much better for their welfare, but it will also help tackle the criminals' business model, because the demand is for puppies, not dogs that are over six months. We hope that if people cannot bring in dogs at six months old, it will take away the incentive to try to get them across the border.

I come to mutilation, which includes ear cropping, the declawing of cats and tail docking. It is very cruel and should not be tolerated. For anyone who is not aware, ear cropping is when someone cuts a dog's ears off to make it look more aggressive. It often happens to breeds such as XL bullies and Dobermanns. It has been illegal in the UK for more than a decade—since, I think, 2013. People are still performing the procedure in the UK, without veterinary supervision and probably with no anaesthetic, and then claiming that the dogs have been brought in from abroad, because it is still legal to bring them in from abroad.

I received messages last night from about a dozen vets, saying that just in the last couple of months, they have treated dogs that have clearly had their ears hacked off in the UK, and that now have infections and need the rest of the ear amputated. This is going on now. The great thing about closing that loophole is that there will be no excuse for owning a dog in the UK with cropped ears, and no one will be able to claim that such a dog has been brought in from abroad.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): One of the great beauties of this Bill is that it applies to Scotland, too. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it will make the prosecution of ear cropping-related cases easier in Scotland, for the benefit of our wonderful dogs?

Dr Chambers: Clarity about the fact that there is no excuse for having a dog with cropped ears should make prosecution and enforcement of the law a lot more straightforward.

I will read out a message that I received from a veterinary colleague last night:

"Just saw for repeat meds check this week, 3yo cropped Doberman, imported but clearly was very young and Owner was not given any passport or papers. He had his ears cropped (supposedly done abroad before being imported, but was probably done in the UK). Lovely bright dog until anyone puts a hand towards his head when it will explode with aggression. Big enough dog to be life threatening if a child approached him. Now exists near permanently muzzled and dosed up on Prozac. It's maddening, frustrating and pitiful all at the same time."

Cutting a dog's ears off with no anaesthetic is obviously physically harmful, but it can also affect the dog's psychology for the rest of their life, so they will not let anyone go near their head. It is quite interesting; we know that dogs love to be stroked, particularly on their heads, and studies show that both a human's and a dog's cortisol levels go down when a human pets a dog. The relationship is mutual and symbiotic. Depriving an animal of that type of relationship for the rest of its life is really upsetting. What is the point in owning a dog if you cannot even stroke it? It is a real shame. There is no reason to mutilate an animal in this way. It is a cruel practice, only carried out for aesthetic reasons, and the Bill will help us to close that loophole for good.

The Bill was amended in Committee to allow the appropriate authority to exempt pet owners from the new requirements in articles 5 and 5A of the pet travel

[Dr Chambers]

regulation in exceptional and compelling circumstances. This aims to ensure that the new measures will not disadvantage protected groups such as assistance dog users. It will also provide flexibility in emergency situations, such as cases where genuine owners can no longer travel within five days of their pets, for example because they have a medical emergency. I know that has caused some concern, and I reassure hon. Members that it is intended for use in limited circumstances, which must be exceptional or compelling. Exemptions sought will need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, and the Government have provided reassurances that no blanket exemptions will be granted.

Finally, in Committee the Bill was amended to remove the power that would have enabled the Secretary of State to make consequential changes that might have been required as a result of changes that the Bill makes to the pet travel rules and corresponding commercial import rules. Further consideration of the legislation has taken place since the Bill was introduced, and we have greater confidence that no further consequential amendments will be required. Should further changes to the pet travel schemes legal framework be needed, the Government may be able to make them using existing powers in other legislation.

The Bill will play a pivotal role in disrupting the cruel pet smuggling trade, a shared objective of Members from across the House. It has been a joy to see the House united on animal welfare, and to see the commitment to working together across parties to end puppy smuggling. I urge all Members to support these crucial measures.

10.9 am

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) for bringing forward the Bill, and for all his work to get it to this stage. We should also thank the former hon. Member for North Devon, who I understand brought forward the Bill in the previous Parliament; it did not quite get through Parliament before the general election. It is good to see proposed legislation moving from one Parliament to the next and having cross-party support.

The hon. Gentleman represents Winchester. Madam Deputy Speaker, you and I share a relationship, as I am a Romsonian and you represent my parents, but one of my first jobs was in Winchester, in the Esso garage by Peter Symonds college, so I know the hon. Gentleman's constituency very well. That was the job that got me through university, and earned me money in the summer holidays. One of my proudest achievements was being given the opportunity to step up and take on the night shift, which was double pay. For a student, that was very exciting. Unfortunately, I lost that job because I fell asleep on my shift and someone stole the carwash while I was asleep. Yes. I was demoted back to daytime shifts, but Winchester always has a place in my heart.

John Grady: It is a great relief to know that two Members of this House sabotaged their petrochemical careers quite early on. I had a job in a garage as an 18-year-old—I cannot remember the brand. I made the fatal mistake of filling up a car salesman's brand new car with diesel, when it was an unleaded car. That is why I never rose to the top of British Petroleum.

Mike Reader: I should state for the record, and for colleagues in *Hansard*, that I am not my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow), as was suggested earlier this week. For those online, I am not my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge), either, whom I was quoted as being this week. Nor am I a member of a much worse version of One Direction. That idea went viral this week, thanks to one of my former Labour colleagues, who temporarily made me Twitter famous.

I am a very passionate member of the Labour Animal Welfare Society, and I would like to thank the society for all its hard work during the election period on this campaign. When we put out social media posts and spoke to residents right across the political spectrum, it was very clear that there is real support for changes and much tougher animal welfare measures. The Conservatives, when in government, failed to take action on e-collars; on banning imports from trophy hunting, fur and foie gras; on banning snares and other inhumane devices that are already banned in Wales and Scotland; and—this is really critical for every pet owner—on the theft of pets. It is really positive to see these measures now coming forward.

Matt Turmaine: On my hon. Friend's point about social media, does he have a view on the importance of having a dog in your social media during a general election campaign? It seemed to be an almost compulsory element of many of the campaigns I was involved in, including mine. Surely the Bill is critical to ensuring the good nature of the animals appearing in those social media posts?

Mike Reader: I completely agree. I was a candidate for 17 months, and for a long while I ran #DoorstepDogs; every week, I took a photo of my favourite dog that I met on the doorstep. Unfortunately, I have given up on that. Maybe I should bring it back.

Dr Chambers: That is a very good point about social media. One reason why there is such an interest in dogs with cropped ears is that a lot of influencers on Instagram and other social media platforms pose with dogs, or show that they have new dogs, with cropped ears. Many people are not aware that it is a mutilation; they think it is how dogs' ears normally look. That drives a demand for dogs that look like that. We will be running a "stop the crop" campaign to try to get influencers and companies that use crop-eared dogs in adverts to stop doing that, so that cropping is not normalised among the general public. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point.

Mike Reader: It is fantastic to hear about that campaign, and I would fully support it. But there are also positives in the world of pets on social media. I follow an account, Southend Dog Training, which has helped me with free advice to ensure that Dash, my little Chorkie—full name: Dash Potato Evans-Reader—sits, walks and does not lick so many people every time we meet them. He does not come out with me on the doorstep, because while I am trying to talk about serious policy issues, he is more keen to get in the house and explore.

In all seriousness, the Bill is really important. It closes loopholes and stops the shameless exploitation of dogs, cats and ferrets—as I learned from the Clerk as I walked in, ferrets are included in the Bill because of

their alignment on rabies categorisation. It is fantastic to see a really well-rounded Bill of this nature. It will stop puppies being stripped from their parents and smuggled into the UK under the age of six months, and it will stop heavily mutated dogs being brought in, as well as heavily pregnant dogs, who just become puppy farms.

I was at a food conference in Northampton yesterday, and when I told people there that I was coming in to Parliament today to talk about puppies, they thought it was a little strange. But I explained the loopholes, and they were not fully aware of what goes on. It is really important that we take this kind of action to close those loopholes.

Christine Jardine: First, I must confess that I am feeling increasingly guilty for not having mentioned my cockapoo, Brora, since everybody else is mentioning their pet. She has been a social media star—she posed in a Scotland football strip just before the last championship.

The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about people not being aware and needing reassurance. When we bought Brora five years ago, I remember it being on my mind that we had to be careful, because there are a lot of people selling puppies on the internet, apparently genuinely. I have heard from constituents who bought a puppy, unaware of the puppy trade, and then faced the sorts of issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) mentioned. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that the public take away from this Bill an awareness of those dangers?

Mike Reader: I could not agree more. It is critical that we do more in Parliament to raise these issues. I also welcome some of the minor amendments made in Committee, which strengthen the Bill further and will reassure people, particularly in the limited circumstances in which the Bill may have unintended consequences.

It is the story of my life that I am a dog lover and an animal lover. Every time I come home from Parliament, Dash is there waiting for me. Very fortunately, he comes with me when I come down to London, and he comes with me back to Northampton. It makes my life so much better, as you say, to come home, decompress—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The hon. Gentleman is doing a marvellous job, but he has used “you” a number of times, as indeed have other Members in their interventions. While I am on the subject of interventions, it is fascinating for me personally to hear about the social media accounts of everybody’s dogs, but could we please try to keep interventions within scope of the Bill?

Mike Reader: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—you make a good point.

As I was saying, when I come home and see Dash, it is a great opportunity to decompress. I agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) that that is such a valuable part of owning a dog.

In closing, I want to thank a number of organisations that have helped me and others to really understand this issue—Four Paws, Battersea and the Countryside Alliance have provided great briefings and have helped me and others to understand it. Today is a victory for common

sense and animal welfare. One way or another, we will make sure that we improve animal welfare rights in this place.

10.17 am

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) on introducing this important Bill. It is an absolute honour and a privilege to speak on this subject. I have spoken on animal welfare in two Westminster Hall debates in the past month, and it is an important topic to speak about on the anniversary of my election, so I am grateful for the opportunity.

I am also an animal lover. I know that all right hon. and hon. Members present are extremely well informed, so the facts and information I will share is not for their benefit. I want to use this opportunity to provide some education for communities across our country and to share the message further afield, beyond this place.

As Mahatma Gandhi said:

“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”

We often say we are a nation of animal lovers, and today is a test: if we legislate, we must legislate like one. Cruel practices like smuggling pregnant animals or separating young animals from their mothers at an early age violates all levels of mercy. These acts cause unnecessary suffering and must be stopped.

Having researched and had information provided by my team, I found the scale of the issue staggering. Between 2015 and 2019, dog imports under the pet travel scheme rose by 86%. Many of those were illegal or misclassified commercial imports. A single journey from Romania to the UK is over 1,500 miles. Puppies as young as 13 weeks are transported in cramped, filthy vans. We have heard about cropped ears, a cruel thing to do to any animal. More than 21,000 dogs with cropped ears are now estimated to be in the UK population—a result of the legal grey area that we hope the Bill will address.

I pay tribute and express my gratitude, I am sure on behalf of the House, to the many charities and organisations that look after animal welfare and ensure issues are brought to the attention of this place, and that are on the ground helping: Battersea, Dogs Trust, Countryside Alliance and many more that are local, regional, national and international.

It is important to share some of the key issues around biosecurity and health risks. Many smuggled puppies and kittens arrive in the UK without the core vaccinations required to prevent rabies, distemper, parvovirus and other life threatening illnesses. These animals are often too young to have received their vaccinations or to have developed any immunity. That is dangerous for them and also poses a serious public health risk to our communities and domestic pet population. The current system allows these animals to enter the country with minimal scrutiny, creating a perfect entry point for zoonotic diseases—those that can jump from animals to humans.

I will share two or three case studies from Battersea. Milo, a six-month-old dog rescued by Battersea, had been brutally mutilated. His ears were hacked and crudely stitched shut with cotton thread, which had been left to fester. That was not just illegal; it was deliberate torture

[*Iqbal Mohamed*]

masquerading as aesthetic enhancement. We need to tackle the glorification of mutilated animals on social media or any other platforms that do not make it clear to the people viewing that it is not the natural state of the animal—it has been mutilated. That is an important point that I hope, through this debate, will become more well known.

To give some more examples, Sunny, Ray and Sky, three Cane Corso puppies, were trafficked over 1,500 miles from Romania. They were just 13 weeks old—under the legal import age—and unvaccinated, mutilated and forced into cramped, stressful conditions. Their ears had been cropped and their tails docked—all illegal here but still allowed under import loopholes. Snowy, a heavily pregnant dog, was smuggled during the final 10% of her pregnancy, in breach of current law. She endured the journey in squalid, dark and suffocating conditions without adequate food or water. These journeys not only traumatised the animals but endanger the lives of unborn puppies and the mothers carrying them.

I did not have much experience of the importation of animals into our country until my preparations for this and previous debates. I am aware that in my constituency there is an illegal trade of puppies, which are kept in small, cramped cages outside until they reach the age when they can be sold. These cruelly treated puppies can be sold for thousands and thousands of pounds. I hope that part of the work we are doing on the Bill can also look to address that.

On the exploitation of loopholes, we have heard that the current pet travel scheme designed for holidaymakers has been systematically abused by organised puppy traffickers. Breeders mislabel commercial sales as personal pet movements to sidestep import rules, veterinary checks and regulations. Smuggling heavily pregnant dogs is a deliberate move, allowing traffickers to appear legitimate by showing the puppies with their mother, deceiving buyers into thinking that the litter was bred responsibly in the UK.

These are not one-off cases. This is organised animal trafficking, often international in scale, that thrives on weak legislation, poor enforcement and consumer deception. Without the Bill, we are effectively enabling profit from pain through a loophole-ridden system that is ripe for abuse.

On constituent engagement on this issue, through Battersea alone over 14,680 people across 649 constituencies have contacted their MPs to urge them to support the Bill. This is a groundswell of support that cuts across party lines. While I have only had one email from a constituent directly about the Bill, I have had over 87 emails in this Parliament from constituents calling for stronger animal welfare protections. This speaks to a powerful public mandate. People are demanding action to end the suffering of trafficked animals and uphold the UK's reputation as a leader on welfare. Passing this Bill is the right and compassionate thing to do.

10.25 am

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): When one thinks of dogs and their close relationship with humans, a good place to start is literature. A great novel about our relationship with dogs is “White Fang” by Jack London,

a great American socialist writer. When it comes to cats, I can do no better than Natsume Sōseki, the great Japanese writer who wrote a series of novels about cats observing their human masters with great wit and intelligence.

As a boy, I had three dogs—or rather, my father did. They were Pistol, Pains and Muttley. My dad believed that dogs should be named after Shakespearean characters, hence Pistol and Pains, but the balance of power shifted in the family, and then we had Muttley, the Hanna-Barbera dog—though we drew the line at Huckleberry Hound. Something very important about the dogs is that they were all strays. They had great emotional difficulty in being able to trust humans because they were mistreated when they were younger. That is why the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) was right to emphasise the real damage that cruelty to animals can do. The next-door neighbours have two cats, Butch and Cuddles, and the clue is somewhat in their name; they were stray cats. Butch took a long time to trust the next-door neighbours and my family and I, but he does trust us now. If animals suffer cruelty when they are young, it causes long-term psychological damage.

I am delighted that the Bill extends to Scotland. This House should not be afraid to legislate for the welfare of people or animals in Scotland, so I commend the hon. Member for Winchester for seeking to legislate for Scotland; it is very important to my constituents. We have the Dogs Trust in Broomhouse in my constituency, which my good friend Councillor Lalley took me to visit. The people there do a huge amount of good work with stray dogs.

Sarah Russell: May I take a moment to mention Dobermann Rescue, based in my constituency, which also does fantastic work? I am sure my hon. Friend will join me in commending its work.

John Grady: I will join my hon. Friend in commending the work of that Dobermann charity. Dogs like Dobermanns and German shepherds have a certain reputation, but they are very kind, loving and loyal, so I commend work that is done to help Dobermanns.

There is a great deal of support in my constituency for the Bill, which has many important elements. Restricting the commercial importation and non-commercial movement of dogs, cats and ferrets into the UK on the grounds of welfare is an important objective. As the Bill is implemented, which I hope it will be, we must redouble our efforts to bring to people's attention how wrong the importation of these animals is.

The hon. Member for Winchester mentioned campaigns on social media, and he was entirely correct to do so. The scale of the problem is large. People are importing these animals for commercial gain, and it involves a great deal of cruelty. There has been a rise in the market for pregnant dogs and cats to be brought in. The hon. Member was right to talk about the mutilation of animals. People have known for decades, if not longer, that the mutilation of animals—tail docking and so on—is cruel and wrong and should not be taking place in this day and age. It is utterly barbaric.

The Bill is very important for public health, as the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (*Iqbal Mohamed*) said—dogs that have not been tested for diseases will not be able to come here—and it will help to fulfil

Labour party manifesto pledges on animal welfare. It will also improve enforcement. I have some experience of that from talking to former colleagues, and the Bill will make it much easier to enforce certain elements of existing animal cruelty laws, for example on the mutilation of dogs. That is very important.

Mention has been made of dogs on Twitter feeds during the general election campaign. I admit that, during the campaign and for many months beforehand, I too had a hobby of taking pictures of dogs and posting them on Twitter. I have got out of the habit, so I thank the hon. Member for Winchester for reminding me that it is quite a pleasant thing to do. It is probably better for my constituents, too; they probably find it much more interesting than my political comments and other interesting observations I may have. They may, in fact, come to the view that I am more perceptive and expert on dogs than on politics, although I hope they will not find that out for another five years or so.

As a vet, the hon. Member for Winchester speaks from a position of real expertise. He outlined why the Bill is important, and he is to be commended for bringing it to the House.

10.31 am

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I rise to support this vital Bill, and I commend the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) for bringing it to the House. As all Members will know, animal welfare is a major concern for our constituents, and nowhere is that more true than Bolton West. The Bill has been long awaited, and I am delighted that this Parliament will finally deliver where previous Parliaments were unable to deliver. We are a nation of animal lovers, and it should be a point of pride that, to reflect that, we strive to have the toughest animal welfare protections anywhere in the world.

My mailbox and postbag reflect the animal welfare concerns that I have and that we have heard during the debate. Dean, a constituent of mine in Daisy Hill, emailed to say:

“According to respondents to the Cats Protection Cats and Their Stats (CATS) 2024 survey, 4% of the cats that were obtained in the 12 months preceding the survey were from abroad. The importation of cats and dogs with mutilations (such as declawing and ear cropping), lack of vaccinations and health checks, and dangerous transport conditions present a significant risk to animal welfare.”

We know that the UK’s biosecurity is compromised by pet smuggling, given that animals may carry transmissible diseases such as rabies and tapeworm, which put both humans and animals at risk. The rising price of cats, in particular pedigrees, means that illegally importing cats is becoming increasingly lucrative for criminals. Cats Protection statistics show that 45% of the cats obtained in the past 12 months were pedigree; for the first time, more pedigree cats than moggies were acquired in a 12-month period. The Bill is a vital opportunity to put in place the measures to tackle pet smuggling that could not complete their passage in the last Parliament.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking the volunteers across Cats Protection and at Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home for the work that they do every day to keep rescued animals safe? Does he agree that those charities need our help and support, and that the Bill will help to amplify the work that they do?

I will also put it on the record that I had two rescue animals—a cat and a dog—who both lived to 19 years of age. Sadly, they are no longer with us, but for the sake of *Hansard* I want to mention their names: Cannie and Roohi.

Phil Brickell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the critical work of animal welfare charities across the country. They can make such a difference.

Diane in Ladybridge emailed to say:

“This Bill is a major step forward in improving the lives of animals.”

She is delighted that it will make it

“much harder to exploit pet travel rules to illegally traffic puppies and kittens bred in horrific conditions overseas into the UK.”

She also noted:

“Dogs and cats involved in bad breeding—whether they’re used for breeding, or bred poorly themselves—don’t have a fair chance in life. They’re more likely to have health problems, and poor socialisation means they can struggle with life as a pet.”

I am really pleased that the Bill will finally close a loophole to address the issue of dogs and cats with illegal mutilations such as cropped ears or docked tails and help to bring down demand for those features. We have spoken about the social media impact. It is incumbent on us as parliamentarians and figures in public life to continue to drive public awareness about why those procedures are mutilations and the adverse impacts they have on the animals and, frankly, society as a whole.

I am really pleased that the Bill will make it much harder to exploit pet travel rules to traffic illegally puppies, kittens and ferrets bred in horrific conditions overseas into the UK. Sadly, these activities can involve gangs who are associated with serious organised crime, which I am personally keen on tackling during my time in Parliament. By bringing in tougher restrictions, we can protect animal welfare and also cut a source of criminal income—an issue that, one way or another, I continue to raise in this House.

While cats and dogs are overwhelmingly the most popular pets in this country, it would be remiss of me, as a northern MP, not to reference the humble ferret, mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Watford (Matt Turmaine) and for Northampton South (Mike Reader). Ferrets are a northern icon. On that topic, our other northern icons, Oasis, are today reforming for their first gig in 16 years. To conclude, having listened to my constituents on the vital importance of protecting animal welfare, it is fair to say that both they and I are “mad fer ret”.

10.36 am

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) on bringing forward this Bill. A year on from the general election, it is nice to have one of those days when there is a sequence of Bills that we can all get behind and support and that should do great good for animals in this country and, hopefully, for some of the humans as well.

When I gave my maiden speech, I highlighted that my predecessor and I—in keeping with convention, I said something nice about him—are both vegetarians and that animal welfare is a cause that is close to both of our hearts. If we look at most of his time in office, we can see his extensive efforts around animal welfare. My

[*Peter Lamb*]

contribution has been far more limited, in part because of the number of constituency issues that I felt needed to take priority during that time, but I am pleased to be here today to support this measure to improve the wellbeing of animals.

I recall a written question my predecessor asked that slightly relates to today's debate, and it was in relation to the importation and exportation of reindeer from the United Kingdom. Thanks to that question, we are now aware that in 2020 and in 2021, there were two imports of reindeer and one export of reindeer. Presumably, Santa's sleigh has separate licensing arrangements in the United Kingdom.

Import controls have a significant role to play in my constituency. Crawley constituency is home to Gatwick airport, and its animal reception centre gives people the important ability to relocate with their pets and also to bring more exotic animals into the United Kingdom. Local authorities also have a significant role to play in these processes. During my time as a councillor, I saw a number of requests for permits for exotic animals, resulting in somewhat confusing conversations about why someone really needed a full-sized crocodile in the middle of a housing estate. That licence was not approved.

The hon. Member for Winchester is to be commended for bringing forward this Bill, and the House is privileged to benefit from his extensive professional experience in understanding the important role that the Bill will play in preventing animal abuse and, hopefully, enhancing wider animal welfare.

We are a nation of animal lovers, and we should feel proud that the legislative framework in this country is already world-leading. Despite all the measures we have in place, I think Members would agree, given the range of correspondence we get from our constituents, that there are probably more separate campaigns on animal welfare than on any other policy area—that has certainly been my experience. It is important that we do not rest on our laurels. We must accept that the job is not done and that, as technology moves things forward, additional measures will need to be put in place to improve animal wellbeing.

The issue of social media and animal abuse online has been raised in the debate, and the hon. Member for Winchester outlined the role that influencers have to play. In addition, there are far too many groups online that are dedicated to animal abuse. Constituents of mine have attempted to shut down such groups, but rather than being supported by social media companies in trying to address the problems, they have instead found themselves reported by the perpetrators of the abuse and have faced having their own accounts shut down and being left without the support they need to bring the networks of abuse to an end.

The worst examples of that type of animal abuse that I am aware of were brought up with me in a constituency surgery, and they relate to the torture of baby monkeys, which are chosen because when they are put in a baby grow, people can convince themselves that they are a baby. Although that is clearly illegal already, the current requirements on social media companies to act are insufficient. I will not burden the House by informing hon. Members of the things that I now know about what happens to those monkeys; all I can say is that

after my constituents left, I spent some minutes dealing with the tears about what had happened to those monkeys. We must do better around this, and I very much hope that moving forward we are able to do so.

I enthusiastically support the Bill, but we cannot rest on our laurels. Meta must be made to answer for not acting to bring an end to animal abuse on its networks and for its active profiting from the advertising that appears on those networks. Advertisers must be made aware that part of what they are paying for when they advertise on Facebook is the maintenance of animal abuse networks. I hope advertisers think more carefully about that in the future.

10.41 am

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I am proud to speak in this debate as the Member of Parliament for Portsmouth North—a seat I did not hold this time last year, but proudly hold today, although technically not for a year until 4.30 tomorrow morning.

I want to speak today in strong support of the Bill. It is a vital step forward in our duty to protect animals from cruelty and exploitation. I thank the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) for introducing the Bill and for his service as a vet. I know the city of Winchester well, as I did my teaching degree at King Alfred's College. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader), Winchester will always have a special place in my heart, particularly Jesters, a pub I worked in for many years, although it does not exist any more.

Portsmouth is a city that cares. Many of my constituents have shared their heartbreak at hearing of how young animals are brought into the UK sometimes under age, unwell and traumatised, just to be sold for profit. The Bill addresses that. It bans the importation of puppies and kittens under the age of six months. It stops the transportation of heavily pregnant animals and prohibits the import of animals that have undergone unnecessary mutilations such as ear cropping or declawing; those practices are outlawed in the UK but are still far too common abroad. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb), I believe that social media platforms and influencers should do more to stop that.

These reforms are not only overdue; they are essential. In Portsmouth, we are fortunate to have a number of deeply committed local charities that deal with the consequences of these inhumane practices. I would like to pay tribute to some of those charities. Those at Cats Protection's Portsmouth branch work tirelessly to rescue, rehabilitate and rehome abandoned or abused cats across the city. Its volunteers provide vital neutering and microchipping services, which help to reduce the stray population and improve feline welfare. They frequently take in cats that have come from unsuitable backgrounds, some of which are linked to international trafficking or illegal sales.

I also want to recognise Portsmouth Cats Lost, Found and Rehomed, which is led by the inspirational Penny Parker. Since 2013, the group has reunited countless lost cats with their families, offered shelter to strays and provided veterinary care to those in desperate need. Its small but mighty rescue cabin, Penny's place, is a beacon of hope for animals who might otherwise just have been left to suffer.

I also applaud Portsmouth Tortoise Rescue in Cosham. Although it does not support cats, dogs or ferrets, it has recently received national recognition for its outstanding work in exotic animal welfare, and Bernice Buckingham and her team of trustees and volunteers do an excellent job. Their educational programme and specialist care have made Portsmouth Tortoise Rescue a trusted name not only in Portsmouth but across the south.

Finally, Phoenix Rehoming has won awards, including animal rescue of the year 2024 and most dedicated pet rehoming service 2024, and I wish the team luck with their nomination for animal charity team of the year 2025. Phoenix Rehoming has a strong footprint in Portsmouth. It works with foster families and communities to rescue and rehome dogs, many of whom have been illegally imported or abandoned after being smuggled as part of this illicit trade.

These organisations are doing heroic work, but they should not have to shoulder the burden of weak regulation and criminal cruelty. By tightening important laws, this Bill reduces the risk of trafficked animals entering the UK and ensures a greater oversight, through veterinary checks, microchipping and enforcement powers. It also protects families in Portsmouth, who often fork out quite a lot of money for these pets and then find they have been sold sick animals, with fake papers, and are left not only heartbroken but facing thousands of pounds in vet bills.

The legislation is not just about animal welfare, but community resilience. It gives our local charities a fighting chance, pet owners peace of mind and, most importantly, vulnerable animals the protections they deserve. I represent a city that believes in fairness, compassion and responsibility, so I am proud to support the Bill on behalf of the people of Portsmouth North. Let us put an end to cruelty at our borders and build a country that treats all living beings with dignity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

10.46 am

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) on introducing this private Member's Bill. As he is a veterinary surgeon, I know that this topic is close to his heart, as it is close to the hearts of many hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) spoke with passion and paid tribute to Selaine Saxby, the former Member for North Devon who brought this Bill forward in the last Parliament, and I thank him for that tribute. The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) quoted Mahatma Gandhi to great effect. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) rightly pointed out that the Bill extends to Scotland, and that sections 1 to 4 apply to Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) reminded us how important animal welfare is to all our constituents, and the hon. Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) reminded us that while our animal welfare laws in Britain are world leading, we can always do better. Finally, the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) paid tribute to those many charities in her constituency that dedicate themselves to improving animal welfare.

Britain is a nation of animal lovers, and the Conservatives are proud of our record in Government of improving animal welfare. In the last Parliament, we banned the keeping of primates as pets, introduced pet abduction as a specific criminal offence, increased the penalties for animal cruelty, banned the export of livestock for slaughter or fattening, and recognised animal sentience in law, through the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022. The establishment of the Animal Sentience Committee ensures that all legislation passed by this House considers the principle of animal sentience. In 2020, we introduced Lucy's law, which banned the third-party sale of puppies and kittens. These regulations helped to protect animals from being kept in shockingly poor conditions, separated from their mothers at a young age and deprived of human or animal interaction for most of their lives.

The animal welfare Bill before us today is another example of doing the right thing to protect those pets that we all love. Many charities have been tirelessly campaigning for this legislation for many years, including the British Veterinary Association, the Dogs Trust, the RSPCA, Four Paws, Cats Protection, Blue Cross, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home and the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation.

The Bill aims to close existing loopholes that are used far too often by dishonest breeders and smugglers to disguise commercial imports of cats and dogs as non-commercial movements, in a bid to avoid compliance with existing welfare standards. I welcome raising the minimum age at which cats and dogs can be imported to six months. That will curtail the ability of unscrupulous puppy smugglers to bring those puppies into the UK.

The Bill also further restricts the import of heavily pregnant animals. The Dogs Trust has seen a record 600% increase in the number of heavily pregnant bitches intercepted at the border since 2021. In preparing for this debate, I have read about the most appalling cases of pregnant animals being transported in cramped conditions to give birth, with little food or water. This barbaric practice can permanently damage the health of both the mother and the puppies or kittens.

Similarly, we support the decision to cap the number of animals transported non-commercially at five per vehicle, rather than five per person as at present. That will close another loophole exploited by smugglers that allows them to transport several dozen animals in one trip, claiming ownership of five per person.

I am equally glad to see this legislation ban the import of dogs and cats with non-exempted mutilations into Great Britain. According to animal welfare charities such as the RSPCA, incidents of ear cropping have skyrocketed twentyfold in the last decade. We on the Conservative Benches are committed to ending that horrible practice. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), who, like the hon. Member for Winchester, is a veterinary surgeon and a passionate advocate of that reform. Of course, mutilation is not limited to dogs, and this legislation will also outlaw the declawing of cats. That is another horrible procedure that has no medical basis, and we support that measure.

This is a good Bill. Its measures are well considered, backed by experts and charities and designed to implement positive change to protect our beloved pets. I am pleased

[Sir Ashley Fox]

to confirm on behalf of the Opposition that we support this Bill, and I sincerely hope it will gain the support it deserves from the whole of the House.

10.51 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):

I congratulate the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) on championing this Bill and guiding its passage through the House. I have welcomed the expertise he has lent to this debate, as well as his information and the way in which he used it in Committee. I was really fascinated to learn about the “Cut the Crop” campaign, and I am keen to hear a bit more about how we can support that.

I thank all Members who have contributed to constructive and positive debates during each of the Bill’s stages. I have to say that the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) must be delighted that he did not pursue his career on the forecourt. He mentioned work of the Animal Welfare Society and his passionate membership of it. He also reminded us all of the importance of doorstep dogs and—one of my favourites—dogs at polling stations, which always seem to appear whenever the election day is. I thank him for his support and join him in supporting Four Paws, Battersea and the Countryside Alliance.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) mentioned dog-on-dog offences. Those are offences under section 3 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, and we are working with the Crown Prosecution Service to update its guidance to make that clear. We are also working with stakeholders to encourage responsible dog ownership and reduce dog attacks. As my hon. Friend quite rightly pointed out, this is about a minority of dog owners, but it is extremely distressing for anybody involved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) mentioned stray dogs and the difficulty they have in gaining trust, which is so true, as well as the damage that cruelty to animals can do throughout a pet’s life. He also mentioned the importance of social media and how we can ensure that all of us in this House are sending the right message that we think the practice of mutilating animals is unacceptable.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) for his support and for raising the importance of ending smuggling. Smuggling is the wrong thing to do for the welfare of animals and for our biosecurity, and that is a really important point. He also raised how we need to bring down the demand for mutilated dogs, and I think we can do more across the whole House on that issue. Of course, I agree with him that ferrets are a northern icon.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) for his support. He is right that Santa’s sleigh has a separate licensing system, so there is no difficulty in reindeers passing between any borders on the night of 24 December. I recognise his support for the welfare of animals, and we must do better. I will take away his important concerns about social media advertising.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) in thanking—I hope I get all of them—Cats Protection Portsmouth, Portsmouth Lost,

Found and Rehomed, Penny’s Place, Phoenix Rehoming, and Bernice Buckingham at Portsmouth Tortoise Rescue for all the work they do. [Interruption.] I was so close. I thank them for all the work they do across her constituency.

As noted by the hon. Member for Winchester, it is nice to have the whole House united on a matter of animal welfare—what a nice way to end the week? The nation is also united on animal welfare. Few topics have as much engagement and support from constituents, as evidenced by the frequent correspondence I receive in Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice and that I am sure all of us across the House receive. The public’s passion for pets is very much reflected in the statistics. According to the PDSA, pet ownership has increased in recent years with over half of adults owning a pet. As the proud owner of my cats Serena, Meglatron and Lily, I welcome the Bill and am thrilled that the measures covers cats because they deserve equal protection as dogs. I pay tribute to my daughter Isabel who is here this morning and the magic way she has with animals. She has a particular talent, when we have had young kittens, in helping them grow up to be soft and gentle animals. In fact, our beloved Thomas used to go to bed with her like a small teddy to be cuddled at night-time. I would go in and see them sitting watching television together—honestly, he was more like a dog than a cat. That only goes to reinforce the point made that when animals are treated well when they are little, they grow up to be soft, gentle and loving animals.

It is only right that imported cats should have parity—I nearly said pawrity—of protection, as they do across our domestic animal welfare laws. While we are talking about the wonderful things we have across our constituencies, I want to mention Jenny’s Cat House. Jenny takes in loads of animals that are rescued and lost and found literally into her house—it has become a charity now. She does incredible work as many do across the constituency.

Mike Reader: As we are talking about constituency issues, a sad thing happened in Northampton a few weeks ago. There was an arson attack in Dunelm, and that spread to Pets at Home in the St James retail park. Unfortunately, that fire ripped through the vet, the dog groomers and the store. Will the Minister join me in thanking all the volunteers, vets, groomers and the fire service who put their lives at risk to save so many pets—dogs, cats and others—as that fire took hold?

Emma Hardy: I of course join my hon. Friend in thanking everyone involved. It is horrific to think that somebody would wish to attack a veterinary building where they know animals receive treatment and where they live. I hope that whoever has done that will be quickly and firmly brought to justice.

As the number of pet owners has increased, there is a number of people travelling with their pets. In 2024, 368,000 dogs, cats and ferrets were moved non-commercially into Great Britain. While most of those were genuine movements, the rise in non-commercial movements also accounts for the uptick in unscrupulous traders that abuse our pet travel rules to illegally smuggle puppies and kittens into the country. Due to its illicit nature, we cannot know the true number of pets illegally smuggled into Great Britain. What we do know, however, is the devastating effect it can have on the health and welfare

of the animals that suffer as a result. I am delighted to reiterate the Government's support for the Bill. These measures represent a crucial step forward in our collective efforts to tackle the pet smuggling trade.

As we set out in our manifesto, this Government are committed to ending puppy smuggling, and the measures in the Bill will close loopholes in our pet travel rules that smugglers exploit. The Bill will tighten these rules by reducing the number of pets that can travel in a single non-commercial movement, and requiring the movement of a pet to be explicitly linked to that of its owner. That will fundamentally disrupt the tactics we know illegal traders employ to avoid more stringent checks and oversight. I am reassured that the Bill gives the Government the power to reduce those limits further should there be evidence that our pet travel rules continue to be abused.

As the hon. Member for Winchester rightly highlighted, the Bill also introduces powers for the Government to tackle low-welfare imports through secondary legislation. The Government must first use these regulation-making powers to introduce three impactful restrictions—restrictions raising the minimum age at which dogs and cats can be moved into Great Britain to six months; banning the import of heavily pregnant dogs and cats; and banning the import of dogs and cats that have been mutilated. We want fewer low-welfare operations supplying pets to the GB market and, fundamentally, we want fewer animals to suffer. I know that colleagues from across the House are keen to see these regulations make it on to the statute book as soon as possible.

This Government are committed to introducing the prohibitions in the Bill as soon as practicable. Delivering these measures through secondary legislation will allow the Government to work closely with stakeholders to understand where appropriate exemptions from the measures may be needed. These will need to be carefully considered to ensure that we do not inadvertently create any loopholes that could be abused. Of course, the enforcement of the measures will be crucial to their success. Local authorities and the Animal and Plant Health Agency will continue to be responsible for enforcing pet travel and commercial import requirements. We will work closely with enforcement bodies to ensure that they have the right tools and guidance to enforce these measures effectively.

I welcome the Bill's new powers to make regulations, which will provide authorities with a clear process and enforcement powers when presented with a non-compliant pet. Regulations will allow for the cost of detention to be met and, if necessary, for the animal to be rehomed. They will bolster the enforcement tools available to agencies, empowering them to take appropriate action if the new rules are not followed, while ensuring that we protect the welfare of pets that are imported illegally.

In Committee, the Government supported several amendments to the Bill, which provided drafting clarification and the necessary flexibilities for genuine owners who will be impacted by the new rules due to protected characteristics or circumstances beyond their control. I was pleased to see those amendments pass, and I am confident that they will strengthen the Bill. The Government supported amendments to narrow the Bill's power to make criminal offences. Those amendments will ensure that any criminal offences created using this power are foreseeable, having been set out in the Bill, and will receive the appropriate scrutiny from Parliament.

The offences specified in the Bill have been informed by engagement with enforcement bodies to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

As touched on by the hon. Member for Winchester, the Bill received a clarification drafting change in Committee. This change made it clear that the existing definition of "pet animal" in our pet travel regulations is not affected by the Bill. Ultimately, it ensures that the status quo is maintained, and the effective operation of our pet travel regime.

The Bill was also amended to allow an appropriate authority to grant an exemption from the tighter non-commercial pet travel rules, as amended in the Bill, in exceptional or compelling circumstances. I reassure hon. Members that this mechanism will be tightly controlled. The Government are committed to ensuring that the Bill will not result in loopholes that could be exploited by smugglers. The mechanism will give the Government flexibility to deal with unanticipated events that may impact the ability of genuine pet owners to follow the more stringent pet travel rules introduced by the Bill—for example, in the case of force majeure, such as a natural disaster that ground planes or a medical emergency that prevents owners from travelling within five days of their pet.

Furthermore, the amendments will ensure that the new measures introduced by the Bill do not adversely impact protected groups, such as assistant dog users, who may wish to travel together in groups larger than five. This has been carefully considered by the Government in accordance with our public sector equality duty under the Equality Act 2010. Importantly, the amendments do not provide blanket exemptions from the rules; instead, each case will be considered individually. The Government will work with the Animal and Plant Health Agency to ensure that there is a clear process to follow, and that exemptions are granted only in truly exceptional or compelling circumstances.

Finally, the Government also supported an amendment that removed the power to make further consequential amendments arising from the Bill's changes to the pet travel rules and corresponding import rules. Since the Bill was introduced, we have further assessed the changes to legislation that might be necessary as a result of the Bill, and we are confident that no further amendments are required. We are keen to take no more power than is necessary. The amendments have not been considered lightly, and I am in no doubt that they improve the deliverability and ability to enforce this Bill.

Several MPs have mentioned our work to reset relations with the EU. As announced at the UK-EU leaders' summit on 19 May 2025, the UK and EU have agreed to work towards having a common sanitary and phytosanitary area, which would make taking pets to the EU on holiday easier and cheaper. It is important that we get the right agreement for the UK, so we are not putting any arbitrary deadlines on negotiations. We will provide more information on pet passports in due course; in the meantime, owners will still need an animal health certificate for their dog, cat or ferret if they are travelling from Great Britain to an EU country. While I am unable to comment on live negotiations, I reassure hon. Members that this Government will continue to support this Bill while negotiating an SPS agreement with the EU.

[Emma Hardy]

As set out in the Government's manifesto, we are committed to ending puppy smuggling and delivering a better future for animals. I am pleased to say that this Bill does just that. Its key measures deliver crucial recommendations by the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and tackle multiple concerns that have been raised by stakeholders regarding loopholes in our pet travel rules. I commend the hon. Member for Winchester on taking this important Bill through the House, and I very much look forward to seeing it on the statute book.

11.5 am

Dr Chambers: I thank all Members who have been involved with this Bill at all its stages, including in Committee, and for forwarding me a lot of correspondence from their constituents about it. I also thank the Government and the Minister for their support for this Bill, and the civil servants and the Clerks of the House for the support they gave my office in getting this done.

About 10 years ago, I was on the British Veterinary Association's policy committee, and we were pushing to tackle puppy smuggling. We were working with other organisations, such as the RSPCA, the Dogs Trust, Cats Protection, FOUR PAWS and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home. Today is a great day for all those organisations, which have wanted this to happen for so long. I thank Lord Trees, who is kindly sponsoring this Bill through the upper House. He was my dean at Liverpool vet school, and in my third year, he failed my parasitology viva, which meant I had to spend a summer revising and coming back for resits instead of having fun. Given that this Bill will help prevent parasitological diseases from coming into the UK, I hope he might consider giving me a retrospective distinction. I know that the Bill will be in good hands in the upper House.

I also thank my team. A private Member's Bill is a lot of work, especially for a new team. I noticed a couple of last-minute changes to my speech—I think I can guess who made some of them. I thank my team, including my chief of staff, Tom Wood, and his cat Luma, who is clearly the most intelligent cat in the world. I also thank Emily Kitchen and her cat Tango—the most clumsy cat in the world—and Sophie Hammond, my parliamentary assistant, who is on maternity leave.

John Grady: Does the hon. Member agree that it is most appropriate that Madam Deputy Speaker, who is Member of Parliament for Bradford, is in the Chair for this Bill's Third Reading? David Hockney, one of Bradford's most famous sons, is a wonderful painter of dogs.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I am the proud owner of two lovely dogs.

Dr Chambers: I look forward to seeing those paintings. I thank Sophie Hammond for all the work she did on this Bill in its early stages, and Hayley Puddefoot, who has taken over from her.

I am so happy today, because no longer will dogs and cats be taken away from their parents at a hugely young age and put in the back of a van, perhaps having been sedated or mutilated, and perhaps while sick, and where they may become overheated. That will come to an end now, which is a great step forward for animal welfare. Finally, I thank all the people of Winchester who elected me to serve as their MP a year ago today. I am so pleased to be able to bring forward a piece of legislation that shows people that what happens in Parliament has a real impact out in the real world.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Bill

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

11.9 am

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It is a pleasure to reach this milestone in the Bill's journey through the House of Commons. As we know, livestock worrying has devastating consequences for both animals and farmers. In Committee, I and other Committee members shared the experiences that had resonated with us of farmers having suffered attacks to their livestock. The damage of a livestock attack can be horrific, causing brutal injuries that are tragically often fatal. There are instances of stress causing pregnant livestock to miscarry, and separation of mothers and their young leading to hypothermia or starvation. I have seen pictures from farmers in my constituency of the aftermath of attacks that have mutilated their calves beyond any hope of keeping them alive.

The consequences of an attack, no matter the scale, are profound, and attacks are sadly all too common. The data from the recent National Sheep Association survey speaks for itself: 96% of respondents had experienced incidents in the last 12 months, and 98% agreed that there is an urgent need for additional police powers. The responses highlight that livestock worrying remains a huge problem for the sector and show just how important it is to deliver the Bill.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): As someone who grew up on a sheep farm, a vet who has treated injuries caused by dogs that are out of control, and someone who continues to work with farmers quite closely in the Meon valley, I cannot emphasise enough how necessary this legislation is. The problem is devastating for animals, but also causes farmers to take a huge economic hit. It is horrendously stressful for everyone involved, and it is not a niche problem—it happens all the time. I thank the hon. Member for introducing this legislation.

Aphra Brandreth: I thank the hon. Member for his insights as a vet, and for emphasising what so many people across the House know: these changes are vital. May I also say how grateful I am to the hon. Members who took the time to serve on the Bill Committee? I am truly grateful for their support and contributions, and for the conversations I have had with many of them about the Bill.

As we heard in Committee, the Bill will modernise the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953, ensuring that it reflects the needs of modern-day farming. The Bill strengthens police powers, so that they can do their job more effectively. Specifically, it gives the police powers of entry, and allows them to seize and detain dogs and to collect evidence—changes that farmers in my constituency have specifically told me are necessary. The Bill will also increase the penalty—and we hope, in turn, the deterrent against livestock worrying. The fine is currently capped at a maximum of £1,000; that will go up to an unlimited amount, to reflect the severity of

livestock worrying from an animal welfare standpoint, as well as the economic toll an attack can have on farming.

Farming has diversified, and therefore the scope of livestock requiring protection has increased. I am delighted that camelids such as alpacas and llamas will now be protected under the Bill. Anyone who has driven down country roads, such as those in my constituency of Chester South and Eddisbury, will know that farmers move livestock. In recognition of that, the Bill includes roads and paths as locations where an offence may take place; that will give farmers greater reassurance when moving livestock. As I said in Committee, the legislation puts animal welfare and farmers right at its heart.

Today marks exactly one year since the general election. I am deeply proud and grateful that in my first year as the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury, I have been able to introduce a Bill in my name that will make a genuine difference both for animal welfare and farmers. This is precisely why I stood for election, and it is testament to the strength of this Parliament that an Opposition Back Benchers can help deliver meaningful change in the law that will have a real and lasting impact.

We should all be able to enjoy the countryside, and there is no finer countryside than in Chester South and Eddisbury. However, that enjoyment comes with a responsibility to preserve and protect it, and to support those who care for it every day: our farming community. The Bill gives us the opportunity to act to protect our countryside, support our farmers and strengthen animal welfare. I hope that Members from all sides of the House will join me in backing it, just as they did in Committee.

11.15 am

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak on another animal welfare Bill today. As the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) said, it is fantastic to see this legislation brought in by a party that is not in government, with cross-party support. I declare that I am a member of the National Farmers Union food and farming fellowship. I have been fortunate to visit a number of farms across the UK to hear at first hand from farmers from a range of specialities. I can say that the Bill will be fully supported across that community, particularly in Northamptonshire.

The NFU does great work to represent our fantastic farmers, a number of whom I met yesterday at a food event in Northampton as we launched the Northamptonshire good food plan. They spoke of the challenges, particularly of working across borders with the police, because their farms often do not fit within normal police boundaries, and said they want more Government support for the rural economy. The Bill goes some way to helping to achieve that.

I am really pleased to see the expansion of the definitions in the Bill, and I commend the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury and the Bill Committee for ensuring that we get that right. In particular, the inclusion of alpacas and llamas is really positive, as we are seeing more and more of them reared in Northamptonshire. It will be positive to continue to review that as farmers diversify into new ways of maintaining food supplies and the environment and ensuring the long-term

[Mike Reader]

sustainability of farming. Bills such as this should continue to be adapted and evolved through successive Governments.

I met a farming colleague relatively recently, who told me about a mauling incident that happened on his land. It was shocking to hear about the direct impact on him and his staff who discovered it, and the fact that the police struggled to take action because of the lack of powers to undertake things such as forensics. It is positive that the Bill is increasing the relevant powers, particularly on the capture of DNA from dogs, to ensure that perpetrators can be brought to justice. It is a grim thing that continues to happen year on year, and we must take positive steps to change it.

The Bill is also very well timed. In Northamptonshire, the new police, fire and crime commissioner, Danielle Stone, has recognised that rural crime has been neglected in recent years. She has launched a rural crime survey, and had a number of roundtables and panels with farmers across the county. We now see farming and the protection of rural communities front and centre in her policing action plan. Northamptonshire is home to the largest town in the UK, Northampton, but also acres and acres of beautiful countryside, which is used for both arable farming and rearing herds and growing crops. It is great timing to see the Bill come through before the summer. Not just my police, fire and crime commissioner but police commissioners across England will recognise and support the Bill as a positive step forward.

When I read the Bill and listened to some of the observations in Committee, I found the expansion of the provisions to roads and paths quite interesting. For the record, my uncle is the former president of the Ramblers' Association, and he repeatedly reminds me of the right to roam campaign whenever I see him at family dos. It is positive that the Bill expands the definition to include roads and paths, because it sets clear requirements when someone accesses land—particularly in somewhere like Northamptonshire, where so many public footpaths run through farmland—to protect farmers and set clear boundaries for those walking their dogs or undertaking more nefarious activities. It is also positive to see the recovery of costs in the Bill. That is a big step forward that will deter people and serve as a reminder to many people who may be impacted by the Bill.

Overall, the Bill takes a really responsible and balanced approach, and I commend the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury on her work. As we have heard today from the many dog owners in the Chamber, dog owners are generally responsible, but when things go wrong and someone does not take that responsibility seriously, there must be measures in place for the police to step in and farmers to be protected, so I am really pleased to see this Bill. It does not take a heavy-handed approach, as a couple of constituents have written to me about. It strikes the right balance, and I fully commend it and thank the hon. Member for bringing it forward.

11.20 am

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) for bringing forward this Bill, which is immensely popular

with local farmers. I have met with the NFU and its membership repeatedly over months, if not most of the last year, and it is always one of the first things they mention to me. I commend her for her sterling work and for the collegiate way in which she always conducts herself, including in this matter.

It is fantastic that we are extending protection to alpacas and llamas. No one wants to see attacks or worrying, and including both those definitions is really important and strengthens the law appropriately. I am incredibly impressed that the Bill covers paths and roads. The hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury thinks her constituency is the most beautiful in the country but, of course, it is not even the most beautiful in Cheshire, because mine is better. One of the really beautiful things I did recently was go to Goostrey Rose Festival last weekend. We have new paths in Goostrey and they are used incredibly regularly by dog walkers, but they are on farm boundaries. This legislation is so important for covering paths like those.

I have been on a farm with a family in the aftermath of a dog attack, and it is terrible. I am not here to demonise dog owners—we have so many considerate, sensible, countryside-loving dog owners in my constituency—and I know the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury is not either. We are here to make sure that the overwhelming majority of people are left in peace to go about their everyday lives, in both the farming community and the dog-owning community—they are often one and the same—and to make sure that rural crime is properly prosecuted.

GPS theft is another major component of rural crime in my area. Our local police and crime commissioner, Dan Price, has been doing work on this, and the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury has been involved in it. It would be great to get an update from the Minister on that.

I want to take a moment to thank the NFU, which has lobbied me extensively on this issue. I am on its food and farming fellowship and have learned a great deal from it. I also thank the farmers in my constituency for continuing to feed us and for looking after the countryside so well.

11.23 am

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I rise to support the Bill, and I commend the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) for bringing it to Parliament.

I want to make some brief remarks about what is sometimes perceived as a tension between those who wish to responsibly enjoy the countryside, and both the economic toll and the harm done to livestock by livestock worrying. Since being elected to this place, I have been a strong champion for expanding responsible access to the countryside across England and Wales—my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) mentioned the Right to Roam campaign.

I commend the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury, because this Bill shines a light on the fact that most of us who wish to go into the great outdoors and enjoy our wonderful countryside, whether that is in Cheshire or on the wonderful west Pennine moors in my Bolton West constituency, do so responsibly, but those who do not ensure that their dogs conduct themselves

in a considerate manner will feel the wrath of these measures. I particularly welcome that, because there is a balance to be struck between farmers and those who look after livestock in the countryside, and those who want to enjoy our great outdoors.

With that in mind, I want to touch on a couple of points. On extending the provisions to include camelids, there are a number of alpacas and llamas at farms in my constituency, including Smithills open farm. Members may think they look rather incongruous on the great west Pennine moors, but I assure them that they are incredibly popular, both in terms of the opportunity to walk them around the moors and with school visits.

I want to touch on a couple of points that the Minister may pick up on, relating to the opportunities that present themselves, outside the criminal law, to push for greater responsible enjoyment of our countryside, particularly in respect of increasing investment in promoting awareness of the countryside code. I will read out some of the provisions in the code, to make people aware. I think they are principles that everyone in this place can rally around:

“Do not feed livestock, horses or wild animals...do not cause damage or disturbance...leave no trace...always keep dogs under control and in sight...dog poo—bag it and bin it...take your litter home”

and, most importantly, be courteous:

“be nice...share the space”

with others. That should be the golden thread that runs through all our time spent in the countryside.

It is worth me putting on the record that the UK ranks the lowest of 14 European nations with regard to nature connectedness and, out 15 European nations surveyed, the UK is 11th in terms of physical activity. So there is greater work to be done to provide access to nature, but also on enjoying it and breaking down some of the barriers to opportunity.

Nevertheless, I commend the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury for bringing forward the Bill. I very much appreciate the concerns she has raised around livestock worrying; she has been a champion for that cause ever since she got elected to this place.

11.27 am

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I commend the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy) for praising her daughter in the Chamber. It is very important to praise children. My Aunt Mary, who moved from Newcastle in the blitz to become a schoolteacher just north of here in London, would always emphasise to me how important it was to give children confidence in their abilities and their qualities.

We were talking earlier about dogs and David Hockney, so it would be remiss of me not to mention Elizabeth Blackadder, a very fine printmaker from Glasgow and one of the United Kingdom's most famous artists. She was a real pioneer in reviving printmaking in Scotland. In Trongate, we have the Glasgow Print Studio. Project Ability currently has an exhibition of art by people who have disabilities and mental health issues. It is a wonderful exhibition. If any Members are going to Glasgow, they should go to that exhibition, because it is absolutely wonderful. It is a beautiful exhibition.

The Bill does not apply to Scotland because it is a criminal matter, and criminal matters are devolved to Scotland in the constitutional settlement, but this is an important issue in Scotland. There has been some discussion about the lack of prosecutions for this sort of offence. It is important that these offences are prosecuted, because farming is an important part of the British economy and the Scottish economy. I know that well because, as a complete townie who gets very uncomfortable if there is a lack of cars and noise, I married into a family of farmers.

My wife's family were dairy farmers on the Solway firth, which looks over into Cumbria where the Bill will apply and have very important impacts, as sheep farming is very important in Cumbria. I do not think my lovely father-in-law Andrew is particularly impressed with my farming abilities. Helping in the milking parlour did not go very well and apparently the fences I put up were not straight enough. He generally thinks I am incompetent in the farming area. I think now, after 23 years of marriage—it is coming up to our wedding anniversary on 12 July—he thinks I am kind of all right as a husband and a father, but I have not checked this week.

My wife's aunt and uncle, Elma and Sam, were sheep farmers. Sheep farming is a very difficult way of making money. It is hard work—farming is hard, hard work, whatever kind it is. Farmers have to get up very early to look after the animals; they have to protect the animals and pay for the veterinary bills, and so on. It is a tough job. I do not think we should underestimate how important this Bill will be as a signal that this House supports farmers and takes into account their concerns. These are hard jobs.

Farmers are stewards of the countryside across Britain. Obviously, Glasgow is the most beautiful place in the world, but I would not wish to get into a dispute about where the most beautiful part of Cheshire is, because Cheshire is beautiful. Farmers are an important part of stewarding the countryside across our family of nations, which is so important to us, and this Bill is important for farmers. Farmers are important for the British economy—not just the farms themselves, but our brilliant farmers, who help to supply restaurants and shops, creating the great revival of British cooking and cuisine that we have seen in our lifetimes. So this Bill is very important, and I hope that the Scottish Government look at it carefully and perhaps review the lack of prosecution of these offences.

Now, I should say something of the Bill itself, because it is important. I have covered the important constitutional aspects of it—that it does not cover Scotland—but clause 2 is key. There is limited scope for the police to seize dogs for prolonged periods of time, even when they are causing danger. It is, I am afraid, regrettably common for dogs that have been seized to carry out further attacks pending the trial of their owner. Giving the police the ability to seize dogs for longer periods of time will therefore prevent those repeated attacks. I commend the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) for addressing that in clause 2; it is an important provision, and she is quite right to include it.

As a recovering lawyer, I have, at times, had an interest in the investigation of crime. Of course, whatever the legal system, it is necessary to have sufficient evidence, broadly, to convince a judge or a jury to convict someone.

[John Grady]

Rural crime is particularly difficult in that regard; the reason is self-evident, when we think about it. As a complete townie, it has taken me a bit of time to spot the self-evidence of it.

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): My hon. Friend consistently refers to himself as a complete townie—a description that I would apply to myself, too. Of course, the fact that we reside in urban areas does not in any way mean that we are unconcerned by the fortunes of our fellow parliamentarians who represent agricultural areas, or indeed their communities, who play a vital role in sustaining us. The importance of food is something I often speak about, for as much as we focus on whatever the leading industry is of the day, society fundamentally comes down to the question of whether we can feed and house ourselves. Covid in particular drove forward the point that the agricultural system in this country is vital.

John Grady: My hon. Friend's intervention typifies his many thoughtful contributions; he makes an important point.

I think all of us who live in cities—townies, like me—have a great yearning for the countryside. In my constituency, we have Tollcross Park, which is a wonderful park; I recommend that everyone visit it. There is a city farm in the park, which houses llamas and alpacas, to which the provisions of the Bill extend; they are protected by it. I would not want to sully this debate with a political point, but I simply point out that the SNP council regularly threatens to close that farm. Tollcross also has some wonderful rose gardens, which the council does not look after particularly well, which is a real disappointment to my constituents. They are right to be disappointed.

Turning back to the Bill, the investigation of crimes in the countryside is difficult, as there are not lots of people about, there is no CCTV and there are very few witnesses, if any. Clause 3 allows for the collection of forensic evidence, which will be very important in linking the dog to the animal that has been attacked and the owner, and in facilitating the prosecution of these serious crimes and bringing about justice. It is fair to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) raised a very important issue.

The improved powers of entry and search in order to look for samples and take impressions from a dog—teeth impressions and so on, I assume—are very important too; again, they make investigation of these crimes easier. It is important that we investigate and prosecute the crimes; if we do not, the law will just sit on the statute book unenforced, ignored and otiose. If we do not have the enforcement mechanisms, we are wasting our time in the House, so the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury is right to include them in the Bill. We do not want to waste our time; everyone in this House agrees that cracking down on these terrible crimes is very important.

I am particularly pleased that the Bill deals with roads and paths. Having helped my father-in-law on many occasions, utterly incompetently, with things like moving animals around—somewhat like my career in the petrochemical industry, when I put diesel in the unleaded car, it was not something I was cut out for—

I know that animals can be attacked and worried on roads and paths. It is also right that attacking livestock is dealt with differently from worrying livestock.

I have probably said enough about the Bill, but let me say finally that I am pleased that camelids are to be protected by it. Llamas and alpacas are beautiful animals. As I mentioned, we have them in the Tollcross city farm; they are well worth a visit. The Bill recognises innovation in Britain's agricultural sector, as it looks to move to new products. Of course, alpacas and llamas are not just important as animals, but a good source of very fine wool for clothes. Anyone who has been to Peru will probably have been approached on a number of occasions to buy an alpaca jumper; they have lovely soft wool. It is important that we extend these protections to that important innovation in the farming industry.

I cannot speak highly enough of the Bill, or of the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury for bringing such an excellent, well-drafted piece of legislation to the House.

11.37 am

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): Like everyone who has spoken so far, I congratulate the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth). Much like the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady), Crawley is an urban constituency. On the plus side, I suppose that means I get to avoid the bunfight over who has the best rural constituency—we undoubtedly have the greatest urban constituency.

We are not necessarily known for our farms in Crawley—we have fairly tight boundaries around the town—but people are often surprised to find that we do have them, because the safeguarded land between the urban area of the town and the airport is currently only usable as agricultural land. We are not allowed to build anything else there. I need to take that up with Ministers in due course, in order to try to release it for much-needed economic and housing space.

Phil Brickell: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital to have farms in built-up settings in order to give a connection to people who perhaps do not have the good fortune of being able to get out into the countryside, to enable them to understand how crucial farming is to this country and also, frankly, so that they may enjoy livestock in a responsible manner?

Peter Lamb: I agree with my hon. Friend. Having any form of green space in close proximity is vital psychologically. We will be discussing the space industry soon, and research undertaken by those in the space industry shows the huge psychological boost that people get from being close to green spaces.

It is worth bearing in mind that farming is not necessarily the best representation of natural England. When we in this place talk about housing development, I worry because all too often people become obsessed with the notion that England is supposed to be a land of rolling green fields. The reality is that this country was densely forested, and substantial amounts of biodiversity have been removed to make viable areas that are now open green fields. In the Government's housing programme, we should look at such areas as brownfield land, on the

basis that they are not what natural England is supposed to look like. In many cases, new housing developments will have greater levels of biodiversity.

None the less, integrating farming alongside other forms of industry is an important part of developing well-rounded communities. I am familiar with such farms, in part because when I was a member of West Sussex county council many years ago—not enough years ago, given my experience of being a county councillor—we bought one of those farms. It was viewed as a fantastic idea, on the basis that the land would in due course be developed into a runway and we would make an absolute killing out of it. I regret to say that even if the development consent order came through right now, it would still be farmland, and it is not the site of the proposed runway. That is another of the county's investments that has not really played out as planned.

John Grady: The National Wealth Fund, which the Government are focusing on—building, to be fair, on work done by the previous Administration—has a real focus on helping local authorities to make sensible investments. Does my hon. Friend agree that given the various sagas that we have seen—Thurrock and solar, for example, or interest rate swaps by Hammersmith and Fulham back in the day—that is a very sensible objective for the National Wealth Fund?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. The hon. Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) will, I am sure, be speaking to the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Bill.

Peter Lamb: I am fighting my way back to it, Madam Deputy Speaker. Just to address my hon. Friend's point, having been a local authority leader for quite some time, I understand the pressures on councils to make such investments if their income is being reduced in other ways. Clearly, however, many lessons have had to be learned. I hope that the fund will provide opportunities to use public money far better.

If Members will please allow me to get back to the substance of the Bill, I will proceed with all due haste. My constituency is surrounded by fields, and consequently the provisions that affect those areas also affect my constituents. We have livestock in the constituency, particularly in the nature centre in one of the town's main parks. It has just been rebranded as Tilgate zoo, but for a long time it was the nature and rare breeds centre, where I have spent many happy hours in various capacities. It is where I got married; that was a high point. It is where I was bitten by a turkey at the age of two; that was a low point. I am sure it all balances out in the long run.

I am afraid we do not have any alpacas or llamas, although I would love us to get some. We are supposed to be rolling out different country exhibits as time goes on. I am reminded that alpacas and llamas are no laughing matter. The Inca empire never developed the wheel; the entire empire was built off the back of alpacas and llamas. As such, they are worthy of great respect.

What we did have, however, was sheep and cows, but some pretty harrowing things happened to the livestock at the nature centre. In one case, a sheep was set on fire

while it was still alive. Although the Bill does not directly deal with that, the mentality behind the disrespect of such animals is worthy of note. Far more often, dogs have been set on the animals, or at least people have not been in control of their dogs. We eventually had to remove the sheep entirely from the publicly accessible areas.

In fact, we went a bit further than that, because the local authority owns the park. We also had a problem around the main lake, where we kept finding that cygnets and baby ducklings were being mauled by dogs that had come off leash. We took the decision to implement a public space protection order, mandating all dog owners to keep their dogs on leads in those areas to try to reduce the risk to other animals. I will be honest and say that it was not well received. We are re-consulting on it now, but I suspect it probably still will not be desperately well received.

The big problem around these issues is that people love their dogs, and they think their dog could never possibly do anything wrong. I am certain that they are right about that in the overwhelming majority of cases, but there will always be situations where an owner will not be in control, something will happen and others pay the price—people are put at risk or we lose animals. Despite having voluntary provisions in these areas, experiences show that these are insufficient to the task of requiring people to keep their dogs under control. The provisions need to cover all the cases; they cannot just deal with the odd exception.

It is really important that the Bill puts in place provisions to enable the police to take appropriate action to monitor, investigate and resolve situations where livestock have been affected. But it is not just about putting provisions in place. We have a habit sometimes of producing regulations but not allocating resource, and if we do not allocate the resource, we do not actually produce any better outcomes. A big concern of mine is that if we create laws that we do not then enforce, we encourage lawlessness in the long run. We should have sufficient regulation that we are capable of enforcing and are prepared to enforce in order to maintain the value and meaning of the law to our constituents.

This issue is not just about animal welfare. While it is tragic when incidents occur than affect livestock, it is a fundamentally a matter of economics as well—the point I made to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East. This is an industry; these are people's livelihoods, and as we are well aware from debates in this place over the last year, they operate on extremely tight margins, and these people cannot afford the kind of losses that this abuse can cause.

It is important that there are systems of regulation in place to enable the industry to operate effectively into the future, because this is not simply about what happens to the industry; agriculture is a matter of national security for all of us. As an island, we have had to learn this lesson many times. As a country, we have always had to import some food from overseas, and there has always been trade. As far back as the neolithic age, we imported a certain amount of herring from Scandinavia. We saw very clearly in world war two the impact on society as a whole when U-boats were able to disrupt the trade system with the empire and convoys and sailors had to put their lives at risk to ensure that people would survive. This country made efforts at the time,

[*Peter Lamb*]

with campaigns encouraging people to grow their own food, and efforts have been made since to try to create a large-enough agricultural sector in the United Kingdom so that we will always be able to feed our population. The development of buffer stock systems over the wars ensured that market fluctuations did not drive people out of business, and they continue to operate on some level to this day.

The impact on our national security was driven home to us during covid, when those who were working throughout the food distribution sector were designated as key workers. It is regrettable that we as a society have rowed back from realising that people in these logistical and retail roles play a far more fundamental role in our day-to-day ability to survive than many of the roles that we choose to promote in society. Ultimately, we need laws that are going to support those in this industry to thrive. In summary, I agree with the proposals in the Bill—and I have attempted to get through my speech at the fastest possible pace to make that point.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

11.49 am

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) for introducing the Bill, which has enjoyed wide support from Members across the House.

The hon. Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) reminded us of the need to keep control of dogs on paths and country lanes. The hon. Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) stressed the importance of these improved protections for her farmers, as they are for farmers in Somerset. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) emphasised the need for responsible access to the countryside, about which I agree. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) told us about the need for strengthened police powers.

The hon. Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) took us on a gentle country ramble in his speech, and told us that his constituency is entirely urban and he knows little of farming. Let me tell him not to worry, because he is clearly eminently qualified to be Labour's next Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—he could scarcely know less or do worse than the current incumbent.

I pay tribute to those groups that have long championed this reform. They include the National Sheep Association, the RSPCA, the British Veterinary Association, the National Farmers Union and the all-party parliamentary group for animal welfare.

As I have already mentioned once today, Britain is a nation of animal lovers and the Conservatives are proud of our record in Government of further improving Britain's world-leading position on animal welfare. This Bill follows in that proud tradition, because livestock worrying is a blight on our countryside and a blight on our farmers. In a recent survey by the National Sheep Association, 87% of respondents said they had experienced a dog attack on their livestock in the past 12 months. One in 20 of those respondents said that they had experienced between 10 and 30 such attacks, which is truly appalling.

These attacks cause distress and injury to livestock and, in the most extreme cases, they can cause the death of animals. That is not only traumatic for farmers, but it can be expensive too. NFU Mutual data shows that insurance claims for dog attacks on farm animals exceeded £1.8 million in 2023. Farmers have enough to worry about with this Government's new family farm tax, without the additional burden of attacks on their livestock by dogs.

The Bill makes several improvements to existing law. First, it introduces a vital distinction between livestock worrying and attacking. This change will help to strengthen enforcement where serious harm has occurred. Clause 2 expands police powers to seize dogs they reasonably expect to have been involved in such offences. This important amendment helps to close existing legal loopholes and ensures swift police action to prevent further harm.

Clause 3 empowers police and veterinary professionals to take samples or impressions from wounded animals or suspected dogs to aid criminal investigations. This change will make it significantly easier to gather evidence and bring charges. The National Farmers Union has rightly championed the measure, noting that many livestock worrying incidents go unreported due to a lack of confidence in enforcement. The possibility of using DNA testing could be a game changer for successful prosecutions, and I urge the Government to support further research and work with police forces to implement the results.

Clause 4 allows officers with a warrant to search properties for dogs believed to be involved in an attack. This is a crucial power to ensure justice is served and will help end the widespread perception among farmers that little can be done once an attack occurs. Another major improvement is the inclusion of roads and public paths within the legislation's scope. Livestock are often moved between fields using country lanes. Under current rules, if an animal is attacked outside a field, the burden unfairly falls on the farmer. This Bill corrects that and rightly places responsibility on dog owners to always control their pets near livestock.

The Bill broadens the definition of livestock to include camelids, such as alpacas and llamas, which are increasingly part of rural enterprises. I particularly welcome that clause, especially on behalf of establishments such as the Animal Farm Adventure Park in Berrow, in my constituency.

The Bill introduces many essential enforcement powers that will allow our police to crack down on worrying, but we must not forget about prevention. Responsible dog ownership is key. The previous Government's working group brought together police, stakeholders and welfare organisations to improve education on how to keep pets and livestock safe. In Wales, a 64% drop in livestock worrying incidents between 2023 and 2024 has been credited to outreach campaigns, dog training courses and effective rural crime teams. We must continue to amplify educational messages such as those in the country code. I call on the Government to make sure they continue that vital work and to look at how we might further encourage responsible dog ownership.

My constituency has a large farming community, and I have seen at first hand the impact of livestock worrying on my constituents. I recently met Austen Lockyer, who farms in my constituency. He told me that he struggles when irresponsible owners allow their dogs off leads on

public footpaths through his fields, treating them like recreation grounds and worrying his sheep. I know the Bill will be a comfort to him and those like him and that we are acting to shift the burden of responsibility to dog owners.

I am pleased to have supported the Bill since it was introduced and through Committee, and it is a pleasure to stand at the Dispatch Box and confirm that the Opposition support the Bill in full. I urge colleagues from all parties to support the Bill and to bring an end to the scourge of livestock worrying in rural communities.

11.56 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a privilege to speak on Third Reading. I express my gratitude to the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) for taking the Bill through the House.

I really was not going to get party political on this day of unity when we were all in so much agreement. However, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox), has prompted me to do so, and who am I to turn away such an invitation? It is marvellous that he thinks the Bill is such a good idea and that he is fully supportive of it. I say gently to him that his party had 14 years in which to support Bills like this and the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill that we debated earlier. It was quite interesting to hear him try to defend the previous Government's record at DEFRA—we all know that every single river, lake and sea was filled with sewage. I am more than happy to discuss the record of the previous Government.

I will return to my tone of unity. I thank everyone who contributed to getting the Bill to Third Reading and everyone who was involved in Committee. I have been briefed on how much support the Bill was shown in Committee, so I thank all Members from across the House for their work in that.

I thank the hon. Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) for mentioning his membership of the NFU food and farming fellowship and the support of the NFU. I completely agree with him on the difference that capturing dogs' DNA will make to enforcement. It is important that that is adopted and developed. I am tempted back into getting political again: I agree with my hon. Friend that rural crime was neglected for 14 years under the previous Government, but we are starting to take it more seriously.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) for engaging frequently with the NFU and representing its views, as well as those of farmers across her constituency. I agree with her that it is important that the Bill covers paths and roads as well. I will not get involved in the debate on which is the most beautiful constituency. How could I, Madam Deputy Speaker, when you and I know that Yorkshire is God's own country? I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) for talking about responsible access to the countryside. When we enjoying the beauty of nature, it is crucial that we all obey the countryside code. I hope that all Members promote the code across their constituencies.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the bagging and binning of dog poo. That reminds me of when I attended the Filey folk festival and one of the most amusing songs I have heard for a long time, which was about the dog poo tree. The song was dedicated to all those people who go on a walk, collect their dog's poo in a dog poo bag, and then hang the bag on the dog poo tree at the end of the walk. It reminds us all to not just bag it, but take it away with us.

Mike Reader: On that point, I went to the Hardingstone village fair this weekend—I had a pop-up surgery. I want to thank the constituent who came to tell me about the dog poo epidemic in Hardingstone. She asked, "What's the Government going to do to help?" I confirmed that we will make sure that councils have the power to address this issue, and that I will raise it with West Northamptonshire council to make sure that it takes action. It is clearly impacting residents in the village of Hardingstone.

Emma Hardy: I completely agree that it is incredibly unpleasant. As always, it is only a minority of people who fail to take away their dog's poo.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) for the tip on visiting the beautiful print art in Glasgow. I hope that his father-in-law is impressed by his support for this Bill, if not by his ability as a farmer. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his 23rd wedding anniversary on 12 July.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) talked about the psychological boost that we get when we are near nature. He is completely right. It is such a positive feeling to be out in the wild. I always talk to my local Yorkshire wildlife group about the importance of "tangle"; where some people see mess, others see biodiversity and nature. We get the most nature where there is a tangle of different plants growing; we get very little on a mowed lawn. We get nature where we see weeds, different habitats, and different areas for species to grow and develop. I am convinced that this is a reason not to do as much gardening; we are then supporting biodiversity and the need for tangle. Members have also mentioned the importance of planting more forest and talked about how we can raise the amount of biodiversity on our new estates, all of which I completely agree with.

Sarah Russell: The Minister mentions forests. I want to congratulate Trees for Congleton, which has just planted its 30,000th tree in Congleton. It set out a few years ago to plant one tree for every citizen in the town, and it has achieved that. I think that is quite remarkable.

Emma Hardy: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Trees for Congleton. Thirty thousand trees is an incredible achievement, and let us hope it keeps going.

The number of livestock kept in the UK has nearly doubled since the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953 was passed, and there has been a large increase in dog ownership. The National Sheep Association's 2025 survey indicates that 96% of respondents have experienced between one and 10 incidents of sheep worrying in the last 12 months. That highlights the urgent need to modernise the legislation in order to address this issue. On average, respondents reported four sheep deaths per

[Emma Hardy]

year due to sheep worrying by dogs—an increase on previous years—and one respondent reported 44 sheep killed in a single attack. These figures do not account for miscarriages of lambs, or for the other secondary impacts of livestock worrying.

The behaviour of dogs that chase, attack or cause distress to livestock can have devastating outcomes and result in injury or death, which can have a detrimental impact on farmers. Livestock worrying can also have wider implications, such as lambs being aborted and flocks of birds being smothered. That demonstrates how harmful such incidents can be. It is clear that we need stronger measures to attack livestock worrying and the devastating effects on farmers and livestock, and this Bill will deliver these measures.

The Government recognise the distress that livestock worrying can cause animals and their keepers. All reported crime must be taken seriously, investigated and, where appropriate, taken through the courts, so that perpetrators receive the appropriate penalties. This Bill amends the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953, which underpins livestock worrying offences and enforcement, and I will summarise the three main areas that the Bill will address before going into more detail on the measures.

The Bill will primarily focus on three areas. It will modernise the definitions and scope of the livestock worrying offence by extending the locations where an offence may take place to include roads and paths, and it will expand the species scope to include camelids, which are commonly found. It will strengthen police powers, including powers of entry, the seizure and detention of dogs, and the collection of evidence, to improve enforcement, and as a deterrent, it will increase the maximum penalty from a fine of £1,000 to an unlimited fine. Those three key areas will strengthen the legislation and deterrence around livestock worrying and attacks on livestock.

The Bill will broaden the locations where an offence may take place to include roads and paths. Dogs and dog walkers are commonly found walking on roads and paths, and this new measure will help to protect livestock when they are being moved—for instance, cows going into a milking parlour, or sheep being moved across the fields. That is an important new protection.

The Bill will extend the species protected by the Act to include camelids, such as llamas and alpacas. The British Alpaca Society estimates that there might be as many as 45,000 alpacas owned by members in England, and a further 20,000 owned by non-members.

The Bill will also amend the wording of the offence of livestock worrying so that attacking livestock is dealt with separately from worrying livestock. “Attacking” is part of what is more widely described as “worrying” in the 1953 Act. However, the term “worrying” can dismiss the severity of some offences. Reframing the Act so that “attacking” is distinct from “worrying” better highlights the violent nature of incidents involving attacks on livestock.

The new police powers will be a huge help to the police. The primary focus of the Bill is to strengthen those powers to enable the police to respond to livestock worrying incidents more effectively. They include extending

powers of seizure, modifying entry powers and introducing a new power to take samples and impressions from livestock and suspected dogs. Furthermore, in a survey carried out by the National Sheep Association in 2025, 98% of respondents agreed that there was an urgent need for additional police powers—it is generally unheard of to get 98% of people to agree on something.

The police can currently only seize a dog found or suspected to have worried livestock for the purpose of identifying the owner. The police have limited powers at their disposal to address reoffending when the same dog is found attacking livestock repeatedly, or the same owner has several dogs that worry livestock. Under this Bill, if the police have reasonable grounds to believe that there is a risk that the dog could attack or worry livestock again, they have the power to seize and detain the dog. The dog can be detained until an investigation has been carried out or, if proceedings are brought for an offence, until those proceedings have been determined or withdrawn. We hope this power will address the issue of reoffending and dog owners who disregard the law, and will help to address the most serious instances of livestock worrying.

The Bill will also introduce a power to enable the police to take samples and impressions from a dog or livestock where they have reasonable grounds to believe that the dog has attacked or worried the livestock and that sample or impression might provide evidence of an offence. The sample or impression could then be used as evidence to support a prosecution. Samples may be retained until either the police investigation into a potential offence has finished or court proceedings have finished or been withdrawn.

Finally, the Bill will extend the powers of entry. Under current legislation, the police can enter a premises only for the purpose of identifying the dog owner. The reasons for extending the power of entry in relation to this offence is to ensure that the police can collect the necessary evidence to prosecute these crimes. The Bill will extend police powers to allow the police to enter and search a premises, with a warrant, to seize and take samples from a dog if there are reasonable grounds to believe that an offence has been committed. The expanded powers of entry will allow the police to seize items that may be evidence of an offence—for example, a dog collar, or a towel with blood on it.

These powers are important for improving the conviction rate and reducing the prevalence of reoffending, so that we protect our respected farmers from the horrific consequence of livestock worrying. In the light of our improvements to enforcement mechanisms to allow the police to deal with and investigate incidents of livestock worrying more effectively, we hope that livestock owners or bystanders will feel encouraged to report more incidents, and will know that the reports will be taken seriously.

The Bill will also increase penalties. The penalty is currently set at a maximum fine of £1,000. The maximum penalty will be increased to an unlimited fine to act as a deterrent. The courts will determine an appropriate fine amount, in line with sentencing guidelines, that takes into account the seriousness of the offence and the financial circumstances of the offender. The courts can already impose a compensation order on an offender, requiring them to make financial reparation to the victim for any personal injury, loss or damage resulting from an offence. Compensation may be ordered for

such an amount as the court considers appropriate, having regard to any evidence, including any representations made by the offender or prosecutor. There is no limit on the value of a single compensation order handed down to an offender, and the Bill will not change that.

A survey carried out by the National Farmers Union in 2025 found that in England, the midlands was the worst-hit region by cost, with dog attacks on livestock costing an estimated £425,000. It was followed by the south-east, where the cost is an estimated £225,000. Farm animals in the south-east of England worth an estimated £139,000 were severely injured or killed in dog attacks in 2024. That is up 23% on the previous year. Furthermore, the National Sheep Association found that more than half of all respondents felt that increased fines, punishment and seizure powers would reduce sheep worrying incidents.

Of course, many responsible dog walkers enjoy the countryside without incident. Dog owners have a responsibility to ensure that their dogs are kept safe and under control. The countryside code highlights that it is best practice to keep dogs on a lead around livestock. It says that visitors should always check local signs, as there are locations where they must keep their dog on a lead for part or all of the year. We recognise that there is a careful balance to be struck between protecting the wider public and their livestock from dog attacks, the freedom that people enjoy when they are walking their dogs, and, of course, the welfare of those dogs, including their freedom to exhibit normal behaviours.

The new police powers that the Bill will introduce will ensure an effective response to reported cases. They are vital measures that will help improve enforcement and protect the livelihoods of our valuable farming communities. Countryside access came up. The Bill would cover a scenario in which the person in charge of the dog caused it to attack livestock that had strayed on to a road or path. The 1953 Act protects livestock that may have strayed from one field to another if it is agricultural land as defined in the Act, subject to certain exemptions and offences.

The countryside code encourages people to check local signs and leave gates as they find them. The public right of way guidance highlights the responsibility of landowners regarding waymarking and signs, including the responsibility to use signs to warn people of dangers that are not obvious. The welfare of livestock is the responsibility of the owner, and they must take necessary measures to protect their livestock. Owners of livestock should of course take reasonable care to see that their livestock do not stray. There is a common law duty on anyone who keeps animals in a field next to a road to take reasonable care to prevent their escape, in order to avoid damage. This private Member's Bill focuses on delivering the greatest impact by improving the police's powers to investigate and support convictions.

Let me say, in answer to a question asked, that it will not be an offence to fail to report an incident. We would always encourage dog walkers to be responsible in such circumstances by bringing an incident to the attention of the livestock owner and the police, so that the owner can ensure that the injured livestock can receive the care or treatment they need. That is important for welfare reasons. It would be difficult to enforce a legal reporting requirement.

On other species being protected, sheep are specifically protected from dogs at large because they are most susceptible to distress in the presence of dogs, and are prone to abort their young when distressed. Primary legislation could be considered in future to add other species if necessary. That point was raised by one of my hon. Friends. The countryside code highlights that it is best practice to keep dogs on a lead around livestock, and we would encourage this practice to ensure that dogs and walkers are kept safe.

It is important to note that the Bill will not amend section 1(2A) of the 1953 Act, which sets out an exemption to section 1(2)(c) for guide dogs. Owners of a guide dog will remain exempt from criminal liability if their guide dog is at large in a field or enclosure where there are sheep. However, the offence of chasing or attacking livestock applies to guide dogs, and the owner of the guide dog would be committing an offence if the dog chased or attacked livestock. Ultimately, it remains for the courts to decide what can be considered a guide dog.

I recognise the strong public support for animal welfare in this country, as reflected in the volume of correspondence received by my Department and the sustained engagement from stakeholders. Key stakeholders, including the livestock and farming sector, the animal welfare sector, the police and the veterinary sector, have been engaged in respect of these measures.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I apologise to the Bill's promoter, the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), for being late; I had hoped to be here earlier.

The Minister talked about the importance of animal welfare to people up and down the country, not least in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Will she give us a flavour of when the Government will publish our animal welfare strategy?

Emma Hardy: I hate to give my hon. Friend the parliamentary answer "in due course", but he will have to forgive me.

As illustrated by the two Bills we have taken through the House this morning and the actions we have taken in our first year, we are very committed to animal welfare, which is of huge importance to the country. As we heard in the previous debate, we are a nation of animal lovers. We will not revisit the names of all our pets, but we genuinely have a kind and caring nature. One of my favourite events in Parliament is when we have the cats and dogs of Westminster competitions, which are more fiercely fought than some by-elections.

The depth of concern about this issue has been evident in today's debate. The Government are fully committed to supporting this important Bill as it progresses through the other place. This Government were elected on a mandate to introduce the most ambitious plans to improve animal welfare in a generation. The Department has initiated a series of meetings with key animal welfare stakeholders as part of the development of an overarching approach to animal welfare, demonstrating our commitment to improving animal welfare across the board, and the Prime Minister has committed to publish an animal welfare strategy later this year—or "in due course".

I thank all Members across the House for their support, engagement and constructive comments. Once again, I am also grateful for the support from farmers,

[Emma Hardy]

welfare stakeholders, police and others who welcome the Bill. This Bill will have a lasting impact for those affected by livestock worrying, and I am delighted to support it. I thank the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury and look forward to seeing the Bill on the statute book.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With the leave of the House, I call Aphra Brandreth to wind up the debate.

12.16 pm

Aphra Brandreth: With the leave the House, may I take this opportunity to thank the Minister for the majority of her remarks? Of course, we disagree about the Conservative record on animal welfare, but I thank her for her personal support and that of the Government for the Bill.

I would like to thank to a number of people who have contributed to this legislation. The Bill commenced its journey in the last Parliament as a private Member's Bill under the sponsorship of Baroness Coffey, and it is fitting that she has expressed her intent to take the Bill through the other place. I am grateful for her support and wish to put on the record my sincere thanks.

I thank again all Members who have been involved in and spoken during the passage of the Bill. It has been a pleasure to work with colleagues, and I am incredibly grateful for their involvement. I also want to acknowledge the contributions made today that rightly emphasise that the Bill is not about targeting dog owners. I am a dog lover myself, and I know that the vast majority of dog owners are responsible and care deeply about animal welfare, whether it is dogs, sheep or, indeed, alpacas. The Bill is about ensuring that we can all enjoy the countryside responsibly.

I thank the team in the Public Bill Office and at DEFRA who have worked so hard to progress the Bill. I also thank my brilliant, very hard-working team for all their help, and particularly Joel Hetherington for his invaluable support.

Finally, I thank the farmers in my constituency of Chester South and Eddisbury who have shared their experiences with me. Their insights into the devastating impact of attacks and the difficulties of securing prosecutions under the current law have been invaluable in shaping the legislation. It really has been a team effort, and the difference we can make as a result of this Bill will be felt across farming communities. It is for them that we have brought this legislation forward, and I could not be prouder to have played my part in delivering it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Absent Voting (Elections in Scotland and Wales) Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

12.19 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before we begin, I remind Members of the differences between Report and Third Reading. The scope of the Report stage debate is only amendment 1 in the name of the Member in charge. The scope of the Third Reading debate to follow will be the whole Bill as it stands after Report. Members may wish to consider those points and then decide at which stage or stages they want to try to catch my eye.

Clause 2

ELECTIONS TO THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 1, in clause 2, page 4, line 37, at end insert—

“(3A) In section 114 (subordinate legislation: particular provisions), in subsection (1), after ‘sections’ insert ‘12B.’”.

This enables regulations made under new section 12B of the Scotland Act 1998 (as inserted by clause 2) to be exercised by modifying provision made by or under that Act.

I am pleased to be in the Chamber today. I thank all Members who have taken part in the passage of the Bill so far. It addresses an issue that needs to be resolved at pace to ensure that electors in Scotland and Wales can benefit in time for their devolved parliamentary elections next May. I am grateful to the House for the unanimous support I have received.

I hope to complete the Commons passage of this important Bill today, but before that is possible, a minor and technical amendment must be made. Amendment 1 to clause 2 amends the power in proposed new section 12B of the Scotland Act 1998 to expressly indicate that the power can be used to amend secondary legislation made under the Act. The amendment came at the request of the Scottish Government to correct an oversight concerning how their devolved legislation operates and how the Bill will be implemented.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK Government's focus, under the Secretary of State for Scotland, on working closely with the Scottish Government—where possible, to be pragmatic—is important? It has secured an amendment to the Bill that will be of benefit to the voters in Baillieston in my constituency, who go to the polling stations at Broomhouse Hall and in the wonderful primary schools of Garrowhill, Swinton, Caledonia and St Bridget's.

Tracy Gilbert: Yes, I agree. There has been support from the Scottish Government and we have been working in co-operation. How the Bill will be implemented by the Scottish Government is a core part of the amendment.

Without the amendment, the Bill could still deliver on its purpose. However, the Scottish Government would have to repeal and restate the entire Scottish Parliament

(Elections etc.) Order 2015 with renewed provisions. The amendment seeks to remedy that oversight and ensure that the Scottish Government are able to implement the Bill in their own devolved legislation, so that Scottish electors may benefit in time for the May 2026 Scottish Parliament elections.

It is unfortunate to need to make a technical amendment this late in the process of parliamentary scrutiny, particularly given that the error could have been identified some time ago, but I am glad to be able to assist the Scottish Government with this matter. I commend the amendment to the House.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) on all her work. She has shown admirable commitment during the passage of the Bill so far, and her commitment to delivering it for the benefit of voters in Scotland is evident. I also take the opportunity to reaffirm that the Bill has the full support of the Government. I am grateful to have seen support from across the House for the changes that it will make possible.

Amendment 1 is further evidence of the diligence that my hon. Friend has shown towards the Bill. I am particularly grateful to her for accommodating the Scottish Government's request for the amendment at this late stage. She has clearly explained that it is a minor and technical amendment that will simplify the implementation process for the Scottish Government. The change in clause 2 makes it explicit that the new section 12B power introduced by the Bill can amend secondary legislation made under the Scotland Act.

The amendment has been considered by my officials, who are content that it does not present any kind of novel approach to legislation or set any precedent. It is simply a sensible change that will avoid unnecessary restatement and then reconsideration of existing legislation by the Scottish Parliament, thereby increasing the chances of the important changes that the Bill will make possible being delivered in time for the May 2026 Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru elections. I am pleased that the issue has been identified at this stage, and confirm that the Government support the amendment.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Third Reading

12.25 pm

Tracy Gilbert: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

With your leave, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to thank hon. Members across the House for their contributions during the various stages of the Bill's passage. I also thank the civil servants in the registration and franchise policy team and the Public Bill Office in Parliament for providing me with so much support with the Bill—I can confirm that I have received quite an education in the legislative process. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister for her steadfast support throughout the passage of this Bill.

The introduction of the online absent voting application service has given electors in England, Scotland and Wales the option to apply online for a postal or proxy vote in UK general elections. Electors in England are also given the option to use the online service to apply

for a postal or proxy vote for all other types of election that they can participate in; unfortunately, the same cannot be said for voters in Scotland and Wales. As it stands, voters in Scotland and Wales face a fragmented system in which they may apply online for a postal or proxy vote for a UK general election but still rely on filling out paper forms for their local council or devolved Parliament elections. The Bill enables that inconsistency to be ended.

In short, the Bill will allow for the extension of the same online application options to voters in Scotland and Wales for devolved elections. The goal is to have the measures in place ahead of the devolved elections scheduled for May 2026. I have emphasised this before, but I again stress the importance of devolution. The responsibility for local elections and elections to the Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru is rightfully devolved to the respective nations. The Bill has been drafted to ensure that devolution is respected, with the proposals having been discussed with Ministers from both the Scottish and Welsh Governments. Alongside support from those Governments, the Bill has enjoyed cross-party support throughout its passage.

John Grady: My hon. Friend—who recently had her birthday—is quite right to emphasise the importance of good working between the Scottish Government and the Westminster Government to ensure that the voting rules are harmonised. Will she outline how that benefits voters at Eastbank primary school and Eastbank academy in Shettleston in my wonderful seat?

Tracy Gilbert: I would imagine it means they will get an extra day off school for the elections, which most kids enjoy.

The Bill enhances democracy. Last year, when the general election was called, it was quite tricky for Scottish voters because there was a tight time window; the Bill will allow people to apply more easily for access to a ballot if they are going to be away on holiday. It has also been welcomed by the electoral sector, which recognises the benefits of expanding a streamlined and secure system. This is testament to what can be achieved when we work collaboratively across Governments and parties in the interests of democratic participation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) mentioned. I hope the Bill will proceed through this House and swiftly move to the other place, and I urge Members to support its passage today.

12.29 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) on getting this Bill to its Third Reading and getting both sides of the House behind it, although I note that there are no SNP Members in the Chamber. I am a proud Member for an English constituency, but we in Newcastle-under-Lyme have seen the benefit of a system that defends and supports the franchise and ensures that people are able to have their say. As such, I wanted to gently contribute to this debate, to give my support to my hon. Friend and encourage colleagues to get behind the Bill.

Democracy is important. It is so important that we discuss the Bill, ensuring that people up and down the United Kingdom, including in Wales and Scotland, are

[Adam Jogee]

able to hold their elected politicians to account to ensure that their decisions reflect their views. We do so on the first anniversary of this Labour Government—that speaks very much to the power of the vote. The Bill is about ensuring that people have as much support as possible to vote, to have their say, to shape the future and, as I say, to hold their elected representatives to account at local and devolved level in Scotland and Wales.

I used to work for a Welsh MP, and I lived in Scotland and also worked for a Scottish MP before my election to this House, so I well recall the challenges and experiences.

John Grady: My hon. Friend is the Member of Parliament for the wonderful place of Newcastle-under-Lyme. Does he agree that the purpose of the Bill is to bring some much-needed consistency to voting arrangements across our family of nations? Voters in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Newcastle upon Tyne or the wonderful Newcastleton in Scottish Borders should all be able to vote in a reasonably consistent way.

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am an English MP; we are talking about Scotland and Wales; and my wife is from Northern Ireland. Our four nations are very much represented in my short contribution to this debate.

I have seen personally the ease of the postal and proxy vote system. I love to vote in person, but those in the west midlands Labour party are hard taskmasters and encourage us to vote by post so that we can be knocking on doors, seeing my hon. Friend the Minister beating Tories where and when we can. However, making it easier to vote for people who have health or family issues, or who are called away for work and the rest, is vital. We have seen the consequences—the threats to our democracy—of people not thinking that politics represents them and their issues, and does not involve or include them. We must think about what we can do to neutralise those concerns and those fears, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) has done so brilliantly in her Bill, notwithstanding her technical amendment, which was supported by the House. It speaks for itself.

I am grateful to you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am here to support my hon. Friend before I get the train home, and I look forward to the Bill successfully passing its Third Reading.

12.32 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for bringing forward the Bill, which I rise to support. It seeks not only to modernise our democratic processes but to safeguard the rights of every citizen across the devolved nations of the UK. At its heart, the Bill is about strengthening participation and ensuring that no one is left without a voice in our democratic institutions. In particular, it seeks to streamline and clarify the mechanisms for absentee voting—by post or by proxy—in the Scottish Parliament and in the Senedd Cymru elections, to align them more effectively with the broader UK framework while respecting the integrity of the devolved powers.

The right to vote is the bedrock of our democracy, but a right is meaningful only if it can be exercised in practice. Too many voters across Scotland and Wales, especially those in rural areas, students, those with disabilities and military personnel, have faced avoidable barriers to postal or proxy voting. Inconsistent regulations and outdated application processes have led to confusion and delays, and the result is that people are prevented from participating in our democracy. They may be serving overseas or temporarily relocated for work or on caring duties for a loved one—playing a vital part in our society or our economy—yet they are penalised for it by being unable to vote.

The Bill's reforms are sensible and pragmatic and aim to standardise the application procedures for such votes, improving the accessibility and transparency of the system but keeping it inclusive and fair. I am well assured that in doing so, the Bill does not seek to override or diminish the autonomy of the Scottish Parliament or Senedd Cymru, but rather offer a legislative framework that can be adopted in co-operation with them. It should be seen as an opportunity for collaboration—a chance for all corners of the UK to work together to improve the democratic process for every voter. A voter in Aberdeen should have exactly the same confidence in the integrity and accessibility of their vote as my constituents in Aylesbury have. Uniformity strengthens, rather than weakens, our Union and our democracy.

I want to make a wider point about the context. We have seen a decline in voter turnout in recent years, especially among younger and transient populations. I think that stems from the wider challenge that we have in society of young people, and people more broadly, feeling a bit disillusioned and disengaged from politics.

John Grady: My hon. Friend mentions the lack of enthusiasm for voting among some young people. That is a real problem in Scotland. Does she agree that one potential explanation is the catastrophic decline of education standards, the insolvency of universities in Scotland and so forth? That may be contributing to a decline in voter enthusiasm.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I agree; the education system plays a big part. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, which brings me to a related point.

I recently ran a work experience programme for a fantastic group of 16 to 18-year-olds in Aylesbury, and I asked the students to come up with ideas for what more the Government could do for young people in this country. One group came straight to this point of politics, democracy and law. I thank the young people in that group—Ruqaiya Begum, Jacob McNorton, Munashe Ndoro, Georgia Bolland and Alex Foster—for their suggestions. Their ask of the Government was that we give the school curriculum a much greater focus on voting systems, political awareness, civic engagement, the rule of law and human rights. They were spot on, and we had great discussions about how that should help to increase understanding, engagement and participation in our democracy. I shared my hopes that our manifesto commitment to lower the voting age from 18 to 16 in general elections will help to do just that. I really hope that we as a Government will take that forward as quickly as possible.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for bringing forward this important change. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) agree that we need to continue to have the conversation about what democracy means to people, and that creating consistency in the voting system aids that conversation?

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I do agree. It is exactly that: if we are going to rebuild trust in democracy, that has to start with elections, and with a voting system that people have faith in.

We have discussed the urgent need to rebuild engagement and trust in our democracy. That is fundamental, and the Bill, which will make absent voting more user-friendly and dependable, is a really important, concrete step forward. I urge colleagues across the House, regardless of which party or region they represent, to support it and help to ensure that no voter anywhere in the UK is absent from participating in our democracy simply because they are absent on polling day.

12.38 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for introducing the Bill and welcome the opportunity to raise issues of fairness and equality in the UK's democracy.

We have seen in England that absent voting, by post or proxy, has empowered thousands of people to make their voices heard, even when life gets in the way, whether in the form of illness, work commitments, accessibility concerns, disability, caring commitments, simply being away on holiday or, in the case of my city, serving in another country. No one should be forced to choose between voting and the demands of everyday life, so it is only right that voters in Wales and Scotland have the same protections and access. We must not allow a postcode lottery when it comes to democracy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) noted, if we as a Government are serious about strengthening trust in politics, we must make voting easier, not harder.

On that note of making voting easier, it would be remiss of me if I were not to welcome the Government's move to allow the veterans ID card to be used as valid voter identification. That is really welcomed by many Portsmouth North residents who have served our country. It is absolutely right that those who have served our country are not excluded from democratic participation due to ID restrictions. Many veterans, particularly those who are older or more vulnerable, told me how they faced real challenges accessing approved forms of ID, so recognising the veterans ID card as valid is a small but significant step towards honouring that service and ensuring their voices are heard in the ballot box.

Although the Bill does not address voting age, I want to place on record my strong support for extending voting rights to 16 and 17-year-olds across the whole of the UK to ensure fairness, whether in absent voting or by age. Young people in Scotland and Wales already vote in devolved and local elections, and it is time young people in England and Northern Ireland had the same voice across all elections. The Bill is a step towards a fairer and more accessible democracy. It is a step we must take.

12.40 pm

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) on bringing forward the Bill. Devolution has been an interest of mine for a very long time. It was the topic of my master's dissertation and my first job outside politics, so I am thrilled to be back dealing with it all again as a member of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

The Bill reminds me that one of the main arguments in favour of introducing devolution was to free up parliamentary time. It was considered bizarre that there we were, in the late 20th century, when devolution was being debated, with feudalism still in Scotland because no Government could possibly find the parliamentary time in the UK Parliament to try to resolve those issues and other issues of concern to residents in Scotland. That highlighted the importance of producing bodies that could grant that time to consider those issues, and many other issues, on a local basis of what could be the best for residents in those areas.

The fact that these measures are coming via a private Member's Bill continues to highlight the importance of trying to secure better parliamentary time for different parts of the UK for the issues that matter to them, and the importance of devolution to ensuring that matters of relevance for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—and hopefully for England in due course—are addressed. I note that the amendment continues with that approach, empowering devolved Governments' ability to implement changes in their own way. It highlights how it remains entirely possible for the nations to have the right powers to deliver for their citizens in the right way without having to engage with all the problems that would come with any approach to independence, so long may that approach continue.

I am glad to see the consultation that has taken place with devolved Administrations, as I believe consent is an incredibly important part of the process of ensuring that our devolution settlement operates well. I believe that that is critical. Technically, as a unitary system we have parliamentary sovereignty in this place and the UK Parliament can still legislate unilaterally in these areas, but if the devolved settlement is to survive, every part of the United Kingdom must be prepared to play their role in that partnership.

I cannot claim to be a fan of the Elections Act 2022, which brought many of the provisions into place. During my time in local government, I was the chair of the working group that the Local Government Association set up to go through the provisions in the Bill, which was assisted by representatives of returning officers and representatives of electoral services administrators. It would be fair to say that their views of most of the provisions were wholly negative in the context of what the Bill sought to do, and many of the arguments did not seem to make a huge amount of sense at the time. None the less, we did produce a number of cross-party conclusions. Regrettably, they were not adopted by the LGA until far too late in the process to have had any viable impact.

The aspects in the Bill are, I believe, positive. They should help to enable greater access to absent voting for residents in Scotland and Wales, and hopefully avoid some of the confusion that arises.

[Peter Lamb]

As a country, we have an increasingly confusing set of election arrangements. Many different types of electoral systems are employed, there are different age arrangements in different places and there are different rules around this, that and the other. When people think that one set of rules is in play and in fact, given a particular context, there is another, that creates growing problems with confidence in our electoral system. Although it is a challenge, it is important to our democracy that, as far as possible, the general public understand how the systems operate, how they select their governors and how they express their voice. That is a critical part of the UK retaining genuine democratic accountability.

The more that can be done to harmonise arrangements across the entire United Kingdom, and to ensure that there is a much simpler approach to people expressing their views to us, the greater the level of confidence in the system. Having two different sets of arrangements around casting votes cannot do much to encourage people to engage in the process. The very low levels of turnout at the last general election, which was a year ago today, suggest that there are issues that need to be addressed in how we try to engage people in the process and encourage them to participate.

One big problem is that if we do not have a viable system to enable people to cast their votes, taking into account people's differing capacities to attend polling stations, we risk having a bias in the system in favour of one set of groups and against another. Younger able-bodied people and those who are less busy will be in a better position to participate and submit their votes, meaning the electoral system will gradually move in favour of only part of the population. That will deliver outcomes in those elections that may result in the system no longer acting as a voice for the whole of society, only a part of that society.

We are all aware of some areas where that already happens, where there is higher turnout by some groups relative to other groups, resulting in them having preferential status in our electioneering. The more that can be done to make it as easy as possible for people to cast their vote, the greater the likelihood that we will have a more representative sample of electors participating in the system, and that all our different institutions will genuinely represent the views of constituents within the country, and consequentially within policy.

I conclude by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith on introducing the Bill. It is an important step towards addressing many of the issues, and I hope further steps will be forthcoming to increase greater accountability and democratic participation in our democracy.

12.47 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I am obliged to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for introducing this important piece of legislation. For hon. Members who do not know Edinburgh North and Leith, the word “and” is very important in the name of that constituency: Leith is quite separate from Edinburgh—it is a separate city and a wonderful city too. I have many fond memories of being in my hon. Friend's constituency, because I studied in Edinburgh and I was involved in the Children's

Holiday Venture charity, which is still going strong. Students would take children who had been referred by social workers out swimming, ice skating or away to the countryside for the weekend. I loved my time with that charity, known as “The Students” in Pilton, in my hon. Friend's seat.

The Bill tackles the important issue of trust in politics. In a way, it is mechanistic, in that it looks at mechanisms for voting, but trust in politics is damaged if people feel that they cannot exercise their right to vote because they have been excluded by being disabled, on holiday or for other reasons. People's trust in politics is damaged if they feel that they are prevented from voting for reasons that they, quite properly, view as being archaic and anachronistic.

These issues were raised with me during the last general election campaign, as it took place during the Scottish school holidays. We have different school holiday dates in Scotland. They start earlier because our harvests are earlier—not very important in Glasgow East, where there are no farms whatsoever. People felt excluded from voting because they had gone on holiday, and the arrangements did not run as well as they ought to have done.

The Bill gives the Scottish and Welsh Governments concurrent powers to introduce regulations to enable applications for postal and proxy votes for the devolved Administrations to be made online using the Government Digital Service. That will make it easier for my constituents in Carmyle, a wonderful mining village, to vote. The Bill also aligns postal voting renewal cycles. This is confusing for me, but postal voting cycles in Scotland are not aligned, and postal votes are very important for many people. That will help, for example, a postal voter in Mount Vernon who cannot get to Mount Vernon primary school to exercise their right to vote. That is important for confidence in democracy.

Other examples of divergence are set out well in the explanatory notes, which were pulled together by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith and the relevant Department. It is important to minimise divergence in this area and harmonise the rules, because people will question our democracy if those in, for example, Wishaw and Tollcross—I spoke about it earlier, with its wonderful park—are subject to different rules from, say, relatives in Northumberland, Newcastle, Corby or London.

That has been the subject of comment in reports by the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Management Board for Scotland, which does much important work in scrutinising election rules. I understand that PACAC also took an interest in it. It is important that these rules operate effectively so that, for example, constituents of mine in Calton and Bridgeton—voting, perhaps, at Bridgeton library, Sacred Heart primary school or Dalmarnock primary school—can cast their votes. It is important that those bodies keep this under control.

The Bill results from close working with the UK Government and the Scottish Government. The Secretary of State for Scotland has put a lot of work into ensuring that the Governments work together where possible for the good of people in Scotland.

Peter Lamb: My hon. Friend has highlighted PACAC's work scrutinising elections. As Parliament's Select Committee that is overseeing this part of the process,

we produced recommendations on behalf of the United Kingdom as a whole. Given that the Bill will devolve to Scottish Government representatives more delegated legislation powers around implementation, does he think it is important that we have a close link between our own Select Committees and those in Scotland and Wales, to ensure that the right lessons are learned and implemented across the whole United Kingdom, rather than just in any one of its constituent parts?

John Grady: That is a very good point, and I suggest that the Chair of PACAC picks it up with the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee. There are learnings from what happens in Scotland that we can apply in the rest of our family of nations, and vice versa—although I would say that there are no learnings that we can draw from the SNP Government on running a health service, which is in a catastrophic state in Scotland. Speaking of the health service, which is suffering in Scotland, it is important—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I remind Members that we really ought to stay in scope and discuss absent voting in Scotland and Wales, and not necessarily the health service.

John Grady: I do apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was just coming to the point that this Bill is so important because voters need to be able to exercise their right to vote to express their views on the management of councils and the Government in Scotland, and the Bill enables people to do so. I apologise for appearing to stray slightly, but it was bringing me to that important point. With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I think we have heard enough from me.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

12.54 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) on her tenacity in getting this Bill through its parliamentary stages. It is timely that the hon. Lady has today—on the first anniversary of an election that I might care to forget, but that she will definitely care to remember for the rest of her career—made such a great change to our democratic structures through our Bill. If she has achieved this much in the first 12 months, I, for one, look forward to seeing what she will achieve in the next four years. I would like to genuinely congratulate her on behalf of the official Opposition and Members across the House on the way she has conducted herself in getting this legislation on the statute books. Her constituents will also quite rightly be proud.

I also want to take this opportunity to wish Members across the House a happy first anniversary—although, technically, the anniversary is tomorrow. We were all tired in the early hours of that morning; for me, it was 4.36 am, as I remember. I wish a happy anniversary to all new MPs across the House on their first anniversary of serving in this place. I look forward to working with them on a cross-party basis over the next four years, and maybe beyond.

Adam Jogee *rose*—

Paul Holmes: I was just about to refer to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), but I will let him go first.

Adam Jogee: I wish the shadow Minister a happy anniversary, too.

Paul Holmes: Well, I thank the hon. Gentleman—my friend—for what I know are warm and genuine congratulations. I was about to say that I even congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme a happy anniversary on his election. I am still utterly convinced that while he is the most sartorially elegant MP on the Labour Benches—[*Interruption.*] The Whip on duty, the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), who has not even bothered to wear a tie, is somehow shouting “Shame”. I say to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme that I am still convinced that deep down, he is a secret Conservative, and we look forward to seeing his slow conversion to this side of the House over the next four years.

Adam Jogee: Wishful thinking is all I will say, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am very proud of my Labour party membership card, thank you very much.

Paul Holmes: Thou doth protest too much—I think we will just keep it to the fact that the hon. Gentleman is the most sartorially elegant member of the Labour parliamentary party, and I would be grateful, after this debate, if he could tell me where he gets his ties.

By the way, I also want to say happy anniversary to those of us who survived the last election, too—especially my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), who is sitting on the Front Bench next to me.

I welcome the Minister being in her place. The Conservatives completely agree with her remarks on the amendment that was tabled. It is perfectly straightforward, and we support it. In a rare moment of cross-party unity, we completely echo what the Minister has said, and therefore we do not need to say much more on that.

I will just pay tribute to the four Back-Bench contributors for their remarks. The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme has said he is making a habit of beating Conservatives, but let us just see what happens in four years’ time—I will not predict what will happen at the next election. As I said earlier, he is a genuine friend, and I genuinely like his engaging contributions to many debates in this House; they are always backed up by the principled aims he has in any area of policy in this House—long may that continue.

The hon. Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) gave a great speech. She set out the full scope of the Bill clearly and how it will make a tangible change to many people who live in Scotland. I congratulate her on that.

Even though the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) is from a rival city down the Solent from me, I thought she made an excellent contribution. She made important points on the changes to the legislation to ensure that veterans cards can be used as official ID for voting. I represent many veterans in my community, particularly naval veterans—as I know the hon. Lady does, with the home of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth North—and I know that that is a vital change that is being made. It was a commitment of the previous Government; I think it is fair to say that parliamentary time ran out, so we were unable to do that, so I am pleased that the new Government took that forward.

[Paul Holmes]

The hon. Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) was right to share his expertise on devolution, and gave fascinating historical context for this Bill. I remember being in the Stag's Head pub on the University of Southampton's campus in 2006, when he was chairman of the university's Labour Society and I was chairman of its Conservative Association. For transparency, I will declare that it was a lot smaller than the Labour Society. I am not sure whether he ever imagined that we would share a Chamber today. As we saw from his speech, he is a fierce defender of democracy, a fierce supporter of devolution, and a passionate defender of his beliefs and principles. I wish him well going forward.

Peter Lamb: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for his kind remarks. Given that we are talking about democratic engagement and encouraging greater participation, does he agree that there are few better ways of encouraging people to engage with the system than getting them into student politics at university?

Paul Holmes: My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) just said that he could not think of anything worse, but I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I saw something very special in him when we battled together. He was in the year above me, though hon. Members might not think so from looking at him. I absolutely agree that universities can be at the forefront and heart of early democratic engagement, and can shape people's views and political compass. I am perfectly willing to say in this House that my politics 15, 16 or 17 years ago were very different from my politics today. That is down to the genuinely open nature of debates in this Chamber and, most importantly, on university campuses.

I am feeling a bit left out, because the hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) regularly intervened on others but has not intervened on me. He gave a staunch defence of the Bill in some particularly pertinent areas, and talked about other areas that are maybe not so pertinent. I will watch him over the next four years. I wonder how many schools in his constituency he has mentioned in his first 12 months in this House.

John Grady: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Holmes: As if I could not.

John Grady: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. Having spent a lot of time with him on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill Committee, I know that the charming way in which he presents his submissions would enhance people's trust in politics, including those voting at Calton Parkhead parish church hall. I am obliged.

Paul Holmes: The hon. Gentleman never lets me down. I hope he does not say that within earshot of the Leader of the Opposition, but I can promise her on the Floor of the House that she has nothing to worry about from me. Like him, I will carry on engaging in debates in this House. Where we do not agree, we can do so in a nice, polite and respectful way. We are talking about enhancing democracy for the people of Scotland through this legislation; the way that Members have conducted

themselves today serves as a lesson on how people should conduct themselves. I am not talking about any specific parties.

The Bill is welcome, and makes the necessary provisions to ensure that where there is divergence, the whole of Great Britain's shared democratic values are brought into closer practical alignment. It supports the unity of our democratic system while respecting the devolved nations' identities. The Conservative party will always look to bridge the gaps between the constituent national communities that make our country so vibrant.

In my role on the Opposition Front Bench, I spend much of my time fighting against what I perceive to be the Government's repeated attempts to strip local people of their agency and voice. I have had disagreements with the hon. Member for Glasgow East on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, but this Bill is refreshing. Frankly, it is a relief to be able to support the work of the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, who has brought forward a Bill that empowers, rather than undermines, our citizens. Specifically, we welcome the provisions that make it easier for people across Scotland and Wales to participate in elections. This Bill honours the principle that democracy should be accessible to all, not a privilege for the few. That is a principle that we on the Conservative Benches will always defend, as I know the Minister does through her role.

Accessibility is vital, but so too is security. Protecting the integrity of our elections and guarding against fraud or interference is a core responsibility of any Government. Ministers must take decisive and proactive steps, while modernising and reforming our system, to prevent malign influence, whether domestic or foreign.

We do not have to look for long to see instances of electoral interference from foreign state and non-state actors. Indeed, most recently, it was reported that dozens of anonymous pro Scottish independence X accounts allegedly operated by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have gone silent since Israel launched strikes on Iranian military and cyber targets on 12 June. The accounts, which seemed to use fake Scottish identities to spread anti-UK sentiment, were identified by Clemson University researchers as being part of a suspected foreign influence campaign.

That example is one among many, and it illustrates an important point that we all must take seriously. That is why I welcome the Government's stated commitment to working closely with the Electoral Commission and others to protect the integrity, security and effectiveness of UK elections and referendums. I urge them to ensure that this is not just rhetoric but reality.

It is right to note that the Bill builds on work by the previous Government, including the Elections Act 2022, which took important steps to strengthen the security of our democratic processes, introducing requirements such as digital imprints on online campaign materials and enhancing transparency in political funding. Those were much-needed reforms, and it was a shame that legislative consent was not given to those measures in 2022. The Bill now mitigates the effect of that decision.

As the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith said, the inclusion of identity verification for postal and proxy vote applications is another necessary measure to close off vulnerabilities in our system. There must not be a mismatch between how people register by post and

how they do so digitally. These are technical details, but their impact on the integrity of our electoral process is profound. We must not allow inconsistent standards to become weak spots in our democracy, because we can be sure that our adversaries abroad would use those to divide us and cause chaos in any way they can.

This Bill represents a sensible and timely move to enhance voter access and uphold the integrity of our electoral system. By aligning absent voting procedures in devolved elections with those across the rest of the United Kingdom, it helps to modernise and safeguard our democratic processes for the future. Crucially, it also empowers voters in Scotland and Wales by making participation in elections simpler and more accessible.

I must reiterate what I said on Second Reading: I urge the Government to abandon their plans to water down voter ID requirements. They have found it within themselves to make U-turns in other areas. Today we are legislating to make voting easier for people while maintaining adequate security, but we cannot also have the Government watering down voter ID requirements, which would reduce security in our voting system.

On that rare note of disharmony during an afternoon of unity, I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith again on the constructive and inclusive approach that she has taken. I look forward to seeing this legislation on the statute book. Let us see whether she brings more legislation forward over the next four years to make a real difference in this country.

1.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) on all her fantastic work, and on ensuring there is cross-party support for this Bill. I echo the point that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), made about her ability to make such an important change so quickly; we are celebrating it being a year since the general election.

I commend my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith), for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), for Crawley (Peter Lamb) and for Glasgow East (John Grady) for their excellent speeches, which highlighted the importance of this private Member's Bill. They also pointed out some of the changes that we have already made; for instance, I am proud to have introduced the veteran ID card while in government. There is also a specific proposal in our manifesto to reduce the voting age, so that 16 and 17-year-olds can vote.

The Government share the commitment of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith to this Bill, which will give people in Scotland and Wales the same choices for managing their voting arrangements for devolved elections as they already have for reserved elections. Many of us will remember a time when absent voting in the UK was still governed by excessively restrictive criteria; electors had to provide valid reasons, such as illness, travel or occupational constraints, to qualify for a postal vote. Similarly, proxy voting was limited to those with clear impediments to attending the polling station.

This changed in 2001, when postal voting on demand was introduced in Great Britain, allowing electors to freely apply for a postal vote. That change was quickly embraced by the electorate: in the 2001 general election, there was a significant increase in the number of postal votes issued compared with previous elections, and by 2005, the figure had more than doubled. By 2010, over 7 million postal votes were issued across the UK. Now that electors have been given the choice to vote in a way that best suits them and their needs, it has become clear that there is significant demand for flexibility in how people exercise their democratic rights. While it is less commonly used, the option to vote via a proxy has also remained a viable and necessary alternative for many electors across the country.

In 2007, measures were introduced to verify the identity of postal voters. They added a layer of security to the process and ensured that electors could have confidence in the system. These included the requirement for voters to provide personal identifiers, such as their date of birth and signature, when applying for and returning postal ballots. The introduction of the "Register to vote" service in 2014 gave electors the ability to go online and make their application to vote without needing to submit a paper application. That change, much like the changes to absent voting, has proved extremely popular with the electorate; in 2024, over 92% of all applications to register to vote were made using the online service, with less than 8% taking the traditional paper route. The modernisation of our electoral system through the changes I have just laid out has proven popular with electors time and again.

The Bill relates to the online absent vote application service, which, as has been pointed out, went live in October 2023 as a result of the need to modernise the way in which electors apply for their absent votes. Given the enthusiasm that electors have shown for the freedom to decide the method by which they cast their ballot, and the clear preference for using online services to apply to vote, it is no surprise that the new online absent vote application service has also proven popular. Unfortunately, as we have heard, voters in Scotland and Wales can use the new online service to apply for postal and proxy votes only for reserved elections, such as elections to the UK Parliament. The benefits of extending the online absent vote application service to devolved elections for electors in Scotland and Wales are clear. It will allow people in Scotland and Wales the option of applying online for a postal or proxy vote for devolved parliamentary and local elections, or of applying through a traditional paper application.

In Scotland and Wales, voters who wish to apply for a postal or proxy vote in devolved parliamentary or local elections must still complete a paper application form and submit it by post. As we have heard, this Bill seeks to give electors in Scotland and Wales the same choice as others over how they apply for their absent vote for use in Senedd Cymru, Scottish Parliament, and local elections. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith has said, the Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru will hold their parliamentary elections in May 2026. It would be hugely beneficial both to voters and to electoral administrators in Scotland and Wales alike if access to the online services is made available in time for those elections. There is a great deal of enthusiasm from the Scottish and Welsh Governments

[*Rushanara Ali*]

about the benefits, as was made clear to me in my meetings in Cardiff this week with the Scottish Government Minister for Parliamentary Business and the Welsh Government Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith said, the Bill has been welcomed by those working in the Scottish and Welsh electoral sectors. My officials work closely with the electoral administration community, and as such I can say with confidence that the Bill will deliver clear benefits for both electors and administrators, in particular by removing the need for duplicate applications to be made for devolved and reserved absent votes. That means less time for electors spent making applications and less time for administrators spent processing applications. We will continue to work closely with the Scottish and Welsh Governments, including on technical aspects of the Bill's implementation.

The changes in the Bill represent just one of the ways that this Government intend to encourage electoral engagement and participation. As I have mentioned, we will also lower the voting age, giving 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds the right to shape their future at the ballot box. We will set out plans to further strengthen the integrity of elections and encourage participation in democracy. We are working in partnership with the electoral sector to bring about the changes in this Bill and the many other changes we are seeking to make.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith for her tireless work on this important Bill. I am also grateful to the shadow Minister for his and his party's support for the Bill, for which I am glad there has been wider cross-party support. I am grateful to my hon. Friends and other hon. Members for taking such strong interest in the Bill and for coming

here on a Friday to speak in support of it. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith once again for her work, and I look forward to working with colleagues to ensure that the Bill passes. I hope very much that Members will support the Bill's measures and ensure that it advances to the other place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With the leave of the House, I call Tracy Gilbert to wind up.

1.17 pm

Tracy Gilbert: With the leave of the House, I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank Members from across the House for their contributions and support today. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) for his very kind remarks; it shows how we can work across the House with kindness and mutual support, which I am very grateful for. I thank my team for the work they have done to support me during this first year and for helping me to bring this Bill forward, along with officials from Government Departments. Without their support, I would not have been able to bring the Bill to the House. I look forward to the continued support of hon. Members for the Bill as it passes through its stages.

It is apt to be speaking today, when a year ago today we were all awaiting our fate to see whether we would be making the journey to this place. I put on the record my thanks to my constituents in Edinburgh North and Leith for enabling me to secure my place in this House, thereby enabling me to take forward this piece of legislation. It will enhance democracy and encourage participation for all our constituents across the whole of the UK. I look forward to the Bill receiving support to enable it to pass to the other place.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Space Industry (Indemnities) Bill

Third Reading

1.20 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I will start with a short summary of the Bill. Which will amend two sections of the Space Industry Act 2018 to provide legal certainty that all spaceflight operator licences must include a limit on the amount of the operator's liability to the Government under section 36 of the Act. The reason for that is that under international law applicable to space, Governments including the UK are liable for damage to property or death or personal injury caused by space activities. Section 36 passes on that liability to spaceflight operators and requires them to indemnify the Government. Without legal certainty over a cap, much-needed investment in the UK space industry, which is critical for defence and civilian purposes, will be held back, and that investment will go elsewhere. That is the purpose of the Bill: to encourage vital investment in our space sector, of which we should be proud.

I realise that parliamentarians in this place have not always been enthusiastic about space. When the Soviet spacecraft Luna 2 reached the surface of the moon on 13 September 1959, the Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd, who went on to be a Speaker of this place, reacted with great enthusiasm. He said:

"I don't think many people are terribly interested in the Russian rocket",

despite it being historic. Harold Macmillan, on the other hand, was much more enthusiastic. When Armstrong and Aldrin were waiting in the lunar module, and we had had a man on the moon, Harold Wilson said:

"We must all be filled with a profound sense of wonder and admiration in witnessing this historic event."

In fact, the UK played an important role in that space mission, and UK industry was involved, too. There was somewhat of a stooshie—a Scots word for a row—about the failure of the British ambassador to attend the launch, and his letter in the National Archives explains why. His explanation basically boils down to the fact that he had been to one previously, and that once you have seen one space launch, you have seen them all. It just goes to show that the importance of the special relationship is nothing new, but it did cause somewhat of a stooshie. Of course, nothing in 1969 was as important as Newcastle United winning the Inter-Cities Fairs cup.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): My hon. Friend just talked about the importance of the space sector to so many of us and, indeed, to the whole of the UK. Will he join me in welcoming this Labour UK Government's investment in the space sector in Scotland?

John Grady: Yes. The UK Government have invested in Orbex, in Forres in the north of Scotland. It remains important to give grants to earlier-stage companies because they cannot get the equity and debt funding that more advanced companies can, so I welcome that important investment.

The space sector and satellites are central to almost everyone's day-to-day lives. When we tap in and out of the underground on the way home or when we purchase things, that relies on satellite technology. Space is also a key focus for the national wealth fund, as confirmed by Lord Livermore, who is Financial Secretary to the Treasury, and John Flint, the chief executive of the national wealth fund, when we discussed the fund at the Treasury Committee this week. Space is an important future business for Britain, and an important economic opportunity.

Another reason why it is important to invest in space is for defence—it is critical to the defence of the United Kingdom. If we have a vibrant space industry in the United Kingdom, that will support the technological innovation we need to defend our country and our allies as we move into a much more difficult foreign policy context.

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend will be aware of the role that the Starlink system has played in Ukraine in enabling the frontline operations of the Ukrainian army. For a very long time, GPS was the main determinant of whether Trident could arrive at its destination. It strikes me that in some ways the technology, our ability to put things into space and what we are putting up there will be what absolutely determines the nature of warfare in the 21st century; does my hon. Friend agree?

John Grady: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The UK Government have committed to investing in defence and in advances in tech defence. As we develop defence, investing in space is utterly critical and central to that. It is a matter of some regret that Scottish companies that invest in military matters are not funded by the Scottish National Investment Bank or Scottish Enterprise, because they have the view that we should not invest in defence, even though it will create jobs and is important for defending the north of Scotland, which is where my mother came from and which is now very important for defence.

I am an MP for Glasgow, which has a rich history of innovation and an incredibly promising cluster of space expertise. My seat has the fantastic University of Strathclyde. I recently met Professor Malcolm Macdonald from the university, who is the director of the centre for signal and image processing and the applied space technology laboratory. He outlined to me with great enthusiasm and knowledge the amount of innovation in the space sector in Glasgow and across the United Kingdom. This is a critical industry that we must invest in and for which we must create the conditions of investment. Around 52,000 people work in the space sector across the UK, so this is a big opportunity.

Let me turn to talk about precisely what the Bill does, albeit with four words: it seeks to limit space operators' liability. I emphasise that spaceflight activities are heavily regulated by the UK Civil Aviation Authority for safety. There is day-to-day scrutiny of their safety from an expert safety regulator—the CAA is one of the best regulators in the world—so we are concerned with small risks that are reduced to the very minimum extent possible by a very strong regulatory regime. One of the reasons why our family of nations has a great advantage in space is that because we are right at the end of

[John Grady]

Europe, we have a great place to launch, because we do not launch over big urban areas. If we go right up to Shetland, there is nothing for hundreds of miles.

There are treaties under international space law, and the UK Government have a long-standing legal liability for damage caused by UK spaceflight-related operations. Despite the space safety regime, there is a residual risk that things go wrong and the UK Government face claims. The UK Government can make claims against operators, which take place under section 36 of the 2018 Act. That is quite proper. Operators have to assume and bear risk, and the Government need to ensure that operators can pay out on claims made against them—as we are quite rightly adopting a cross-party spirit today, I commend the previous Government on their work on space law—which is why the regime under the 2018 Act makes provisions for space operators to put in place compulsory insurance.

The businesses have to insure themselves and are regulated by a very competent regulator. The question is: what happens if a claim exceeds the amount of insurance that can be put in place on a sensible basis? That is really what we are addressing here. The current legislation does not require the Civil Aviation Authority or the Government to include a cap in the licence; it makes it optional. Section 12(2) of the 2018 Act provides:

“An operator licence may specify a limit on the amount of the licensee’s liability under section 36 in respect of the activities authorised by the licence.”

The critical thing that my Bill will do is quite simply to swap “may” for “must”, and as a consequence the word “any” in section 36 is changed to “the”. That is consistent with long-standing Government policy that the liability should be limited—there is a clear, documented policy that it is limited.

However, the problem with documented policies as opposed to statute—as a recovering lawyer, I go back to my legal career here—is that Government policies are ultimately much easier to change than statutes. We can have a claim for legitimate expectations and a breach of those, but that is a very difficult class of claim to run, and there has not been a huge number of successful cases of that sort in the courts. It is a difficult area of public law.

Business quite properly says, “You could change this policy and expose our existing investments to additional risk.” Business could also fairly go and look elsewhere for investment. Investors will not invest in the same way in the face of a lack of statutory protection, so the critical thing the Bill does is to include a statutory protection. It requires the Government to cap the liability and encourages people to invest, and that puts us on a par with our principal competitor nations for space investment. So, four words to the Bill, with two swapped, but it is absolutely critical for the future of an industry that could be brilliant for the United Kingdom and all our constituents for years to come.

Melanie Ward: Does my hon. Friend agree that the space sector gives our country—and indeed to the world—a sense of possibility and innovation? He talks about the four words in the Bill—Buzz Lightyear provides us with another four words to take inspiration from: “To infinity and beyond!”

John Grady: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, as she does regularly. The space sector creates enthusiasm for young people. When I met young students at the University of Strathclyde, I could see that it had engendered excitement about the future, and that is a good thing.

1.30 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I speak on this Bill as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for space. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on having such a massive effect on the UK space industry by changing just two words in the Space Industry Act 2018. His Bill is perhaps one of the most sublime Bills relating to the space sector that I have seen. It is truly incredible that we can have such a change to our industry.

We have had a space sector in this country for many years and it has been quite successful. As we have heard, it is currently worth about £19 billion a year and employs about 52,000 people, but the sector’s potential is absolutely enormous. The expectation is that, by 2035, the global space sector will be worth £1.8 trillion, and it is the ambition of this country at some point to get about 10% of that sector. That would be £180 billion a year of economic activity, so it is incredibly important.

The hon. Gentleman made important points about the space sector and all the exciting things we can do beyond the Kármán line in space. Importantly for those Scottish Members present, we will see the most symbolic part of the space sector to the north of Unst in the Shetland islands, hopefully before the year is out: a launch from British soil. That is genuinely very exciting.

Our whole economy can benefit. The hon. Gentleman is helping to open up an opportunity for the City of London, which for a long time has been a financier of innovation, trade and many different things. Importantly, it has been one of the biggest wholesale and specialist insurance markets in the world. By changing two words in the 2018 Act, the hon. Gentleman is not only unleashing spaceflight licensing for the UK but unleashing yet more opportunity at Lloyd’s of London. On top of that, as we see more space businesses coming to locate in the UK because of that opportunity, we will see even more opportunities, such as space companies being listed on the London stock exchange, bond issues and a whole load of corporate finance activities. Beyond that, there will be yet more activity in the legal sector, for example. The Bill is therefore incredibly important. The hon. Gentleman has done something incredibly simple but incredibly important, and all in the space sector are incredibly grateful.

I have a small anecdote about Buzz Lightyear—we heard mention of his catchphrase, “To infinity and beyond!” I met Buzz Aldrin’s son a few years ago and made a joke about “To infinity and beyond” to him, and he turned around to me and said, “The Disney corporation never paid my dad enough for that.”

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his Bill. It will be truly transformational.

1.34 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) for bringing the Bill forward. I also thank the

hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) for chairing the all-party parliamentary group for space and for his promotion of the sector.

As the MP for Portsmouth North, I strongly support this pivotal Bill, which will unlock further growth in our already thriving regional space cluster. It will ensure that operators take responsibility but, critically, that their liability is limited. As we heard from my hon. Friend, that statutory provision will bring us in line with our competitors.

Portsmouth and the wider Hampshire region are increasingly central to the UK's space ambitions. Through initiatives such as Space South Central, we are part of the largest regional space cluster in the country, which generates more than £3 billion annually and employs more than 5,600 people. In Portsmouth, our universities, small and medium-sized enterprises and global industry leaders work in close partnership to pioneer satellite applications, mission design and advanced technologies.

The Bill's provision to offer limited Government indemnity to commercial launch providers is critical. It will lower barriers to entry, de-risk new ventures, attract investment and enable orbital missions from UK soil. That is not just theoretical; it has real implications for Portsmouth's space sector.

Let me highlight some of the potential beneficiaries in my city. The University of Portsmouth's Institute of Cosmology and Gravitation is actively designing small satellite missions, from Earth observation CubeSats to lunar radio probes. Its space mission incubator and CosmoCube projects are prime examples of innovation that stands to gain from accelerated launch capabilities. The university also hosts the South Coast Centre of Excellence in Satellite Applications—part of the Satellite Applications Catapult, which supports businesses in satellite development, data-driven services and AI applications. The indemnity will provide confidence to those SMEs entering into new orbit ventures.

In the private sector, global giants such as Airbus Defence and Space operate from Portsmouth's Hilsea facility. Its multimillion-pound Oberon reconnaissance satellite contract with the Ministry of Defence sustains 1,000 local jobs—roles that will be bolstered by a more robust UK space launch ecosystem. It also provides fantastic apprenticeship opportunities for young people.

Hampshire-based firms such as QinetiQ, BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin and Airbus are deeply integrated into space innovation and, locally, into our communities. With the Bill's indemnity framework, these organisations—universities and companies alike—will gain access to faster mission approvals and greater capacity to adopt emerging UK launch providers, with results including new jobs, expanded contracts, strengthened regional growth and a win for my city.

Let us consider the Bill's impact. More research-led satellites such as CosmoCube could be developed and launched from Cornwall or Scotland, but Portsmouth businesses will be able to contribute all the way from design to orbit. Portsmouth's science, technology, engineering and maths pipeline, from UTC Portsmouth through to the university's Mission Space programme, will benefit enormously from real, home-grown launch activity. That will inspire students, help retain talent and create new high-tech career paths. Charities and public services will also benefit. Space-enabled monitoring

applications powered by data from low-cost satellites could support coastal management, environmental protection and emergency response in my maritime city.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the charity that I am a trustee of, STEMunity, which had a fantastic reception this week and, by working with a number of other charities and public and private sector companies, has introduced young people to the world of space.

This is not just a technical fix of four words; it is a strategic piece of legislation that can help cement Portsmouth's place in the UK space age—and, indeed, the UK in the world—by reducing risk for our inventors.

1.38 pm

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) for bringing forward this important Bill. It is fantastic to see space made in today's programme to debate it. Many of the contributions have been out of this world. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Bill is a timely and necessary measure to sharpen the UK's competitive edge in what is undoubtedly one of the most strategically important domains of our time. Having almost completed my first year on the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I have seen at first hand that our security relies not only on land, sea and air, but increasingly on the space domain and our assets in orbit. Satellite communications, Earth observation and precise navigation form the backbone of military operations, but also of our civil economy—I will come back to that later.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) pointed out in his intervention, any disruption up there has immediate and profound consequences to operations down here. We know at first hand that China and other nations are taking leaps and bounds in its drive to dominate the space domain, so anything we can do to strengthen the UK space economy is critical.

Before coming to this House, I was very fortunate that my team supported clients such as Defence Equipment & Support in negotiations around the space domain, in particular providing better commercial and buying support, which is critical, so I have seen at first hand the complexity of this emerging market, and how the public sector needs to keep up to date and respond to the demands and the asks of the private sector, and drive growth.

Just down the road from me in Harwell, a project completed by my former firm in 2023, the National Satellite Test Facility, received £120 million of new investment by the public sector through the Science and Facilities Technology Council. That shows that when we unlock investment, it is not just about the assets that end up in space, but about the big, chunky, complex engineering construction opportunities that are opened up in places such as the OxCam corridor, where my constituency sits. Through that work, I have seen how the private sector is poised and hungry to drive forward the next wave of space innovation. What is holding us back, generally, is not technology, talent, innovation or the drive for growth, but regulatory uncertainty. Despite the fact that the Bill relates to only four words, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East said, it will make a big difference.

[Mike Reader]

The Space Industry Act 2018 laid the groundwork for the modern commercial sector we have in space. I commend the previous Government, as we are debating in a spirit of collaboration and co-operation across the House, for their work on that and for the space industrial strategy, which was published later. I can see echoes of that now in the industrial strategy, and I know that when the defence industrial strategy comes out later in the year, space will be front and centre of that as well. It is positive that we can build on some of the good work done by the Conservatives.

Without knowing what financial exposure firms might face if an accident or an incident occurs, companies hesitate to invest, insurers demand eye-watering premiums, and ultimately, we lose manufacturing contracts to other jurisdictions. The simple but powerful adjustment made by the Bill changes the law so that the indemnity limit for each operator licence is not optional, but mandatory. Each licence must spell out the licensee's maximum liabilities. This is an essential risk management mechanism and it means that companies know exactly what they are signing up for. It also allows them to secure insurance in a predictable way. In the construction sector, we had a lot of unpredictable insurance post-Grenfell and particularly post-industrial shock, so I know how, for a commercial business, insecure insurance and unpredictability of insurance is important.

The Government's new industrial strategy is really positive for the space sector. In my constituency, the Bill will stimulate jobs and growth. It specifically recognises that the Government will be investing in research and development for the space industry through the Cambridge Growth Company, which will drive new opportunities for my constituents.

When we consider this issue, we must also remember the wider stakes.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am enjoying my hon. Friend's speech on space. I must declare that I prefer to have my feet firmly on planet Earth, but none the less I am enjoying his contribution. I have been advised that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. Where does my hon. Friend think those on the second Opposition Bench are from?

Mike Reader: I am sure they are working hard in their constituencies right now.

Adam Jogee: Where they are from, not where they are.

Mike Reader: Where they are from, I do not know, but I am sure they are working hard in their constituencies right now. I will keep the collegiate relationship we have here today, but I thank my hon. Friend for that comment.

I was talking about international impacts. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international trade and investment, I think the Bill is a very positive step forward to help drive investment. As we see countries such as the US, Luxembourg, Australia and Japan change their regulatory regimes, we need to keep that front and centre.

I did say I would briefly mention the civil economy, as we have a Minister from the Department here today. Regulatory certainty matters. I see that the Sustainable

Aviation Fuel Bill is coming forward, but I note that the fuel strategy is also very important. One in five of my constituents work in logistics, so it is critical that we see certainty in all sectors of the Department for Transport.

I will conclude by saying this. Space is no longer the preserve of big Government agencies alone. We see a lot of innovation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) said in relation to her constituency, there is fierce commercial competition and a lot of opportunity. The Bill will ensure that, whether we are exploring near space, planets, exoplanets, exomoons or even going out further into space, we support the British economy and get the space industry growing.

1.44 pm

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): I will try to keep my remarks brief. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on making many fine contributions today and still managing to find time to pass his own Bill.

This is an area of personal interest to me. I made the terrible choice 20 years ago to go into politics, but most of my family are scientists. My grandfather was Professor Sir Robert Boyd, who is often described as the father of British space science. My dad still works in the sector. The pace at which the industry is progressing is quite remarkable. When SpaceX and Virgin Galactic first came out, I thought to myself, "How on earth are these companies going to make any money at all?" But they could certainly see the future in all of this. As has been set out, the opportunities presented by space are vast, and legislation needs to keep pace.

Ultimately, it is a question of risk. Risk will always be part of the process, as it is in every part of life. It is perfectly possible to manage it in a way that makes it viable to undertake various activities. The Bill, in its four words, sets out to resolve that, addressing liability and insurance issues to enable the viability of the UK's space industry, which surely will be seen as a vital area of economic growth in times to follow, and of national security, as has been discussed.

No doubt, the discussion of risks may arouse concern from the general public, but for the average person, the risks are vanishingly low. Most objects sent up into space are far too small to survive re-entry. Frankly, huge satellites pose a far greater risk to each other now, through what is known as Kessler syndrome, where one knocks into another and that sets off a cascade that destroys all the satellites in lower orbit, making them completely unusable. The risk of an individual being hit by space debris is less than one in a trillion. Rockets can blow up—they are very similar to missiles—but they tend to be limited to a small range of places, which consistently are remote, and follow a path unlikely to pose a risk to people's property.

The industry has to have an approach to risk, but from an individual perspective, we should not in any way be worried. As has been highlighted, the Civil Aviation Authority, which happens to be based in my constituency, plays a significant role in that. It does fine work in this area, in addition to general aviation. The Bill manages these risks well. It is a vital part of how to deliver an economy of the future for the UK, and I am delighted to support it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

1.47 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak again on the Bill. It is a short Bill—it replaces just two words—but one with substantial implications. The meat of the Bill, if I can call it that, is to replace “may” with “must”.

I will briefly refer to some of the excellent contributions. I am relieved to have heard many fewer revolting puns than in previous debates on this subject; nevertheless, a couple slipped through. I start with the sponsor of the Bill, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady), who set out the commercial need for the change to the Act. He made the sensible point that Government policy is easier to change than statute. If we were not sure of that before this week, one should just ask the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer to understand that it is easier to change policy than it is to change legislation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for space, which makes him eminently well-qualified to speak in this debate. I was pondering my own qualifications, and the best I could come up with was that I played rugby for a team called the Space Cadets when I was at university. That is about as close as I could get to the space industry. My hon. Friend rightly made the case for a role for the City of London. He mentioned developing opportunities for Lloyds of London, listings, bond issuance and subsequent legal support. The hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) highlighted the role of Portsmouth and the wider Hampshire space cluster. She said that it was just four words that needed to be changed—in that sentence, she doubled the size of the Bill.

The hon. Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) reflected on space developments in the context of defence, and on commercial opportunities being held back because of regulatory uncertainty. He was right to highlight that regulatory certainty matters. Finally, the hon. Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) said he was the grandson of the father of British space science, which presumably makes him the son of British space science.

We cannot complain about inadequate consideration of the Bill. The first attempt to enact the change was introduced by the former Member for Woking, Jonathan Lord, and we had a Second Reading of a very similarly worded Bill on 23 February 2024. Unfortunately, that Bill was lost in the parliamentary wash-up session, as a result of the general election being called later that year. I am pleased that the incoming Government have, through their inspirational Back Benchers, been able to introduce a private Member’s Bill in very similar terms.

Second Reading was quite a long time ago—back on 7 March this year—but since then, the Bill has been through Committee and undergone robust line-by-line consideration. I am pleased to report to the House that the word “must” has not been altered in Committee. I wonder whether “definitely should” or “really ought” was posited by Members, but, in the end, we have the same wording as on Second Reading. We now come to the remaining stages, no doubt to an enormous sigh of

relief from the industry, and perhaps a little bit of frustration about why it has taken so long to change just two words in an Act that received Royal Assent back in 2018.

As a personal observation, I question whether the private Member’s Bill route is appropriate for legislation that has such significant commercial impact. The industry has been waiting. We have heard from speaker after speaker about the commercial importance of changing “may” to “must”, and yet it has taken seven years from identifying the original problem to effecting a solution. We need to really think about that, because this Bill is important and delay has had a cost.

The UK space industry generates £18.9 billion for our economy. There are at least 1,800 businesses involved in it, some 52,000 jobs are directly employed by the space industry and, with the supply chain, that number increases to 130,000. No doubt, those figures are out of date as it is a growing industry. We have strong demand for UK commercial spaceflight that led to the original regulatory benefit, arising out of our Brexit freedoms, to have a dynamic regulatory environment. It has given us a genuine economic commercial advantage over our European friends and neighbours, because we have been able to have a more dynamic approach to regulation.

However, that has been put at risk because of the difficulties in calculating potential liabilities. Others have already gone through the legal niceties of the Space Industry Act 2018, so I do not propose to go through those line by line as I would normally. Suffice it to say, the legal duty of a space operator is to provide insurance for their operations, and that is required under the Act. That brings a corollary obligation to make a calculation to potential exposure. If someone is making an actuarial calculation of the risk to which a client is exposing an insurer, they need to undertake a calculation of the scale—the quantum—of that risk.

This is where the regulatory uncertainty has played its part. Although it has been repeated in this Chamber and elsewhere that it is, and remains, Government policy to have an indemnity beyond a certain level of liability, the uncertainty is that the legislation does not require the Government to do that. Section 12(2) gives the Civil Aviation Authority—the regulatory authority in this case—power to set an upper limit to provide clarity. This Bill turns that power into an obligation, which is quite right.

We have had a fun debate and I am very pleased that the legislation is nearing the end of its legislative journey, but we collectively need to stop and think. This is an uncontroversial change, with cross-party support, supporting a growth industry, and yet it has taken five months to progress from Second Reading to the remaining stages. That is simply not good enough. We collectively need to think of a way in which we can get this kind of legislation accelerated.

Launches into space are never straightforward, and this Bill is no exception. It had an initial flare-out on its launchpad before the last general election, and since then it has had an excruciatingly slow reconstruction and review. But it is finally ready for launch, and I wish it well. I hope it releases many further launches across the United Kingdom.

1.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) for promoting this short but important Bill. I wanted to get further into Newcastle United's Inter-Cities Fairs cup win in 1969, but I do not think today is the day.

I thank all who have contributed to the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) for his chairmanship of the APPG for space. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), for Northampton South (Mike Reader) and for Crawley (Peter Lamb). I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), for his support as well. He mentioned puns—I attempted a pun in the House the other day, and Mr Speaker reminded me to stick to the day job. I will not try to emulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South.

This industry is so important, and it will be going forward. It has already been said that it contributes £19 billion to the UK economy, and it is already employing 52,000 people right across our land. I am pleased to confirm that the Bill has the Government's full support. We have economic growth at the heart of our agenda, and we are taking steps to support major infrastructure and to reduce bureaucratic red tape in regulatory frameworks to better support innovation and growth in the UK.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): The Minister talks about economic growth. I recently met a Mongolian lady working at the Satellite Applications Catapult, which exists to grow the UK space sector. We have heard about Buzz Aldrin and Buzz Lightyear—I am afraid I have a pun coming. With that in mind, will the Minister set out in further detail, perhaps at the Dispatch Box now, how he foresees the Bill giving the space sector the rocket boosters it needs to go to infinity and beyond?

Mike Kane: Today is 4 July and there will be fireworks across the pond, but we want rocket boosters under our space industry. Most of Europe is landlocked—or I

should say space-locked—which provides the UK with a unique opportunity to be a launchpad for satellites produced all around Europe. That is the market that we are going for.

The industry has made it clear that holding unlimited liabilities will have an adverse effect on the UK spaceflight industry. If the Government did not limit a spaceflight operator's liability, spaceflight companies and investors might move to jurisdictions that have more favourable liability regimes where operator liability is limited, or that provide guarantees to meet all claims or those above the operator's limit of liability, such as the US or France. For those reasons, we are pleased to support the Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With the leave of the House, I call John Grady to wind up.

1.58 pm

John Grady: I will keep my remarks short. I thank all Members for their support today, on Second Reading and in Committee. I also thank the Department for Transport civil servants who assisted me. The Clerk of Private Members' Bills puts in a lot of work to help us all with our Private Members' Bills, and I give thanks to them as well.

This Bill will now go to another place, where Baroness Anelay of St Johns has kindly agreed to take it on, and I thank her for so doing. I should also thank the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), who has been nothing but enthusiastic about this Bill from the off. It is good to hear enthusiasm, and speaking as a new Member—or a year-old Member—it is always very helpful to have advice from Members from across the Chamber.

Of course, I thank my team for their help with the Bill. I thank you for your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I also thank the voters and residents of Glasgow East, because it is a privilege to be here representing them. I love every minute of my time representing my seat.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Licensing Hours Extensions Bill

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

2 pm

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Licensing Hours Extensions Bill, proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger), is about cutting red tape and unnecessary and time-consuming bureaucracy for the hospitality industry and local authorities when they simply want to open earlier or stay open later on occasions of special importance.

The Bill will amend the Licensing Act 2003 to allow licensing extensions to be made more quickly and simply. Furthermore, it will make it possible to extend licensing hours for noteworthy events at short notice, even when Parliament is not sitting. Such decisions will be considered on a case-by-case basis, and extensions will be used as and when is deemed appropriate by the Government, with the criteria for making such an extension remaining unchanged, and the power resting with the Home Secretary.

The Bill will make a very simple alteration to the Licensing Act 2003, so that the negative procedure is used and the requirement for debate is removed, though Members can still pray against an extension if they wish. That will allow extensions to licensing hours to be processed without using up valuable parliamentary time—something I am certain you would approve of, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is extremely welcome that there has been broad support and consensus across the House for this measure. Whether that says something about parliamentarians and pints, I could not possibly say.

The negative procedure also has the benefit of allowing licensing extensions to be made in the rare event that they are needed during parliamentary recess or at short notice. Following the affirmative procedure is problematic when an order needs to be made at short notice, as we have seen in the past—for example, at the time of the women's world cup in 2023.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): This summer, the women's club world cup comes to Northampton. If it was in another country, this legislation would be critical, because I am sure that many want to see the England women's rugby team play, as they will do at Franklin's Gardens. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as we see more interest in sports, particularly women's sports, it is critical that the Government have the ability to change licensing hours without the affirmative procedure?

Matt Turmaine: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct: this is vital legislation. It is wholly appropriate to make this alteration in order to permit swift changes to licensing hours as necessary.

This move will ensure that there will be no such limitations in the future, and that any hospitality venue will have the option of taking advantage of an extension issued by the Home Secretary. Special occasions such as world cups, European championships and royal weddings live long in all our memories, even if we are enjoying the hospitality so enabled. It is only right that our pubs and hospitality venues are given the opportunity to be a part of the experience on those occasions. My hon. Friend

the Member for Wrexham and I hope that the Bill will pass today, and will do exactly what it says on the tin, especially on this day of celebration, one year on from the general election.

2.4 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As the Member of Parliament for Portsmouth North, I am proud to speak in support of the Licensing Hours Extensions Bill, which is a sensible and necessary reform to support our struggling hospitality sector and, as we have heard, allow communities to come together during moments of national significance. The Bill gives the Government the power to extend licensing hours across the country for key events, such as royal celebrations, national sporting victories and commemorative days, without the need for venues to go through costly and time-consuming individual applications.

For Portsmouth North, this is more than just a technical measure—it is a lifeline. Across areas such as North End, Drayton, Cosham and Hilsea, we have seen much-loved venues close their doors in recent years, yet some still stand strong at the heart of our communities. Pubs such as the Harvest Home in Copnor, the George in Cosham, the Drayton Tavern in Drayton and the Cross Keys in Paulsgrove, where my mum and dad met, have fought to keep going, despite increased pressures from rising costs, staff shortages and regulatory burdens. For many of these venues, the opportunity to stay open later during special events without additional red tape could mean the difference between a profitable night and another loss.

I want to highlight the role of Casemates Studios in Hilsea. Although primarily a creative space, it supports a range of community events, music gigs and social gatherings. More flexible licensing arrangements will allow places like Casemates to better host local talent and public events tied to national occasions, without the financial or bureaucratic strain that often puts them off even trying. This Bill supports exactly that kind of local, community-led vibrancy. Having spoken with business owners across my constituency, I know how hard they have worked to stay afloat. The Licensing Hours Extensions Bill removes an unnecessary hurdle. It simplifies the process, reduces costs, and gives our hospitality businesses a fair shot at success when it matters most—on those big nights when our country is celebrating.

Let me be clear: this is not about handing out licences indiscriminately. The Bill rightly ensures that local authorities and the police are consulted before any national extension is granted, meaning that residents will still be protected from antisocial behaviour and decisions will reflect the needs of the whole community.

Portsmouth North's pubs and venues are not just businesses—they are places where people gather, celebrate, mark milestones and find connections. This Bill gives them a boost at a time when many are struggling to keep the lights on. I am pleased to support the Bill, and urge colleagues across the House to do the same for the sake of our local economies, our community spirit and the future of our British pub. As our Lionesses begin their Euros campaign, I wish them our very best.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

2.7 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Watford (Matt Turmaine) for bringing forward this private Member's Bill, alongside the hon. Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger), and I am pleased to confirm that the Conservative party supports the measure. It is legislation that the previous Conservative Government supported, and we welcome its return to the House. The Bill changes section 197 of the Licensing Act 2003, moving licensing hours orders from the affirmative to the negative procedure. As we have heard, this will save precious parliamentary time while maintaining full democratic accountability through the prayer procedure, which allows Members to object within 40 days.

The hospitality sector is vital to local economies throughout the United Kingdom. From rural pubs to city centre hotels, these businesses need the flexibility to serve their communities during national celebrations. When His Majesty the King was crowned in 2023, establishments across the country wanted to mark that historic occasion. The current process makes it unnecessarily difficult to respond to such moments of national significance. Since 2003, this power has been used sparingly for national events; every single order has had to pass through Parliament, and has done so unopposed. Public consultation also shows strong support, with 77% backing the coronation extensions to licences in 2023.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): When this Bill had its Second Reading, I put it to the Minister who was responding then, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), that this was a rather puny measure, and that there is a strong case for deregulating this whole area, and for getting Parliament and the Government out of the hospitality sector's hair in relation to licensing hours. Does my hon. Friend agree that this Bill is far too limited a measure?

Harriet Cross: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Of course, we should all strive for deregulation, and would like more of it all the time. That is probably a bit too much to take on within the very small confines of this private Member's Bill, but it is certainly something we should strive for, in order to help businesses across the country, and definitely something I would look at.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again. Will she also include within her inquiries, and her thoughts about ambition, some more control over the negative procedure? The hon. Member for Watford (Matt Turmaine), who introduced the Bill today, asserted that anybody who was against an order passed under the negative procedure would be able to pray against it, but the opportunity to ensure that a prayer results in a debate is almost non-existent. That is a theoretical, rather than practical, constraint. One of the issues I have been trying to raise is—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Sir Christopher is a parliamentarian with enough experience to know that that is a very, very long intervention. He has been here from the start; he could have chosen to contribute in the debate.

Harriet Cross: I thank my hon. Friend for the intervention. This is clearly an area that he is very passionate about. If these proposals progress, I am sure that he will be able to feed into them well.

We have been hearing about the affirmative procedure versus the negative procedure. The affirmative procedure has proven particularly cumbersome when unexpected events arise. When our Lionesses reached the world cup final with just four days' notice, as we have heard, the parliamentary process nearly prevented communities from coming together to celebrate. Even my communities in Scotland would have had the opportunity to do so, if they had been in the same situation. Moving to the negative procedure would allow the Government to respond swiftly to such moments, while maintaining parliamentary oversight.

This change does not weaken democratic oversight at all; it simply makes the process more efficient. The Secretary of State must still consult appropriately under section 172, and public consultation will continue. As we have heard, any Member of either House retains the right to table a prayer motion for the annulment of the order, and judicial review remains available.

The benefits are clear. Parliamentary time spent on uncontested orders can be reallocated to generally contentious matters. By making small, sensible changes like this, we free up valuable time to debate critical issues facing our country, such as securing our energy supply, supporting rural and coastal communities, tackling neighbourhood crime and holding this Government to account.

The Conservative party is and always will be the party of business. We understand that the ability to open for longer during national celebrations can provide a significant and welcome boost of energy and income to our pubs, bars, restaurants and high streets. This Bill facilitates that in a more efficient manner. We support the Bill because it is a common-sense, practical measure that continues to champion the work we did in government, and because it will help businesses and communities across all our constituencies.

In conclusion, as this is a thoroughly logical piece of legislation, which removes unnecessary procedural steps and allows the House to better focus on its primary responsibilities, we support it and commend it to the House.

2.12 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I rise to speak only because I was not able to complete my intervention; as you rightly said, Madam Deputy Speaker, it was getting very long.

The point I want to make in my short contribution to this debate is that it is because of the lack of flexibility in the negative procedure that we find ourselves having to discuss the matter on Third Reading today. If the House had the ability to amend statutory instruments, and had a guarantee, more or less, that if there was an objection to an order made under the negative procedure, it could be the subject of debate, there would be less concern about orders being subject to the negative procedure, rather than the affirmative procedure.

This Bill has been dragged through this House at great length. I do not quite understand the explanation for that. Under the Bill, in the narrow context of a

sporting event taking place that resulted in the need for a celebration that there had not been notice of at a time when the House was sitting—according to the Bill's sponsors, it would be relevant only in such circumstances—the Government could allow a licensing extension.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD) *claimed to move the closure* (*Standing Order No. 36*).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): As we have not yet heard from the Minister, I am not prepared to take a closure motion at this time.

Sir Christopher Chope: In the light of the number of people who voted at 9.35 am, I think it is highly unlikely that any closure motion could be carried, because it would need 100 Members to support it. I have been speaking for only two or three minutes. I know the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) is keen to get on and discuss his Bill, which I know the Government wish to talk out—I am a little bit perplexed about that.

The negative resolution procedure would be necessary only in an emergency. I was quite tempted to extend my remarks, because the hon. Member for Watford (Matt Turmaine) tried to link the contents of the Bill with today's first anniversary of the election of what I think is undeniably the worst Government this country has ever experienced. Would we really have wanted to celebrate that in the pubs? Last night, I was commiserating with a group of Conservatives in a London constituency about what had happened over the last year, and explaining to them that they should take courage from the fact that at least we are 20% of the way through this ghastly Government.

Matt Turmaine: My remarks were entirely oriented around the suggestion that those wishing to celebrate would be able to do so. No compulsion to do so was intended.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am so relieved to hear that. As a believer in freedom and choice, I think people should have the chance to go to the pub either to celebrate or to commiserate. I share the desire of the hon. Gentleman and many others in this House to promote the hospitality industry. There seems to be some evidence that a lot more young people are coming back to drink and celebrate in pubs, and long may that continue. In my constituency, as in many others, far too many good pubs and other hospitality venues have closed down, not least because of the Government's imposition of extra employers' national insurance and increases in the national minimum wage.

Although the Government will probably take credit for allowing this Bill—this very modest measure—to go through, it needs to be put in perspective. At the same time, they have been the author of a whole lot of measures that have been very bad news for the hospitality industry across the country, and in Christchurch in particular.

2.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Matt Turmaine) and to others who spoke in the debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), for their contributions. I thank my hon. Friend

the Member for Watford for speaking on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger), who introduced the Bill, and I am grateful to be speaking on behalf of the Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson).

Throughout proceedings on the Bill, there has been a high degree of consensus on the measures it contains, and I am pleased to say that the Government fully support it. I recognise the depth of experience that my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham brings to it, with his 25-plus years in the hospitality sector. Rightly, the Bill supports the sector, which is responsible for around 2.6 million jobs in our country and is an important part of our local and national economy.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Watford explained, section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003 makes provision for the Secretary of State to make an order that relaxes licensing hours in England and Wales on an occasion of exceptional international, national or local significance. In practice, the Home Secretary determines whether an occasion meets the criteria on a case-by-case basis, and any orders that are brought forward must specify the dates and times of the relaxations. Such orders benefit businesses, which can stay open for longer; communities, which can come together to celebrate important events; and licensing authorities, which do not have to process a large number of individual licence extensions. Of course, it is still for individual businesses to decide whether they wish to take advantage of any extension, but if businesses do wish to stay open, a blanket licensing extension means that individual businesses do not have to give a temporary event notice to their local authority, saving them time as well as the associated fee.

The Bill will amend the Licensing Act 2003 so that relaxation orders can be made via the negative resolution procedure, rather than the current affirmative procedure. In the past, we have relaxed licensing hours for high-profile royal events, such as Her late Majesty the Queen's platinum jubilee and the coronation of His Majesty the King; other events of significant national importance, such as the recent celebrations on the 80th anniversary of VE Day; and major sporting events, including the finals of the men's European championship football tournaments in 2020 and 2024, and the women's European championship this summer.

Let me summarise the benefits of changing the procedure. First, by removing the need for businesses to submit individual temporary event notices and, subsequently, for local authorities to work tirelessly in processing them, we will reduce the burden placed on those organisations. Hospitality venues will also have one fewer administrative task to process as they prepare for events.

Secondly, as I have previously mentioned, a more practical reason for making this change is that, as well as being used for royal occasions—for which there is plenty of notice—licensing extensions can be used when one of our national football teams makes it to the final of a tournament. Given the nature of how these competitions play out, there is very little time between the team qualifying for a key match and the match taking place.

In the summer of 2021, the England men's team made it to the final of the delayed Euro 2020 tournament; thankfully, with the help of colleagues of different parties, we were able to swiftly put an order in place in the three days between the semi-final and the final. In

[Seema Malhotra]

the summer of 2023, however, the England women's team reached the final of the World cup, which took place when Parliament was in recess. As such, it was not possible to extend licensing hours. Changing the process to the negative procedure will mean that an order can be made when Parliament is in recess, so that we can avoid such a situation arising again. History has shown that there is clearly cross-party support for this measure, which is important to colleagues on both sides of the House.

Having outlined the benefits of being able to make orders swiftly, I will briefly make some remarks about how the Government will consider what needs to be in place when using the powers. We are clear that the Government must continue to plan ahead so that, wherever possible, licensing hours extension orders can be made in time for prior public consultation. It is also important to make it clear that the police have generally been supportive of extensions for royal events, and that no noticeable issues have been attributed to extended drinking hours. Indeed, many people might like to drink non-alcoholic beverages, which are available in almost all pubs and restaurants across the country.

The Government recognise the importance of providing the police with ample time to put in place any additional policing measures that may be necessary to prevent an increase in crime or disorder in our communities, and we make sure that their views on these matters are heard in advance. To that end, the Government remain firmly committed to continuing to plan in advance wherever possible.

The power in section 172 of the Licensing Act has been used sparingly, and rightly so. As the statutory guidance that accompanies the Licensing Act sets out, it should normally be possible for those applying for premises licences to anticipate special occasions. The change will apply to England and Wales only. I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham and others who have spoken in support of this important new measure.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Company Directors (Duties) Bill

Second Reading

2.26 pm

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Under current UK law, company directors have one overriding duty: to maximise shareholder interest. This narrow, outdated legal framework of shareholder primacy has created a culture in which short-term financial performance overrides long-term sustainability. The Bill will amend section 172 of the Companies Act to change the duty of company directors by requiring them to balance the needs of shareholders with those of employees and the environment, thereby building better and more sustainable businesses. The Institute of Directors backs this change, which will empower directors to do the right thing for their business. It will drive the sustainable growth needed to turbocharge our economy and help to realise the Government's ambitions for growth.

The Bill gives directors the legal clarity and freedom to make better, long-term decisions, moving away from the short-term drive of a quarter's profits. Businesses focused on their stakeholders, not solely on shareholder returns, consistently outperform their counterparts. Last year, UK B corps increased their turnover by 23%, compared with the national average of 17%, and they saw a 9.6% increase in employee headcount, compared with a national decrease of 0.5%. Moreover, research conducted by Demos on behalf of the Better Business Act highlighted that a purpose-led economy would boost UK GDP by £149 billion.

It is clear that embracing stakeholder primacy improves financial performance. The law should encourage this, not obstruct it. It is time to change the law to follow the example of the thousands of businesses and organisations that have seen that better business works well. With this change, we can help to build better businesses and a better Britain.

2.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) on introducing the Bill and on squeezing in his remarks under the wire. He made some important observations. Clearly, we do not have the time we would like to explore the provisions in more detail, but I understand that I will be engaging with him—

Martin Wrigley *rose—*

Justin Madders: I may have anticipated the hon. Member's intervention; I will be engaging with him shortly on the Bill's provisions. It is not a Bill that the Government will be able to support, but I do want to have further conversations with him about it. It is important that we recognise directors' duties for what they are: a cornerstone of UK company law. They help to ensure that companies are run responsibly and, importantly, that directors act with integrity at all times.

We are really talking about section 172 of the Companies Act 2006, which the Bill seeks to amend. That is a key part of the directors' duties framework, which was

developed in the light of the major company law review commissioned by the previous Labour Government. I want to be clear that section 172 as it stands already places a legal duty on directors to have regard in their decision making to the interests of employees and the impact of the company's operations on the community and the environment. It also requires directors to consider a range of other factors, including the impact of any decision on the long-term success of the company.

2.30 pm

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

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 12 September.

Business without Debate

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 11 July.

STRATEGIC LITIGATION AGAINST PUBLIC PARTICIPATION BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 December.

SALE OF TICKETS (SPORTING AND CULTURAL EVENTS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

HORTICULTURAL PEAT (PROHIBITION OF SALE) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 12 September.

WOMEN'S STATE PENSION AGE (OMBUDSMAN REPORT AND COMPENSATION SCHEME) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 12 September.

THEFT OF TOOLS OF TRADE (SENTENCING) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 31 October.

QUANTITATIVE EASING (PROHIBITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

RIVERS, STREAMS AND LAKES (PROTECTED STATUS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

GAZA (INDEPENDENT PUBLIC INQUIRY) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 12 September.

SUPPORT FOR INFANTS AND PARENTS ETC (INFORMATION) BILL [LORDS]

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

DOMESTIC BUILDING WORKS (CONSUMER PROTECTION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

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 12 September.

ANIMAL SHELTERS (LICENSING) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

HEALTH INSURANCE (EXEMPTION FROM INSURANCE PREMIUM 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 9 January 2026.

GREEN BELT (PROTECTION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 January 2026.

GREEN SPACES BILL

*Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (7 March),
That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 12 September.

**EXEMPTION FROM VALUE ADDED TAX
(PUBLIC ELECTRIC VEHICLE
CHARGING POINTS) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 January 2026.

**PUBLIC SECTOR EXIT PAYMENTS
(LIMITATION) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 30 January 2026.

**MEAT (INFORMATION ABOUT
METHOD OF KILLING) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 February 2026.

**EXEMPTION FROM VALUE ADDED TAX
(LISTED PLACES OF WORSHIP) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 13 February 2026.

**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 20 February 2026.

**CARAVAN SITE LICENSING (EXEMPTIONS
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 27 February 2026.

ARM'S-LENGTH BODIES (REVIEW) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 March 2026.

**PUBLIC HEALTH (CONTROL OF DISEASE)
ACT 1984 (AMENDMENT) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 13 March 2026.

**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 20 March 2026.

**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 27 March 2026.

**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 17 April 2026.

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

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 April 2026.

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 9 January 2026.

ANONYMITY OF SUSPECTS BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 January 2026.

**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 23 January 2026.

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 30 January 2026.

**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 6 February 2026.

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 13 February 2026.

**VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS ACT
(REVIEW) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 20 February 2026.

**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 27 February 2026.

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 March 2026.

**MOBILE HOMES ACT 1983
(AMENDMENT) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 13 March 2026.

**ARM'S-LENGTH BODIES (ACCOUNTABILITY
TO PARLIAMENT) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 20 March 2026.

BAILIFFS (WARRANTS OF POSSESSION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 March 2026.

**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 17 April 2026.

PETS (MICROCHIPS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

IMMIGRATION AND VISAS BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

**BRITISH INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY
(SOVEREIGNTY AND CONSTITUTIONAL
ARRANGEMENTS) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

Services for Adults with Learning Difficulties: Hillingdon

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

2.40 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I rise to discuss services for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities in Hillingdon. Approximately 1.3 million people in England have a learning disability. If we include those with learning difficulties, that figure is even higher. Yet too often our services, education system, NHS, workplaces and society as a whole are not inclusive of their needs, and they are often seen as an afterthought.

I was motivated to bring forward this Adjournment debate having recently had the privilege of meeting many adults with learning disabilities and difficulties and their families in the borough of Hillingdon. They expressed to me that, again, they feel like an afterthought, as they were appalled by the council's recent decision to close another vital service for adults; many other services have been closed, moved or cut in recent years.

Before turning to the specific important services that have been lost or are under threat, it is important to note that, of course, many good organisations are working hard in challenging circumstances to provide support. In the NHS, the Hillingdon community team for people with learning disabilities provides specialist support for adults with learning disabilities in the community and across primary and secondary care. Those services, however, are largely around diagnosis and access to medical support—just one aspect of an adult's needs.

DASH, a voluntary sector group, offers a range of sporting and recreational activities for people with a disability, all focused on encouraging people to socialise, but it too has struggled with decreasing funding in recent years. Hillingdon Autistic Care and Support provides an autism hub, advice and social activities for adults in the London borough of Hillingdon, but the slashing of its budget in 2023 led to the closure of the popular tea rooms—a café open to the public that offered training and work support to adults with autism. Unfortunately, that was a sign of even more damaging cuts to come. Following those proposals, an e-petition signed by 3,330 people called on the council not to withdraw the funding for the tea rooms. Despite that, the council pressed ahead, claiming that 20 people benefiting from training and support was not good value for money—a disappointing sign of things to come, with a council knowing the price of everything, but the value of nothing.

More broadly in the area of education, the Park View centre, part of the Orchard Hill college group near Uxbridge, has a range of on-site vocational opportunities. The college does excellent work in challenging facilities that were not purpose-built. I recently had the privilege of meeting a number of their learners and staff, and they showed me at first hand how much they have to offer our community and workplaces. As well as insisting I attend their next disco, their overwhelming message was that they love their job coach Holly, but unfortunately, there was only one Holly in the whole of the college. They wanted more work coaches, placements, internships and job coach support. Yes, learning is vital, but they

wanted it to lead somewhere in adult life. They wanted real workplace experience and, ideally, a full-time or part-time role.

The Government's commitment to invest more than £1 billion into workplace support for those with disabilities is a welcome step forward. I hope that the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions will work together to ensure that this investment is also targeted to help adults with learning difficulties get the support they desperately need.

Data suggests that the employment gap for people with a learning disability is still far too wide. Of the people accessing long-term social care, only 5% of those with a learning disability are in paid work, which is a shame on our society. Charities have previously called on the Government to set a new ambitious target for reducing the disability employment gap with strategic actions behind it. A previous Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said in March 2023 that he would set a new disability employment goal, but progress has been slow, and I hope the two Departments can work together to progress that. Such a gap is why supporting work placements, centres for training and volunteering is vital.

Following the closure of the Hillingdon tea rooms, another such facility is now under threat. There is a strong community-led campaign to save the Rural Activities Garden Centre, which provides employment opportunities, skills, lifelong relationships and a connection to our community for adults with learning difficulties across west London. Conservative-led Hillingdon council took the decision just last week to slash that vital service.

I have been shocked and saddened to see how the voices of adults with learning difficulties and their families have been silenced in this discussion, not even being allowed to speak or question the decision at the civic centre. We are now in this Chamber, and we can ensure that their voices and stories are heard; a number of them are in the Gallery with their families.

George is 28. He was separated from his parents at birth due to their inability to care for him at that time. He has spent years unable to eat without a feeding tube and has battled self-harm throughout his life. After decades of struggle for specialist support, four years ago George found something precious: a community at the Rural Activities Garden Centre, where he feels valued and understood. Since the announcement, and as a result of the fear that that vital support system may be stripped away, George's challenges have again become overwhelming.

Oliver has been attending the RAGC for 10 years and has complex health needs. He is partially sighted and has severe learning difficulties and chronic kidney disease. More recently, he has suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Oliver's battle with mental health impacted on his ability to do day-to-day tasks and the usual activities that brought him joy, but one comfort remained: the RAGC.

There is also Doug, who I have had the pleasure to meet. He is an adult with learning disabilities that impact on his ability to read, write and count. Where the private sector was unable to provide support to Doug with his additional needs, the RAGC saw past what he could not do and nurtured what he could. It watched him transform from a shy young man into a

confident 32-year-old with purpose. After the closure meeting, Doug asked a simple but heartbreaking question: “Where do the staff go? What happens to me and my mates?”

I was also told of Georgia’s story. Before joining RAGC, she struggled with anxiety and undiagnosed autism, leaving her imprisoned in her own home. The garden centre helped her to develop skills and build confidence, and she even went on to compete in a wreath-making competition. It was the service now under threat that transformed her from someone who could not leave the house to someone who could confidently serve customers—what a transformation. She fears the closure will reignite those same issues that she has worked so hard to manage.

The difficulties of day-to-day life are often felt more acutely by adults with learning difficulties. It is the sanctuary that places such as the RAGC provide that makes it imperative we continue to fight for their survival. The Rural Activities Garden Centre makes employment opportunities, personal development and skills curation accessible for those who are often isolated. I have met so many people from right across the community who have volunteered there, gained skills and even moved into permanent jobs as a result. Families feel that their loved ones are cared for, safe and nurtured in this space, and it has given carers and families their own ability to have respite and time to care for themselves.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. He will know that the garden centre also provides an essential service to my constituents. I have visited the place for either 20 or 30 years—I am not clear—and it was commended by the former Conservative leader of Hillingdon council, who called it a jewel in the crown. That is why it has come as such a shock that this Conservative administration is now willing to close it with such brutality. Does the hon. Member agree that the council should, even at this late stage, think again and consult properly—including all those volunteers and parents as well as the people who use the centre—to look at a wider range of options? This does not have to happen now: the council just needs to listen to us.

Danny Beales: I concur completely with my right hon. Friend. We have both met those affected, their loved ones and their families, and we can really hear and see the value. Unfortunately, that value was not considered in the rushed decision made by the councillors—I will turn to the lack of consultation very soon, and I completely agree with him about that. It is not too late and, like him, I hope that the council thinks again.

The Rural Activities Garden Centre is another in a long list of closures at the hands of the local council. Following years of financial mismanagement by the leadership, the *modus operandi* has become to cut through its crisis. While the council’s cabinet sees nothing more than a line on a spreadsheet, behind this move are adults with learning difficulties, whose lives have been transformed by this service and who risk losing it all as a result of the council’s decision. By its own admission, it views the decision of the closure through the lens of profit. Failure to turn a profit means inevitable closure to Hillingdon council. That was the reason quoted at the recent decision-making meeting, but should social

services have to make a profit to survive? To me, it defeats the objective of those services. By that logic, one wonders what will be cut next by Hillingdon council? What other social services or schools will it have in its sights?

This heartless approach to community services aside, Hillingdon council’s binary decision making in relation to profit is economically flawed. These services are not costs; they are investments in the future. The National Audit Office calculated that supporting someone with moderate learning disabilities in residential care costs £4.7 million over their lifetime. With proper community support such as the RAGC, that drops by £1 million. We save money while giving people the dignity, purpose and independence they deserve.

Perhaps the council’s inability to understand this basic economic principle of investment and returns sheds some light on why it is about to go bankrupt, receiving damning reports from its own chief financial officers. Still, Hillingdon council dismisses the RAGC as merely a “retail service”. Tell that to George, Doug, Oliver or Georgia. Tell the families who have watched their loved ones transform from isolation to independence that this is a “retail service”.

I recognise that there are similar stories across the country, unfortunately, scattering services, breaking up communities and destroying what works for short-term savings that create long-term costs, with our most vulnerable communities always the first to feel the brunt. The Rural Activities Garden Centre works. Its clients thrive. Their families are supported. The evidence is overwhelming, but evidence means nothing without political will, and political will means nothing without adequate funding.

We are not asking for the impossible. We are asking the council and this Government to back choice and independence for adults with learning difficulties and care packages and to recognise that supported employment is not a luxury to be cut when times are tough; it is a vital investment that pays dividends in human dignity and economic returns for national and local government.

The Rural Activities Garden Centre must be saved. Services like it across England must be protected. The people who depend on them deserve nothing less than our absolute commitment to their dignity, their potential and their right to belong. I appreciate the Minister giving up her time to be here today, with so many pressing issues across the health and care system. There are some specific issues I hope she will take away for further consideration.

First, I and local families would like to welcome the Minister to Hillingdon to meet disabled adults and those with learning difficulties, to hear their experience of a fragmented system and a council and NHS not working together as well as they could and should, which I hope could inform the broader review of social care taking place nationally.

Secondly, the Women and Equalities Committee report in 2023 on inequalities for people with learning disabilities outlined clearly that people with a learning disability, and those who care for them, are the real experts when it comes to their health and care needs. However, aside from the occasional opportunity to feed into consultations, far too often their voices are missing when it comes to decision making at both a local and national level. Their lived experience should be better reflected in efforts to reduce health inequalities and improve outcomes.

[Danny Beales]

I hope the Government will look at how they can embed co-production and meaningful engagement in decision making on care packages and services and ensure that those with care packages and support are genuinely consulted and engaged in any service changes. There must also be clearer guidance for providers and commissioners of services about consultations and full equality impact assessments being conducted before services are changed, which has been woefully lacking in this case.

Thirdly, the NHS 10-year plan, launched yesterday, included welcome announcements about supporting people with health budgets, giving people personal health plans and a shift to prevention and community-based working for the NHS. Will the Minister address whether we can and should expect the same principles to lead work on adult social care support, too?

Fourthly, on enabling joint working, the Public Accounts Committee report in 2017, "Local support for people with a learning disability", found that people with a learning disability who live in the community have patchy access to healthcare and limited opportunities to participate in the community—for example, by having a job. While the Department has the policy lead for people with a learning disability and care plans, responsibility for their support spans across Government. We even found that to be the case when discussing which Department should respond to this debate. Responsibilities cross the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

In its report, the Public Accounts Committee recommended that Government should

"set out a cross-government strategy for improving access to health care and opportunities"

for adults with learning disabilities to

"participate in the community, including employment, as well as how it will measure the effectiveness of this strategy."

I hope we can return to this in future, because clearly all these Departments bear some oversight and responsibility for this important group of the population.

Lastly, I hope the Minister will join me in thanking Oliver, Doug, George and Georgia, as well as all the service users and their families, for building this project from scratch, many decades ago, planting the first trees, building the first planters, volunteering to keep it going in difficult times and creating this amazing life-changing project, and now also for their campaign to fight for its survival. I hope that Hillingdon council will think again, take the time to genuinely listen and get the decision right, working with the community. In the absence of that, I hope the Government will prioritise adults with learning difficulties in services like this one.

We were elected a year ago today on a manifesto of change, investing in people, transforming life chances and providing everyone with opportunity. These are the things that the Rural Activities Garden Centre, and so many other services in Hillingdon, have done, and can continue to do, for countless people in the borough of Hillingdon.

2.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) for securing this debate around services in the community for people with a learning difficulty in Hillingdon, and for championing the rights of people with learning difficulties in his area. I welcome those in the Gallery who are here to demonstrate how important services for people with learning difficulties in Hillingdon are to them. I join my hon. Friend in paying particular tribute to Oliver, Doug, George and Georgia for all their work in this area.

I am aware that, as a member of the Health and Social Care Committee, my hon. Friend has a keen interest in health and social care matters. He will therefore be pleased to know that the Government have today published their response to the Health and Social Care Committee report "Adult Social Care Reform: the cost of inaction". I am sorry to hear that Hillingdon council has decided to close the Rural Activities Garden Centre, but as Members know, decisions on local services are for councils to make since they are best placed to understand and meet the needs of their local populations.

John McDonnell: I fully appreciate the point that the Minister makes, but will she take advice from colleagues in other Departments on the following specific point? My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) and I have been working with different groups and we have sought to register, under relevant legislation, the Rural Activities Garden Centre as a community asset, which would force the local authority to properly consult with us and to engage with the wider community. The council is going ahead with the decision to sell or close in advance of even considering whether it should be a community asset. Will she help us by taking advice, from whichever Department is relevant, about whether or not there is anything we can do, as a Government, to ensure that Hillingdon council abides by the legislation that was passed to protect community assets such as this one?

Ashley Dalton: I will ensure that that issue is raised with the relevant Department. I will say a little more about some of the expectations we place on local authorities to shape their care markets to meet the diverse needs of all local people, as required under the Care Act 2014.

This Government recognise the vital importance of co-production and working with people who draw on care and support. To ensure local authorities are meeting these duties, the Care Quality Commission are assessing local adult social care services by publishing a full report and overall performance rating for each local authority. Hillingdon has been rated as "Good" in the CQC's recent assessment, but the report also includes feedback on areas where the CQC concluded that Hillingdon could improve.

It is great to be having this discussion today, on the last day of Co-production Week, an important annual awareness campaign to recognise the benefits of working in equal partnership with people using health and social care provision. Local councils should absolutely involve, engage and consult adults with learning difficulties on their care plans, as well as on wider decisions that affect their care and support, and their lives in general. We are

committed to encouraging genuine co-production between social care professionals, local authorities, policymakers and, crucially, people who draw on care and support, to design a system that works better for everyone—one that is fair, inclusive and puts people first.

The Government recognise that investment in local services in the community is vital. That is why we have made available over £69 billion for local government this financial year, increasing core spending power by up to 6.8% in cash terms on last year. For Hillingdon, that means a total of £266.3 million in its core spending power for this year, an increase of 6.2% on 2024-25.

We strongly encourage councils to apply elements of good market-shaping practice involving providers. My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip talked about how people with learning disabilities should be worked with across the Government, but actually that applies to all Government, because we seek to serve the people and that includes people with learning disabilities.

Yesterday, we published our 10-year plan. I am delighted that social care will, for some people, be a key part of the neighbourhood health services we discussed, but the adult social care system is in need of wider reform. We have already begun that journey, including legislating for a fair pay agreement and the independent commission into social care. Over time, the neighbourhood health service and the national care service will work hand-in-hand with each other to help people stay well and live independently.

To conclude, I note my hon. Friend's invitation to visit Hillingdon and I will ensure that that invitation is extended to the relevant Minister. I once again thank him for bringing forward this important debate, and every Member who has contributed. I hope that Hillingdon council takes notice of this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

3.1 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 4 July 2025

TREASURY

Legislation Day: Finance Bill

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray):

The Government are committed to developing and legislating for tax policy in a way that achieves long-term economic stability and supports economic growth.

The Government are committed to a single major fiscal event each year, through which the Budget is delivered. Following the Budget, relevant tax policy measures will be legislated for in the Finance Bill or another appropriate legislative vehicle.

The Government will publish draft clauses for the next Finance Bill, covering pre-announced policy changes, on 21 July, along with accompanying explanatory notes, tax information and impact notes, responses to consultations and other supporting documents. All publications will be available on the gov.uk website.

[HCWS779]

DEFENCE

Afghan Resettlement Scheme Data Incident: Update

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): I would like to update the House on the proactive approach the Ministry of Defence has taken for a historical data handling incident affecting 277 individuals that applied to the Afghan relocation and assistance policy scheme in 2021 under the previous Administration.

Members will be aware this data handling incident involved group emails being sent to multiple individuals in September 2021. These emails mistakenly made recipients' email addresses visible to all, instead of using the blind carbon copy function. After an investigation by the Information Commissioner's Office, the then Minister for the Armed Forces laid before the House a written ministerial statement on 13 December 2023, detailing the Ministry of Defence's commitment to financially compensate those directly impacted by the data incident.

Having reviewed this matter, it is my full intention to make good on the previous Ministers' commitments. I can confirm to Members that the Ministry of Defence will be directly contacting those individuals who were affected by the data incident. Once a response is received and the affected individual's identity confirmed, a single ex-gratia payment of up to £4,000 per individual will be made. The total cost is expected to be in the region of £1.6 million and every effort will be made to ensure payments are made as quickly as reasonably practical.

I cannot undo past mistakes, but I wish to assure Members that, in my role as Minister for the Armed Forces, I intend to drive improvement in the Department's

data handling training and practices. Defence's record on these topics must improve and I am determined to ensure it does.

[HCWS781]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

UK Onshore Wind Industry

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks):

I am tabling this statement to inform members of the publication of the onshore wind taskforce strategy and updated community benefits guidance for onshore wind in England.

The Government are committed to delivering a clean, affordable and secure energy system by 2030, and accelerating progress towards net zero. Onshore wind is one of the cheapest electricity generation technologies and will play a crucial role in delivering our decarbonisation goals. Having more low-cost renewables like onshore wind reduces the UK's exposure to volatile global fossil fuel prices, which protects consumer energy bills against future price shocks. Onshore wind is therefore vital to boost Britain's energy independence, protect bill payers, support high-skilled jobs and tackle the climate crisis.

Making Britain a clean energy superpower is one of the Government's five missions. The clean power action plan, published in December 2024, set a target for 27 to 29 GW of onshore wind by 2030. Today's publications are a significant step forward in delivering the 2030 mission. This mission is about driving economic growth as well as clean power, and industries such as onshore wind present a significant economic opportunity. For example, by 2030 up to 45,000 UK jobs could be supported by the onshore wind sector.

Onshore wind taskforce strategy

The strategy is the main output of a joint Government and industry taskforce established to identify and agree essential actions to mitigate barriers to deployment across the UK and capitalise on the economic benefits. The taskforce was set up following the removal of the de facto ban on onshore wind in England in July 2024 to streamline and maximise the deployment of onshore wind.

This is the Government's first ever dedicated strategy for onshore wind, committing to 42 actions across planning, grid, workforce, financing and aviation. This will ensure we quickly unlock onshore wind deployment, deliver on the economic benefits, and make progress towards our clean power mission. Highlights of the onshore wind strategy include:

New actions to ensure the planning system is ready for the first English projects to come through the pipeline since the removal of the de facto ban, which severely limited deployment.

Ambitious actions to address interference issues between onshore wind turbines and civil and military aviation systems, to help get onshore wind projects moving.

A range of new commitments, alongside industry, to build the evidence base to support future onshore wind supply chain and skills interventions.

Today we are also announcing the establishment of an onshore wind council to ensure we deliver on the critical actions in today's publications and continue the excellent collaboration with industry.

Guidance on community benefits for onshore wind in England

Government want to ensure that communities directly benefit from our 2030 goals, and today we have published updated voluntary guidance on community benefits for onshore wind in England, ensuring developments have a lasting positive impact on communities. The guidance includes:

Best practice models for benefits schemes such as community benefit funds, local electricity bill discounts and shared ownership.

Support available to communities when co-designing and administering funds, summarising best practice engagement principles.

A resource kit for communities with detailed case studies and example documentation.

The guidance sets expectations that developers pay community benefits of £5,000 per megawatt of installed capacity per year for the operational lifetime of the project. This would mean a 25 MW wind farm would deliver £3.75 million of funding for communities on local initiatives across a 30-year operating life. If we deliver 29 GW of onshore wind by 2030, we could unlock around £70 million of additional private investment in our rural towns and villages every year.

Scaling up onshore wind generation will be critical to the success of the Government's clean energy mission. Today's publications will give a boost to the onshore wind industry and local communities, reduce our dependence on volatile fossil fuels, and improve our energy security.

[HCWS778]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Residential Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): The Government are today laying regulations to address the last three outstanding Grenfell Tower inquiry phase 1 recommendations, on personal emergency evacuation plans, or PEEPs, and building-level evacuation plans.

The Fire Safety (Residential Evacuation Plans) (England) Regulations 2025 mandate residential PEEPs and mark a long-awaited step forward in improving the fire safety and evacuation of vulnerable residents who were so badly let down on the night of the tragedy. It applies to residents living in England in high-rise residential buildings—at least seven storeys or 18 metres high—and 11-metre to 18-metre high buildings with a simultaneous evacuation strategy.

Through these regulations, residents with physical and mental disabilities and impairments will be entitled to:

a person-centred fire risk assessment to consider their specific individual risks and ability to evacuate in the event of a fire;

the measures that could be reasonably and proportionately introduced to mitigate against their risks and aid their evacuation;

a written statement recording what they should do in a fire and;

provision of information to their local fire and rescue service (where the resident consents to the information being shared) so they know where the most vulnerable residents live and can support their evacuation or rescue in the event of a fire.

The regulations also mandate production of whole-building evacuation plans, shared with local fire and rescue services.

The laying of the regulations addresses recommendations 33.22c, 33.22e, 33.22f—now numbers 59, 60 and 61—from phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry.

The Government have committed funding this year to begin this important work by supporting social housing providers to deliver residential PEEPs for their renters. Future years' funding will be confirmed through the spending review and business planning processes.

In addition, Government are today publishing a factsheet and toolkit to support building owners and managers as they develop residential PEEPs. This toolkit contains real-life and proven initiatives to support vulnerable residents which have already been successfully deployed at scale.

The regulations will come into force on 6 April 2026.

The Government are committed to continued and full engagement with stakeholders as the policy is operationalised to ensure that it addresses the needs of users and reflects their lived experience. Specifically, we will:

continue to engage key stakeholders on draft statutory guidance to support building owners and managers in fulfilling the requirements of the regulations. The guidance will be published in the autumn.

set up a stakeholder advisory panel with representatives of disability stakeholders and building owners and managers, to identify and review new initiatives for inclusion in the toolkit.

continue to listen to stakeholders as residential PEEPs beds in, as part of monitoring the impact and effectiveness of the policy.

[HCWS782]

Leaseholder Consumer Rights: Consultation

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The cost of living remains a pressing concern for leaseholders across England and Wales. In addition to managing the costs of household bills and other essentials, many are struggling to cope with the additional financial strain placed on them by high and rising service charges that are all too often opaque in nature.

With a view to better protecting leaseholders, I am pleased to announce that the Government have launched a wide-ranging consultation on proposals to hold landlords and managing agents to account for the services they provide and the charges and fees they levy.

At the heart of the consultation are the measures contained in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 to improve fairness and transparency in the calculation and presentation of service charge demands. Once enacted, these will ensure that all leaseholders are issued with standard service charge documentation in a form that provides clear, detailed information about how their service charges are calculated and spent. The result will

be service charges that are more easily challengeable at the appropriate tribunal if leaseholders consider them to be unreasonable.

Through the consultation, we are also seeking views on the measures contained in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 relating to landlords' legal costs. By addressing the unreasonable practice where landlords are able to recover their litigation costs from leaseholders regardless of the outcome of a legal challenge, we intend to reduce existing barriers to justified challenges against poor practice.

We are also acutely aware of the ongoing impact of opaque and substantial building insurance commissions recovered from leaseholders through service charges. As part of the remediation acceleration plan announcement last December, the Government launched a public consultation on measures to prevent the imposition of such charges. It closed in February and we intend to set out next steps in due course.

Improving the fairness and transparency of service charges and rebalancing the legal costs regime will significantly strengthen leaseholder consumer rights, but we are using the consultation to seek views on proposals that extend beyond those reforms to the leasehold system already in statute as a result of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024.

Specifically, we are inviting views on reform of the section 20 process that leaseholders must go through when a landlord wants to carry out "major works" funded by a service charge. We know that one-off, unexpected, and often very large bills for major works can place huge financial strain on leaseholders. Far too many receive little or no notice about such works and so have little time to obtain sufficient funds.

It is not in dispute that buildings must be properly maintained, but major works, such as repairing a roof or replacing a lift, should be properly planned for, with leaseholders as far as possible kept fully informed. The current system does not work for anyone, whether leaseholders, managing agents or landlords, and we are seeking views on how we can improve it to make it fit for purpose.

Through this consultation, we are also taking initial steps to strengthen the regulation of managing agents by introducing mandatory professional qualifications that will set a new basic standard that managing agents will be required to meet.

Managing agents play a key role in the maintenance of multi-occupancy buildings and freehold estates, and their importance will only increase as commonhold becomes the default tenure and existing leaseholders are empowered to exercise their right to manage, collectively enfranchise, or to convert to commonhold.

While we know that there is good practice in the sector, far too many leaseholders and residential freeholders suffer abuse and poor service at the hands of unscrupulous managing agents. While further reform will be necessary to drive up the standard of service provided by managing agents and ensure they are made more accountable to leaseholders, the introduction of mandatory qualifications in England is an important first step to ensuring all agents have the knowledge and skills they need to do their jobs effectively.

The consultation also explores other ways in which the regulation of managing agents could be strengthened, including specific interventions recommended in the final report of the regulation of property agents working group chaired by Lord Best, such as giving leaseholders the power to switch and veto managing agents. We will continue to reflect on the various other recommendations made in the 2019 report.

Taken together, the various proposals outlined in the consultation will provide existing leaseholders with far greater rights and protections and will empower them to challenge poor practice and unreasonable charge and fees.

Given the complexity of property law and the wide variation of leases across millions of homes, it is important that we engage extensively through the consultation to ensure the smooth implementation of the proposals in question. As such, we want to hear from leaseholders themselves as well as all those involved in managing leasehold buildings.

Following the consultation, we intend to bring the various measures into force as quickly as possible. We also remain firmly committed to commencing the remaining provisions in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 and to progressing the wider set of reforms necessary to end the feudal leasehold system for good, as set out in the written ministerial statement of 21 November 2024.

[HCWS780]

Petition

Friday 4 July 2025

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

Banking Hub for Selkirk and Eyemouth

The petition of the residents of Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk,

Declares that residents of Selkirk and Eyemouth are being left without proper access to cash and banking facilities. This is causing significant concern and worry for the local community, and that LINK should take the necessary steps to tackle this by setting up a banking hub in each of the towns. Further that a separate online petition on the same issue has generated 1,456 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that the residents of Selkirk and Eyemouth have access to a Banking Hub, with proper access to cash and banking facilities.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John Lamont, *Official Report*, 3 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 281.]

[P003079]

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): The Government thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont MP) for submitting the petition on behalf of his constituents regarding access to cash and banking facilities in Selkirk and Eyemouth and the request for the establishment of banking hubs in these towns.

The Government understand the importance of face-to-face banking to communities and high streets and are committed to championing sufficient access for all as a priority. This is why the Government are working closely with industry to roll out 350 banking hubs across the UK. The UK banking sector has committed to deliver these hubs by the end of this Parliament. Over 160 hubs are open and delivering vital cash and in-person banking services, and over 230 have been recommended by LINK.

The Government also recognise that cash continues to be used by millions of people across the UK, including those in vulnerable groups, and are committed to protecting access to cash for individuals and businesses.

The Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 established the Financial Conduct Authority as the lead regulator for access to cash. The FCA introduced regulatory rules for access to cash in September 2024. These rules require the UK's largest banks and building societies to assess the impact of a closure or material alteration of a relevant cash withdrawal or deposit facility, and put in place a new service if necessary.

Banking hubs are a voluntary service, developed by the financial services sector in the context of legislation to protect access to cash under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023. Their roll-out is overseen by Cash Access UK, a not-for-profit company set up and funded by the banks for the purpose of co-ordinating banking hub delivery.

Regarding the petition for banking hubs in Selkirk and Eyemouth, it is important to note that the locations of banking hubs are independently determined by LINK, the industry co-ordinating body responsible for undertaking access to cash assessments.

When receiving a community request or notification of a branch closure, LINK will first assess what will be left in a community after a change to the cash services on a high street. Then LINK undertakes an assessment of the impact on the local community, looking at the proximity to the nearest branch, size of the community (population and number of SMEs) and the extent of community vulnerability, old age and digital skills. LINK also assesses local needs via an in-person visit. This gives the opportunity for LINK to take into account specific aspects of the local area, such as a steep hill or poor transport links.

LINK publishes the outcomes of its assessments on its website. If, as a result of an assessment, LINK has not recommended a banking hub, the decision can be appealed within 28 days of the assessment. More information on the appeals process is available on its website.

Everyday in-person banking services can also be accessed via the Post Office. The Post Office banking framework allows personal and business customers to withdraw and deposit cash, check their balance, pay bills and cash cheques at 11,500 post office branches across the UK.

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Friday 4 July 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	41WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND	
Afghan Resettlement Scheme Data Incident:		LOCAL GOVERNMENT	43WS
Update.....	41WS	Leaseholder Consumer Rights: Consultation	44WS
		Residential Personal Emergency Evacuation	
		Plans	43WS
ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	42WS	TREASURY	41WS
UK Onshore Wind Industry.....	42WS	Legislation Day: Finance Bill	41WS

PETITION

Friday 4 July 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	5P
Banking Hub for Selkirk and Eyemouth	5P

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 11 July 2025**

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 4 July 2025

Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill [Col. 539]
As amended, further considered; read the Third time and passed

Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Bill [Col. 563]
Not amended, further considered; read the Third time and passed

Absent Voting (Elections in Scotland and Wales) Bill [Col. 582]
As amended, further considered; read the Third time and passed

Space Industry (Indemnities) Bill [Col. 599]
Not amended, further considered; read the Third time and passed

Licensing Hours Extensions Bill [Col. 611]
Not amended, further considered; read the Third time and passed

Company Directors (Duties) Bill [Col. 618]
Motion for Second Reading—(Martin Wrigley)

Services for Adults with Learning Difficulties: Hillingdon [Col. 625]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 41WS]

Petition [Col. 5P]
Observations
