

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

POLICE, CRIME, SENTENCING AND COURTS BILL

Fifth Sitting

Tuesday 25 May 2021

(Morning)

CONTENTS

CLAUSES 1 AND 2 agreed to.

CLAUSE 3 under consideration when the Committee adjourned till this day
at Two o'clock.

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the final version of the report should be clearly marked in a copy of the report—not telephoned—and must be received in the Editor’s Room, House of Commons,

not later than

Saturday 29 May 2021

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:*Chairs:* † SIR CHARLES WALKER, STEVE McCABE

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| † Anderson, Lee (<i>Ashfield</i>) (Con) | † Higginbotham, Antony (<i>Burnley</i>) (Con) |
| † Atkins, Victoria (<i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department</i>) | † Jones, Sarah (<i>Croydon Central</i>) (Lab) |
| † Baillie, Siobhan (<i>Stroud</i>) (Con) | † Levy, Ian (<i>Blyth Valley</i>) (Con) |
| † Champion, Sarah (<i>Rotherham</i>) (Lab) | † Philp, Chris (<i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department</i>) |
| † Charalambous, Bambos (<i>Enfield, Southgate</i>) (Lab) | † Pursglove, Tom (<i>Corby</i>) (Con) |
| † Clarkson, Chris (<i>Heywood and Middleton</i>) (Con) | Wheeler, Mrs Heather (<i>South Derbyshire</i>) (Con) |
| † Cunningham, Alex (<i>Stockton North</i>) (Lab) | † Williams, Hywel (<i>Arfon</i>) (PC) |
| † Dorans, Allan (<i>Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock</i>) (SNP) | |
| † Eagle, Maria (<i>Garston and Halewood</i>) (Lab) | Huw Yardley, Sarah Thatcher, <i>Committee Clerks</i> |
| † Goodwill, Mr Robert (<i>Scarborough and Whitby</i>) (Con) | † attended the Committee |

Public Bill Committee

Tuesday 25 May 2021

(Morning)

[SIR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill

9.25 am

The Chair: Good morning. Before we begin line-by-line scrutiny of the Bill, I have a few preliminary reminders. Please switch electronic devices to silent. No food or drink is permitted during sittings of the Committee except for the water provided. I remind Members to observe physical distancing. Members should sit only in the places that are clearly marked. It is important that Members find their seats and leave the room promptly to avoid delays for other Members and staff—although I do not think that will be a problem for us given that you are all coming back this afternoon. Members should wear face coverings in Committee unless they are speaking or medically exempt. *Hansard* colleagues would be grateful if Members emailed their speaking notes to hansardnotes@parliament.uk.

We now begin line-by-line consideration of the Bill. The selection list for today's sitting, which shows how selected amendments have been grouped together for debate, is available in the room. Amendments grouped together are generally on the same or a similar issue. Please note that decisions on amendments take place not in the order they are debated but in the order they appear on the amendment paper; the selection and grouping list shows order of debate. Decisions on each amendment are taken when we come to the clause to which an amendment relates. Decisions on new clauses will be taken once we have completed consideration of the existing clauses of the Bill. Members wishing to press a grouped amendment or new clause to a Division should indicate when speaking to it that they wish to do so. Here we go!

Clause 1

POLICE COVENANT REPORT

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 2, in clause 1, page 2, line 2, after “workforce,”, insert

“including the impact of working with traumatised survivors on officers’ wellbeing and morale,”

This amendment aims to ensure the police covenant report, when addressing the health and well-being of members and former members of the police workforce, also addresses the specific impact working with traumatised survivors, such as survivors of child sexual abuse, has on officers’ wellbeing and morale.

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 77, in clause 1, page 2, line 34, at end insert—

“(8A) The Secretary of State may not lay the police covenant report before Parliament unless it has been reviewed by an oversight board.

(8B) The oversight board referred to in section (8A) must be made up of representatives of the following organisations, appointed in each case by the organisation itself—

- (a) the Police Federation,
- (b) the Police Superintendents’ Association,
- (c) the Chief Police Officers Staff Association,
- (d) UNISON,
- (e) the National Police Chiefs Council,
- (f) the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners,
- (g) the Home Office, and
- (h) the College of Policing,

and an independent chair appointed by the Secretary of State, and any other person the Secretary of State considers appropriate.”

Amendment 76, in clause 1, page 2, line 41, at end insert—

- “(aa) members of the British Transport Police,
(ab) members of the Civil Nuclear Constabulary,
(ac) members of the Ministry of Defence police,”

Clause stand part.

New clause 44—*Duty on health service bodies to have due regard to police covenant principles*—

“(1) In exercising in relation to England a relevant healthcare function, a person or body specified in subsection (2) must have due regard to—

- (a) the obligations of and sacrifices made by members of the police workforce,
 - (b) the principle that it is desirable to remove any disadvantage for members or former members of the police workforce arising from their membership or former membership, and
 - (c) the principle that special provision for members or former members of the police workforce may be justified by the effects on such people of membership, or former membership, of that workforce.
- (2) The specified persons and bodies are—
- (a) the National Health Service Commissioning Board;
 - (b) a clinical commissioning group;
 - (c) a National Health Service trust in England;
 - (d) an NHS foundation trust.”

Sarah Champion: It is a pleasure to speak here today and that the first amendment is on the police covenant, which has support across the House. The amendment would make the covenant as strong and useful as it possibly can be.

It is clear that officers and police staff across the country get variable levels of support. They put themselves at risk in the most extreme circumstances, and the horror and trauma they have had to deal with in the last year has been exceptional. I will speak specifically about trauma, and first let me give some examples. Child sex offences recorded by the police increased by 178% between March 2007 and March 2017 and there has been a 511% increase in the abuse of children through sexual exploitation. Unfortunately, in just that example, different police forces across the country give different levels of support to their officers and frontline staff. We should not be surprised that police officers are exposed to trauma, but I find it quite shocking that there is no standard training as soon as individuals join the force to help them identify what trauma is and how to deal with it. The fact that across police forces there is not a standard level of support to be accessed once an officer feels he has the need for it is really letting our forces down.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on tabling the amendment. Does she agree that one of the problems is that for too long there has been a culture in the police of making do, being tough and toughing through it? That is why it is unaddressed, and that can lead to people not raising the concerns they feel and to the absence of help that should be there.

Sarah Champion: My hon. Friend knows the issues intimately and has tried to address them in the past. She speaks with a great deal of experience and she is absolutely right. I was speaking to my district commander about the clause on Friday. He said, “The biggest problem we have is that the culture in the force is basically to deal with it, and we are weak if we try to raise concerns.” My response to him was that in the armed forces, particularly in the last 10 years, they have completely turned that culture around because there was the will and impetus to do that. I am incredibly impressed by the level of self-awareness, recognition and support that the armed forces have when people start to feel the impact of trauma.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Further to what my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood said, the number of police officers who are off sick as a direct result of trauma and related activity demonstrates that the problem is huge. The evidence is there for the change that we propose.

Sarah Champion: This is what I do not understand: throughout my career in Parliament I have tried to focus on prevention, because it is cheaper. The bottom line shows that it is much better at the beginning to teach police officers or back room office staff how to identify trauma, how to deal with it and how to get help. That is why I say to the Minister that, within the covenant and with the opportunities she is given to follow through on her own’s party’s commitment to produce the covenant, we need trauma training and the necessary support in black and white in the police covenant.

Police forces have an organisational responsibility to support the wellbeing of their workforce. The College of Policing published a wellbeing framework, which outlines standards to benchmark their wellbeing services, but that is voluntary. The college has also issued specific guidance on responding to trauma in policing and psychological risk management. Let me offer some more facts and stats—people who know me know that I love a statistic. The 2019 police wellbeing survey identified some really worrying mental health data, finding that 67.1% of police officers responding reported post-traumatic stress symptoms that would warrant an evaluation for post-traumatic stress disorder. That is two thirds of the police. A Police Federation survey of 18,000 members found that

“Attending traumatic and/or distressing incidents” was one of the top 10 reasons why respondents were having psychological difficulties at work.

Let me pick up on the phrase “psychological difficulties at work”. Such difficulties have an impact on the individual, their colleagues, and the public. I have done an awful lot of work with survivors, predominantly of child abuse

but of abuse in general as well. The level of response and empathy that they get from that first police officer tends to dictate how the rest of that process goes and, ultimately, whether they are able to secure the conviction of the perpetrator. If that police officer has undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder and is unable to access support, what will that first interaction with the victim be? It will be poor. That is not the officer’s fault; it is our fault for not putting the support in place to enable them to identify the issue at the time.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): The hon. Lady certainly lives up to her name by standing up for the victims of abuse and those affected in other ways. The police could perhaps learn lessons in how to deal with some of those problems from GCHQ, many of whose officers, including those working in Scarborough, spend many hours looking at online images of child sexual abuse or terrorism. GCHQ is aware of those problems and is on top of them from the very start. Does she agree that the police could learn from GCHQ?

Sarah Champion: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. GCHQ has a large footprint in his constituency, so he has seen at first hand that correct identification and the provision of early intervention and support prevent these issues arising. Unfortunately, in the police force that is a voluntary duty. The police covenant gives us the opportunity to put in the Bill that that needs to be addressed. It is simple, it is cheap, and it involves an hour’s training and signposting to existing resources.

Some 23% of respondents to the Police Federation survey had sought help for their feelings of stress, low mood, anxiety and other difficulties. Let us contrast that with the 67% who were recognised as having undiagnosed PTSD: just 23% of the nearly 70% who had those symptoms sought help.

Alex Cunningham: My hon. Friend will remember that when she was questioning Assistant Commissioner Hewitt about the availability of support, he said:

“An issue that we undoubtedly have around wellbeing and the occupational health service provision is the restricted amount of capacity... In all circumstances, where we want to refer officers or staff for support, one of our frustrations is that it often takes quite a while to access that support.”—[*Official Report, Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Public Bill Committee*, 18 May 2021; c. 6, Q3.]

Does she agree that if we had proper training up front, so that people were trained almost to expect traumatic experiences, the pressure on the system when they undergo them would be all the less?

Sarah Champion: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is what I mean when I talk about recognition, a change of culture and early intervention. Members probably do not know that I trained and qualified as a psychodynamic counsellor. My very first client was a miner who had been buried alive—he was stuck underground. I was in my early 20s and he was in his mid-50s, and we looked at one another and both went, “Oh my God. This is what I have to deal with,” but as it was a post-traumatic stress disorder and he had come very soon after the event had happened, we managed to resolve the issue within four sessions.

[Sarah Champion]

With post-traumatic stress disorder, early intervention is key. If it is left for years—decades, in some cases—it becomes so embedded and ingrained in someone’s psychological make-up that it becomes a really big issue that affects every single aspect of life. It is important to recognise the early signs, which could be covered at the very beginning of training; it could even be an hour-long online training course. We need the police to be able to recognise it themselves. That is where we need to get to, and that is what the police covenant could do.

Returning to the survey, of those police officers who sought help 34% reported that they were poorly or very poorly supported by the police service. Of those with line management responsibility, only 21.8% could remember being given any training on how to support the staff in health and wellbeing.

Members of the National Association of Retired Police Officers have supplied me with examples of the sorts of incidents that they have to deal with. I apologise as they are shocking, but not unnecessarily so, I hope. This is the first case study:

“I served as a traffic sergeant. Part of the role was as a road death scene manager. I attended the scene of many deaths on the roads. I then went to a child abuse investigation, where I got promoted to DI. Whilst a temporary DI, my wife’s best friend and our neighbour hanged herself and I cut the body down. I got symptoms in relation to this straight away and things didn’t get better.

Now 11 years down the line, I have chronic PTSD, the side effects of which are severe depression, anxiety attacks and extreme mood swings. Now, it’s always at the back of my mind that if I’d had early intervention when I asked for it, maybe things would have been different.”

The following is case study 2:

“Operational experiences include attending suicides. For example, within my first few weeks of returning from training school, I attended a suicide where the victim lay on the railway tracks and was hit by a train. I assisted in the recovery of the remains of the victim.

Also, a man jumped off a tall office building and landed headfirst. I was the first on the scene to see the massive head trauma he had suffered.

They were all extremely distressing sights and I have difficulty getting them out of my head, even now.

These are just a few examples where I wasn’t offered any psychological support. I wasn’t even asked if I was okay. It was just seen by everybody as part of the job: suck it up and get on to the next thing.

I retired medically in 1999 as a result of injuries received on duty. I have suffered with complex PTSD and health issues ever since. I am currently waiting to receive further treatment from the NHS. I have received nothing from the police by way of support, even at the time of my retirement.”

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I can confirm the efficacy of having support immediately after a traumatic event. In my own experience as a social worker when I was a young man, I discovered someone who had unfortunately committed suicide. The support that I got from my senior colleagues allowed me to resolve the difficulties I had with the experience. It also convinced me that quick intervention can work very effectively and that, conversely, no intervention at all can lead to problems for many decades.

Sarah Champion: I thank the hon. Member for sharing that experience, which reiterates the two points of early intervention and creating a culture in which it is automatic for a manager to ask, “Are you okay?” and to offer support, and to have support in place.

Alex Cunningham: Another example comes from my personal experience. When I worked for the gas industry, I went to a gas explosion to handle the associated public relations. As we went towards the building where the explosion had taken place, a fireman coming out the door said to me, “It’s not very pleasant in there.” I went in—I had to find out exactly what had happened—and there was the torso of a woman. That was 30-odd years ago, and it lives with me to this day. I got no support whatsoever—I did not even think about it. Perhaps that is all the more reason why we need to ensure that at least our emergency workers are getting the support they need as soon as possible.

Sarah Champion: Exactly. My hon. Friend used the phrase, “I did not even think about it” and that is what we have to change. The police covenant gives us the opportunity to turn that around and have a culture in which, if someone sees something traumatic, it will be automatic to check in on them to see if they are okay. If they are okay, that is good, and they can move on. Our police are suffering the most extreme trauma day in, day out. They do not know it when they get up in the morning but they have no idea what they will face when they open that door. Think of the stress that puts on their bodies—stress that can be alleviated.

Maria Eagle: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not enough just to ask, “How are you?” in the context of a culture that expects people to be okay, and that, consequently, the Minister can give a lead in how she implements her welcome proposal for the police covenant by emphasising that mental health is as important as physical health? Does my hon. Friend also agree that just having wellbeing in there is not quite enough to change a culture and that the expectation that support is given needs to be clear?

Sarah Champion: My hon. Friend puts it far more elegantly than I could; I absolutely agree. The police covenant talks about wellbeing. We need the word “trauma” in there, because that is what we are dealing with. The Minister has the opportunity to put that in black and white and show the leadership that we need. The whole House would support her in that. I really hope that she can take that forward.

In our evidence sessions, Assistant Commissioner Hewitt said that we have an issue with

“the restricted amount of capacity. That is one of our challenges...one of our frustrations is that it often takes quite a while to access that support.”—[*Official Report, Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Public Bill Committee*, 18 May 2021; c. 6, Q3.]

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North, early intervention prevents escalation. John Apter, the chair of the Police Federation, spoke about dealing with trauma, saying:

“We have come an awful long way, but we have not gone far enough. One of the frustrations that my colleagues have is the inconsistency within forces...part of that is the lack of ability or willingness to mandate particular aspects of training and support. The covenant gives us a great opportunity to put in place mandated levels of psychological support and training”.—[*Official Report, Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Public Bill Committee*, 18 May 2021; c. 20, Q30.]

Chief Superintendent Griffiths said:

“There has been a 36% increase in inquiries to the police charities compared with the previous year, the vast majority of which are mental health concerns.”

He added that, on trauma, the exposure for police officers...is quite significant.”—[*Official Report, Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Public Bill Committee*, 18 May 2021; c. 29, Q43.]

9.45 am

My hon. Friend also mentioned the number of police officers who retire on medical grounds or resign because they can no longer cope. My concern is that part of the culture of being a tough person is that they do not articulate when they have a mental health concern; they just walk away from it. I have a constituent who, as a serving officer, dealt with an extremely traumatic case that led to PTSD, which he did not want to admit to his colleagues, so he just left the force.

We are losing a lot of well-trained, competent police officers, and indeed administration and support staff, because we are not intervening early and sending clear signals that they can talk and help will be provided. Even if not for the human rights and the morally right reasons, just economically, it takes a lot of time to train an officer, so why let good people leave because we are not providing early intervention? Putting that in the Bill, and putting in the detail of the police covenant that there will be trauma training and support for all officers, and for administration and support staff, would be a simple but effective way for this Government and this Parliament to support the police.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): As I have previously declared, I am a former detective inspector in the Metropolitan police, where I served for 17 years in operational roles. I absolutely relate to the hon. Lady’s description of the lack of support at that time, but chief constables are required, as part of the police retirement process, to write to retiring officers to offer them such support.

Sarah Champion: Yes, but the case study from NARPO shows that that does not always happen. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, but we ought to extend that support to retired officers. That will not have a massive cost implication, but it is our duty to them for all they have done. We have a fantastic veterans covenant in place. The police covenant provides the opportunity to deliver something similar, in recognition of that incredible service that the police have given us. We should do something when they are serving as an officer and once they have left. The fact that it is voluntary and sometimes it happens and is piecemeal is just not good enough. That is not acceptable. We have the opportunity to change that.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful point. We are looking to introduce the covenant now. Now is the perfect time in many ways, because we lost many police—21,000—over the past 10 years, but there is now a period of significant recruitment, so a lot of officers are coming into the force. Does she agree that now is the perfect time to make sure that we do that early intervention and training, so that those thousands of new officers do not go through the same experience as many others in the past?

Sarah Champion: I completely agree. Now is the perfect time for those reasons, and also because hopefully we are coming out of the pandemic. The service that the

police gave during the pandemic was exceptional. We should recognise the personal trauma that caused to them, by ensuring that the need for trauma support is recognised in the police covenant. That would be the greatest respect we can show.

Alex Cunningham: When my hon. Friend questioned John Apter, the national chair of the Police Federation of England and Wales, she asked whether he supported this measure. He said:

“Absolutely, it needs to be meaningful and tangible, and it needs to have a benefit for those it is there to support—not only officers, but staff, volunteers and retired colleagues.”

He went on to say about training:

“I have had this conversation with the College of Policing, and part of that is the lack of ability or willingness to mandate particular aspects of training and support.”

The most important part of his evidence was:

“The covenant gives us a great opportunity to put in place mandated levels of psychological support and training from the start of somebody’s service to its conclusion and beyond.”—[*Official Report, Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Public Bill Committee*, 18 May 2021; c. 20, Q30.]

I am sure my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that the Police Federation is fully behind the amendment.

Sarah Champion: I do welcome it, but it is not just the Police Federation, NARPO or the College of Policing that are saying that; it is what I hear when I speak to serving officers. I had a long conversation with my district commander about this on Friday, and he cited case after case of officers entering a building, having a traumatic experience, and then him trying to give them support. However, what tends to happen is that the support is not in place, the waiting list is too long and they then go off on long-term sick leave. While off on long-term sick leave, the issue is compounded so it becomes even more of an issue. I paraphrase, but basically he said to me: “When we are able to offer early intervention, the officer comes back and carries on serving. When we are not, we know that they are going to be off for a very long time, if indeed they come back at all.”

I say to the Minister that this amendment is a common-sense courtesy. It is a way for the House and the Minister to make a clear commitment to recognising mental health and trauma, and showing the respect and duty that we have to our police force.

Maria Eagle: I want to make a short contribution based upon my experience before I came into the House, which was a shocking length of time ago. It was 24 years ago, in fact, and now I have put that on the record—oh dear.

Before that time, I was a solicitor practising in civil litigation. I frequently tried to help people who had been traumatised at work and were suing their employer, normally because they had lost their employment. Some of the people I sought to assist in that capacity were serving and former police officers, and others who had encountered traumatic situations in the workplace.

At the time, I thought of myself as a relatively sympathetic ear, and I think I was regarded as such too—Members might be startled to hear that, given the adversarial nature of proceedings in this House over the past 24 years. However, it was tremendously difficult for

[*Maria Eagle*]

me to get a good statement out of the people who had been traumatised, because they had put up barriers. I would ask them, “What effect did this have on you?” and they would say, “I’m fine. I’m okay.” Often that was a few years after the incident that led them to the path out of employment, whether they had to retire or they were medically dismissed. They were clearly not okay, yet even when I, as their solicitor, was seeking to take a statement to assist them in getting some support *ex post facto*, and usually after they had had to leave their employment, they were still almost incapable of telling me how they really felt about what had happened and the impact it had had on them.

I know that if those people had been in a culture that said, “It’s okay to be not okay; we are going to provide you with help; you might not think you need it, but it is here in case you do, and it is perfectly fine to go along to the counsellor and break down in tears; that does not mean you are not a man”—they generally were men, but not only—then my role as a solicitor, trying to get them some compensation for their trauma over the years and their loss of employment, might have been a lot easier.

Sarah Champion: My hon. Friend reminds me of another constituent who is no longer a police officer, unfortunately. He went to what he was told was a domestic incident, was let in and found someone on the floor, convulsing—they had taken a large amount of cocaine when they knew he was entering the building. He tried to resuscitate the person, which led to PTSD. He left the force, but this is where the double nub that my hon. Friend spoke about relating to compensation needs to be considered. The police force did not recognise his PTSD, which was the reason he resigned from the force—he could not cope because he could not get the support from them—but the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority did not acknowledge that he was a victim of a crime because of the incident that led to the trauma, so he got no support, no compensation and no job. He actually went to a solicitor three times and challenged it. I am glad to say that he is now an incredible campaigner for police veterans with PTSD and is getting them the recognition that they deserve, but it should not have to be a fight all the time; it should be automatic.

Maria Eagle: I saw that kind of situation many times in my practice as a solicitor. I always felt that it would have been better to have prevented these things from happening. I believe that amendment 2, by making it clear that the covenant can and should seek to address trauma, could be the key to opening up and changing that culture, facets of which we have all, in our various ways, given examples of today.

One thing that is common to all the examples that Members have recalled from their own experience is that they involve an emergency worker—someone who is there to help and benefit society—who in the course of their employment sees the kinds of things that the rest of us in society are shielded from, thankfully, and then they are not supported to overcome that trauma. That is the common thread.

The Government should accept the amendment, because wellbeing equates to mental wellbeing. It is not just about someone making sure they are physically strong

enough to be a police officer; mental support is just as important. If inserting “trauma” could be a key to unlocking that kind of support, I believe that the Government could be responsible for leading and promoting a change in culture across our emergency services.

That has already happened in the armed forces, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham said. Much progress has been made in what was a very macho workplace, where there was an equal lack of understanding that mental ill health and trauma could lead to serious disability, a lack of operational effectiveness and a requirement to retire far earlier than society would have wished, having invested a lot of money, time and effort into training such specialists. That is also true of our emergency services on the civilian side.

This is an opportunity for the Government to lead what will be a tremendously important change in culture—a signal to those organisations that this is the way forward and this is what matters. This has been missing in our civilian forces and civilian emergency services, and it needs to be there. This could be a really important way of leading that change.

I hope that the Minister will see the importance of that and will ignore what she may have in front of her, which will be from civil servants—who are doing their job absolutely adequately and well, I have no doubt—setting out to try to resist any change to the perfect wording that they have devised. It is not always perfect; it can sometimes be improved. I am not criticising the civil servants—I spent nine years as a Minister, so I know how hard they work—but sometimes a Minister can apply her own common sense to what is in front of her. She is there to do just that. She is there to say to her officials, “That’s all very interesting, but I am applying my political common sense and we are going to accept it.”

If the Minister does that—I hope she will—it could be the beginning of a real change in culture that in future will impact on the nameless people who otherwise might have fallen into the kinds of problems that my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham so eloquently set out. All of us who have spoken in this short debate have some experience of coming across aspects of this issue. In the future there might be unnamed people whose health benefits and who do not lose their employment and livelihoods because the Minister was brave enough to lead the change by accepting the amendments. I hope she will think very seriously about doing so.

10 am

Hywel Williams: I referred earlier to my experience as a young approved social worker under the Mental Health Act of getting an innocuous call, while I was on duty on a Saturday morning, that turned out to be a case of suicide in a very rural and unsupported area, which meant that I was there for quite some time before the police and medical people turned up. I want to make one point to the Minister. Following that day, I had two calls from a colleague—a peer—who shared her experiences and supported me. Then I had two calls from a manager, and on the Monday we had a short, purposeful meeting. My point is that support need not be extensive or even expensive in any real sense. Short interventions that are purposeful and skilled can be very sophisticated and effective.

Sarah Jones: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. As we are debating amendments 2, 77 and 76, clause 1 stand part and new clause 44, I will speak to all the issues in the round. I will start by thanking Sarah Thatcher and Huw Yardley from the Public Bill Office, who have given so much guidance to us all in preparation for the Committee. We start this debate at the end of a difficult and turbulent year, but one in which people across the country have come together and there are many lessons that we can learn. I hope we can apply those lessons to the progress of the Bill. It is a year today since George Floyd was murdered, and I know that the lessons from that will also guide much of what we talk about today.

It is a pleasure to begin our line-by-line consideration of the Bill by debating the introduction of the police covenant, which we all agree with and support. We all probably believe it is long overdue. The tone set by my hon. Friends the Members for Rotherham and for Garston and Halewood shows the nature of our approach and how we want to try to support the changes, but we also want to work to improve them as much as we can.

The Bill creates a statutory duty for forces to support police officers and places a requirement on the Home Secretary to report annually to Parliament. It focuses on protection, health and wellbeing and support for families. It applies—correctly—to serving and former police personnel. It is an appropriate acknowledgement of the sacrifices made by the police service and the need to provide better support. The Police Federation has campaigned for the introduction of a covenant for several years, and I salute it for the campaigning work that it has done. I am pleased that the Government are taking action.

It is appropriate to take a moment to thank, on behalf of the Opposition, the police and all those who have given incredible service working on the frontline through the covid crisis: our police officers, firefighters and other emergency services, health and social care workers, shopworkers and transport workers, who have all shown incredible bravery and dedication. Those who put themselves in harm's way to keep us safe are the very best of us, and we thank them for their service.

We support clause 1. We are pleased that the covenant will focus on

“the health and well-being of members and former members of the police workforce”—

their “physical protection”, and—

“the support required by members of their families”.

Amendment 2, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham, is extremely important. I congratulate her on tabling it and agree with everything she and others have said this morning. It helps to expand on what is an absolutely crucial element of the covenant.

We heard today that a Member of this place has had to take several weeks off because they are suffering from PTSD. The surprise with which we hear that reflects how we do not talk about these issues enough. We do not support people enough who have these conditions, and we are not enabling a lot of different professions to tackle these issues.

In preparation for this debate, I talked to the National Police Chiefs Council, the Police Federation, the Police Superintendents' Association, and many police across the country who have talked about mental health and

how it is a significant and growing issue. Some forces deal with it extremely well and some do not, which is the premise of where we are starting from. Some support out there is absolutely first rate and some really is not. There is no consistency across the country.

Working with traumatised survivors, as my hon. Friend set out, has a huge impact on the wellbeing and morale of police officers and staff, but the impact of running into danger and serving the public goes beyond that. I recall when I first became an MP talking to a police officer who had to stem the blood of a young boy who had been stabbed as he waited for the ambulance to arrive. The trauma of that cannot be underplayed.

I have talked to officers in the custody suite in Croydon where, only last year, Sergeant Matt Ratana, a police officer approaching his retirement after 30 years' service in the police force, was shot dead in front of his colleagues by somebody who had been brought in for questioning. The impact of that on the entire community of police officers cannot be underplayed. The officers who were there had to intervene and try to help their colleague before the emergency services arrived. All the other people who worked in that area who were his friends and colleagues were also affected. Think also of colleagues in the Independent Office for Police Conduct who did the investigation and had to watch repeatedly the CCTV footage of what happened and see a police officer in that situation again and again. That is real, brutal trauma.

Sarah Champion: I support everything my hon. Friend is saying. The examples that she and I and Members here have given are the big trauma incidents that we recognise as likely to have an impact, but I also think it is important to recognise it might involve going to a domestic abuse case and seeing a child who is the same age as your child. A seemingly small case could have the most profound impact. Putting the provision for support in the police covenant, regardless of the incident, is the key to the amendment. It should be up to the individual to know and recognise when something has an impact and is starting to unravel—to see the early signs, whatever the trigger.

Sarah Jones: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We do not always know what is going to trigger those kinds of responses. I met recently with Sam Smith, who some people will know. He is an ex-police officer who served on the frontline for three years. He said:

“You're thrown into a job where, within weeks of starting, you're spat at, fighting people, rolling over dead bodies—your adrenaline levels are so high”.

The job quickly became his life. A chronic shortage of staff meant that Smith did a lot of overtime, spending his time-off sleeping and barely seeing his friends. He started having nightmares. He said:

“I probably wasn't the nicest to my girlfriend—I became irrational and unreasonable. When I look back now, I'm surprised she stayed with me.”

After two and a half years of service, Sam realised he was suffering from PTSD and did not feel he had the support he needed to stay in the job.

Since leaving the force, Sam has been running a campaign calling for better mental health support for police officers, as he is concerned about inconsistencies

[Sarah Jones]

in support across the 43 different police forces. He says that at the moment the main mental health welfare service for police officers is a programme called Oscar Kilo. Many would argue that the money provided is not well spent, the provisions are entirely optional and nothing is mandatory for any forces. Because of that, and ever-tightening budgets within the police, the service can be underused, and many officers had never even heard of it.

Sam is calling for us to go further than the Bill and the amendment. He is calling for a national standard of wellbeing support for police officers and hopes that the Government will back his Green Ribbon Policing campaign. I know he would appreciate it if the Minister would look at the campaign for a national standard of wellbeing support, and perhaps she might consider meeting Sam and talking about how those proposals could be taken forward.

There are some aspects of the Bill on which we will inevitably disagree, but I think we can all, across the House, agree on the importance of the mental health of members and former members of the police workforce. In that spirit, I hope the Minister will support amendment 2 and potentially pledge to go further and consider wider reform to wellbeing standards for police officers.

I will move on to amendments 76 and 77 and new clause 44. As I mentioned, the Police Federation has been campaigning for many years for a covenant, through its “Protect the Protectors” campaign. All the police bodies are in favour. It is a good thing. To be the best it can be, we need to make some improvements and make sure that we do not miss this opportunity.

The covenant comes after a year where the police have had to carry out the enormous challenge of policing the draconian emergency covid legislation, with limited guidance, in some cases, or notice when laws would be changed. The police absolutely rose to that challenge and got the balance right overall. The covenant also comes within the context of significant cuts to the police, as well as the nature of crime changing, with violent crime high, terrorism and historic child abuse cases taking up more of police time, and a high proportion of crimes now online. The number of assaults on police officers has rocketed to more than 35,000 assaults in the last year, a subject we will return to in our debate on clause 2.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham mentioned, the number of police officers leaving the service with mental health problems is too high. Research from a team of sociologists at Cambridge University showed that nearly one in five police officers have symptoms consistent with PTSD. It is widely recognised that mental health issues are widespread and under-detected, and a proper response is patchy across police force areas.

Morale is at an all-time low. The Police Federation’s 2020 survey revealed that 86% of respondents said that they did not feel fairly paid in relation to the stresses and strains of the job. Some 65% of respondents reported that the covid-19 crisis has had a negative impact on their morale and 76% felt unfairly paid for the risks and responsibilities of their job during the pandemic.

Alex Cunningham: My hon. Friend will recollect the evidence given by John Apter during the evidence sessions. He quoted Martin Hewitt:

“You heard from Mr Hewitt that assaults on officers, staffers and other emergency workers have increased by 19% during the pandemic—some horrific levels of attacks—and very often, my colleagues say that they feel they are treated as a second-class victim.”—[*Official Report, Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Public Bill Committee*, 18 May 2021; c. 21, Q33.]

Does my hon. Friend agree that, having seen that surge, what she is trying to achieve is all the more important?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Throughout the period of covid, I have been talking to John Apter, Martin Hewitt and others. The impact on police staff—the exhaustion—of not being able to take leave for long periods of time and of those increased assaults has been significant. We need to reflect that.

As of March 2020, there were 2,578 police officers on long-term sick leave. More than half of long-term police officer absence is due to sick leave. In 2019, the national police wellbeing survey identified some worrying mental health data, which we have heard about. Some 18,066 police officers and 14,526 police staff responded to the survey, and 67.1% of respondents reported post-traumatic stress symptoms that would warrant an evaluation for PTSD. The average anxiety score for police officers was moderately high and their average depression score was moderate. They were not given the vaccine as a priority, so they were running into danger with that threat, and they have also had a pay freeze. This is an opportunity to show that we appreciate the work that they do, and to acknowledge that we can do better in giving them more support in the job that we ask them to do.

10.15 am

Amendment 76 deals with the really important members of the policing family who are not included in the covenant. Gary Thwaite, the chief executive of the Civil Nuclear Police Federation, said:

“Non-Home Office forces are not going to be included in the main primary legislation itself. Instead, like some last-minute afterthought, the CNC, BTP and MDP officers are to be covered under an MOU... a lazy and belittling way which fails to understand that our police forces, whether Home Office or specialist, should be equally valued and protected by an all-encompassing Police Covenant.”

Sarah Champion: I support the amendment. To be quite honest, if I am on a train and something kicks off, I do not really care what police force the officer comes from. If they are a member of the British Transport police and can sort the incident out, I am just incredibly grateful. They ought to get the same recognition and levels of support as any other police officer.

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is completely right. The fact that those police are the responsibility of another Department is neither here nor there. They should absolutely be front and centre as part of the covenant. We want to ensure that all the wider police family is covered by the police covenant. The amendment would extend the covenant to the British Transport police, the Civil Nuclear Police Federation and the Ministry of Defence police.

The British Transport police are the specialist police force for Britain's railways, providing a service to rail operators, their staff, and passengers across the country. They respond to and investigate all crimes committed on or related to the railway network, including the most serious. They also have a significant role to play in protecting the many vulnerable people who use the railway network and stations as refuge when in crisis.

The nature of the work of the British Transport police means that officers regularly deal with the most traumatic incidents, and I would like us to reflect on that. Around 300 people take their own lives on the railways every year. British Transport police are the ones who attend and manage all those scenes, so every year, 40% of British Transport police are affected by people taking their own lives on the railways. More than 1,000 staff are affected by two or more cases.

The British Transport police often do incredible work on county lines. The criminals are savvy to that and are increasingly using taxis and recruiting young people in the towns themselves, rather than putting them on trains, as the British Transport police are so good at spotting those vulnerable young people on trains carrying drugs to other towns. There is a lot of knife crime on the transport system because people might be moving from place to place and through transport hubs. Last year, at East Croydon station, which is a major transport hub in my constituency, there was a murder when two lads from different gang networks bumped into one another and one murdered the other, and the British Transport police were there to respond.

I will give one other example. Please forgive me for talking about Croydon—I know I am a Front Bencher, but it is hard not to bring my own examples. Last week was the start of the inquest into the tram crash in Croydon, when seven people died and many more were injured as a tram toppled over after going too fast around a steep corner. The nature of that horrific incident—the windows shattered and people came out of the tram—meant that many bodies could not be identified. Again, it was the British Transport police who were there as the first responders to that crisis.

Sarah Champion: I did not realise until I started working on child abuse that there is an amazing charity called the Railway Children based in Liverpool and in India. The train network is often the first point at which runaway children are identified, and it is the British Transport police who are there to offer them support. My concern is that if an officer is experiencing trauma themselves, it is much more difficult for them to give the necessary sensitivity to a runaway. I agree that it seems bonkers therefore to separate British Transport police and tag it on as an afterthought.

Sarah Jones: I agree. When we consider the severe and significant impact of such crashes and traumas, as well as the day-to-day experience, as my hon. Friend said, of trying to deal with people fleeing county lines or fleeing crisis, we need to ensure that the British Transport police are as strong as they can be in response.

British Transport police officers are often victims of assault when carrying out their duties. On average, 21.5% of British Transport officers and police community support officers—about one in five—are assaulted each

year. In the previous year to date, there were 470 assaults on British Transport police officers and community support officers. In the last year, during covid, even though the number of people using the trains went right down, assaults increased marginally. I guess that is understandable given the nature of what those officers are trying to enforce: disputes over wearing face masks or coverings on a train. There have been several incidents resulting in spitting or coughing as a method of aggravation towards either the victim on the train or the British Transport police. The Opposition's key argument is that the British Transport police's service is no lesser just because it happens to sit with the Department for Transport. Surely we could bring them in as part of the covenant and give them the same status as those in other police forces.

In the initial conversations about why the British Transport police, the Civil Nuclear constabulary and the Ministry of Defence police were not included, we were told that it was not feasible to put them in the Bill because they sit in different Departments: the Department for Transport, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. However, they are included in other parts of the Bill such as the clauses that refer to police driving standards. If we can include them there, presumably we could include them here.

The key point about the police covenant, which we heard in our evidence last week, is that we do not want it to be just warm words; we want it to make a tangible difference to the experience of those in the police service. It is possible to include all police forces in the Bill, and it is surely the right thing to do. I would be grateful for the Minister to confirm that she has heard and understands that and perhaps will take steps to address it.

I turn to new clause 44. We want our police to have proper mental health support, as we have heard, but we want local health bodies to have due regard to the principles of the covenant, instead of the Secretary of State reporting on these issues and presenting back to police forces. New clause 44 emulates part of what the Government have provided for the military in the Armed Forces Bill, which puts a legal duty on local healthcare bodies. The words, "due regard", have previously been used in other legislation, such as the public sector equality duty contained in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, which requires public authorities to have due regard to several equality considerations when exercising their functions.

We think it would be good to enshrine these measures into the police covenant and in law, particularly on an issue as crucial as health. By emulating the wording of the relevant section of the Armed Forces Bill, new clause 44 does not specify the outcomes but simply ensures that the principles of the police covenant are followed and that police officers, staff and relevant family members are not at a disadvantage. I am aware that this is one of many issues, but the stark figures that we have all been talking about this morning mean there is not really a reason why adequate healthcare support for police and retired police would not be included in the covenant.

Clause 1(7) says:

"A police covenant report must state whether, in the Secretary of State's opinion".

[Sarah Jones]

I want to pick up on that, because it is important to remember that the covenant should be about providing the police with support that has a meaningful impact on their situation. Chief Superintendent Griffiths put it well when he said at the evidence session last week that “a police covenant is almost the sector asking the Government for additional support or assistance, or to rule out any adverse impact on police officers, and for the Government to play their role across all other public agencies to try to level the ground and make sure everything is fair and supportive for policing.”—[*Official Report, Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Public Bill Committee*, 18 May 2021; c. 29, Q44.]

I hope the Minister will consider supporting new clause 44, which I am sure would have the full backing of the House.

Finally, I turn to amendment 77, which is absolutely crucial and goes to the heart of how the covenant should work going forward. The amendment would set up an oversight board for the covenant, with an independent chair and membership of police organisations that would review the annual report before it is laid before Parliament. The amendment would also allow the Secretary of State to appoint other people to the oversight board as they deem appropriate. In essence, the amendment would ensure that the covenant does not have Ministers marking their own homework. The point of the covenant is not for the Home Secretary to decide whether the police are doing what they should be doing; the point is that the police should be working with the Home Secretary to make sure the police are getting the support that they need.

Alex Cunningham: I always think of the expression, “do with”, rather than “do to”, and I am sure my hon. Friend agrees that working closely with the different organisations outlined in the clause will add considerable value to what the Government are trying to achieve. Better than that, it will have better outcomes for the police officers involved.

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is exactly right in how he describes what the covenant should be about and how it should work.

Maria Eagle: Does my hon. Friend agree that by including a broad spread of representative organisations at all levels of the police, whether trade unions or staff associations, and at all levels, from the most junior officer to more senior officers, it is much more likely that the kinds of events that lead to the outcomes that we were discussing earlier in the debate will be identified and can be tackled via the covenant, if those things are talked about across the whole range of organisations before fixing the report? Is that not the point of the amendment?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is absolutely right, and all the police organisations have been really clear that this is how we get the best outcome from the covenant, and that this is how we can best define it. I mentioned the death of George Floyd, and all the major police organisations have been working together on black lives matter issues—for example, by looking at issues around discrimination across the police

force. I have had many conversations with Martin Hewitt, John Apter, police supers and others in which they talk about how absolutely fascinating it has been to talk to police officers lower down in the force, understand what is holding them back and what changes need to be made, and drive that change forward. By bringing in all these organisations, we can deliver better policy.

John Apter, in an evidence session last week, said that “in order to make the covenant meaningful for our members, retired colleagues and volunteers, I think that level of independence on the oversight programme, the oversight board and the delivery board, which would then lead in to the Government, is really important...It is not just the federation calling for this; collectively, we all believe very strongly in it.”—[*Official Report, Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Public Bill Committee*, 18 May 2021; c. 30, Q44.]

That is a powerful case, which I am sure the Minister understands. I hope that she will support our amendments.

10.30 am

We are trying to make the amendments better. We are very supportive of them. We want to help the Government to make them the best they can be. It would be good if the Minister could respond to the points that we are trying to make and perhaps also confirm when she anticipates the covenant will be introduced and whether she has any sense of a timescale for the start, because I know that the police community is keen that it be as soon as possible.

Sarah Champion *rose*—

The Chair: I am going to call the Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Thank you, Sir Charles. It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

First, I thank Opposition Members for the constructive tone of the debate so far. I very much take the point that this covenant meets with the approval of all the parties represented here today and, I am sure, others as well. We are all conscious of the terrible incidents that members of the police force and the wider policing family have to endure on a daily basis, but we are also particularly mindful—reference has been made to this—of what they have had to endure and the services that they have had to provide in the past 12 months. It has been a very difficult time for the whole of society, and it is, I hope, no surprise to anyone that members of our policing family have been at the forefront of that and have been protecting us through these very difficult 12 months. I am therefore really pleased by the constructive tone of the debate thus far.

I am particularly grateful to the hon. Members for Rotherham and for Croydon Central for tabling these amendments and explaining their reasons for doing so. As I hope will become clear, we very much understand the motivations behind the amendments and, indeed, we have great sympathy with what they seek to achieve. We may just have different ideas of how to achieve them.

Let me put the clause in context. I am pleased that parliamentary counsel decided to put this clause at the very start of the Bill, because it is a significant Bill—the largest criminal justice Bill that Parliament has considered

for some time—and I think it right that the police covenant is at the very start. It sets the tone for the rest of the legislation.

This clause will enshrine in law a duty on the Secretary of State to report annually to Parliament on the police covenant, which has been introduced with a view to enhancing support for the police workforce and their families—a very significant point. Even in this Committee Room, there are members of the policing family—they are not direct members themselves, but their fathers, mothers and so on have served in the service—and it is right that we include them in our consideration.

Sarah Champion: I appreciate the Minister giving way. She says, “and their families.” She has just done some exemplary work on the Bill that has become the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and knows that a disproportionately high number of cases of domestic violence and abuse happen within the police world. One would hope that, were we able to tackle the root cause of that by addressing the trauma at the very beginning and putting support in place, the knock-on repercussions would be prevented, which I am sure she and I both really want.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. She is right: in the course of proceedings on that Bill, we examined the impact that domestic abuse has on members of the wider policing family. She is absolutely right, and I will come on to that point about the trauma, if I may. I do very much acknowledge it.

I will just explain the thinking behind the clause as currently drafted. The covenant takes the form of a declaration and is not set out in the Bill. In particular, the report must address the health and wellbeing of members and former members of the police workforce in England and Wales, their physical protections and support for their families. Over time, the report may deal with other matters addressed under the banner of the police covenant.

The clause is in the Bill because our police put themselves at risk on a daily basis, dealing with some of the most challenging, toughest and most heartbreaking situations—hon. Members have given examples of that during this debate. I will explain how the covenant came into being. We set out a frontline review, inviting police officers, staff and community support officers to share ideas, in order to change and improve policing. The results of that review identified the fact that more must be done to support the wellbeing of those across the policing community. We have therefore announced plans to establish a police covenant, to recognise the bravery, sacrifices and commitment of those who work, or who have worked, in policing. No member of the police workforce should suffer any disadvantage as a result of their role in policing, and the covenant will support that aim.

The examples that hon. Members have provided show, first, the challenges, difficulties and—actually—terror that officers must face on occasion. However, I also hope—I am grasping for silver linings—that some of the stories show the improvements in our collective understanding of the impact of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder on mental health.

The example that the hon. Member for Rotherham gave of the officer who—I think she said that they were not even asked if they were okay, which, as the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood quite rightly said, should be only the beginning of the conversation; of course, much more must flow from that first question. However, the officer to whom the hon. Member for Rotherham referred had to leave the force in 1999. I hope that we all, as a society, have gained a better understanding of the impacts of trauma and so on on mental health since then.

Maria Eagle: Because the Minister has just said that trauma is now recognised, will she go the whole hog and include the word in her wonderful clause 1?

Victoria Atkins: I am developing my argument, if I may. The reason I referred to that particular officer, although other examples were given, is that under the covenant, as it is drafted, that officer—as a former member of the police force—is covered by the covenant, and we very much want it to support not just serving members but those who have served and have since retired, or had to leave.

We now come to the nub of the issue—the inclusion of words in the legal framework, as set out in the Bill. We believe very strongly that the consideration of the impact of working with traumatised survivors on the morale and wellbeing of members and former members of the police force is already within scope of the clause, as currently drafted. It falls within the broad categories of health and wellbeing, as set out in clause 1.

Again, just to give the Committee some comfort and, indeed, I hope confidence in what we intend to do, our initial priorities for year one, which will be overseen and monitored by the police covenant oversight board and the police covenant delivery group, will include working towards ensuring that occupational health standards, including for mental health, are embedded in all forces; holding chiefs to account for providing the right quality and investment in their workforce; further consideration of a new chief medical officer for policing in England and Wales; working on a review to establish what is a good support model for families, drawing on established good practice and research from other sectors and international partners; and once that is agreed forces will be required to implement locally bespoke schemes in their local infrastructure. It will include development training for GPs around the role of the police, similar to the military veterans’ GP training, and development of pre-deployment mental health support provided to the police workforce, particularly in the light of the pandemic and the effect that it will have had on the police workforce.

Rather like the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, whereby in the definition we set out the very broad legal framework, and there were many examples of domestic abuse behaviour in those categories, which were then put into the statutory guidance. The wording, “health and wellbeing”, provides the legal framework. Within that, it is for the board, the delivery group and, ultimately, the Secretary of State, to include those matters in the report.

Sarah Champion: The Minister’s words are giving me a lot of comfort, but could she clarify a little more? What she is talking about is retrospective support once the incident has happened. Is it her intent that there will

[Sarah Champion]

be preventive action at the very beginning of police training, so people are aware what the trauma is in advance, rather than just focusing on once it has happened?

Victoria Atkins: I am sure that I will give further clarification in due course if it is needed, but I draw comfort from the fact that the wording I have here is the development of “pre-deployment” mental health support. If that requires further explanation, I am sure that I will provide that explanation in due course.

Maria Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I would just like to give comfort on this point. We also plan that the board should have its inaugural meeting to set its priorities during scrutiny of the Bill. Parliament will be able to assess the priorities that flow from that meeting within the scrutiny of the Bill. The approach in the clause is very much of openness and transparency. We want the concerns that have been quite properly put forward to be addressed within the legal framework as set out in clause 1, and the practical workings to have meaningful effect for officers, former officers and members of staff on the ground.

Maria Eagle: The Minister has been very generous in giving way. It sounds as if she is moving towards the suggestion that she might not accept the amendment. Although in broad terms, the word “trauma” can be encompassed in the widest possible definition of health and wellbeing, one of the difficulties faced thus far is that the culture has been that health is about physical health, and wellbeing is just about not being off work. Consequently, were she to accept the change in wording, it would give a very strong steer that Government see the importance of cultural change being at the heart of the issue.

Victoria Atkins: I would go further, because I would not want the Committee to understand that the covenant is the only work being done on mental health and understanding trauma and wellbeing. There is already work going on with some of the people who have been mentioned in the debate to improve local understanding of the impact. Chief constables are very alive to that.

The point of the covenant is to set the framework for recognition in relation to both mental and physical wellbeing, and to set up the structure so that the Secretary of State is accountable through the report to Parliament for those matters. It is drafted as it is because we do not want to fall into the beguiling trap where, in a year or three years’ time perhaps, people look at a list of conditions in a piece of legislation, and take that as exhaustive. We want professional curiosity and intelligence to be used in these matters. Our concern is that differentiating physical and mental health could have unintended consequences years down the line for how the terms of the covenant are deployed at local level.

10.45 am

Alex Cunningham: The Minister will have heard me quoting John Apter earlier. Having talked to the College of Policing, he said that there is a

“lack of ability or willingness to mandate particular aspects of training and support.”—[*Official Report, Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Public Bill Committee*, 18 May 2021; c. 20, Q30.]

Does she not think that it is time they were given that ability so that, were willing, they could alter the training to suit changing circumstances and the needs of police officers?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. He touches upon one of those imponderables, in that the police are operationally independent. There is always a balancing act, for Ministers of any Government, of any colour, in persuading, cajoling, directing and working with the police to ensure that their training meets both the expectations of the public and the needs of police staff. That is why the police want to come with us on this journey, because we are working together on this. I cannot be as directional as he is perhaps suggesting.

However, the fact that we are having these debates in Parliament is significant. We plan for the board to have its inaugural meeting during the scrutiny of this Parliament, and very senior people, who take what this House says very seriously, will be around the table. Having this debate will very much help them understand their responsibilities in this regard. I note that Paul Griffiths said in giving evidence last week:

“There is a need for consistency across occupational health standards, but I think that could be achieved through the programme management rather than through legislation.”—[*Official Report, Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Public Bill Committee*, 18 May 2021; c. 20, Q30.]

That is really what we are trying to address in clause 1.

The hon. Member for Croydon Central kindly invited me to meet Sam from the Green Ribbon Policing campaign to discuss some of these issues, and I would be delighted to do so. We are very much in listening mode as to how we can improve our plans for this clause. We have kept the wording deliberately broad to ensure that there is room within the legislation to allow the Secretary of State to consider issues of importance as they arise, and the issues that have been raised here will be included in those considerations.

We have built flexibility into the clause through paragraphs (a) to (c) of subsection (2), to be addressed if considered appropriate. We very much want to strike the right balance, by directing the substance of the report without being too prescriptive. As the aim of the covenant is to focus on issues directly relevant to members or former members of the police workforce, we will be establishing a police covenant governance structure, along with key policing stakeholders, to feed directly into the police covenant report. This structure will support us in prioritising the most relevant issues to the police year on year, and ensure that the report reflects that.

Amendment 77 seeks to place the police covenant oversight board on a statutory footing. I hope that it is apparent from what I have said already that we do intend to establish such a board, albeit on a non-statutory basis, to drive the strategic direction of the covenant, to set priorities and to monitor progress, which will feed into the Home Secretary’s annual report to Parliament. The board will comprise key representatives from across policing, but we consider it appropriate for the board to be chaired by the Minister for Policing. As part of our plans to establish the board, we will ensure that its important work feeds into the police covenant report.

Sarah Jones: Does the Minister acknowledge that the reason we want to put the board on a statutory footing is that at the moment it falls to the Home Secretary to provide a report to Parliament only once a year? The power balance of who the covenant is for, who should be driving the improvements and who should be leading what is needed within the police is wrong. We believe that that balance could be put right if the Bill stated that it should be those police organisations, under an independent chair. If the Minister for Policing chairs the board, inevitably he will be marking his own homework. The whole purpose of the covenant is to enable the police to get the support they need in a way that is driven by the police for the police. It is not about the Minister deciding whether what is being done suits him.

Victoria Atkins: I am so pleased that the hon. Lady raises that, because the very first subsection of the Bill sets out the Secretary of State's accountability. It is the Secretary of State who lays a report before Parliament, so they are accountable to Parliament for the contents of that report. I do not have a crystal ball, but I imagine that when the first report is laid, hon. Members from across the House will ask the Secretary of State searching questions about, for example, its observations and provisions in relation to mental health and trauma. In drafting the covenant, we have tried to keep the Secretary of State's accountability absolutely on the face of the Bill. Just as the Secretary of State is accountable at the Dispatch Box, so too must the board be chaired by the relevant Minister, so that the flow of accountability to the Dispatch Box is there.

There are other important boards across Government that are not on a statutory footing but that assist and hold Ministers to account when it comes to how particular work is developed. The accountability point is that the Secretary of State must lay this report before Parliament, and then Parliament will hold the Secretary of State to account.

Sarah Jones: If the board is not on a statutory footing, it does not much matter who is chairing it, because there is no statutory line of accountability. If it is not on the face of the Bill, it does not matter. The Minister could agree to have an independent chair of the board if it is not going to be on a statutory footing. Her argument does not follow, in that sense.

Victoria Atkins: This is very speculative, so forgive me, but let us follow the hon. Lady's example. If the board has an independent chair, and to everyone's surprise they make recommendations to the Secretary of State that do not include measures relating to mental health, the Secretary of State is then in a very difficult position, because she is accountable to Parliament for the contents of the report, yet the work of the report, driven by a committee that is not chaired by one of her Ministers, has come to a set of results that she may not agree with and cannot account for. This is about the trail of accountability from the covenant through to the Dispatch Box. That is why—*[Interruption.]* I am so sorry; I have just been handed a note but cannot read the writing. I think I can get it. We have that chain of accountability through to the Dispatch Box, which is precisely what we are trying to achieve. We do not want the report or the Minister not to be accountable.

Sarah Champion rose—

Victoria Atkins: I will give way, but then I must make some progress.

Sarah Champion: For clarity—I am sorry to labour the point, but it is important—will the board be on a formal setting? Is it an actual thing? Is it the same group of organisations that make up the report at present? If the board is an actual thing, my concern is this. To take the Minister's hypothetical example, a new Home Secretary might not have any interest in mental health and wellbeing, but if the board is on a statutory footing, it still has a duty to push whoever is chairing it in the right direction. Could the Minister clarify whether the board is a formal body?

Victoria Atkins: Of course, and as with other boards, as I have said, the terms are set out and agreed. We want to be open and transparent on that. Its membership will include all the key policing representatives that one would imagine and, what is more, we have tried to go further by giving the Secretary of State the freedom to consult others. If there is a particular charity or organisation that is addressing a particular issue that the board feels is important that year, the Secretary of State has the power to consult that organisation. Again, to provide comfort, we will review the governance arrangements six months after the board is constituted, and we will consider the independence of the board's chair as part of that.

Amendment 76 is an important amendment. We are exploring how the police covenant, as currently drafted, can apply to police forces and law enforcement organisations that do not fall within the remit of the Home Office, in particular the British Transport police, the Civil Nuclear Constabulary, the Ministry of Defence police and the National Crime Agency. We are very much alive to the points made both by organisations and in this debate. With that work ongoing, I trust that the hon. Member for Croydon Central will not press the amendment to a vote.

Finally, new clause 44 would place a duty on specified health service bodies to have due regard to the police covenant principles. I recognise that, in advancing this new clause, the hon. Member for Croydon Central has drawn on the provisions of the Armed Forces Bill 2021 in respect of the armed forces covenant. The difficulty is that the two covenants are at a different stage in their development. The armed forces covenant has been around for some years, and in that context it is right that it should now develop, with the new duty provided for in clause 8 of the Armed Forces Bill. In contrast, we are just getting started with the police covenant. At the moment, we do not think it appropriate to place a requirement on specific public bodies to have due regard to the police covenant. We must gather robust evidence and have careful consideration of the needs and consultation with the relevant health service bodies.

I want to reassure the hon. Lady that, through the reporting requirement that we have set out in the legislation and the governance process, we will be looking at the best way to ensure that our police can access the right care when they need it. In the light of my explanation and my assurance that we are continuing to consider how best to address the report requirement for non-Home Office forces, I hope that the hon. Member for Rotherham will be content to withdraw her amendment.

The Chair: Before I call Sarah Champion, would the shadow Minister like to say anything in response?

Sarah Jones *indicated dissent.*

Sarah Champion: The Minister is clearly in listening mode, and it is deeply appreciated how much time and consideration she has clearly given to the amendment. I am reassured by what she has said. If possible, I would like to have some more of the detail that she was talking about. At this point, I will not push the amendment to a vote, because of the chance to do so at a later date.

Sarah Jones: I thank the Minister for her responses. On amendments 76 and 77, I stress again how keen the police world is that we make some progress on those two issues. I noted that she said on clause 77 that there will be a review in six months that will consider the independence of the chair. I think it makes sense to have an independent chair and believe it is appropriate, given that we are suggesting that the board should review the annual report before it is published. It cannot say what it is—it cannot control that—so having an independent chair would give comfort. However, I heard what she said on that, so I will not push that amendment to a Division. On amendment 76, which she briefly responded to after she got the note that we should hurry up, she said that work is ongoing. I cannot stress enough how strongly the different organisations feel about that. Again, I will not test the view of the Committee on that.

11 am

On new clause 44, however, there is a complete difference of view. The Minister's view that we are just getting started on this and therefore should not provide as wide provisions as possible is the opposite of our view, which is that the point at which we start is exactly the point that we should do so. We cannot be in a position in which the police get more support for their health needs but there is no duty on local health authorities to respond to those needs; both are needed. I will test the view of the Committee on new clause 44.

Sarah Champion: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The Chair: Nobody wants to press any other amendments to a vote, and new clause 44 will be dealt with later, so we come to the decision on clause 1.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

INCREASE IN PENALTY FOR ASSAULT ON EMERGENCY
WORKER

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. Clause 2 increases the maximum penalty for common assault or battery against an emergency worker from 12 months to two years' imprisonment, thereby delivering our manifesto commitment. Our emergency services place themselves in harm's way to protect us, and it is therefore right that we treat with particular seriousness any assault committed against an emergency worker,

which is why we seek to legislate to increase the maximum sentence for assault against them from 12 months to two years' imprisonment. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to our emergency services for the work they do on our behalf and on behalf of all our constituents, keeping us safe, looking after us and protecting us. I am sure the whole Committee will be united in expressing that sentiment.

We consulted last year on extending the maximum penalty from one year to two years and found overwhelming support for the move. In evidence last week, we heard representatives of policing and emergency services expressing strong support for the move as well. It will give courts the ability to pass higher sentences, reflecting the seriousness and severity of these offences. The clause does not change the definition of emergency workers. That is set out in section 3(1) of the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 and covers police constables; National Crime Agency officers; prison and custody officers; fire, rescue and search personnel; and those people providing NHS services. The clause simply amends the maximum sentence that appears in that Act from 12 months to two years.

It is worth saying that, where more serious assaults occur against emergency workers, such as actual bodily harm, grievous bodily harm or grievous bodily harm with intent, those offences will be charged as those more serious matters, which of course have higher sentences. Actual bodily harm has a maximum sentence of five years; GBH, under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, also has a five-year maximum; and GBH with intent has a maximum sentence of life. We of course expect more serious assaults on our emergency workers to be prosecuted and sentenced accordingly.

It is worth noting that the proportion of defendants in assault cases against emergency workers receiving immediate custody went up last year compared with the year before, from 17% to 25%, and about 10,000 cases were successfully prosecuted and sentenced. This legislation is being used on a fairly wide basis.

No amendments have been tabled to the clause. I believe it commands widespread support across the House and among the public. I do not want to detain the Committee longer than necessary. I think I have covered the key elements of the proposals, and spoken about the importance of the work of our emergency services and the tribute that we pay to them. On that basis, I commend the clause to the Committee.

Maria Eagle: I do not wish to detain the Committee for long; I have just a couple of points. The Minister set out that the consultation has gone on. It was obviously a manifesto commitment of his party, and I generally approve of manifesto commitments being implemented. Even if I might not agree with all the ones that were in his manifesto, I can see the point, but am I not right that the original intention of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who introduced the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act, was to have a two-year maximum, but it was reduced during the passage of the legislation to one year as a consequence of the Government of the day wanting it to be one year?

I understand that there have been consultations and a manifesto commitment since, but from where does this Damascene conversion come? It seems to me that the

Government originally said, “We’ll support the legislation if the maximum is one year,” and within months of it being implemented they were saying, “It’s got to be two years,” which was what my hon. Friend actually wanted. He cut it in order to get Government support. I am interested to find out where that conversion came from. Was there some sudden bit of evidence that convinced the Government that my hon. Friend was correct, in which case I congratulate the Government on being willing to change their mind. I would be interested to hear from the Minister where that change of heart came from.

Secondly, I notice that the British Association of Social Workers and the Social Workers Union have submitted a petition to the Government, which I understand has quite a few thousand signatures, asking them to amend the legislation to include social workers in the definition of emergency workers. No doubt there are arguments for and against that, but I wonder whether the Minister has anything to say about whether the Government have any intention of doing that.

Sarah Jones: Clause 2, as the Minister, who is my parliamentary neighbour, has outlined, increases the maximum penalty for assaulting an emergency worker from 12 months to two years. We absolutely support that provision. As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood highlighted, the Opposition have been calling for it for years. On Second Reading of the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018, which my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda introduced, he eloquently said:

“An assault on anyone is wrong, but an attack on any emergency worker—whether that is a police constable, a paramedic, an ambulance driver, an accident and emergency doctor or nurse, a fire officer, a prison officer, someone working in search and rescue, or someone working on a lifeboat—is an attack on us all. And when we are all attacked, we all stand firm together.”—[*Official Report*, 20 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 1103.]

Many Members, including the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle, were present on Second Reading, and I remember well the huge support for that private Member’s Bill, with many Members wanting to speak.

During the covid pandemic, which has happened since that legislation was passed, there has been a shocking increase in the number of attacks on frontline emergency service workers, with a 31% increase compared with 2019. Over the last five years, attacks on frontline police officers have gone up by 50%. It has been clear through the pandemic that emergency services and shopworkers have been right at the forefront, risking their own health to serve their communities. Many have faced unacceptable attacks as they have worked to keep us safe, from being spat at and punched to being verbally abused and intimidated. Those attacks should be met with swift, meaningful punishment.

As I mentioned earlier, Sergeant Matt Ratana was murdered doing the job that he loved last year. All of us, I hope, would do everything that we can to honour his memory by campaigning to stop assaults on our police as best we can. The NHS figures are disturbing. Between January and July last year, there were more than 1,600 physical assaults on UK ambulance workers. In London, there were 355 physical assaults on ambulance workers and 239 incidents of verbal abuse. I experienced

it myself when I rode out with some police officers, and we had to arrest people who were on drugs and being highly abusive. The ambulance workers arrived and were sexually assaulted by the two men. It is a daily occurrence, and we should not accept it.

The Government’s impact assessment states that over 11,250 cases of assault on an emergency worker were proceeded against in 2019, with around 9,050 resulting in a sentence. Of those, 1,900 cases received a fine, 3,600 a community sentence, 950 a suspended sentence and 1,550 an immediate custodial sentence. Of those receiving an immediate custodial sentence, most—67%—were sentenced to three months or less, 27% were given a sentence of three to six months, and only 6% received an immediate custodial sentence of six months or more.

We should pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and for Rhondda for all their work campaigning to achieve the change. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax originally drafted the “Protect the Protectors” Bill and campaigned relentlessly with the Police Federation for its introduction. The Bill was later picked up as a private Member’s Bill by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda, and received universal support to be passed into law.

As has been mentioned, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda had originally pushed for a two-year maximum sentence in his Bill, but the Government had wanted 12 months, to which he agreed in order to ensure that the Bill passed. It is a shame that the Government did not agree to it at that time and it would be useful to understand what the change in view is down to. There are still concerns around the stronger sentence only applying to convictions in the Crown court, and some in the police have raised concerns that it should come alongside effective sentencing guidance: magistrates should be able to sentence for longer to avoid clogging up the Crown court. Sentencing guidance has not yet been published in relation to section 2 of the 2018 Act, and while the increased sentence is welcome in the Bill, it would be good to hear from the Minister about his plans for new sentencing guidance.

Mr Goodwill: Is it also the case that, because we introduced the ability to appeal against lenient sentences, if judges and magistrates do not use the powers in the Bill available to them, it is open to the Government or law officers to challenge those sentences?

Sarah Jones: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It would be good to hear the Minister’s view on that in his response.

To finish my remarks on clause 2, which recognises the bravery of emergency workers and appreciates that there should be increased sentences for those who assault them, the Government could take many other actions that may also reduce the number of assaults against emergency workers. We should not lose sight of them. Being alone on a patrol increases the risk of assault, and that tends to be down to resources. The Government need to tackle that issue. We also have a woefully small amount of evidence as to why assaults are increasing. What is the evidence around what is happening, and why it is happening? What analysis has been done by the Home Office on where these assaults are taking place, and why?

[Sarah Jones]

Linked to that is the issue of protective equipment. There has been a big increase in body-worn cameras and spit guards in policing, but what lessons are actually being learned from covid, and from the experience suffered by our police officers and other emergency workers during this time, to ensure that we are doing everything we can to protect them in the future? In conclusion, clause 2 is a welcome step in the right direction.

Sarah Champion: Covid has obviously changed everything, including our definition of “emergency worker”. Several MPs have pointed out that emergency workers are not the only group suffering from frequent violent attacks, and provisions should be extended to all staff in the NHS and social care, as well as to shopworkers. In 2020, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers found that the vast majority of shopworkers—88%—were victims of verbal abuse in 2020. They were largely trying to implement the covid restrictions. Nearly two thirds were threatened, and nearly one in 10 were assaulted. Can the Minister explain what the Government are doing for those workers? They were on the frontline of the pandemic and should be given the same level of protection as emergency workers.

11.15 am

Chris Philp: Let me reply briefly to some of the points that have been raised by Opposition Members.

The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood asked about what had prompted the change from one year to two years and if there had been a “Damascene conversion.” The change is evidence that the Government are always willing to listen and to reflect. They have listened to organisations such as the Police Federation and to the results of the consultation. It is no bad thing that a Government are willing to keep things under review and to make changes, where there is public appetite or evidence to support them, rather than simply to remain with a particular position that was taken two or three years ago. It is a sign of maturity and wisdom that we are willing to make changes as appropriate.

Both the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Rotherham asked about other workers, including social workers. The 2018 Act, which passed with widespread cross-party support, drew a particular distinction about frontline emergency workers—the police, firefighters, frontline NHS staff, rescue services and so on—who are putting themselves directly into harm’s way, because what they are doing is unique.

However, as both hon. Members and the shadow Minister said, other workers also have contact with the public, including retail workers and social workers, which is important. That is why the sentencing guidelines we already have rightly recognise that a victim might be working in the public sector or otherwise providing a service to the public, including working in a shop, as an aggravating factor. Because it is recognised as an aggravating factor, it means that if the victim is one of those people, the judge is duty bound to pass a higher sentence than would otherwise be the case, so that is accounted for in the way I just described.

The shadow Minister spoke a little about the sentences passed down and mentioned that in 2019 only 6% of sentences for common assault on an emergency worker

were for six months or more. That went up a bit last year. The figures for 2020 came out just a few days ago, and it went up to 15% in 2020. The average sentence has gone up as well. By elevating the maximum sentence today, we in Parliament are sending a clear signal to the judiciary and others that we expect this offence to be taken extremely seriously, and sentenced accordingly and commensurately.

My understanding is that the Sentencing Council guidelines for the offence as it already exists are due to be published in the near future, possibly as soon as later this week. They will provide further clarity to the judiciary, but Parliament’s voice will be heard clearly today in signalling that we expect longer sentences for people who assault our emergency workers. I am sure the judiciary will hear that.

The shadow Minister made some points about ensuring that the police are properly protected. She drew particular attention to the risks of attending lone patrols and the need for resources. We are in the middle of a successful police recruitment campaign, which will eventually target 23,000 extra police. We are about a third of the way through that. The result of that extra recruitment will be to mitigate some of the risks that the shadow Minister mentioned. As a fellow Croydon MP and her constituency neighbour, I am well aware of those risks and was painfully affected by the awful murder of Sergeant Matt Ratana. I take the opportunity to join the shadow Minister in paying tribute to Sergeant Ratana and his family. He died in the course of duty after a long and distinguished career, and I am sure we all want to remember him and his family.

I hope that answers the questions that were raised, and I commend the clause to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3

SPECIAL CONSTABLES AND POLICE FEDERATIONS: AMENDMENTS TO THE POLICE ACT 1996

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Victoria Atkins: Sir Charles, noting that there are no amendments, I do not propose to speak to the clause, which I commend to the Committee.

Sarah Jones: I was proposing to say a few words.

The Chair: Which is absolutely your right, shadow Minister.

Sarah Jones: Thank you, Sir Charles. Clause 3 would allow police specials—volunteer police officers—to become members of the Police Federation, a proposal that we support. I wanted to say a few words because special constables play a vital role in keeping our communities safe. They have been of huge value to communities across the country, particularly through the pandemic. The special constabulary has a long and proud history and has made an immeasurable contribution to policing our communities.

Sir Robert Peel is often quoted:

“The police are the people, and the people are the police.”

That cannot be more applicable than to our special constables who volunteer to make our communities safer while working at other jobs. It is important that

special constabulary officers feel valued and that their contribution is recognised. It is imperative that they have the support and opportunities to thrive and feel they have the protections they deserve for doing such an important job. I know this clause is close to the Police Federation's heart and to that of former special John Apter, who has campaigned for police specials to join the federation.

The number of police specials has significantly declined. There were 9,126 specials in England and Wales in September 2020. That is 10,500 fewer than in 2012, a drop of more than 15%. John Apter argues that including the specials in the Police Federation will help increase numbers, as the representation that the change will bring may encourage more people to volunteer with the police. It would give specials a legal status, like that of police officers who are members of the federation. Putting the change into law will formalise that support for specials. In a survey about federation membership, 94% of respondents who were specials said that they wanted to join the Police Federation.

In Scotland, police specials are already part of the Scottish Police Federation. Scottish specials have the same legal status in the force as their regular officer counterparts. Both are appointed to office by the chief constable of Police Scotland, so there is no legal barrier to specials joining the Scottish Police Federation. The inclusion of specials in the Scottish federation has been uncontroversial, as far as I can see.

The Association of Special Constabulary Officers is supportive of specials being given greater access to the federation's legal advice and assistance services. It says:

"As frontline volunteer police officers we are exposed to the same risks of complaints and injuries and conduct investigations, and the Federation has an unrivalled local network of capability on those issues already in place, which is required under police regulations and funded by forces. In this respect ASCO is supportive of the ongoing work."

However, ASCO has voiced concerns about how much it will cost and the risk of specials losing their independent voice. ASCO wants to retain its role as the representative association and professional body for police specials, with the federation being the lead and expert organisation in respect of the elements of formal representation that it is funded to undertake.

The cost will be around £3 million, which is not being covered by the Home Office. If the number of specials increase, as we hope, back to 2012 levels, that would possibly rise to £6 million or £7 million. The chair, workforce lead and "citizens in policing" lead for the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners have agreed in principle to fund membership for specials. They wrote to all current PCCs in June 2020, asking them to indicate their willingness to pay specials' subscription fees. Although we support the relatively uncontroversial clause, will the Minister confirm that that £3 million cost is accurate? Does she think the cost of membership is proportionate? Is it appropriate for taxpayers to cover that amount out of the police precept, especially if the number of specials rise and the cost goes up to £6 million or £7 million?

Victoria Atkins: I note the time. Our special constables make a vital contribution to keeping communities safe, through their professionalism, dedication and sacrifice, increasingly fulfilling a range of specialised and frontline roles. They often face the same risks as regular officers while on duty and have the same powers as regular officers.

11.25 am

The Chair adjourned the Committee without Question put (Standing Order No. 88).

Adjourned till this day at Two o'clock.

