

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

## Public Bill Committee

### LEVELLING-UP AND REGENERATION BILL

*Sixth Sitting*

*Tuesday 28 June 2022*

*(Afternoon)*

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CLAUSES 1 TO 6 agreed to.

Adjourned till Thursday 30 June at half-past Eleven o'clock.

Written evidence reported to the House.

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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,

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**Saturday 2 July 2022**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chairs:* MR PETER BONE, † SIR MARK HENDRICK, MRS SHERYLL MURRAY, IAN PAISLEY

† Andrew, Stuart (*Minister for Housing*)

† Atherton, Sarah (*Wrexham*) (Con)

† Dines, Miss Sarah (*Derbyshire Dales*) (Con)

† Farron, Tim (*Westmorland and Lonsdale*) (LD)

† Fletcher, Colleen (*Coventry North East*) (Lab)

Gibson, Patricia (*North Ayrshire and Arran*) (SNP)

† Henry, Darren (*Broxtowe*) (Con)

† Kruger, Danny (*Devizes*) (Con)

† Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma (*South Shields*) (Lab)

† Maskell, Rachael (*York Central*) (Lab/Co-op)

† Moore, Robbie (*Keighley*) (Con)

† Mortimer, Jill (*Hartlepool*) (Con)

† Norris, Alex (*Nottingham North*) (Lab/Co-op)

† O'Brien, Neil (*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities*)

† Pennycook, Matthew (*Greenwich and Woolwich*) (Lab)

† Smith, Greg (*Buckingham*) (Con)

† Vickers, Matt (*Stockton South*) (Con)

Bethan Harding, Adam Mellows-Facer, *Committee Clerks*

† **attended the Committee**

## Public Bill Committee

Tuesday 28 June 2022

(Afternoon)

[SIR MARK HENDRICK *in the Chair*]

### Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

2 pm

**The Chair:** Before we begin, I have a few reminders for the Committee. Please switch any electronic devices to silent. No food or drink is permitted during Committee sittings, except for water, which is provided on the tables. *Hansard* colleagues will be grateful if Members could email their speaking notes to [hansardnotes@parliament.uk](mailto:hansardnotes@parliament.uk).

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 29, in clause 1, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

“(c) details of how Her Majesty’s Government will ensure that the levelling-up missions are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal to end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round.”

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to consider amendment 30.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Mark. The amendments simply ask that the Government align the levelling-up missions with the United Nations sustainable development goal to end hunger and ensure access by all people—the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants—to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round. The amendments also ask that that be measured by tracking the prevalence of undernourishment and moderate or severe food insecurity in the population, based on the food insecurity experience scale.

It is astonishing that in a Bill that attempts to level up all parts of the UK, not once is hunger or food insecurity mentioned, despite the Prime Minister acknowledging that it is not possible to level up the country without reducing the number of children living in poverty. There are 14.5 million people living in poverty across our country. Poverty among children and pensioners was rising for the six years prior to covid, along with a resurgence of Victorian diseases associated with malnutrition, such as scurvy and rickets.

Surely the Government must have grasped that in order for at least five of their own missions to succeed, people need to have access to food. Living standards, education, skills, health and wellbeing are all deeply impacted upon if people live in a household marked by hunger. Pre-pandemic, over 2 million children started their school day with a gnawing hunger in their stomach. No matter how impressive a teacher is, if a child is worrying about where their next meal may come from, they simply do not learn. Overall, the physical, emotional and mental health links to hunger are well documented.

The Government’s own reporting in the family resources survey, which was only made possible after years of campaigning to implement my Food Insecurity Bill, shows that households in the north-east are more likely struggle to afford food than those anywhere else in the country. It would be completely misguided to think that we can level up the country without addressing this issue. Due to the pandemic, soaring inflation and limited Government support to mitigate the impact of rising living costs, those figures will be far worse in the coming years, without concerted and committed Government action.

By making a clear commitment in the Bill to tackle growing levels of hunger, the Government are signalling that they understand and are willing to act, and to be held to account for that action. They signed up to sustainable development goal 2 in 2015, with the aim to end hunger. The Minister for South Asia, North Africa, the United Nations and the Commonwealth—in the other place—recently reconfirmed the UK’s commitment to achieving the goals by 2030, stressing that the SDGs remain a globally recognised framework for building back better from coronavirus, in line with the Prime Minister’s levelling-up priorities. That makes it even more surprising that hunger is missing from the Bill.

If not in this Bill, how will the Government measure the prevalence of hunger in line with their levelling-up commitments? Or are the Prime Minister’s comments just more of the empty rhetoric that we have become so accustomed to from this Government? So far, the Government’s performance has been inadequate to combat hunger and food insecurity. The SDG tracker figures for 2020 to 2021 show that over 4 million people are regularly going hungry or do not have access to nutritious food on a regular basis. The Food Foundation has found that the number of food-insecure households is rising, with figures for 2022 so far show prevalence in nearly 5 million households, with 2 million children suffering. If it were not for the estimated 2,300 food banks in this country, those adults and children would be completely without food. That should be a source of great shame for those on the Government Benches.

The regional disparities that the Bill supposedly aims to level out are most stark when we consider the fact that life expectancy in my part of the world, the north-east, is six years less for men and seven years less for women than it is in the south-east. The pandemic has revealed the serious underlying health inequalities in this country. Increasing healthy life expectancy is a huge challenge, and public health funding was a crucial part of achieving that mission. However, the most recent allocation saw councils receive a real-terms cut—another example of the Government’s actions not matching their levelling-up rhetoric.

The cross-party Environmental Audit Committee reported in 2019 that, when it came to sustainable development goal 2,

“the UK is not performing well enough or performance is deteriorating”.

The Government-commissioned national food strategy found that diet is the leading cause of avoidable harm to our health, but the Government have ignored Henry Dimbleby’s recommendation to increase eligibility for free school meals. Adult and child obesity levels are one of the metrics used to assess the success of the mission to improve life expectancy, yet today, on the anniversary

of the Government's child obesity plan, it has been reported that 70% of commitments have been delayed or have disappeared.

If the Government are serious about levelling up, tackling food insecurity is vital to achieving the levelling-up White Paper's missions on education, skills, wellbeing, living standards, health and life expectancy. As Anna Taylor, chief executive of the Food Foundation, has said:

"If the Government wants to really get to grips with the issue, a comprehensive approach to levelling-up must tackle food insecurity head on."

Accepting this simple and cost-neutral amendment would signal that this Government accept, at long last, that people are going hungry on their watch and that they are prepared to do something about it. I sincerely hope the Minister has carefully considered my amendments, and I look forward to his response.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Shields on tabling these two really important amendments, which it is right for this Committee and the Government to consider. I want to reflect on the source of food poverty and some of the challenges we face.

Fifty years ago, 20% of household income was spent on food, roughly speaking. Today, again roughly speaking, that figure is 10%. That is not a comment on our leaving the European Union; it is an observation that over the past 40-odd years the UK has effectively subsidised food without ever really debating whether that was a good thing or the correct policy. The fact that direct allocation of funding to food production in this country is being phased out is going to have an impact on the price of food, and if we care about levelling up within and between communities, and about tackling poverty and all the consequences that the hon. Lady has rightly mentioned, we are surely going to care about that impact.

I wonder whether Ministers consider that ensuring the United Kingdom does what it can to tackle the rising cost of food, not least by being able to produce more of it itself, is part of their brief and their mission. It depends on who one believes, but about 55%, roughly speaking, of the food that British people eat is produced in the United Kingdom. If we are moving away from a form of direct payments to farmers and towards payments for producing public goods—which, in principle, I am in favour of—we need to be mindful of what the consequences will be. As the Government seek to withdraw direct payments for farmers as they move towards their new scheme, unless they do so well and carefully, there will be consequences. We will see fewer farmers and less food produced, which will have an impact on the price of food on supermarket shelves across this country.

Also, when levelling up our own country, we surely do not want to be responsible for adding to global poverty in the process. If we by accident or design reduce the amount of food we produce as a country, we will add not only to need in our country, but to our demand for food imported from other countries. Getting on for 100% of the grain consumed by people in north Africa and the middle east comes from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, so we can see a huge problem there. The United Kingdom fishing in the same market as north African and middle eastern countries for its food—food

that we could be producing ourselves—is a reminder that if we, by accident or design, produce less food ourselves, we are actively putting the world's poorest people in an even more marginal position.

I am keen for the Minister to accept the hon. Lady's amendments and to consider the impact of levelling up as a whole, not just on the poorest people in our communities, but across the world.

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Mark. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields on her amendments and the powerful case she made for them. I agreed with her completely. She is absolutely right that there will be no levelling up if we have hunger in our communities. Just as a child cannot do much hungry, in our communities people will not be able to access those better opportunities that we hope for them, and that we believe levelling up will drive for them, if they are hungry. Measures in her Food Insecurity Bill would do much to tackle such issues. I hope the Minister is minded to reflect on that.

My hon. Friend's points about the obesity strategy were well made. That is a salutary case, which tells us a little about some of the risks ahead with levelling up. A year ago, I was the shadow Minister in that area, and that strategy was the big priority of the day for the Government—"Don't worry about us. We're going to drive that forward and it will make all the difference"—because at the time the Prime Minister had personal investment in it. Now the Prime Minister's personal focus is considerably elsewhere from whether the nation is overweight. As a result, a number of things have been dropped—every Sunday we find out which more have been dropped—perhaps in recognition of political considerations, rather than public health ones. That is what we risk with levelling up, if we do not get such things on the face of the Bill, instead relying on good will and trust, which today there might be plenty of, but tomorrow different people will be in our chairs and the agenda will have moved on. That is important.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the points he is making, and to my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields. A bigger point should be made: while the second sustainable development goal is clearly for zero hunger, the first goal is for no poverty. Here we have a matrix of 17 ambitions that will, in effect, level up areas across the world. We are talking about having levelling-up missions. Given that the Government are way off target on many of the SDGs, first, is there not a risk that we might well be repeating that exercise in the levelling-up agenda and, secondly, with two sets of matrices, should they not be integrated so that the levelling-up missions can be mapped on to the SDGs?

**Alex Norris:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. If as a nation we are genuinely seeking to do both those things—as I hope the Minister will say that we are—they need to be done together. As my hon. Friend said, they should be mapped on to each other, so that the actions that we will talk about shortly drive the activity and the outputs that we all want to see.

Turning to the amendments, and reflecting on the contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for South Shields and for York Central, it is important to

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state that the sustainable development goals are for all of us. They are not a worthy set of indicators and actions held at a global level that apply to those around the world who have the least and need the most support; they are analogous to levelling up in the sense that they apply around the world and in every community in some way, even if that way is different. Climate, for example, is an area to which we all need to contribute in our different ways, yet all of us will benefit. Those with the most, of which we are one, might have the best means to make the strongest contribution.

2.15 pm

We hope that, with all our resources and wealth in this country, we would not need to worry about goal 2, on ending hunger, but actually we do, for all the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields set out. FareShare estimates that one in 10 of the UK's population—nearly 7 million—struggle to get enough food. Goodness me, what does that say about us? Similarly, one of the developments over the last 12 years of this Government has been rampant food bank expansion. My hon. Friend mentioned the number of food banks. It is also startling to look at the number of three-day parcels. In 2010-11, 61,500 people used Trussell Trust foodbanks for a three-day parcel. Last year, that was nearly 2.2 million people. Even if we go back to before the pandemic and all the impact it had on people's lives, it was still 1.9 million people—an extraordinary expansion.

That is the legacy of the last 12 years and having an unbalanced economy, poorly thought-out welfare and essentially zero wage growth. That is what we are left with and what we seek to level up from, and actually that is what will make our work here much harder. It is present in all our communities and, frankly, all of us should be very angry about it—I know I am.

If we are levelling up, surely we are addressing hunger, and amendment 29 would be a welcome way of doing so. If we are going to do that, and I reference previous discussions, we need to be honest about the scale of the problem. Amendment 30 does that well. The level of denial across the Government on this issue is staggering. Hunger is happening every day, and it is avoidable. Reading the same tired, discredited stats about it, which the Prime Minister will do tomorrow at Prime Minister's questions, and saying, "We've never been doing so well economically," will not do, frankly. We need to be honest, and amendment 30 would do that. This pair of amendments would move us forward considerably, and I hope the Minister is minded to listen.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien):** Let me start by addressing some of the wider and important points made by the hon. Member for South Shields and then move on to the narrower issue of the amendment. The hon. Member made an impassioned speech and some important observations about the big differences between life expectancy in different parts of the country. The differences were also highlighted in our White Paper. We are doing a number of things to directly tackle those problems, both on the income side that she talked about and the health side.

With regard to help for poorer households, the universal credit taper rate cut will help lower-income families keep more of their earnings. It makes nearly 2 million households about £1,000 better off if they work full time. The increase in the national living wage introduced by this Government makes full-time workers about £1,000 better off, and as it goes up towards two thirds of medium earnings, it will be one of the highest minimum wages in the world. We are investing about £1.1 billion over this spending review for employment support for the sick and disabled, and we have the £1 billion support fund for those households that are most in need during this difficult period.

We are all keen to do everything we can to try to reduce the reliance on foodbanks. That is why we have reviewed the role of sanctions in the benefit system. There will always be sanctions and rules in the benefit system, but we need to ensure that they are proportionate and avoid people unnecessarily finding themselves without benefits. We have expanded free school meals to all five to seven-year-olds, benefiting about 1.3 million children. We have spent £24 million on extending school breakfasts.

We are taking action on the health side of the ledger. The introduction of the soft drinks industry levy—the sugar tax, as some call it—has led to the average person consuming the equivalent of one fewer 250 ml sugary drink per week. It has been a huge success, and one of the most successful of its kind anywhere in the world. Through the forthcoming health disparities White Paper, we will continue to go further on that issue. Community diagnostic facilities will be a part of the story, as well as the overall increase in NHS investment. There are a lot of things happening on the vital agenda that the hon. Lady talked about.

Likewise, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale made a profound point: the fundamental questions of food security and production, and the way they have been framed for the last 40 years, have changed. There is now a global under-supply challenge. He was quite right to say that that must make us rethink, and that is why we are investing heavily in our farm transition plan, spending about £270 million on innovation to help farming communities and farmers. However, there was a bigger and more profound point in what he said.

The hon. Member for York Central talked about the need to integrate the agendas of the sustainable development goals and the levelling-up missions. We are doing that, although in a different way from that suggested in the amendments. The country is committed to delivery of the UN sustainable development goals by 2030, including the goal to end hunger and ensure access by all people to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round.

The Bill is designed to establish the framework for missions, not the content of the missions themselves. The framework provides ample opportunity to scrutinise the substance of the missions against a range of Government policies, including the sustainable development goals and health data. All Departments are responsible for aspects of the sustainable development goals that relate to their respective remits. Departments articulate how they are working towards those goals in their outcome delivery plans.

The last outcome delivery plan from Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office included information that is relevant to the goals raised in the

amendments. The next iteration of those departmental outcome delivery plans will also include information about how Departments are working towards their levelling-up mission. Those documents will simultaneously address progress on the UN missions and on our levelling-up mission, so we will have an integrated view. We think that is the appropriate place in which to make the link mentioned by the hon. Member for York Central between levelling-up missions and the UN sustainable development goals.

Mission 7, which addresses healthy life expectancy, is already linked to nutrition and food. The Government's food strategy, for example, committed to reducing the healthy life expectancy gap between local areas, where it is highest and lowest, by 2030; to adding five years to healthy life expectancy by 2035, as I said earlier; to reducing the proportion of the population who live with diet-related illnesses; and to committing to increasing the proportion of healthier food that is sold. In its forthcoming health disparities White Paper, the Department of Health and Social Care will set out missions to address, among other things, diet-related ill health.

All those measures will feed through to healthy life expectancy data, which already underpins the health mission. As a consequence, the amendment is unnecessary, so I ask the hon. Member for South Shields to withdraw it.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I will keep my comments brief as I do not wish to detain the Committee too long.

The Minister listed ways in which the Government are helping, but I politely remind him that people on universal credit have a five-week wait with no money at all. Pensions, benefits and wages are nowhere near keeping pace with inflation. The fact that the Government have had to put in emergency support funds to help families is indicative of their failure to help the hardest hit for such a long time.

I will not press the amendments to a vote on this occasion, but this is not the last time I will talk about this topic in Committee. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

*Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.*

**Alex Norris:** I beg to move amendment 14, in clause 1, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

“(2A) The first statement of levelling-up missions must include—

- (a) a requirement to improve pay, employment and productivity of every UK region by 2030, with the gap between the top performing and other areas closing,
- (b) a requirement to increase domestic public investment in Research and Development outside the Greater South East by at least 40% by 2030 and at least one-third over the Spending Review period,
- (c) a requirement by 2030 to improve local public transport connectivity across the UK with improved services, simpler fares and integrated ticketing,
- (d) a requirement by 2030 for there to be nationwide gigabit-capable broadband and 4G coverage, with 5G coverage for the majority of the population,
- (e) a requirement by 2030 the number of primary school children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths to have significantly

increased so that in England 90% of children will achieve the expected standard, and the percentage of children meeting the expected standard in the worst performing areas will have increased by over a third,

- (f) a requirement that by 2030 the number of people successfully completing high-quality skills training will have significantly increased in every area of the UK,
- (g) a requirement that by 2030 the gap in Healthy Life Expectancy (HLE) between local areas where it is highest and lowest will have narrowed, and by 2035 HLE will rise by 5 years,
- (h) a requirement that by 2030, well-being will have improved in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing,
- (i) a requirement that by 2030 people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between the top performing and other areas closing,
- (j) a requirement that by 2030, renters will have a secure path to ownership with the number of first-time buyers increasing in all areas; and for the number of non-decent rented homes to have fallen by 50%, with the biggest improvements in the lowest performing areas,
- (k) a requirement that by 2030 homicide, serious violence, and neighbourhood crime will have fallen, focused on the worst-affected areas,
- (l) a requirement that by 2030, every part of England that requests one will have a devolution deal with powers at or approaching the highest level of devolution and a simplified, long-term funding settlement, and
- (m) a requirement to build Northern Powerhouse Rail, a high-speed rail line, between Leeds and Manchester.”

*This amendment would require the statement of levelling-up missions to include the levelling-up missions detailed in the Levelling Up White Paper.*

One of the quirks of the Bill is that although the Government have kept their commitment to enshrining levelling-up missions in law, they have not enshrined “the” levelling-up missions in law. Clause 1 states only that a Minister of the Crown will set out those missions at some point, but there is no sense of what that means, so I want to explore that and hear from the Minister about it.

So much effort, light and heat went into heralding the new dawn of the levelling-up mission, and into the release of the White Paper and all the press releases—each releasing a bit of the same information every time—and so much work went on in the Chamber, including all the oral questions, but all we ever hear about is the Secretary of State and those missions that drive him out of bed every morning; he cannot do anything but those missions. They are the whole reason we are here—the centrepiece of the Government's domestic agenda—but they are completely absent from the Bill.

Indeed, the Minister himself nearly fell into that very trap in the debate on amendment 13, when he addressed a point from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central and said, on one of the missions she is very enthusiastic about, “That is why we are putting it into the Bill.” In fact, we are doing no such thing. We are not putting anything into the Bill. We are putting missions into the Bill, but there is no sense or prescription of what they are. The Committee is being asked to fly

[Alex Norris]

blind and trust that these will be very good things that really ought to be the focus of the Government of the day, but we just do not know what they are.

That is compounded by the fact that we are also working without an impact assessment. I raised that point on Second Reading, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), when she asked the Minister for Housing, who was winding up the debate, to confirm that an impact assessment will be published and when that would happen. The Minister responded:

“Yes, there will be, and it will come at the second stage of Committee.”—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2022; Vol. 715, c. 914.]

I am not quite sure what “the second stage of Committee” means in that context, but I do know that we do not have an impact assessment now. We are in a really odd situation where the Government are telling us that they have this centrepiece domestic commitment to levelling up that will right all the wrongs of everything they have done over the past 12 years—“Don’t worry, we’ll get this right now!”—but they cannot even tell us what impact it will have.

I put it to the Minister—hopefully he will tell me I am wrong—that none of this will make much of a difference, will it? The Government want to enshrine the missions in law, but the Minister cannot even say what they are. The Government want to change the missions themselves without the engagement of Parliament. They set them for five-year cycles, but they want to be able to move away from that, too. They do not want any independence in the system either—we have had that debate already.

This legislation is light and substance-less. Both the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), and myself have been criticised by the Secretary of State for saying, “Is this it?” when it comes to this agenda. However, once again, we are left to ask, “Is this it?” There seems to be no substance to the legislation; there is certainly no demonstration of it. I hope the Minister can address that.

In the absence of even the most basic analysis of what the Government themselves think they are going to deliver, we are being told that they ought to be left unfettered by ministerial decree to set the direction for levelling up. However, they cannot even tell us what they are seeking to achieve. That seems so odd and indicative of qualified commitment; we hear of strong commitment, but this is qualified commitment.

Amendment 14 is not the most elegant amendment that I have ever managed, but it seeks to address the issue that I have outlined. It does nothing more than add back to the Bill the Government’s own levelling-up missions—plus another of their centrepiece commitments that they have discarded along the way, because it was in my mind. Those commitments were important enough for the White Paper, so I think they might be important enough for us to have a quick look at them today. I will not go through them all.

The amendment would add back in a commitment to improve the pay, employment and productivity of every region in the UK by 2030, while closing the gaps between the best and worst off. We know from the recent Resolution Foundation report that, outside of London, no progress has been made in this area during my adult lifetime. In fact, this lack of overall income

change hides growing gaps in investment and self-employment income, driven by richer households in London and the south-east. The report also found that the Government’s investment plans will not move the dial on this issue. Again, it is perhaps no surprise that that commitment is not on the face of the Bill.

The second commitment is to research and development investment. The Minister made reference to research and development spending outside the south-east to at least three different witnesses that I can think of, and he has referenced it in two debates we have had so far. We support him in this venture, as it is really important. Why is the commitment not in the Bill? I cannot imagine that will change. When he mentioned it earlier, he talked about it in the context of the spending review period and the fact that that spending review will end at some point. Surely, the one-third element at least will be met in that time and the 40% element will be met by 2030. Otherwise, why has it been set so often?

Moving on a little, it is, perhaps, not a huge surprise that pledges around education, healthy life expectancy and wellbeing no longer feature in the legislation, given the record over the last decade. We will have plenty of time to talk housing, but that is not much better either.

I had hoped we would be able to probe the commitments, if they were on the face of the Bill. Perhaps the Minister will give us a commitment or a direction of travel on that. It might save us the bother of drafting a new clause, if we heard a commitment that the Minister and his colleagues were going to make levelling-up missions a statutory objective of the Homes and Communities Agency—Homes England to its friends. Indeed, they might be minded to say that all non-executive agencies that sit under the Department will have levelling up as one of their core missions. I hope the Minister can address that point. Then at the end of the amendment, we also make reference to Northern Powerhouse Rail—an oft-promised, core part of the levelling-up programme that has been downgraded too.

2.30 pm

Those missions are not my words; they are the Government’s own words. It is their Bill. I find it is quite strange that the two do not meet. The Minister will make his case. It could be that he feels the missions do not need to be explicitly in the Bill. Perhaps, as we heard in earlier debates, the priorities will change. Amendment 14 only mandates the first statement. In fact, it only mandates that on the very first day of the levelling-up programme, the Government ought to be keeping the promises they made so publicly when they committed to the agenda. I think it is reasonable for the Opposition, Parliament and the British people to expect that on at least the first day of levelling up, the Government demonstrate that they will do the things they say they will do.

I am not inclined to withdraw the amendment, but I will hear the case made. We want at least to hear a cast-iron, on the record and to the letter—frankly, to the comma—commitment that, following Royal Assent, the missions referred to in the first statement made under clause 1 will be identical to the missions in the White Paper, down to each semicolon and full stop. I cannot see the case for diverging. The Minister can avoid all that by accepting the amendment. We would all be better off if he did.

**Rachael Maskell:** I thank my hon. Friend for his opening remarks on amendment 14, which I wholeheartedly support. I want to talk first about the importance of the Bill. There are 325 pages about levelling up, yet not a mention of the indices that the levelling-up agenda will be focused around. That seems somewhat bizarre when they are so fundamental to addressing the inequalities and disparities across the country. Therefore, it is crucial that in clause 1 of the Bill we talk about what we are going to be focusing on.

The National Health Service Act 1946—right up to the Lansley changes in 2012—talked about all the areas in which healthcare would be delivered. When that was taken out, we suddenly saw a postcode lottery. I certainly do not want to see postcode lotteries around levelling up, because that would defeat the objective of the exercise. I believe it is really important to sew the missions into the Bill, so that we know what we are focusing on. I appreciate that the Minister may want to consider some of them again, so I will come on to that shortly.

Earlier today, I talked about the drivers to levelling up and their importance. We heard in evidence about the cluster economy, and I have talked much about the levelling up that that will bring to my city. The economic investment would bring inward investment and booming research in academia around those key cluster pieces, creating jobs, opportunities and skills. That will have a substantial impact on people's income and ability to have agency in our society. It will also address the grotesque inequalities and injustices across all our communities.

We heard the Minister earlier listing off the Government investments. It is not just about capital spend. It has to be about revenue spend. Revenue spend, which we have seen from other funding sources, has a significant impact on shifting inequalities. I think about the skills agenda and other areas. I trust that we will have the right focus when we look at where to place those investments to accelerate opportunity for our constituents.

Sitting within the employment framework is the transport framework, which we had a discussion about earlier. In amendment 14, proposed new paragraphs (c) and (m) demonstrate the difference that good transport infrastructure could make to where investment goes and how that relates to communities. For example, the distance between York and Hull is just 37.1 miles, and yet the fastest train takes 54 minutes and the average journey is one hour and eight minutes. If those two cities were connected by better transport links, the bioeconomy of York could fire the energy and fuel economy of the Humber and vice versa. We would then start seeing real intersectionality and those economies would be more than the sum of their parts. We would then start to see opportunities coming to areas of significant deprivation in Hull, and to my city of York. Such connectivity is crucial, which is why I welcome the aims of the amendment.

If we think about London, we see how easy it is to connect over such distances, and we see its booming economy. The evidence pays out: where the infrastructure is lacking, that impacts on the opportunities otherwise available. I say that about the hard-core transport infrastructure, but the same could be said about the digital infrastructure. The further people are from urban cores, particularly from London, and particularly in rural areas, the weaker the digital infrastructure.

Let me turn to proposed new paragraphs (e) and (f). A skills economy is important to the creation of a stronger economy. Higher York is an initiative that brings together the two further education colleges as well as the two universities and together they are working to build the economy of York. I hope that the Minister can start seeing the pieces of the jigsaw come together as the cluster economy, the skills and the transport infrastructure have the multiplier effect. The amendments are so crucial to Labour because we want to ensure that we are building the picture as opposed to pieces of it being in different places. This is about the connectivity between them.

Proposed new paragraphs (g) and (h) relate to the physical and mental health of our communities. I want to draw on the work of Professor Sir Michael Marmot. I am sure that we all are familiar with the work that he has conducted over a significant time, which has demonstrated that economic disparity is the greatest contributor to health inequality. Alongside that work is that of Dame Carol Black and the epidemiologists Professor Kate Pickett and Professor Richard Wilkinson. They have made the case to demonstrate how living in particular regions and nations determine people's life chances, and in turn that disparity dictates people's opportunities in some many different respects.

If we look across the nation, we know that in 2010 the disparity in male life expectancy in the most deprived areas of England was 10.3 years. I have to say that that disparity has shortened and that the gap for women is now 8.3 years. Those are important indicators, and that is why a measurement of life expectancy should be included in the Bill—so that we can focus on what can be achieved from it. Just in York, I know that there is eight-year life expectancy gap between those who live in Copmanthorpe and Wheldrakes and those who live in Clifton and Westfield—affluence versus poverty. We know that is a driver of other negative factors.

On top of people's wellbeing, their satisfaction in their own local community is also important. That is why proposed new paragraph (i) is so important. I know that the Professor Kate Pickett has been looking at the inequality of power. I hope much of the Bill will address that inequality, although I have some concern about that.

Our constituents are not able to determine their destiny. They do not have agency or a voice in the future of their communities, and that includes decisions about the type of housing being built and whether it is for external investors to buy, as opposed to being for them to have a foothold. We must look at this point of agency and opportunity in order to build satisfaction. When people are happier, that builds identity and pride in place, which is important for the wider cultural context of society, so this is an important thing to hardwire into the legislation.

I recognise proposed new paragraph (j) talks about housing security. I am sure we will talk about that a lot over the course of the coming months, because it is too important not to keep bringing up. I know the impact it is having on my communities, with more and more people being pushed out and their identity and opportunities being taken away. It is important to draw on what we heard in the evidence sessions about that, and from our own experience, as we seek to amend the Bill. I trust the Minister will be more open to amendments as we work

[*Rachael Maskell*]

through the Bill, because it is crucial that we get this right. This may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for us in this place and for our constituents, as they seek the main thing that is important for future stability.

Publicly funded projects should not suck money out of a locality, but regrettably that is what is happening. They take land for profit and leave little by way of legacy, frustrating the opportunity such projects have to make an impact in a local area. In future debates, I will refer a lot to York Central, where public land and public money does not guarantee either levelling up or public good. As a result, we want to see significant change in the legislation to ensure that we are maximising our public assets to benefit communities. Housing is such an example.

External investors will purchase luxury developments on the York Central site, and Homes England has indicated that the area could well turn into “Airbnb Central” in the middle of York, fuelling the hen and stag economy we are trying to steer away from, while denying people in my city the chance to get a franchise into housing. Even worse, the situation is heating up the housing market, meaning that it is running away from people in my community. That is why I hope we can bring the significant change we need to the legislation.

When the Government invest in projects, we want to ensure that they level up communities and provide opportunity. That is why these clauses are so important. They are looking at the housing context but they focus on optimising the social, economic and environmental benefits for communities, and we heard much in the evidence session to support that.

I am glad that the Government have recognised the importance of criminal justice and, I trust, will address such issues through a public health approach. To break the cycle of crime, we need proper investment in communities. The work of Professors Pickett and Wilkinson draws attention to how socioeconomic disadvantage pushes people into criminality. Therefore, it is important for us to look at how we disaggregate that to ensure the right interventions are put in place to draw people out of that environment and into a safer place.

Proposed new paragraph (1) addresses the disparities in devolution, which we will explore later in the Bill. It is really important that we look at that. Part 2 focuses on the different powers that combined county authorities are going to be able to draw down. Of course, our local communities’ existing powers are often drawn up and taken away, as opposed to more powers being given. Disparities in the powers of the CCAs start to mean that we are not talking about levelling up, because they have different authorities, controls and abilities to invest.

2.45 pm

I want to draw on the thoughtful contribution from Dr Benwell last week. He made a compelling case about natural capital and the environment when it comes to levelling up, and how they play a central role in levelling up and life enhancements. I hope that the Government will reflect on his evidence and consider how nature and the environment, alongside our heritage, culture and the arts—we also heard evidence on that—have a significant role to play in the levelling-up agenda. It is not in this amendment, nor within the Government’s missions, but

I hope that the Minister will reflect on the opportunity to bring that forward. The climate challenge is the most important issue facing us all, and our natural environment gives so much back to us and will therefore certainly enable us to level up.

This amendment is essential to ensure that we have a clear understanding of what the legislation is about and a context in to focus its work, and so that we are able to deliver exactly what the people of our country need in order to level up.

**Neil O’Brien:** I hope that I can make the hon. Member for Nottingham North happy—that is my main goal in life—but I do have to point out that there is a tension at the heart of the amendment. On the one hand, he wants us to commit to saying that our levelling-up missions will be the levelling-up missions, but his amendment changes those missions in a number of ways, to add in, as he said, various things that were in his mind at the time as he was drafting it. He said he could not see the case for diverging from the levelling-up missions and I agree, which is why we will not be able to accept this amendment, which seeks to change the missions.

We have said on numerous occasions that the missions in the White Paper are our missions for levelling up and uniting the country. It has always been the Government’s intention—this is where I hope I can make the hon. Member happy—that the first such statement would contain the missions from the levelling-up White Paper. If that is the intent of the amendment, I am happy to say that I can reconfirm that that is what we are doing here.

The hon. Member also asked about public bodies. As he will probably remember, we committed in the White Paper to introduce a requirement for public bodies to have an objective of reducing geographical variations where they are relevant to their business area. The Treasury and Cabinet Office are taking that objective forward as part of the public bodies reform programme. That work is ongoing.

It is not that we disagree with some of the objectives in the amendment; we want to stick to the missions that we set out in the White Paper, rather than change them via the amendment. For example, it is worth picking up his point about Northern Powerhouse Rail, a project that is hugely dear to my heart, and the hon. Member for York Central also made an important point. When we make these huge improvements and major investments, particularly in the section between Leeds and Manchester, the benefits radiate out to a much wider area—everywhere from York to Liverpool, up to the north-east and across, for those of us coming up from the midlands as well.

The wider story about what happened with rail in the north is that we inherited a situation where the rail franchise for the north had been let in 2004 on a no-growth basis, based on pessimistic assumptions about growth in the north. As a result, we had this scenario where someone would be at the top of the escalators in Leeds station looking down on a “Ben-Hur”-style crowd of a huge number of people, and a tiny train with two carriages would turn up and they would all try to cram on it. It was unsatisfactory, and we put that right in subsequent franchises.

We also had the infamous Pacer trains from my childhood still rattling around the north, giving northerners a second-class rail service. I am glad to say that, through

ministerial direction, we got rid of those unsatisfactory trains and now have sleek bullet trains running the trans-Pennine service. Of course, we are now going further through the integrated rail plan and building an entirely new line between Warrington and Marsden as part of the £96 billion investment, which will cut journey times between Leeds and Manchester from 55 minutes to 33 minutes.

As part of the wider investments, we will cut journey times between Leeds and Bradford from 20 minutes to 12 minutes, and there will also be big improvements between the midlands and the north. For example, journey times between Leeds and Birmingham will go from 118 minutes to 79 minutes, but the improvements go right across the north. It is not that we do not share the exciting objective to improve northern rail, as first set out in the then Chancellor's speech in 2014, but we want to do the other thing that the shadow Minister asked us to do, which is to stick to our levelling-up missions, as worked out with great care in the White Paper. That is why we oppose the amendment.

To take on some of the wider points that have been made, it is true that missions may need to evolve over time, and we may talk more about this in subsequent parts of today's session. If the missions were to appear in legislation—I know that the amendment talks only about the first statement—the process to adjust them in the future would become unhelpfully rigid and time-consuming, potentially meaning that they would not be revised and would become less relevant to policy. Previous Governments have known this too, as public service agreements were not set out in law but were still a powerful tool to organise Government policy.

Flexibility is about ensuring that missions remain relevant and ambitious. Missions should ratchet up, not down, as performance improves. For example, fantastic progress is being made towards the gigabit broadband mission, with more than two thirds of homes and businesses covered—up from single-digit figures just a couple of years ago—so it may well be appropriate to increase the ambition of that mission in the future as our certainty levels increase.

None of the missions we talked about earlier is necessarily bound by the spending review period, so they will need changing over time. As drafted, the Bill gives Parliament and the public the opportunity to scrutinise the missions when the statement of levelling-up missions is laid. The hon. Member for Nottingham North implied that there would be subtle changes without anyone debating them, but we would have to make a statement to Parliament, so Parliament will debate them; there is no lack of transparency whatsoever. I hope that by recommitting to our levelling-up missions, I have put his mind at ease, and I hope that I have also explained why we oppose the amendment, which would change our levelling-up missions.

**Alex Norris:** I am grateful to colleagues for their responses. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central made a good point about focus, but she also mentioned revenue spending, which I know is something that Ministers understand. That is part of understanding that these things will be not just a priority of the day, but a priority for the years ahead, which means having them written down. I asked only for a day, but I am sure we could a little better than that. There is still a strong case for them to be there in statute for all to see.

My hon. Friend also mentioned York to Hull, and the arguments that she made are similar to arguments that I could make about Nottingham to Leicester or Coventry, but they also make me think of other broken rail promises. The midland main line electrification has been announced, unannounced and re-announced so many times, and HS2 involves broken promises. The Minister talked about these being programmes delivered from first promises in 2014, but the reality is that it feels like some of the promises are coming on Pacer trains up to the north, and they do not all get there. That is what leaves me with a slight lack of confidence.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central talked about the laying of the jigsaw, which was an elegant way to put it. That is what we are trying to do here. It is not a series of disparate engagements, but one collective one. She also talked about Marmot, and that is why we should put things in law rather than just have reviews and advisory exercises. If we spent the time implementing Marmot that we have spent debating the outcomes—and not seemingly disagreeing very much—goodness me, we would be levelling up from a much higher platform.

My hon. Friend made a point about the environment, Dr Benwell's evidence was so important. It is one of those little things that I wish I could just click my fingers and do for my community. I represent the outer estates of a big city which, like many cities in the midlands and the north, is surrounded by country parks and former pits, and there are so many that we cannot get to from the estate because there is no way of getting in. I wish we could just do those things. Those are the kinds of simple interventions that would really make a difference if we really committed to them, and I am sad that we have not got that in statute.

**Rachael Maskell:** Line 7 of the Bill says that a “statement of levelling-up missions” will be made. Obviously, that means that there is not anything in statute or in secondary legislation. This is something that Government are clearly pouring in a lot of energy and time into just to make a statement. Is that not a bit weak?

**Alex Norris:** That is certainly what I had in mind when I tabled the amendment. It is not enough for me. We have already said that we are not going to have any independence in the system and are not going to be able to codify the resourcing for levelling up, and we are now being asked not even to codify what levelling up really is. It is just too much to ask.

That is an important point on which to segue to what the Minister said. He said that he seeks to make me happy, and I am very glad to hear that. I can at least reassure him that I am always happy—certainly in this place. I am also optimistic and hopeful about doing better, which is why I come to this Committee with such a spring in my step. I seek to help him to do that.

The Minister said that the Government cannot accept these amendments because they have gone through the filter of my head. I think that is a little naughty, in the sense that these are the Government's own promises—this is not freelancing on my part—but if that were the case, he could of course have tabled his own version that is closer to the original version in the White Paper. If he did that, we would accept it and move on to the next item on the agenda. He could have done that in the published Bill or through an amendment. He has not sought to do that, so I am not sure the drafting is the issue; I think it is the point of substance.

[Alex Norris]

I am grateful that the Minister committed that the first edition will be faithful to the White Paper. I appreciate that and take it as it is intended. The problem, however, is that it will not be sent to us until some point later this year—I am not sure when precisely, but it will certainly be a lot colder than it is now—and the reality is that the Minister may not be sat there in that point. There may be a reshuffle. We read that online every day. The Prime Minister has got to keep his MPs in line in some way, and he is going to have to work out how all the jobs he has offered to people, which in many cases will be the same ones, will work. Once he has done that, the Ministers will change. The Minister will be very suitable for promotion to the Cabinet—I have no doubt about that—so he is asking me to take it on trust with the person who follows him when I do not know who that person will be. As I say, the culture of the Government is not strong, and as a result I cannot accept it on that basis, so I will press the amendment to a Division.

Before I finish, I am grateful for what the Minister said about the non-exec agencies and housing. I appreciate him addressing those points.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 6, Noes 10.*

#### Division No. 1]

#### AYES

Farron, Tim	Maskell, Rachael
Fletcher, Colleen	Norris, Alex
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Pennycook, Matthew

#### NOES

Andrew, rh Stuart	Moore, Robbie
Atherton, Sarah	Mortimer, Jill
Dines, Miss Sarah	O'Brien, Neil
Henry, Darren	Smith, Greg
Kruger, Danny	Vickers, Matt

*Question accordingly negatived.*

3 pm

**Alex Norris:** I beg to move amendment 4, clause 1, page 2, line 6, at end insert—

“(4A) A statement of levelling-up missions must be accompanied by an action plan which sets out details of how Her Majesty’s Government intends to deliver these missions by the target date.”

*This amendment would require the Government to publish an action plan alongside a statement of levelling-up missions which sets out how they will deliver the missions.*

The amendment seeks to improve clause 1 so that the statement of missions is accompanied by a proper action plan to show how those missions will be delivered. For the three or so years that levelling up has been in our political lexicon, there have been significant struggles to define what it is. The White Paper and the Bill did not settle that matter, I would gently say. There is a breadth of ground covered by the White Paper—everyone would accept that. The numerous promises made regarding levelling up cover an enormous range of public policy. The danger in that is the energy settles and stops at that high-level, broad approach; there is political consensus on those things as priorities, but there is little detail. That is what we have at the moment.

To make sense of the Bill, we need action plans that demonstrate how the missions will be achieved. That is what amendment 4 would add to the Bill, by requiring that alongside the statement of levelling-up missions is a tabled action plan that shows how the missions will be met by the target date. The Government touch on that in the White Paper, which says:

“Levelling up requires a focused, long-term plan of action”.

Chapter 3 of the White Paper—the policy programme—is supposed to address that plan. Much of it is taken up by restatements of the case for action established elsewhere in the document, and the rest is several disparate initiatives that are supposed to contribute. There is not really a sense of how they will contribute, what proportion of the contribution they will make and by when. The common theme of many of those initiatives is that that they were already happening, or would have happened, with or without the White Paper or Bill, and that makes me question whether they will really be a meaningful part of levelling up.

We have no way of knowing whether the aggregate of what is in the White Paper adds up to a levelled-up country. That is compounded by the absence of an impact assessment for us to consider—which also really will not do. We have no idea, but we are being asked to take on trust that the breadth of the Government’s programme—none of which will be committed to law—will deliver on levelling up. I do not think that will do. I have no doubt that there is lots of proper planning and co-ordination between various Departments. There will need to be lots of engagement between central Government and different layers of government: mayors; combined authorities; county combined authorities, once we get to part 2; councils; town councils; parish councils; and neighbourhood forums. There are a lot of stakeholders to have a say.

If levelling up is not something that happens to people, but is instead a partnership between central Government and local government—between leaders and the public—then everybody needs to know what role they are expected to play and what contribution they are making to the whole. I am sure that this work must have been done internally already by Ministers with support from the Department. I cannot imagine that a simple publication of such work is likely to prove too onerous a requirement. It would add to transparency and give the Committee more confidence.

**Rachael Maskell:** I agree with my hon. Friend, because it feels that it could become a bit of a tick-box exercise otherwise. We would all be incredibly concerned if that were the case. In order to level up, surely there would need to be RAG rating of priorities; there would need to be Gant charts in order to work across the Departments to understand where those priorities fit and how they are scheduled together. Would it not make sense to have an action plan to drive the agenda, rather than putting initiatives forward and ticking boxes?

**Alex Norris:** That is exactly right. The RAG rating point is well made—it is what we would expect. There are lots of former councillors in the room, and that is what we would expect at local authority level, so it is not too much to ask central Government either. That would help us to address one of our concerns on the Opposition Benches.

I have no doubt that whatever happens between now and the next general election or the next eight years to the end of the 2030 mission, the Government will present the policy as a success—that is what Governments do. My concern is that it will be a political spinning of an expression of progress rather than a real one. But having the action plans beneath and seeing whether those individual actions have actually been delivered would make a significant difference to building confidence. Again, it would help with clarity of purpose, because it would show precisely what we are hoping to achieve.

The scope of the policy is vast—it will touch on every domestic policy area. It will be cross-departmental, but there still needs to be significant individual programmes to deliver on it. We might need to know what those individual programmes are, to give clarity on how the Government intend to achieve that.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Bearing in mind that the Government have had 12 years to come up with this policy, although they are able to say what will they do, they cannot say how they will do it. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is easy to conclude that the Government might not be really committed to delivering any of it?

**Alex Norris:** That is my concern. My biggest anxiety is that the Government have got to this point, after a long time in government and with the highly publicised problems that they face, a little out of ideas and energy. The omissions may amount to a to-do list, which we make when we have loads to do that we never quite get to. We write the to-do list because that is a small step in the right direction. I fear that without concrete, clear, public and transparent action plans, that is what they will be. They will not be in the Bill, but things suddenly will not be on the to-do list anymore, because they have stopped being a priority.

We need a laser-like focus on the problems we face in this country, not imprecise policies with imprecise actions that lead to policy failures and end up devaluing the levelling up brand, breaking public confidence and not delivering for people. That is not what people want. There is expectation across the country that levelling up will happen, will matter and will be different. At the moment, we cannot tell our constituents how and why that will be the case other than in quite a broad and abstract way, which does not mean an awful lot on the street and at estate level.

Sadly, I cannot say to councillors or residents, “This is what they were trying to drive from the centre, and this is your role in it. Don’t just sit back and wait to be levelled up—participate. Here are the things that you get to participate in.” At the moment, we cannot say that and I hope we might be able to do a little better.

**Tim Farron:** Clause 1(4) states that “levelling-up missions must specify a target date for...delivery” but without an action plan, we are playing into the hands of people who think that we in this place say stuff and never mean to deliver it. If the Minister were serious about delivering on those missions, an action plan seems a simple request. This feels like a project with no project management. There are end goals but no staging posts to get there.

I have a couple of quick examples. Let us say we were going to try to set a target that I believe we need, and I hope others will agree, of 150,000 new social rented

properties every year. For any kind of construction-based outcome that we want, whether housing, industry or environmental projects, we need a construction workforce. The action plan and the project management would include the setting up and sourcing of that workforce, long before the delivery date. The hon. Member for York Central talked about Airbnb in York, which is also a massive issue for us in the Lake district and the rest of Cumbria. If we wanted to give local authorities and communities power to regulate their housing stock so that we had equality and built and kept homes for people to live in, to be part of the workforce and the community, rather than allowing them to bleed out into the Airbnb sector, we would need to do things along the way to achieve that. There would need to be a planning department big enough, with people qualified enough.

These missions, with target dates for delivery, but no action plan to deliver them, is project management without the management. That is foolish. I do not see why the Government will not accept that.

**Neil O’Brien:** I have a mix of bad and good news for the hon. Member for Nottingham North. The bad news is that we will resist the amendment. The good news is that he can, even within this Committee sitting, achieve the legislation that he wants. Let me explain.

The Bill sets out the framework for delivering on our levelling-up missions and places a statutory duty on the Government to publish an annual report on progress, as we have discussed. The Government agree with the principle behind the amendment that the delivery of levelling-up missions must be accompanied by detailed actions from the Government to drive change. Of course it must—that is why we have already published an action plan setting out details of how we plan to take the agenda forward, in the form of our levelling-up White Paper.

That is also why we have specified the importance of having an action plan in the Bill. We will be coming to clause 2 shortly—I hope the hon. Gentleman will support it standing part—and subsection (2)(c) already places a statutory obligation on the Government to produce an annual report on levelling-up, which must include,

“what Her Majesty’s Government plans to do in the future to deliver each of those levelling-up missions.”

That already includes the action plan that the hon. Gentleman seeks. Therefore, while I agree completely with the sentiment behind the amendment, it is not necessary and I ask the hon. Member to withdraw it.

**Alex Norris:** I am grateful for the responses. I agree with everything that the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, said about the steps. Looking to 2030, we need to know what the incremental moments are, what we need to prepare and what skills people might need to access those jobs. That was a point well made.

I am also grateful to the Minister, though my opinion differs significantly. I do not think that the White Paper presents an action plan. I think the third chapter is anything but, and I would be slightly anxious if that is what action plans are likely to look like in the future. Most points have no date on them and no sense of what contribution they make. It is a list of things that might contribute; a plan of actions, maybe, but it is not an action plan.

[Alex Norris]

The Minister's point on clause 2 is helpful—that is partly why we laid this probing amendment—but if what comes with that report is the series of actions that are in the White Paper, that is likely to cause disappointment. I hope that when we do see a report, it will be a bit more detailed on contributions and timeframes and, critically—this is the bit that will be hard for the Government to do—on saying which areas are doing well and which are doing badly. I suspect that may be a point of difference.

I do not think there is a need to labour the amendment any further. The point has been made. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

*Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.*

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

**Alex Norris:** To wrap up our discussions so far, this is the beginning of the Bill, where the Government are staking out their territory on a major part of their domestic agenda. It is concerning that attempts to add independence into the system, to get real analysis of the resources and to get the Government to state in law what they are trying to do have all been rebuffed. We need to do better if the legislation is to be really meaningful and drive us forward. That is not a reason for us to oppose clause 1 at this point, but I hope we can get to a little more detail in the subsequent clauses and build some confidence in Parliament that this is going to be a process with some teeth.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

## Clause 2

### ANNUAL ETC REPORTS ON DELIVERY OF LEVELLING-UP MISSIONS

3.15 pm

**Alex Norris:** I beg to move amendment 6, in clause 2, page 3, leave out subsections (4) and (5).

*This amendment would remove the provision allowing the Secretary of State to discontinue a levelling-up mission.*

Clause 2 brings forward the welcome obligation on Ministers to report annually, as discussed previously. Suitably frequent analysis of ongoing work is an important part of knowing that we are going in the right direction. However, subsections (4) and (5) give Ministers an unfettered ability to drop missions they no longer like. My amendment would delete that provision. Subsection (4) reads:

“If Her Majesty's Government considers that it is no longer appropriate for it to pursue a levelling-up mission in the current statement of levelling-up missions, the report may state that Her Majesty's Government no longer intends to pursue that mission, instead of dealing with the matters mentioned in subsection (2)”. Subsection (2) details the nature of the reports, as the Minister said. We think that is too strong a provision for Ministers to reserve for themselves.

It is now more than two and half years since the 2019 election, and we have been on a journey of trying to work out what levelling up is. We have been on a journey in the first part of the Bill, and we are still led to believe that this is a strong and crucial part of the Government's domestic agenda. Ministers have waxed lyrical about the importance of the missions, which the Secretary of State described as

“clear, ambitious... underpinned by metrics by which we can be held to account to drive the change that we need.”—[*Official Report*, 2 February 2022; Vol. 708, c. 312.]

I am not quite sure that we have seen that so far. We are led to believe that the missions are so important—important enough for an annual report—but that has failed already because the missions are now non-specific.

The vagaries have then been added to with subsections (4) and (5), which give Ministers the freedom to drop a mission with a message of discontinuation if they are failing to meet one or have not done enough. That seems too much. Ministers need to be held to account for their promises. The statements are required for a period of five years, so the missions should be taken through to the end of that period. The Secretary of State said that he wants accountability

“to drive the change that we need.”—[*Official Report*, 2 February 2022; Vol. 708, c. 312.]

But that feels difficult to believe if, at the first opportunity to legislate on the matter, Ministers insert subsections that allow them to move away from their commitments.

**Rachael Maskell:** I share my hon. Friend's concern. If this was easy, we could have been levelling up the country for the past 40, 50 or 100 years, but that has not happened. I am sure that progress will be made on some of the objectives, but the difficult stuff that will really bring about the necessary transformation to address the disparities that people face could be dropped, meaning that disadvantage will be sustained. Does he agree that five years is a short time for comparison, and it should be sustained over, say, a Parliament?

**Alex Norris:** Yes, and it is reasonable to ask that these long-term commitments be sustained for that period of time.

The goal here is to ensure that promises are acted on and implemented in a timely fashion. The fear is that these subsections just give a future Government with less interest in levelling up—a Government who find themselves distracted by other matters of the day, or who prioritise other things—an easy out to junk the missions wholesale. They will say, “These need to be refined into smaller, more focused missions.” That is how it will go, and then they will slowly get broader and less meaningful and we will not have the longer-term action plans on statute and slowly they will just disappear.

Subsections (4) and (5) are a real risk to delivery. Ministers may just be too tempted when times are difficult. The journey over the eight years to deal with the missions is going to be very difficult; there will be moments when it feels very hard, even hopeless, to deliver on them. Having the temptation to withdraw may be too much. The missions are too important. We have to have a stronger check.

Secondly, there is the issue of accountability. If central Government and Parliament are entering into a partnership with our communities to level up our country, how does that partnership work if one party can just walk away without consultation, without engagement and without explanation? There would be a political bunfight. We have lots of political bunfights here, so I am not sure it would register. The whole thing would just get lost in the downward spiral of political discourse. We should not support that.

Local areas would be planning. The great thing about levelling up, the slightly longer-term vision and the commitments made in the White Paper, is that we have sent out a call to communities saying, “This is what is going to happen in future.” The Minister has mentioned research and development. The White Paper says to communities, “Prioritise this sort of work. We will seek to invest in you. Prepare the ground for that investment in your community, because we are going to do things differently and you could benefit from it.” What a great thing to say to local communities.

How will that work if the next week the Minister can suddenly say, “Actually, we don’t want to do that any more; that is not what is good for the country and we are not going to do it”? Suddenly, what they were planning on is no longer a priority. That is just another way that this is not a partnership of equals.

If we allow these easy outs in the Bill, we are once again risking not meeting the expectations of our constituents. That would be a disaster for the goals, but it would also be a disaster for trust and confidence in this place. The annual reports are such an important part of the driving progress—in my book, they are probably the most important part. Why not do them without the opt-outs? That would be a much stronger position to take.

**Neil O’Brien:** The purpose of giving the Government the ability to discontinue a mission is to allow for policy to adapt to changing circumstances, not to avoid scrutiny. If our purpose was to avoid scrutiny, we would not have written into the Bill the requirement for a statement to Parliament when they are changed. Missions are long term by definition. That is an important feature, but it does not alter the fact that the world, and with it what are good policy objectives, can change.

By allowing the Government to discontinue a mission, subject to setting out the reasons for doing so, the Bill gives necessary discretion to Governments to adjust policy priorities over time. There may be very good reasons for wanting to discontinue a mission. The Government may want to be more ambitious. For example, we are making fantastic progress on our digital mission and we want to push ourselves harder to deliver more of what is needed. We may want to respond to changing events, such as the unprecedented pandemic, to tackle the most pressing issues facing the country, rather than being forced to deliver missions that are no longer appropriate.

Subsections (4) and (5), which the amendment would delete, make that clear. They stipulate that if a Government no longer intend to pursue a levelling-up mission, they must state that intention clearly in the annual report and, crucially, provide reasons for its discontinuation. That level of transparency allows both Houses of Parliament and the public to scrutinise the decision and determine whether it was reasonable. If a Government were seen to be abandoning a mission for poor reasons, they would be held to account.

**Rachael Maskell:** Will the Minister give an example of why one of the 12 missions he has set out in the White Paper would be abandoned?

**Neil O’Brien:** I gave an example earlier of the R&D mission, which is specific to this spending review. It says we will increase R&D spending by a third over the

spending review period. That mission will no longer have meaning after the spending review period, because it will have happened, so we will need to change the mission.

Let me give the hon. Lady another example about which I am optimistic. On local leadership, the mission at the moment is that by 2030 every part of England that wants a high-level devolution deal will have one. There is a lot of work in getting the devolution deals ready, as she knows better than most, but it is possible that we will be able to go even further.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** On a point of clarification, the Minister has been talking about changing the missions, but subsections (4) and (5), as I read them, are about scrapping the missions. Surely some rewording is needed here.

**Neil O’Brien:** There is a continuity between those two things. We might get rid of something and replace it with something that is in the same space. The subsections just give a clear framework for how that works—transparency, the statement to Parliament, the debate, and so on and so forth. I am not totally clear about the policy intent behind the amendment: is the idea that missions should be changeable only through primary legislation? Is that the concept here?

**Alex Norris** *indicated dissent.*

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** On another point of clarification, subsection (4) clearly states “no longer intends to pursue that mission”, but the examples the Minister is giving are about changing missions, and perhaps improving them. They are very different things.

**Neil O’Brien:** Once we have delivered our commitment to increase R&D spending outside the greater south-east by a third over the spending review period, it will no longer be possible logically for us to continue that mission. That will just not be possible, as a matter of logic, so we will discontinue the mission. I hope that puts the hon. Lady’s mind at ease.

The hon. Member for Nottingham North has the look of a man who is about to intervene, but I will take an intervention from the hon. Member for York Central.

**Rachael Maskell:** I am more concerned now than I was. We know that levelling up is going to take a concerted effort over a significant period of time, but it sounds as though this is now a list of initiatives that are being ticked off and which are short term, as opposed to achieving the transformation that Labour wants to see. It seems almost as though we have a disparity of language between the two sides. We would see missions evolving so as to develop the parity that we long to see across the country, whereas the Government are just talking about short-term initiatives. Is this really levelling up? I question that. Are we going to see the opportunity for significant investment to bring about the transformation our communities desperately need?

**Neil O’Brien:** I respect the hon. Lady enormously, but the Government are setting out a series of ambitious, long-term missions over the horizon to 2030 and publishing unprecedented detail on how we will analyse progress on those missions, which is not something I remember

[Neil O'Brien]

the Labour Government doing at any point during their time in office. There is a degree to which I am happy to listen to criticisms, but I note that there is a track record that we can discuss as well.

Members of the Committee have a sense of why we oppose the amendment. If we are serious about having a long-term agenda, which we are, we need the flexibility to adjust, tighten, ratchet up and go further on all these things, because things change over time. That is necessary for an ambitious mission to 2030 to endure.

The hon. Member for Nottingham North raised the prospect of me still being here in 2030—in his eyes, a grisly prospect, and possibly a grisly prospect in my eyes as well—but he knows in his heart of hearts, as I do, that a degree of flexibility needs to be built in if we want to have a long-term agenda and to adjust to changes in circumstances. Over such a period, things change.

3.30 pm

**Alex Norris:** I confess that I am a little disappointed. To an extent, we are seeking to save Ministers from themselves. The Minister started by saying that there is no desire to avoid scrutiny—well, that is really good. These proposals would not be in the Bill in the way they are if that were the Government's goal. I am not sure that has quite passed the clause 1 debate test. However, the point is that it is not real scrutiny if these things can just be dropped quietly—if it is a difficult day or two, and then the rest of the time they are on easy street—so I am not sure about that.

Similarly, I felt a level of disbelief at the idea that this might prevent Ministers from doing better. Of course these things do not prevent them from doing better. They would not need to discontinue a mission because they were doing too well at it; I cannot see why that would be the case. Surely these stretched targets would be the minimum, rather than the maximum.

The Minister relies on the point about R&D again. There is a question about whether that is a mission or just an input. If the Minister is saying today that, as written in the White Paper, it has already in-built its obsolescence over the next couple of years, I gently say to him that he has just reserved for himself the power to write the missions. We want them to put in the ones that are in the White Paper, but if he wishes to enhance them and do better than what is in the White Paper, he will find us very willing partners in that. I just cannot believe that doing these things too quickly means that they need to be discontinued. If only that were the case.

It feels that this is a bit of an easy out for Ministers, and I do not think it enhances the Bill. We will probably take this issue on again when we debate clause 4, so at this point I will not press the amendment to a Division, but we will return to it. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

*Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.*

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

**Alex Norris:** I wish briefly to ask the Minister a question that relates to the second part of the evidence from Will Tanner—I mentioned the first bit earlier. He said:

“In a second but similar way, I think there is a missed opportunity in terms of not aligning that reporting framework against a Treasury set of fiscal events. Ultimately, levelling up is so interdependent with tax and spend policy that if the Treasury is reporting at different times, particularly around changing tax measures or making large public spending decisions through the spending review, there is the risk that levelling up falls through the cracks of the way the Government make major decisions, rather than being completely aligned as a whole of Government mission”.—[*Official Report, Levelling-up and Regeneration Public Bill Committee*, 23 June 2022; c. 144, Q179.]

For my understanding, I want to ask the Minister when he thinks the reports tabled under clause 2 are likely to fall in the year, and whether he is minded to align them with financial events—either the one that happens in the spring or the one that happens in the autumn.

**Neil O'Brien:** That is an important question. I will not answer it today, and it may depend on the circumstances. Will Tanner's point is the same sort of point that I was making about R&D and the spending review commitment. There needs to be an introduction of costs to do this. Fiscal events and spending reviews are hugely important events, in terms of achieving all the things we are trying to achieve. It is not something that I can answer today. It is a sensible question, and we will think about it further.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 2 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 3

#### REPORTS: PARLIAMENTARY SCRUTINY AND PUBLICATION

**Alex Norris:** I beg to move amendment 7, in clause 3, page 3, line 28, leave out “120” and insert “30”.

*This amendment would reduce the period of time by which a report under section 2 must be laid before each House of Parliament to 30 days.*

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 8, in clause 3, page 3, line 32, leave out “120” and insert “30”.

*See explanatory statement to Amendment 7.*

**Alex Norris:** Clause 3 adds a little more detail to the reporting requirement set out in clause 2, which we have just debated. We support the idea of annual reporting to help determine whether we are on target to achieve what we are seeking as country, but subsections (1) and (3) both state that the reports must be published within 120 calendar days of the end of the reporting period. That is far too long.

The point of reporting is to understand how well—or otherwise—progress is being made, not just so that we can have a political debate about whether the Government are any good. The point is to be able to correct the course, change resourcing or make any number of decisions to ensure that goals are hit. Giving up a third of the year is simply too much. Amendment 7 seeks to reduce that to 30 days, to allow much more time in the following year to correct the course.

I hope that is not an onerous burden; I assume that Ministers and their teams will not wait until the last day of the reporting period to start preparations. I would like to think that Ministers will have a monthly—if not weekly or daily—grip of the progress made, as this is the centrepiece of the domestic programme. That report

ought to be a formalising of work already done in the name of good Government. I hope we might find the Minister in listening mode.

**Tim Farron:** There appears to be a bit of a pattern of the Government not having the confidence of their convictions in the Bill. We are not to have an independent review body, we are not specifying the amount of resource for individual missions, and there is no action plan. Now we are to have an annual report a third of the way through the next reporting period. If the Government do have confidence in what they are seeking to do, surely they would not wish to avoid live scrutiny, which they might do for 120 days into the next period. I support the amendments and I hope that the Government will consider at least reducing the amount of time after the reporting period, if not down to 30 days then at least to somewhat less than 120.

**Neil O'Brien:** We will resist the amendments, for reasons of pure practicality. The Bill states that the annual report under clause 2 has to be laid before each House of Parliament within 120 days of the year that the report covers. That is to allow the relevant data and official statistics to be published and any corresponding analysis for the annual report to be completed. That means sufficient time to prepare a quality report.

The statistics covered in the report will include some of the most advanced and up-to-date metrics and methodologies available. That will be an enormous data-driven exercise, building on some of the new institutions I talked about earlier. It is right to give the Government sufficient time to deliver a high-quality report. Reducing the time from 120 days to 30 days risks the annual report being published without key pieces of data being available, from example from the Office for National Statistics. That would undermine the accountability role that the annual report is meant to play. Given those constraints, I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw the amendment.

**Alex Norris:** I agree with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale that a pattern is emerging. The Government seemingly want to reserve a huge amount of leeway when reviewing the success, or otherwise, of the programme. At every stage there seems to be broad reserved powers for how they will explain what is and is not happening. That is a real shame and it projects a lack of confidence and, I suggest, assertion in this agenda.

**Rachael Maskell:** By turning down the opportunity for an independent body to review, the Minister is articulating that the Government do not have the know-how and resources to deliver a timely report on the levelling-up objectives. Surely those two agendas come together.

**Alex Norris:** I find it hard to believe, too. I believe in the brilliance of the British civil service. I think this could be done.

**Neil O'Brien:** A point to bring out is that it is not merely about the resources of Government to pull together the information; a lot of the ONS data that Opposition Members want to see will simply not be available, because the ONS publishes things on the lag—we do not get the year's data for a particular thing

on the day the year ends, so there is a time lag. We are extremely interested in producing more granular and useful data, reducing those time lags, but there are time lags and the report would simply not contain the information that we all want to see if we reduced the amount of time available, because we would be eating into the ONS time lag.

**Alex Norris:** That, however, is set against the point that was made in the opening debate about the annex to the White Paper, which was presented to us as a suite of impactful metrics, updateable as we proceeded, and with which we could keep score—it was even suggested at one point that we might even be able to do it ourselves, but the Minister said, “Don't worry, the Government will do that.” Ironically, given the nature of the clause, I feel that the goalposts are starting to move a bit on this point as well. We have a lot of time left in Committee and the Bill generally has a long way to run, so I hope that the Minister will reflect on the debate and see whether there is a compromise somewhere in the middle. At this stage, I am happy to give him the room to do so, so I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

*Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.*

*Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

#### Clause 4

CHANGES TO MISSION PROGRESS METHODOLOGY AND METRICS OR TARGET DATES

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

**The Chair:** Does the Minister wish to speak to clause 4 stand part?

**Neil O'Brien:** Move formally.

**The Chair:** Does the Opposition spokesman wish to comment?

**Alex Norris:** I am really surprised that the Minister wants to do this formally. I understand that with the previous clauses we had already covered much of the meat that would have been considered in a stand part debate, but clause 4 is a significant part of the Bill.

Subsection (1) states that the clause “applies if a Minister of the Crown considers that the mission progress methodology and metrics, or the target date for the delivery of a levelling-up mission, in the current statement of levelling-up missions should be changed.”

Under subsection (2)(a), that allows that Minister to “revise the current statement of levelling-up missions so as to change the mission progress methodology and metrics or (as the case may be) target date”,

and all that they have to do in return is put out a statement saying that is what they want to do, laying it before Parliament and publishing it. As with the debate we had on clause 2, I thought that such a change would be worthy of discussion, if nothing else.

That is at the heart of the Opposition's criticism of the Bill, and Ministers know that. We think that the thing is being set up broadly and loosely so that, crucially, when they do not succeed, they can move the goalposts and get away with it. That strikes to the core of the weakness in the Government's case and in their commitment to this agenda, which is supposedly so

[Alex Norris]

central to their domestic policy. Any such move would be worthy of discussion, and we Opposition Front Benchers do not support the provision.

We will seek to divide on the clause because, again, it simply reserves too much power to Ministers seeking to evade and avoid being honest about what they have and have not been able to deliver. That is not a good thing. As we have seen on a number of occasions, the Bill is already building in why it is likely not to succeed, or certainly why this Government will not make a success of it. The point is that any changes would be worthy of discussion, so I cannot support the clause.

3.45 pm

**Neil O'Brien:** The clause provides the ability to amend the methodology and metrics that support the levelling-up missions, or to amend the target dates for delivery in between the normal reporting cycle. The intention is to allow the metrics that support the levelling-up missions to be updated if the relevant data sources change or improve.

Although the technical annex to the White Paper represents the state of the art as of the start of this year, we are actively working to improve all the different data sources in it. For instance, the ONS might publish a new data source that is relevant to one of the missions, and it may be relevant to formally add that data source to the list of metrics that the annual report will monitor.

Indeed, as we heard in oral evidence, the ONS is, for the first time, working on a single metric for the whole of the UK, so that we have a single multiple deprivation index. That is exactly the sort of data source that we might want to use. The country and Parliament would expect the Government to use the latest, best and most granular data in evaluating their progress towards delivering the levelling-up missions.

Under subsection (2), the Minister of the Crown “must publish a statement” setting out reasons for the change, and

“lay the revised statement of levelling-up missions before...Parliament and then publish it”,

so that it is all done in an entirely transparent way. I commend the clause to the Committee.

*Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 10, Noes 6.*

#### Division No. 2]

#### AYES

Andrew, rh Stuart  
Atherton, Sarah  
Dines, Miss Sarah  
Henry, Darren  
Kruger, Danny

Moore, Robbie  
Mortimer, Jill  
O'Brien, Neil  
Smith, Greg  
Vickers, Matt

#### NOES

Farron, Tim  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma

Maskell, Rachael  
Norris, Alex  
Pennycook, Matthew

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Clause 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

## Clause 5

### REVIEWS OF STATEMENTS OF LEVELLING-UP MISSIONS

**Alex Norris:** I beg to move amendment 11, in clause 5, page 6, line 5, leave out from “which” to end of subsection (11) and insert—

“both conditions in subsection (12) have been met.

12. The conditions are that—

(a) the House of Commons, and

(b) the House of Lords

has passed a Motion of the form in subsection (13).

13. The form of the Motion is—

That this House approves the revisions to the statement of levelling-up missions made under section 5 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2022 and laid before Parliament on [date].”

*This amendment would require both Houses of Parliament to approve revisions to the statement of levelling-up missions to be approved by both Houses of Parliament before they have effect.*

In the light of the significant autonomy that the Government have carved out for themselves in the Bill—on which we have so far been unable to move them at all—the amendment would rebalance a little the relationship between the Executive and Parliament. The journey of the Bill so far has been a bit displeasing.

Clause 1 establishes five non-explicit year-long missions, and as we were unable to move the Government on that matter, we will have to trust them that those are the same missions as in the White Paper. Clause 2 establishes the annual reports, but there is no acceptance of the need for independence in establishing the real picture behind—if I may say so—the fluff. That is a real shame. Clause 3 establishes that those reports will land roughly four months into the annual cycle, which is far too late. That measure is designed for ministerial convenience rather than effective decision making or leadership. Clause 4 gives Ministers the scope to change virtually everything about the missions and to move the goalposts should it suit them.

We have now reached clause 5, which obliges Ministers to review the missions in a five-year cycle at their instigation and, again, change the missions should it suit them. If clause 1 had included the missions, and if clause 5 were a counterpart to it—perhaps as clause 2—that would have addressed the Minister’s concerns about changes in circumstances over time, and it would have addressed a lot of the Opposition’s concerns about the Government’s commitment to the missions and whether they will just move things at their convenience. If the annual reporting had then been in clause 3, we probably would have had something with which we could all agree.

Instead, levelling up has been left as purely the function of the Executive. They can add, subtract or do whatever they please, when they please. If they do not hit a target, that is fine; they can change the target. If the date is not convenient for a target, they can ignore it or change it. If progress is not being made, “Well, we don’t really need to tell anybody.” As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale says, these are not the actions of a Government who are really confident of this agenda and have such a grasp of it that we can sit here and say that they will deliver on it. I am quite sceptical about, given what we have seen so far.

There are welcome provisions in the Bill about statements being tabled, but there will be no votes on that. If the Government want to make a significant policy change,

we will not have the opportunity to represent our constituents and make their voices heard, so that they can play their role as partners in levelling up and express their opinions on the direction of policy. I find it really hard that such a significant national project, which is seeking to fundamentally change the governance of this country, as stated in the White Paper and outlined in the Bill, does not include a space for debate and vote. I think that is the least that we should be able to ask for.

Amendment 11 is quite simple. It would require the statement of missions under the clause 5 powers to be approved by both Houses of Parliament before they take effect. That is a pretty modest fetter. The Government of the day, I suspect, will want to reset these missions in line with what they have said in an election. They will presumably be able to get their business through Parliament, and I would think that those in the other place would not be keen to hold up things that were settled in an election, so that is likely to be relatively easy. Instead, we have too much of a gap there.

It is important that we act now to embed Parliament in the processes set out in the Bill. If this is about decentralisation—I expect that is what we will see in part 2—then it cannot have, right at the outset, the Executive at the centre, hoarding yet more power, with such a command and say over policy areas. In fact, the effect of the first five clauses is to detach those areas away from Parliament and give them to the Executive, for them to horde for themselves. When the Government make significant policy decisions, whether on Trident, tax changes or the uprating of benefits and pensions, they have to come to this place, either downstairs or upstairs. Our constituents then get to hear what we say about those changes and our views on them before we then come to a vote. Why not on levelling up too?

That means proper debate as well. Currently, statements are to be tabled. I would be keen to hear from the Minister that those will not be written ministerial statements but oral statements with the chance for debate and discussion, because, again, that is a fundamental function of this place. This issue has so much importance to all right hon. and hon. Members, because it is vital to all of us. As we have said before, this is not an issue of north versus south, or London versus the rest of the country. I have no doubt that every constituency will have an element somewhere that will be covered by the levelling up missions that we want to see. All of us will want to have a say on that and, more importantly, to give our communities their say on it. Any revisions could drastically change policy and have far-reaching implications, and we would not quite be able to do what we are here to do.

As I say, we have tried to move the Government on greater independence and transparency, clarity of resources and perhaps constraining Ministers just a little on what they can change at the stroke of a pen. We have not moved them there, and this is a final backstop on that through a parliamentary vote. I hope that the Minister, having heard the basis of the amendment and how keen we are for it, might be minded to support it.

**Rachael Maskell:** I wish to make a couple of quick points at this juncture. The amendment goes to the heart of whether this is an autocratic or democratic Government. Enabling Parliament to bring forward a motion to debate and discuss, and giving it the opportunity to reform and bring forward new missions, is surely at

the heart of what the Bill is all about. That is particularly the case because the impact is not just on Government Departments, but on all of the agencies across our country and our communities themselves. Therefore, being able to scrutinise that process, and to have a debatable motion in Parliament, is really important to ensure that we get it right.

My second point is a bit of learning from me on what is behind the White Paper. My understanding is that if we are to address inequality in our country—which we absolutely must—and the disparities experienced across our communities, which frustrates us all, then we have to look long term at how we achieve that. What the Minister has said clearly today is that the process is more about ticking boxes on a few manifesto pledges than actually getting to the heart of the issues that have been driving inequality across our communities for decades. Thus, this is not really a levelling-up Bill; it is a manifesto-check Bill. It does not really address those entrenched inequalities that I am sure Members across the House want to see addressed. I do not believe that can be achieved unless it is the goal at the heart of the Bill. The Bill, as it stands, is about short-termism, rather than the sustained investment we require.

I therefore urge the Minister to accept the amendment, not least because—going back to what Dr Benwell said—there is a very important omission in the legislation about our natural environment. Climate change is the biggest driver of global inequality, as well as a massive factor in national inequality, and the biggest challenge facing us all—something that one day the Treasury will have to address. It is essential that we enable Parliament to have a say over the direction of the levelling-up missions.

**Neil O'Brien:** The Bill already provides for significant parliamentary oversight. This is the first time in any regional policy that the Government have set clear long-term missions in this way. It is the first time there has been a clear statement of how those missions will be monitored, evaluated and judged. The Bill requires that statements of levelling-up missions, the annual report, revisions to the missions, and indeed revisions to the metrics supporting the missions, are all laid before the Houses of Parliament. That provides numerous unprecedented opportunities for Parliament to debate and scrutinise the activity of the Government pertaining to levelling up.

It would be disproportionate also to require that both Houses of Parliament approve the addition or discontinuation of missions. The hon. Member for Nottingham North said that the upper House would not be keen to hold things up, but it is all about proportionality. It is a concern that is already addressed in the Bill, because clause 2 stipulates, in subsections (4) and (5), that if a Government no longer intend to pursue a levelling-up mission, they must state that very clearly in the annual report and, crucially, provide reasons for its discontinuation. That will allow both Houses of Parliament and the public to scrutinise the decision and determine whether it is reasonable. If the Government are seen to be abandoning the mission for the wrong reasons, then they will of course be held to account.

The Bill strikes the right balance between explaining and justifying changes to missions in a transparent and accountable way, without requiring both Houses of

[Neil O'Brien]

Parliament explicitly to approve them. I therefore ask the hon. Member for Nottingham North to withdraw the amendment.

4 pm

**Alex Norris:** As my hon. Friend the Member for York Central has pointed out, we have raised many good questions today about what is really behind the White Paper and how deep the commitment is. There is a risk of tick-box compliance. My fear of that has only grown, and we are left with the lingering question of whether the Bill really will be transformative. There are just so many get-outs to allow Ministers to get away with it.

In his response, the Minister said that this is the first time the Government have set such missions. I gently suggest that the Government have not set anything yet. They have set that there will be missions; we are told what they are likely to be, but they are not set in stone. We are once again taking lots of things on confidence.

The Minister talked about opportunities for debate. I hope that was, at least obliquely, assent that the measures will be tabled in oral statements rather than written ones, so we have a genuine chance to debate them. I worry that the requirements could be complied with through a written ministerial statement rather than an oral one. If I am wrong, I will gladly take an intervention.

It is exceptionally brave of the Minister to use subsections (4) and (5) of clause 2 as a defence. He already knows that the Opposition think those are particularly weak provisions. He says those should give us confidence that Parliament is protected and that the Government will do what they say they will, when those are the very provisions that allow the Government to not do so. Instead, he wants us to rely on some sense of public conversation and thinks that would resolve the matter. That does not give me an awful lot of confidence.

That gets back to the heart of what we are doing. The initiator of levelling up has to be the centre; they have parliamentary initiative. Levelling up is a partnership across national Government and, hopefully, the whole of Parliament, sub-regional and regional government, local government, parish and town councils, as well as on every street and estate. We should all have a say and a part in it, but at the moment there is one partner who

says they are committed—every other partner is completely committed—but they want to reserve the right to remove, amend or change their commitment to the agenda as it suits them. It seems that they do not particularly want to talk about or engage on the matter beyond that nebulous sense of public conversation.

I say to the Minister that the public conversation is already taking place. He looks at the same polling as I do. He knows about the lack of public confidence in this place to deliver anything at all. As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale said with sobering effect earlier about the Government's commitment to the levelling-up agenda, they know what the public think of them. This is just another brick in that wall; politicians making a press release promise, but not particularly interested in then doing the hard, scary and lonely work required to deliver on that. Every community group we go to, and our local authorities, which are calling for devolution too, says, "We want to help. We want to be part of this process." Parliament offers a direct way of having that say and being that conduit. I sometimes wish we were better at it, but we are that conduit—imperfect though we are.

Instead, at every opportunity we are trying to say, "Involve someone other than yourself. Please don't think that this is a Government programme that will be delivered centrally." Every time we do that, I am afraid that it is being rebuffed. It comes back to the question asked by colleagues about whether that means there is that warts-and-all commitment to do levelling up, even when it is hard or when it might be time to receive criticism. I have not seen that at all so far.

I will not push the amendment to a Division, because we want to return to the matter at a later stage, but this is a fundamental point, and I hope that over the weeks and months ahead that we might hear something better on it. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

*Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.*

*Clauses 5 and 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Ordered,* That further consideration be now adjourned.—(*Miss Dines.*)

4.4 pm

*Adjourned till Thursday 30 June at half-past Eleven o'clock.*

**Written evidence reported to the House**

LRB04 McCarthy Stone

LRB05 The Heritage Alliance

LRB06 TheCityUK

LRB07 British Property Federation

LRB08 Andrew Singer

LRB09 District Councils Network





