

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

## SUPPORTED HOUSING (REGULATORY OVERSIGHT) BILL

*Wednesday 11 January 2023*

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CLAUSES 1 to 14 agreed to.  
Bill to be reported, without amendment.

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**Sunday 15 January 2023**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:***Chair:* CLIVE EFFORD

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|--|--|
| † Aiken, Nickie ( <i>Cities of London and Westminster</i> ) (Con)  | † Hughes, Eddie ( <i>Walsall North</i> ) (Con)                 |
| † Betts, Mr Clive ( <i>Sheffield South East</i> ) (Lab)  | † McCabe, Steve ( <i>Birmingham, Selly Oak</i> ) (Lab)         |
| † Blackman, Bob ( <i>Harrow East</i> ) (Con)   | † Mohindra, Mr Gagan ( <i>South West Hertfordshire</i> ) (Con) |
| Buchan, Felicity ( <i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities</i> ) | † Morgan, Helen ( <i>North Shropshire</i> ) (LD)               |
| † Byrne, Ian ( <i>Liverpool, West Derby</i> ) (Lab)  | † Robinson, Mary ( <i>Cheadle</i> ) (Con)                      |
| † Elphicke, Mrs Natalie ( <i>Dover</i> ) (Con)   | † Sambrook, Gary ( <i>Birmingham, Northfield</i> ) (Con)       |
| Everitt, Ben ( <i>Milton Keynes North</i> ) (Con)  | Wallis, Dr Jamie ( <i>Bridgend</i> ) (Con)                     |
| † Hamilton, Mrs Paulette ( <i>Birmingham, Erdington</i> ) (Lab)  | Wilson, Munira ( <i>Twickenham</i> ) (LD)                      |
| † Hayes, Helen ( <i>Dulwich and West Norwood</i> ) (Lab)   | Anne-Marie Griffiths, <i>Committee Clerk</i>                   |
|  | † <b>attended the Committee</b>                                |

## Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 11 January 2023

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

### Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill

9.25 am

**The Chair:** Before we begin, I have a few preliminary reminders for the Committee. Please switch off electronic devices or put them on silent. No food or drink other than water is to be consumed during the Committee's sittings. Hansard colleagues will be grateful if Members email their speaking notes to [hansardnotes@parliament.uk](mailto:hansardnotes@parliament.uk). The selection of amendments is online and on paper in the room, on the table in front of me.

#### Clause 1

##### SUPPORTED HOUSING ADVISORY PANEL

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

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Efford. I thank colleagues from across the House for agreeing to sit on this Bill Committee and enabling us to scrutinise the Bill in some detail.

The Bill is centred around the report on exempt accommodation produced by the Select Committee on Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The Chair of that Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East, has agreed to serve on this Committee, and several other colleagues who sit on that Select Committee are here.

From the outset, I want to make clear that what we are seeking to do is to drive out rogue landlords, not hinder the really brilliant work being done by thousands of organisations across the country who provide supported housing for vulnerable people. To achieve that, clause 1 sets out the advice that needs to be provided to the Secretary of State. It is clear that this is a complex policy area and we want to make sure that we do not have unforeseen, inadvertent consequences that inconvenience the good people who provide an excellent service. I believe the clause is non-controversial. It requires the Supported Housing Advisory Panel to be set up; the rest of the provisions are permissive.

In formulating the Bill, we have sought to detail the sorts of expertise we believe are required. The panel the Secretary of State is required to set up will provide information to housing authorities, social services authorities and so on, so it needs expertise from people involved in social housing, local housing authorities and social services, as well as someone who has the interests of charities at heart and someone who has the interests of residents at heart, which often gets overlooked. If more expertise is required, the clause permits the Secretary of State to appoint to the panel people other than those specific representatives, but it could well be that someone who is nominated to the panel is expert in more than one field, so one representative from each of those areas is not a requirement.

The clause then sets out in some detail what the panel should do and what advice should be given to the Secretary of State. Obviously, the main purpose of the panel is to ensure that the Secretary of State is informed when action is required to be taken under later clauses. I commend the clause to the Committee and I look forward to contributions from colleagues.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I will not refer to your abject failure at the weekend to defeat Sheffield United in the cup. That would be very unfair of me.

**The Chair:** It wasn't me personally!

**Mr Betts:** I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Harrow East, my honourable Select Committee friend. We worked together closely on the Bill, as did the whole Select Committee; our report on the issue was unanimous. We described what we saw, which— notwithstanding the excellent provision that does exist in the sector—is a system and a delivery of service that is in many respects a complete mess. We saw appalling examples of accommodation that was not fit for purpose, and that the supposed support in this supported accommodation did not exist, consisting as it did of a “support worker” opening a door and shouting up the stairs, “Are you alright, then?” It was absolutely dreadful.

What was in some ways even worse is that the taxpayer was paying millions of pounds for this service, although the Department for Work and Pensions could not actually tell us how much. In the end, though, the Committee is not asking for more money. We are saying that the money that is there could be spent an awful lot better. Delivering to very vulnerable people a better service than they are currently getting and improving the lives of people in communities that have been blighted by this are the objectives we have in mind for the legislation. We do not want to drive out good providers or close down good accommodation. We want to get at the rogue providers who operate scams to make millions of pounds out of housing benefit at the expense of vulnerable people who are not getting the service they deserve.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan):** It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank all Members who have joined us this morning, including my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, whom I congratulate on reaching Committee with the Bill. I agree with both what he said in his introduction and the comments from the hon. Member for Sheffield South East.

Supported housing is a vital safety net for many people, enabling them to live independently with some support. There are many excellent examples of supported housing providing support for people experiencing homelessness, older people, people with a disability and those suffering from mental ill health, to name but a few, but as we are all aware, there are rogue landlords operating supported housing schemes. Those landlords are exploiting the vulnerable people they are supposed to be helping. This is completely unacceptable. We must continue to deliver a clear message to those providers: their time is up.

This Bill, which the Government support, includes a range of measures to drive out rogue providers and drive up the quality of supported housing. It is a very important measure that comes after many Government interventions. In October 2020, we published the national statement of expectations setting out the Government's vision for quality supported housing. In the same month, we launched the pilots, and in March 2022, following the evaluation of the pilots, we announced our intention to bring forward regulations. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has come forward with his Bill. We have also announced that over the next three years we are expanding the pilots to 22 new local authorities, with a further £20 million programme of support. The Government are sending a clear message: we will not tolerate abuse of the supported housing system. Time is up for rogue landlords.

Clause 1 places a duty on the Secretary of State to set up a new advisory panel and to appoint a chair to the panel through consulting the members. The new panel will advise on the design and implementation of the measures in the Bill. It will be able to take a strategic view of our plans, as well as undertake its own work related to supported housing. This is an excellent opportunity to bring together key stakeholders to share their expertise and to advise the Government. The advisory panel will give Government direct access to stakeholders and their knowledge of the sector at a crucial time when we will be consulting on how best to deliver and implement the measures in the Bill. The panel will consist of those with an interest from across the supported housing sector, including but not limited to those who represent the interests of registered providers, local housing authorities, charities providing supported housing and residents of supported housing. I look forward to convening the panel at the earliest opportunity.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank the Minister for her remarks and her support for the Bill generally. I also thank the hon. Member for Sheffield South East, the Chair of the Select Committee, for the inquiry we jointly conducted. This is a very important element of getting the advice that the Secretary of State will need on policy. The one area where there was discussion was the appointment of the chair of this panel, which I think it is important. It is now down to the Secretary of State to make the appointment, but the chair could be a member of the panel who already has expertise and is quite capable. I think enough has been said about this clause, but I will have more to say as we proceed.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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

## Clause 2

### LOCAL SUPPORTED HOUSING STRATEGIES

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

**Bob Blackman:** Clause 2 builds on the advice to be provided to the Secretary of State and covers local housing strategies. One of the things we established during the Select Committee inquiry was, as has been said by the Chair of the Committee, that it is a bit of a wild west show out there in terms of how supported accommodation is provided. There is a lack of regulation

and scrutiny, and even in local authorities such as Birmingham, which has introduced its own scheme, the rogue landlords refuse to comply.

The clause requires local authorities to review the exempt accommodation in their area, so that we can establish exactly how much there is out there. One of the problems that has been encountered as we have had discussions on the progress of the Bill is the lack of data. This issue is not limited to Birmingham. It is spreading out all over the country, in some quite strange places. I know it is the case in, for example, Scarborough, Blackpool and Southwark.

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I welcome his Bill. In a former life I was cabinet member for public protection, and under that came the environmental health service. I was always shocked when I got my monthly reports about the shocking housing conditions in the private rented sector. Does my hon. Friend agree that this Bill will hopefully do something to give tenants the confidence to go to local authorities and show that they are living in dreadful conditions, so that councils can then go after these landlords? Too often tenants do not feel that they should go and speak to a councillor or their council, because they fear being evicted by their landlords.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. One of the challenges here is that we are talking about some of the most vulnerable people in society. They may be mentally ill, physically ill or recovering from drug addiction or a gambling addiction. They may have left the armed forces or prison. There are all sorts of reasons why someone would be in supported accommodation. I will reflect on that as we go through this part of the Bill.

One of the things we established during the Select Committee inquiry was that often tenants are scared stiff to speak up for themselves for fear of being evicted. Rogue landlords will typically say to people, "If you don't conform and do what you're told, you will be out on the streets. And by the way, the local housing authority won't house you, so you could end up rough sleeping and being very vulnerable." That is the sort of intimidation they face.

The clause goes into some detail about making sure that local authorities review the need in their area, including the type and extent of accommodation. Without that data, it is very difficult to exercise any form of control. That is why the clause gives the local authority a duty to carry out a review and produce a strategy. It may be that certain areas of the country do not have a need—I doubt that, but some may claim they have no need for any supported housing." None the less, almost all local authorities will be required to produce a plan and make sure that they interact with social services and set out what is going to be provided and to what standards, because no one should be forced to live in substandard accommodation, particularly people in these circumstances.

I have had the opportunity of speaking to many providers of accommodation of this type. They recognise the vulnerability of people, but often they have no interaction with the local authority because they provide the services directly. We are seeking here to make sure



[Bob Blackman]

that the local authority establishes how much need there is in its area, and then makes sure that that need is met. Without a strategy, an overall view cannot be provided.

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am very supportive of the hon. Gentleman's aims overall with the Bill, and with this clause in particular. It is important that local authorities have an absolutely clear picture of the need or demand in their area. Does he accept that—this point is not in the clause, but will have to be entertained if the clause is to achieve its aims—having identified the need, there has to be a clear and concerted effort to assist local authorities to provide suitable accommodation? That suggests that we need some sort of targets, both on housebuilding and on identifying appropriate amounts of accommodation in the private sector.

**Bob Blackman**: I share the hon. Gentleman's view that we need to meet the need, but we first have to establish what the need is. Many local authorities are working together with not-for-profit providers on both the social services and other elements to provide the accommodation required, and making sure that they are working jointly. Where that process happens, it works very well. What we are seeking to do is to prevent the position whereby rogue landlords set up operations and bring people in who are literally just provided with accommodation and no support whatever—the Chair of the Select Committee talked about that situation earlier. Those people are unknown to the local authority as tenants and are therefore not supported.

That is one of the reasons why this Bill is so important: to regulate the entirety of the sector. Many organisations have continued on, happily providing the sort of service that we would hope to see everyone receive, but unfortunately there is now a large minority of people who are not providing any form of service whatever. That is why we need local authorities to establish the level of need and then, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak says, to establish how much housing needs to be provided and what type of housing and facilities are required, so that that need is met.

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I rise to agree with much of what has been said. We should not focus the entire debate on what is happening in Birmingham, but I have experience of what was happening in Birmingham 10 years ago because I worked for YMCA Birmingham.

We provided exempt supported accommodation. I had a number of unscrupulous people approach me and have a discussion about how we could manage accommodation on their behalf. When we told them how much it would cost to provide the service and what we thought was a proportionate and appropriate level of support, they were not interested. They wanted to go somewhere else—to find the people who were doing the “shout up the stairs” approach, which the Chair of the Select Committee commented on earlier. That was 10 years ago.

Although I raised some concerns at the time, for various reasons, partly because of the size of Birmingham's local authority, it feels to me that the situation got to a

point where the local authority was overwhelmed by the amount of accommodation required. Once that door is opened, and people realise there is a very lucrative business model here, more and more people rush in, and it is then very difficult for Birmingham to stem the flow. I commend the work that Birmingham has done, partly with money from the Government's pilot scheme, and the report of its scrutiny committee, which shows how well the authority has collectively worked to get a grip on the issue.

9.45 am

This is a business model, so if one area, such as Birmingham, gets a grip on the issue, the business will just be pushed to other, more vulnerable authorities that naively await to be overwhelmed themselves. That is why it is critical that we do an assessment, and that we seek to focus the minds of those in local authorities on the fact that this problem might be coming their way.

I agree completely with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East that it would be surprising if an area found that it did not have any need to provide supported accommodation. When it comes to that accommodation, we often focus on particular vulnerable groups, perhaps those who are on the edge of rough sleeping, but there is excellent provision in other areas—for example, for those with long-term learning difficulties. The provision of exempt supported accommodation for them, or for elderly people, is critical, and there is almost certainly a need for it across the country. Clause 2 will focus people's minds, and it is incredibly important.

**Felicity Buchan**: Under the Bill, local housing authorities will have a duty to carry out a review of supported housing provision in their districts and publish a strategy, which will be updated every five years. The strategies sit outside the enforcement mechanisms in the Bill, but they will be an equally important part of our approach. The supported housing oversight pilots demonstrated the real value of local needs assessments and strategic plans, which enabled local authorities to better understand what type of supported provision was being offered in their area, who provided it and the quality of it. The pilots also showed that strategic planning helped local authorities to better understand the mix of residents that providers are accommodating.

The strategies that the Bill will introduce will include an assessment of the current availability of supported housing in a local housing authority's district and an assessment of the likely future need for supported housing. The strategies will sit alongside and complement existing strategies, such as those on domestic abuse. Guidance will be published to ensure that those are produced in a consistent way that enables a national picture to be built up. We will incorporate best practice insights from the pilot local authorities to ensure the strategies are designed in the most useful and beneficial way. They will help local authorities to make evidence-based decisions about their support housing provision. When combined with other elements in the Bill, they will empower local authorities to take the right decisions for their areas.

In addition to those local strategies, which will provide useful information at a local level, the Government also have research under way. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East will be glad to hear that we commissioned the research from Sheffield Hallam University. It will

provide an up-to-date estimate of the size and cost of the supported housing sector across Great Britain, as well as estimates of future demand. I agree that data on supported housing needs must be improved, and I heard that message from a number of Members on Second Reading. Better data will give the Government and local authorities greater awareness of the supported housing already being provided, where providers are operating and the residents that they are housing.

**Eddie Hughes:** This is perhaps not something that we need to consider in this Committee, but it was raised at the Select Committee. It is a bit of an omission on the Government's part, collectively, that we do not know, at the press of a button, the number of people and the cost associated with supported housing. It would be lovely if, at some point in the not-too-distant future, there were a marker on Government databases that said, "This is a supported housing claim." Then a single authority could at any point ask how many supported housing claims it has. We would not need extensive research from Sheffield Hallam and others; we would just press a button, get a report and know where we were.

**Felicity Buchan:** I absolutely agree with my predecessor, and I thank him for all his work on the Bill. I agree that we need better data. I reassure him that we are working alongside the DWP so that we are much more in touch with where supported housing is and where housing benefit is being paid to it.

The DWP has already made changes to the way local authorities provide housing benefit data on supported housing claims by including flags in the collection system. That is for new housing benefit claims, so it will take time for this to work its way through the system and have data over time.

We are collectively in agreement that data needs to be improved. The supported housing strategies will be vital in maintaining a clear picture of supported housing provision and future need across England. When combined, these improvements in data and the introduction of strategic plans will help to create a clearer national picture of the supported housing provision across the country.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank the Minister for setting out the position that the Government will take. Clearly, as Members have said, the most important thing here is to gather the data and information and ensure that we have a strategy for dealing with the type of appropriate accommodation.

One thing that escaped me during my introduction is that there are certain aspects—for example, those vulnerable people fleeing domestic abuse—where we must be cautious about what data is released and made available. That is one reason why it must be clear that guidance from the Secretary of State can be issued to local authorities appropriately. That, of course, would then be a requirement on a local authority to take certain actions.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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

**The Chair:** Order. Before we move on to clause 3, I should say that we are nearly 30 minutes into the sitting. We have a hard stop at 11.25 am, and a few amendments

need to be debated. We can organise another sitting to complete the Bill; if that is the will of the Committee, that will obviously take place. Proper scrutiny must take place, but I remind the Committee that 11.25 am is a hard stop.

### Clause 3

#### NATIONAL SUPPORTED HOUSING STANDARDS

**Mr Betts:** I beg to move amendment 1, in clause 3, page 4, line 8, at end insert—

- “(5) The Secretary of State may by regulations confer powers on local housing authorities to enforce the National Supported Housing Standards.
- (6) Regulations made under subsection (5) shall be in a form analogous to Part 1 of the Housing Act 2004, with such modifications, amendments, disapplication or transitional provisions as the Secretary of State shall consider appropriate for the purpose of enabling local housing authorities to secure compliance with the National Supported Housing Standards.
- (7) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (5) may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by resolution of each House of Parliament.”

*This amendment seeks to give the Secretary of State the option of giving local housing authorities the power to introduce a scheme to enforce the National Supported Housing Standards.*

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment 2, in clause 3, page 4, line 8, at end insert—

- “(5) If, at the end of the period of one year beginning with the day on which this Act is passed, the power in subsection (1) is yet to be exercised, the Secretary of State must publish, in such manner as the Secretary of State thinks fit, a report setting out the progress that has been made towards doing so.”

*This amendment would require the Secretary of State to explain why they have not introduced National Supported Housing Standards, if they have not done so within a year of Royal Assent of the Act.*

Clause stand part.

**Mr Betts:** Thank you, Mr Efford; I take your strictures to heart. I have two amendments. The first one recognises the need for standards to be set down and for a discussion about how that might best be done. I am happy to hear what the Minister has to say. We all want to see standards effectively laid down and followed through; the current lack of standards is a real problem in the sector.

I move on to my second amendment. I am not doubting the good intentions of the Minister in any way, but we have, of course, had one or two changes of Minister; by the time we come to implement this, someone else might be there. I am trying to get on the record what happens if the powers that may be exercised by Ministers are not exercised in practice. Is there a mechanism for whoever the Minister is at the time to report back to Members about what progress has or has not been made? I would be happy to hear the Minister's response.

**Bob Blackman:** I should say from the outset that I agree with the thrust of the amendment, but we need to look at the issue in some detail to ensure that it reflects exactly what we are seeking to do in the Bill. I hope that the hon. Member for Sheffield South East will not press

[Bob Blackman]

this to a vote. We will seek assurances from the Minister about what can be done to ensure that we enforce these regulations on local authorities and that we have proper standards.

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): The Chair of the Select Committee is right to raise the issue of how housing standards can be enforced in this important area, particularly as they affect vulnerable people. I ask the Minister to consider whether the connection of the financial payment—that relationship with DWP extra support payments, which my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North rightly raised—could be part of the mechanism. We know that local authorities, even with resources, have struggled with rogue landlords and to really enforce housing standards in other ways. I encourage the thinking about financial as well as enforcement powers.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. There are a number of different existing models. Many local authorities pay the rent through housing benefit for a tenant to live in supported accommodation. There can then be a discretionary social services element, provided under a contract by the local authority to the housing provider, in order to provide support. It is a very complex area, as my hon. Friend knows. We must get this right; there could be unforeseen circumstances if we are too prescriptive at this stage. It may well be that the detail has to be set out in regulations as the consultation process and the regulations that follow from the Bill go through. I do not think it would be sensible at this stage to agree to the amendment. I trust we will get some assurances from my hon. Friend the Minister in that respect.

The clause requires appropriate supported housing standards to be followed, introduced and enforced by the local authority. As my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North said—his points were well made—people should be living in reasonable accommodation suitable to their needs. That is part and parcel of setting out what the standards should be. That does not mean the sort of things we saw in Birmingham, with its scandalous elements: where a three-bedroom house is suddenly turned into an eight-bedroom house, with a small kitchen and small living area, and people are crammed in without any support whatever; where there is no control over the type of people put into these houses or their needs; and where someone fleeing domestic violence, a recovering drug addict, someone who has left prison for sexual offences and others can all be accommodated within the same unit, without any consideration of their separate needs and responsibilities. We need to set the standards out.

Amendment 2 relates to the Secretary of State reporting back. We look forward to the Minister still being in place by the time we get the Bill on the statute book, although I notice that here we have an ex-Minister, who began the process, and another ex-Minister, who is now my Whip—we have had three Ministers already, during the course of the Bill's proceedings. We need to make sure that we are making progress and that we are implementing the provisions. I look forward to some warm words, a firm contribution and a commitment from my hon. Friend the Minister, to make sure that we

get action in this area quickly, expeditiously and appropriately as well as a commitment that, if we do not get that action, Ministers will come back and tell us why.

**The Chair:** I call the Minister.

**Felicity Buchan:** Thank you. I appreciate the warm words about my longevity.

**The Chair:** Order. I apologise, Minister; permit me to interrupt. Paulette Hamilton wanted to speak.

**Mrs Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Efford. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship—I feel as if I have said that a few times recently.

It is no secret that Birmingham has a serious problem with exempt supported accommodation. I absolutely agree with the amendment. One of my constituents is currently living in a five-bedroom house where partitions have been put in and the toilet is broken. For the last four months, rats have been running around the house. This is happening in Erdington, Kingstanding and Castle Vale. I have heard from other constituents. One woman who came to my surgery is living in exempt accommodation. She is heavily pregnant. At the moment, the property has bed bugs and she is sleeping on the floor. The landlord is doing nothing about it.

10 am

Real people are at the heart of this private Member's Bill. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East for tabling the amendment. Our constituents are why we want enforcement of the national supported housing standards. That is so important. They are why the ability to confer those powers should be expressly given to the Secretary of State. I am delighted to support the amendment.

**The Chair:** I apologise for not calling you, Mrs Hamilton.

**Mrs Hamilton:** That is okay—

**The Chair:** Be bolder in catching my eye!

**Mrs Hamilton:** I am learning, Mr Efford.

**Felicity Buchan:** I agree with the comment from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East that it is critical that we get this right. The consultation process is critical to the Bill. We need to avoid unintended consequences.

I will start with amendment 1, which would enable the Secretary of State to enforce the supported housing standards in the same way as housing health and safety is enforced in private housing currently, if he chose to do so. Under the Bill as drafted, local housing authorities will have powers to enforce the new national supported housing standards through a licensing scheme, should they choose to run one. We will issue guidance to sit alongside the licensing regime—following the regulations being made—to ensure that local authorities that choose to run a licensing scheme do so in a consistent way.

Critically, we will consult, under the duty set out in clause 6, on the effectiveness of the licensing regime as a method to enforce the national supported housing



standards, as well as on additional ways through which to enforce the standards. The amendment would overlap with the consultation duty in clause 6 and pre-empt the results of that consultation, by putting forward a ready-made solution.

I have been clear that the Government's priority, in deciding on the detail of implementing the measures set out in the Bill, is to listen carefully to the concerns of the supported housing sector and its residents. We all want to avoid any unintended consequences.

**Eddie Hughes:** Yesterday I met Kate Henderson and Sue Ramsden from the National Housing Federation, and it seems to me that there is tremendous support for the Bill across the housing sector. There is a great will to work collectively to ensure that there are no unintended consequences and to drive out the rogue landlords. Has the Minister had that experience herself with the sector?

**Felicity Buchan:** Absolutely. I think that the sector is very supportive of what we are doing with this private Member's Bill. There is some concern about unintended consequences, and that is why consultation will be key.

I would be happy to discuss the amendment further with the hon. Member for Sheffield South East as an option in the consultation document, rather than setting it out in the Bill. I urge him to withdraw his amendment.

**Mr Betts:** Given that assurance, I will not press my amendment. I look forward to further consultations on it.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr Betts—

**Felicity Buchan:** I have finished on amendment 1, but I have not got to amendment 2.

**The Chair:** I beg your pardon. I was trying to move you on—we are nearly 40 minutes in and only on clause 3!

**Felicity Buchan:** On amendment 2, it is unusual for the Government to be required, in a Bill, to make progress reports on individual Bill measures in the way proposed in this amendment. Clearly, there are already well established methods for holding Government to account—including by inviting or calling Ministers to one's Select Committee. However, there is a requirement in relation to the licensing regulations—this is in clause 4(2)—for the Secretary of State to give a progress report if he has not put in place the licensing regulations after 12 months.

Today, I can give an oral commitment here in Committee that if that clause is triggered, we will also give an update on the national supported housing standards at the same time. On that basis, I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw his amendment.

I turn to clause 3 stand part. Clause 3 enables the Secretary of State to prepare and publish new national supported housing standards. The standards will cover both the adequacy of the accommodation and the quality of the care, support or supervision provided. They will be enforced through the licensing schemes to ensure that only those who meet the standards will be granted a licence.

To take up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dover, our intention is firmly to work with DWP to look to align the national housing standards with housing benefit. I absolutely agree with her that we need to cut out the financial incentive for rogue operators. I reassure her that I had a conversation yesterday with my opposite number in DWP and we are fully aligned with those objectives.

**Mr Betts:** I accept the Minister's assurances that when producing the report relating to licensing, as detailed in clause 4(2), she will also publish an update on progress with national housing standards. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

*Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.*

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

## Clause 4

### LICENSING REGULATIONS

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

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

Amendment 3, in clause 5, page 5, line 45, at end insert—

“(e) conditions relating to the assessment of the needs of persons who are residents or potential residents of supported exempt accommodation.”

*This amendment sets out that assessing the needs of people who are residents or potential residents of supported exempt accommodation is a condition that may be attached to a licence.*

Clause 5 stand part.

Amendment 5, in clause 6, page 6, line 29, leave out “statutory”.

Amendment 6, in clause 6, page 6, line 38, leave out “statutory”.

Amendment 7, in clause 6, page 6, line 40, leave out “statutory”.

Amendment 8, in clause 6, page 7, line 3, leave out “statutory”.

Amendment 9, in clause 6, page 7, line 4, leave out “the Local Government Association” and insert “local authorities in England”.

Clauses 6 and 7 stand part.

**Bob Blackman:** Clauses 4 to 7 are the heart of the Bill, because clause 4 sets out the licensing regime that we wish to introduce. The measure is permissive and will allow local authorities to introduce the licensing scheme if they so choose. There is a great deal of detail in the clause, which leads on to the further provision in clause 5 and the provision in clause 6 about the need to consult, as the Minister has set out. Consultation is mightily important, because this is where all the good providers need to give the Government feedback on how they are operating and what needs to happen.

I should explain the amendments that I have tabled in respect of consultation. In the draft Bill, we put the Local Government Association down as a statutory consultee. Following that, the LGA came back to us and said, “We don't want to be a statutory consultee, but we generally want local authorities to be.” The

[Bob Blackman]

LGA does not want to act on behalf of all local authorities because this is a permissive measure and not all local authorities will want to introduce a licensing scheme. Therefore, the amendments are sensible tidying-up amendments. I think our explanation yesterday may have caused Ministers and officials some confusion, but I hope that the amendments can be made to ensure that the legislation is appropriate.

The key is making the licensing scheme, if it is introduced, common across local authorities. One of the things that has been brought home to me loud and clear by a number of organisations that operate across a number of local authorities is that they do not want a licensing scheme to be different from one authority to another, so as far as possible it needs to be a common practice across local authorities. It also needs to be compulsory. Birmingham Members know that Birmingham tried to introduce a voluntary scheme; all the good providers signed up, but funnily enough the rogue landlords said, “Well, we don’t have to, so we won’t.”

In debates on previous clauses, we talked about the standards to be provided and the requirements on local authorities and the Secretary of State, but the heart of the Bill is a licensing scheme that is fit for purpose and ensures that fit and proper persons operate in these areas and provide accommodation. We must ensure that not-for-profit originations are not completely inconvenienced and that the fees are not so high that organisations are impoverished and driven out of providing accommodation in the first place.

Exempt accommodation can be provided only through a not-for-profit organisation. The scandal at the moment is that unscrupulous landlords buy a property, expand it to the maximum possible under permitted development, provide a small living area and a small bathroom, stack the house with as many people as they physically can, and then claim housing benefit on an enhanced basis for vulnerable people. Members might say, “Well, hang on. That’s a private landlord operating that way,” but what the private landlord does is set up a not-for-profit organisation alongside that, to which they lease the property. The not-for-profit organisation runs the service and provides the rent to the landlord, but the landlord is also running the not-for-profit organisation.

That scam has to be dealt with, which is one of the reasons why a licensing regime needs to be introduced so that we have a fit-and-proper person test and ensure all the aspects of what needs to be provided. We must ensure that accommodation is decent and that the services for vulnerable people are provided in the way they should be. We cannot have a situation in which vulnerable people are exploited and almost retained as prisoners within their own accommodation. That is extremely important.

**Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I wholeheartedly agree with this Bill. We have seen on the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee some of what the hon. Gentleman has outlined and some of the scandalous places people are forced to live. The leverage that rogue landlords have over them is absolutely appalling and at times life-threatening. Is he talking about landlord licensing only for exempt

accommodation, or right across the board? Should private landlords be part of the landlord licensing scheme? A pilot was successful in Liverpool, but it has ended.

**Bob Blackman:** Generally speaking, licensing schemes for private sector housing are outside the scope of this Bill. We are looking particularly at supported housing and exempt accommodation. We have had some discussions about extending the scope of the Bill to all supported housing. I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to a very different licensing regime, which of course can be introduced, but we are concentrating on vulnerable individuals who are provided with accommodation.

The problem is that exempt accommodation is just that: it is exempt from all the regulations relating to houses in multiple occupation and all other aspects, and enhanced housing benefit can be claimed as a result. There have been some financial scandals. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby knows, during the Select Committee inquiry we uncovered a number of scams; whether we can fix them all in this Bill is another matter. What we can do—what we are doing—is lay out a whole series of things. When the Bill was first drafted this section was a great deal longer. We were convinced—I cannot remember by which Minister, but one of the three—that we should remove a large section and put it in regulation, because it is then easier to change and amend as the market changes.

10.15 am

The sort of people we are talking about will look at every particular avenue to escape the regulation. We need to make it clear that there is going to be a regulatory regime, that it is as common as possible throughout the country, and that there will be further details in regulation after the consultation has taken place. The licensing regime that the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby referred to is very different; this one is specifically to deal with this particular challenge, in respect of which there is currently no regulation at all.

**Mr Betts:** I will speak to amendment 3 and raise a couple of other issues relating to the provisions under consideration.

On amendment 3, during our Select Committee inquiry one of the issues we heard from those concerned was how individuals got into exempt accommodation and how often people with very different needs—and sometimes very different but challenging behaviour—get put together in a completely inappropriate way. The worst examples were of women fleeing domestic violence being housed in the same building as people who have been perpetrators of that violence in the past. We heard about people trying to give up an addiction who were housed in the same building as people with a track record of dealing drugs. It was simply not appropriate; there is no control over who goes where. Gumtree and Facebook were regular means by which individuals accessed exempt accommodation. That was not satisfactory.

The standards to be enforced are set out in clause 5(3). Everyone agrees that licences should cover the standards of accommodation, as well as the use of the accommodation, the provision of care—or lack of it in some cases—and compliance with the national supported housing standards. The one thing the Bill is missing is the issue of access to that accommodation. That is why I put into amendment 3 words about,

“conditions relating to the assessment of the needs of persons who are residents or potential residents of supported exempt accommodation.”

We should take account of people’s needs and ensure that in future housing people with completely different and often conflicting needs and lifestyles—such as the perpetrators of domestic abuse being housed with victims of domestic abuse—simply cannot happen.

I accept that the wording may not be completely correct. I am hopeful that the Minister will accept the spirit of what I am trying to put forward, if not the precise wording. I look forward to what she has to say.

I have two other points. As the hon. Member for Harrow East said, of key importance are clauses 4 and 5, on licensing. Clause 2, on local supported housing strategies, places additional requirements on local councils. Will the Minister confirm that those requirements will be considered as new burdens, and that appropriate discussions will happen with the LGA and councils about that?

Finally, one of the most appalling things we heard about in our inquiry was the scams that take place. In the end, we could improve the accommodation for the same money that has been spent, had it been spent better. One of the examples we heard was about the council leader in West Devon. Quite rightly, we have heard a lot about Birmingham—my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak was the first Member who came to me to say that this was a major problem that the Select Committee needed to look at—but we heard from the leader of West Devon about a portfolio of 12 properties that were sold to a special purpose vehicle for £6 million. On the same day, they were sold to an offshore investment company for £18 million. That is a £12 million profit for a portfolio of properties.

What is happening in many cases is that it is not property organisations that provide exempt accommodation. Organisations buy up these properties and rent them to an organisation—sometimes one they have created themselves as a subsidiary—that is not for profit. But that not-for-profit organisation is charged an enormous rent by the profit-making organisation, and that feeds through into the level of housing benefit that is eventually paid out on behalf of the occupiers of exempt accommodation. It is that sort of scam that needs to be stopped.

I would like to ask the Minister for some assurances, having looked at the wording in clause 5(5)(b) on “removing or restricting an entitlement to housing benefit” and limiting the rent. Will the Minister be looking to stop these sorts of scams by using the powers set out in the Bill so far?

**Felicity Buchan:** I will start with amendment 3, then move on to amendments 5 to 9, and then I will follow up on the points raised by hon. Members.

On amendment 3, the Government agree that it is vital that the needs of supported housing residents are properly assessed so that they get the help they need, and for supported housing to deliver the right outcomes. My original intention was to include the requirement for individual needs assessments in the national supported housing standards, as that will be a needs assessment and will cover the accommodation provided and the care and support package.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East has raised an interesting point, and I agree that putting the measure on the face of the Bill may have some merit. However, more detail is needed to flesh out the amendment. It particularly needs to spell out what the needs assessment covers in more precise language and how it interacts with care, support and provision. I would be happy to talk more about the matter with the hon. Gentleman, and I am happy to consider making changes to be introduced by the Government on Report. On that basis, I ask him to withdraw amendment 3.

I understand that amendments 5 to 9, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, are technical and are there to remove the Local Government Association from being named as a statutory consultee. The Government believe that “statutory” can remain on the face of the Bill in respect of amendments 5 to 8. I could go into more detail, but in the interests of time, and as this is a more technical matter, I ask my hon. Friend to withdraw the amendments to delete “statutory”, because we believe that removing it does not materially affect the duty being placed on the Secretary of State to consult the named organisations.

On amendment 9, I understand that the Local Government Association has requested this change. I am happy to support the removal of its name from the clause, but elsewhere in the Bill we have referred to “local housing authorities” and “social services authorities” and I am disinclined to introduce a third term. I propose to my hon. Friend that we work on an alternative, including local housing authorities or social services authorities, and that the Government will table that amendment on Report.

**The Chair:** Mr Betts, did you want to speak? I got the impression you did not want to get up.

**Mr Betts:** I was hoping to say one or two things and that the Minister might respond to my points about new burdens and benefits.

**Felicity Buchan:** I completely forgot; I was trying to rush through the amendments. My apologies.

First, on new burdens assessments, I confirm that an assessment will be made and that local authorities will get money for any new burdens. I anticipate that the new burdens will come about through setting up the strategies for the five-year period, and the initial set-up of the licensing scheme.

Secondly, I agree with the hon. Member for Sheffield South East that we cannot allow the scams to continue. It is an absolute outrage that public money is going towards rogue landlords when it should be used more effectively to help vulnerable people in society. That dovetails with the point, made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dover, that we need a linkage between housing benefit and the national supported housing standards. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East has my word that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions, will look to get rid of the scams. Clearly, it will take work and require a lot of deep analysis, but we are determined to look to make that linkage with the DWP.



**The Chair:** Fortunately, I can allow people to speak more than once, but whether the Minister will answer questions is not a matter for the Chair. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East has got his points across. Bob Blackman, your body language said to me that you did not want to get up again.

**Bob Blackman:** I was just wary about who else was standing up.

**The Chair:** You should be in my position!

**Bob Blackman:** In relation to the amendments, the most important thing to remember is that with the vulnerable people we are talking about, every case is unique; individuals have unique needs. Good supported housing organisations will provide an initial assessment of what those needs are so they can build a support network. The amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East, the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, requires that to happen.

At the moment, rogue landlords do not provide any assessment of needs whatsoever. The only need they are interested in is how much money they can get from the housing benefit regime. I agree that we need to look at this in more detail to make sure it is correct, but it is in the spirit of the Bill and there is a need to specify that this will be a requirement for providers. They must assess the needs of the individuals they are responsible for housing.

Let me turn to my amendments. I accept the Minister's strictures to look at tidying up this area. As I have said, the Local Government Association does not want to be a statutory consultee. Therefore, we could tidy the wording up a bit in relation to housing and social services authorities to ensure the language is consistent. I agree we could do that on Report.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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

*Clauses 5 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 8

#### PLANNING

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

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to consider clause 9 stand part.

10.30 am

**Bob Blackman:** Clauses 8 and 9 deal with two aspects of the Bill. One prevalent problem in the planning system is that in local authority areas there is no control whatever over someone setting up a supported housing unit. We have had a lot of discussion about whether we could have some sort of saturation test, so that we do not get whole ghettos of supported housing units being set up, driving out other people. We are now looking at whether we will need to go further, which clause 8 specifically addresses.

If licensing does what we require it to—that is, control the way in which supported housing is provided across the piece—that will be fine. However, during the Select Committee inquiry we established that when a property

is purchased for use as supported housing, that should go through the planning process and the local authority should consider a planning application for a change of use of that property; I believe that will be required. That is the only means by which a local authority can exercise control before the unit is brought into operation. It would then allow local people and councillors to have their say, and ensure that we control the number of units being set up before they are set up, rather than try to deal with the situation afterwards.

Clause 8 is permissive, so that if we have clear evidence that the change of use is required to take place through the planning process, the Secretary of State can introduce that process. It is not a requirement from day one; my personal feeling is that that is the best way of controlling the setting up of supported housing units, but I completely understand the position we have reached with the Department. There is concern that that requirement may not be necessary.

**Mrs Hamilton:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman: that was the issue in the area in which I was a councillor prior to becoming an MP. When HMOs were being set up in the area, we had to go through planning, but when rogue landlords realised that HMOs needed planning permission, they switched tack and went for these exempt supported living accommodations. The problem is that we would struggle to get the numbers once they had been set up, and the ghettos are already there in places like Birmingham. I absolutely agree that the issue needs to be considered, because rogue landlords have a way of knowing how to get around the rules, and we need to tighten them up.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. It is clearly outrageous that if someone set up an HMO, they would be regulated, but if they said, "No, this is supported housing and exempt accommodation", they would not be. That just cannot be right, and it is one reason that we have looked at the licensing regime as a process of enforcing the law. It may work, but my personal view is that I would much rather see a position where planning takes place. Clause 8 allows the Secretary of State to say, following a review of the operation of the licensing regime, "We haven't gone far enough. We must now introduce a position whereby the change of use requires planning permission." It is a warning shot, as it were, and then further powers can be introduced if necessary.

Clause 9 is an important clause for vulnerable people. At the moment, landlords routinely say to their vulnerable tenants, "Do what you're told or else you'll be on the streets, and if you go on the streets, the local authority will deem you to have left a secure property. Therefore you have made yourself homeless and they have no duty to house you whatsoever." It is a threat for keeping individuals in that situation.

**Eddie Hughes:** I agree about just how pernicious the impact of this issue is. We are talking about vulnerable people, and therefore those who are likely to take that threat of being made homeless very seriously and so keep quiet and continue to endure dreadful accommodation. I appreciate that this is not really the purpose of this debate, but we also see that in social housing generally, where we have seen some dreadful cases of damp and



mould and the landlord continues to expect that rent be paid, even though the accommodation they are providing is dreadful. We must absolutely ensure that this issue does not hang as a threat over vulnerable people.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Clearly, this is one of areas that was a concern when we produced the Bill—that, in the end, someone could be classified as being intentionally homeless if they object to the conditions that they are in, or anything else.

The other aspect that we have not brought out during this process but needs to be spelled out is that rogue landlords have a direct incentive for the individuals in their services not to improve their lot. If they were to have the temerity to actually go and get a job and get some income, they would be forced out, because they would no longer be entitled to enhanced housing benefit. We must address that scandal as well.

The key point is that tenants can be assured that if they have a complaint to make, they should go ahead and make it and draw to the attention of the local authorities, or the individuals operating the licensing regime, that their position is that their accommodation is not acceptable and needs to be improved. The landlords should not be holding them literally to ransom.

Clause 9 gives the reassurance that someone can go to their local authority and leave the premises they are in on the basis of it not being suitable to their needs—it is damp, mouldy, or in whatever condition—and that the local authority will then need to look at their circumstances appropriately. They would then be dealt with under normal homelessness legislation, so would not be “intentionally homeless” and would be able to gain support from the local authority.

I commend these two very important clauses to the Committee.

**Mrs Elphicke:** I am grateful for the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I want briefly to explore the new provision on homelessness, the intent of which I wholeheartedly support.

The Bill has been introduced with a focus on the outrageous examples of rogue landlords, who must be dealt with. However, as we have explored in the Select Committee review, and in my own experience, some of the more mainstream providers, who we would otherwise think would be good providers in this space, have had situations in which they did not provide the right level of supported care for very vulnerable people. I want to explore with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East whether, in respect of the provision about whether the standard of care support and supervision is provided, the issue would be in the opinion of the person to whom the support or care is provided, rather than in the organisation’s opinion.

Let me give two brief illustrative examples. First, in my prior life I volunteered with a homeless night shelter. I worked in homeless support for a number of years. In the Dover Outreach Centre, which is a fantastic example of this kind of support, in a number of cases people found themselves back in homelessness because a respected local organisation that supports drug, alcohol and other situations found that those people were not suitable for their programmes and removed them from that accommodation after incidents of repeated alcohol or

drug abuse. In such a situation, people need additional support or other organisations to help them; they are still in need, still vulnerable and still homeless. I am keen to ensure that the obligation to support would extend to situations where the programme that has been provided has not achieved the outcome of keeping that person from homelessness and has not got them on the road to being in a home.

My second point is that the son of a constituent of mine recently committed suicide, having been thrown out of supported exempt housing—again, in a situation where they had both physical and mental health needs. It was a complex situation, as is not unusual, and the case is subject to a coroner’s investigation, so I will not comment on the detail further, except to say again that if we are looking to ensure that there is a safety net of support for people in vulnerable housing and care situations, can we make sure that the legislation deals with those sorts of real-life situations, which can occur even in the best organised supported housing provider?

**Felicity Buchan:** Let me start with clause 8, which commits the Government to reviewing the effectiveness of the licensing regulations on the condition and type of accommodation, and the provision of support, within three years of our making the regulations. Following the review, the Secretary of State must consider whether to introduce a new planning use class for supported housing.

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the licensing scheme will be extremely important. We need to keep the measures in the Bill under review and see whether further measures are necessary to drive out rogue landlords and drive up the quality of supported housing.

**Steve McCabe:** The hon. Member for Harrow East spoke about the concerns around saturation when he was outlining the clause. Is not the other concern that by converting these properties we are destroying family homes, at the very time when one of the Government’s priorities is to generate more?

**Felicity Buchan:** Yes, and that is precisely why we have decided to opt for a local licensing regime; we strongly feel that local authorities know their areas best and know where there is need.

Let me turn to the issue of homelessness. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dover for her comments. I send my sympathies to the family involved. I think that everyone, from all parties in the House, will agree that if vulnerable people find themselves in poor-quality supported housing, they should not be afraid to look for help. Residents should not fear being penalised for leaving poor-quality supported housing, whether it is poor because of the accommodation itself or because of the level of the support provided. The Bill clarifies the position for both residents and local authorities. The examples that my hon. Friend gave show the importance of consultation, which is fundamental to the Bill, because through consultation we will be able to set the national supported housing standards in such a way that they are applied fairly to all cases.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dover in particular for her intervention. I give her the assurance that the intention is that the individuals involved will determine whether they are leaving a property

[Bob Blackman]

under those circumstances. The key is to prevent the local authority from automatically refusing someone accommodation or assistance. The Bill dovetails with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which I piloted through some seven years ago now, to ensure that local authorities act appropriately when dealing with people who are homeless through no fault of their own. The whole point is to make it clear that they are not at fault by exercising this position. I thank the Minister for making clear her position on the planning issue. As I have said, my personal view is that we will require provision going forward, but let us establish the position.

On local licensing, we need to see a great deal of consistency across the country in the type of licensing policies that are implemented, so that national organisations are not having to cope with different licensing arrangements in different local authorities.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 8 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 10

#### SHARING OF INFORMATION RELATING TO SUPPORTED EXEMPT ACCOMMODATION

**Mr Betts:** I beg to move amendment 4 in clause 10, page 8, line 26, at end insert—

“(8) If, at the end of the period of one year beginning with the day on which this Act is passed, the power in subsection (1) is yet to be exercised, the Secretary of State must publish, in such manner as the Secretary of State thinks fit, a report setting out the progress that has been made towards doing so.”

*This amendment would require the Secretary of State to explain why they have not made provision about the sharing of information relating to supported exempt accommodation, if they have not done so within a year of Royal Assent of the Act.*

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to discuss clauses 10 and 11 stand part.

**Mr Betts:** As I said when discussing a previous amendment, I am not doubting the Minister’s good intentions, but trying to make sure that we have her on the record. Clearly, the sharing of information, as in many of these areas, is really important. We know that rogue landlords and others get around rules because organisations and authorities have different information. They often cannot share with each other, let alone do not share with each other.

We have already had reference to the need for DWP and DLUHC to work closely together and make sure that information about the payment of benefits is there and available to be shared across the piece. All I am really asking here is that, if progress is not made in the way that the Minister clearly intends, could we have it on the record that a report will be made? Now, the Minister may well say that it is not usual to put such commitments on the record. I anticipate the speech that she is about to give, but can we at least have an assurance that the intention is that the report will be made? That would satisfy me and prevent me from having to push the amendment to a vote.

**Bob Blackman:** Effectively, the purpose behind clause 10 is as I outlined at the beginning. We are talking about some of the most vulnerable people in society. The people we are talking about are normally women, such as those fleeing domestic violence. We are talking about people that are mentally or physically ill; they may be recovering from all sorts of addictions. There can be a whole plethora of reasons why people are in supported housing. Data on that is sensitive and personal, so we must be very careful about how that data is shared and with whom it is shared. Often, we are talking about people who may have moved around from one authority to another. Essentially, clause 10 sets out the regime that will operate and the requirement that the Department will introduce regulations on how this should be handled.

This is going to be one of the most difficult areas of the regulation that will follow the Bill because it will have to cover a range of different types of information and of circumstances under which information can be transferred. It is absolutely vital to protect vulnerable individuals in society in this way.

**Felicity Buchan:** As with amendment 2, which was about a reporting requirement for housing standards, I am prepared to give a commitment in this Committee: if we are required to report on licensing regulations after 12 months, we will include an update on the progress on information sharing powers. I agree with the hon. Member for Harrow East that we need to be sensitive about the sharing of information, given the involvement of people such as domestic abuse survivors. Information about their current residence is very sensitive, so, again, consultation is key. We may have to exempt certain groups, but it is an important clause.

**Mr Betts:** I was hoping that the Minister would say something about reporting on progress, or how that might be done in due course.

**Felicity Buchan:** I did make a—

**The Chair:** This will be an intervention, I assume. It is not for hon. Members to chair me. [*Laughter.*]

**Felicity Buchan:** I did make a similar commitment to the one that we gave on the housing standards. To the extent that we are reporting on the licensing regulations after 12 months, we will include an update on the progress of information-sharing powers and on national housing standards.

**The Chair:** I feel like I am intruding on your private conversation. Sorry about having a formal procedure.

**Mr Betts:** May I finish the conversation?

**The Chair:** That was an intervention, so you still have the Floor.

**Mr Betts:** I confirm that I will not press my amendment to a vote, given the Minister’s assurances. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

*Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.*

*Clauses 10 and 11 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

**Clause 12**

MEANING OF “SUPPORTED EXEMPT ACCOMMODATION”

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

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to consider clauses 13 and 14 stand part.

**Bob Blackman:** Clauses 12 to 14 simply adapt the definitions for the Bill. I think they are uncontroversial and appropriate. Clause 13 is about other interpretations and clause 14 about the Bill’s commencement, extent and short title. They are essential clauses, but not controversial.

**Felicity Buchan:** I agree with my hon. Friend that clauses 12 to 14 are relatively straightforward, but I want to make one point about clause 12, on the meaning of “supported exempt accommodation”. Several overlapping definitions of supported housing include two in housing benefit regulations: those for “exempt accommodation” and for “specified accommodation”. The Bill refers to the broader supported housing definition—of specified accommodation—as “supported exempt accommodation”.

Existing evidence points to the issues in supported housing typically occurring in housing provision that meets the “exempt accommodation” definition, so that is the current focus of the licensing scheme regulations. As I stated, there is a risk of loopholes, so we will consult on whether to expand the licensing scheme to cover all supported housing. The broader definition of “supported exempt accommodation” applies to the other elements of the Bill, including local authority strategic planning, information sharing and the national supported housing standards.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank the Minister for the information on consultation. This is a key area. The sort of people we are trying to drive out of business will use every and any loophole there is, so getting the exact wording right is vital. I accept completely what my hon. Friend has said about the consultation.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 12 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.  
Clauses 13 and 14 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

**New Clause 2**

CHARTER OF RIGHTS FOR RESIDENTS OF SUPPORTED  
EXEMPT ACCOMMODATION

(1) A local housing authority in England must publish a Charter of Rights for residents of supported exempt accommodation (“Charter of Rights”).

(2) A Charter of Rights under subsection (1) must be published—

- (a) within three months of the date on which this Act comes into force, and
- (b) annually thereafter.

(3) A Charter of Rights under subsection (1) must contain—

- (a) a statement of the rights of residents of supported exempt accommodation,
- (b) a statement of the responsibilities of providers of supported exempt accommodation,
- (c) information about support services for residents of supported exempt accommodation.

(4) In preparing a Charter, the local housing authority must consult—

- (a) residents of supported exempt accommodation,

- (b) providers of supported exempt accommodation, and
- (c) civil society organisations.

(5) The Secretary of State must by regulations require a provider of supported exempt accommodation to—

- (a) ensure that its staff are aware of the Charter of Rights published by the local housing authority,
- (b) provide a copy of the Charter of Rights to every resident in the supported exempt accommodation it provides,
- (c) have regard to the relevant Charter of Rights in exercising its functions.

(6) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (5) may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.’—(*Kate Hollern.*)

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

**Mr Betts:** I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

I am moving the new clause on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern), who tabled it. I will not spend long on this, but I promised that I would move it so that the Minister could respond.

The intention of the new clause is simply to put the needs and rights of those resident in supported exempt accommodation at the heart of our debate in Committee. In the end, that is what we are trying to do: provide better accommodation for people who are often in desperate and real need. I will not press this to a vote, but I want the debate to be about how the Minister might think the issues raised in new clause 2—on having the rights of residents recognised formally—will be best addressed in the Bill.

**Felicity Buchan:** The new clause would require all local authorities in England to produce a charter of rights for supported housing residents. That seems to have significant risk of overlap with the national supported housing standards. For some of the reasons already outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, for local authorities each to produce their own charters would be unhelpful. We need consistency.

I make the point that while individual local authorities will decide whether they put in place a licensing regime, guidance will be issued to ensure consistency across the local authorities. We believe that the national housing standards will have a more consistent national approach, and an enforcement mechanism through licensing. We will therefore not support the new clause.

In answer to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East, vulnerable people should clearly be at the heart of our concerns. At the moment, unfortunately, in certain situations rogue landlords are paid too much Government money, and the Government need value for money for the taxpayer. Simultaneously, vulnerable residents are not getting the support that they need. I give the hon. Gentleman my assurance that vulnerable residents will be a major focus of our consultation, which will be there to ensure that their needs are met through the national supported housing standards.

**Mr Betts:** I accept the Minister’s assurances. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

*Clause, by leave, withdrawn.*

*Bill to be reported, without amendment.*

10.58 am

*Committee rose.*

