

Friday  
26 January 2024

Volume 744  
No. 39



**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Friday 26 January 2024**

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# House of Commons

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*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

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

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that overnight, Ministers have briefed out that they are pausing negotiations with Canada over an updated free trade agreement. While there may be good negotiating reasons, and particularly good agricultural reasons, for doing so, there are implications if the pause in negotiations means that there is no agreement to roll over an existing agreement on rules of origin on manufactured goods for exports to Canada. That could, for example, make British cars and other manufactured goods more expensive in Canadian markets.

Given that the Government's record on economic growth is so poor, and their record on trade negotiations is also poor, can the Speaker tell the House whether Ministers are going to make a statement to set out urgently why that pause is taking place and how the cliff edge on rules of origin will be handled?

**Mr Speaker:** I am very grateful to the hon. Member for his point of order, and for giving notice of it. I have had no indication from the Government that they intend to make a statement on this matter, but I am sure the occupants of the Treasury Bench have noted the hon. Member's remarks. I will say that it is amazing how quickly the Government come to give good news; I just hope that they will reflect on briefing matters out overnight. As I say, I always believe this House should hear first—it is a very clear message, but unfortunately it is not getting through. Let us hope it does this time.

## Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill

*Second Reading*

9.36 am

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

When I first discovered that I had been successful in the ballot, as other Members have been during this Session, I received requests from organisations and groups on all manner of worthy issues, yet my overriding thought was that I hoped to take through legislation that would achieve meaningful change for individuals and families on a day-to-day basis, and make their lives that little bit less difficult. I put on record my thanks to organisations such as Gingerbread and the Fawcett Society, which have offered invaluable support and guidance in aiding the development of this Bill.

In the tradition of the House working at its best when it works cross party, I place on the record my thanks to the Minister, his officials and the hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), who is often forgotten and never thanked for the invaluable work she does in supporting Members in the passing of private Members' Bills. I sincerely thank the Minister and his officials for the constructive and open way in which they have engaged in finding consensus to reach this point.

I am confident that within the political DNA of all Members of this place is an aim to almost always undertake work that has the biggest impact—work that brings about the most meaningful change for the largest group of people in society we can reach. In doing so, however, we often miss the groups in society who are forgotten or who fall through the legislative cracks of loopholes in our laws. I am pleased to say that this Bill will not impact tens of thousands of people across the United Kingdom, because nobody in this House or in wider society would want it to. As its title states, it is fundamentally about the loss of a partner, wife or mother in childbirth, and about ensuring that more of those left behind have a right to leave in those most horrendous of circumstances.

The House rightly has an annual debate on child loss, which impacts too many people year after year. To me, it is an unimaginable grief, yet like so many issues, life events and tragedies, it can be left unsaid and undebated if it is not raised by a Member. As a husband and a parent, I cannot comprehend losing a partner in childbirth, or indeed what it is like for a child to lose either of their parents before their birth. The phrase, "It would make anyone's blood run cold," is probably a grave understatement. The trauma is unimaginable, yet every year a proportion of families must endure that most tragic of circumstances: the unimaginable joy of becoming a parent, but facing the devastating grief of losing the person you had planned the next part of your life with, and now having to somehow raise a child alone.

Like many colleagues across the House, my party has been committed to boosting and safeguarding employment and parental rights in recent decades. In recent years, Bills have been passed on neonatal care, supporting people with baby loss and, of course, shared parental leave, but there is always much more to do. The Bill I have tabled seeks to give a day-one right to leave for parents in the most tragic of circumstances who do not meet current continuity of service requirements, so that they have a guaranteed leave entitlement to process the grief and change in personal circumstances, along with a job to return to when they are able to do so.

I want to mention the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry), who led the charge on this issue when he introduced his ten-minute rule Bill in respect of his constituent Aaron. I will leave him to speak of those circumstances, but I pay tribute to him for the tenacious way that he has lobbied on this issue over the past year. Equally, in mentioning him I confess that this Bill is a little different—or perhaps a lot—from his original Bill, but for me this is about making progress on the issue. My sincere, genuine hope is that the Bill will be the start of a process and debate about making changes to a specific area of law in the months and years to come. I am pleased that the Labour party, if given the privilege to serve our country following the general

[Chris Elmore]

election, whenever it comes, has a plan to improve employment rights, including those of new parents, so I hope I can lobby Labour Ministers in the years ahead.

The numbers behind this issue are concerning, and I am sorry to say that they are going in the wrong direction. Data released only a few weeks ago by MBRRACE, which monitors the cause of maternal deaths, stillbirths and infant deaths, highlights how the number of women dying each year during pregnancy, or soon after, has increased to its highest level in 20 years, with 3.41 deaths per 100,000 women. Even more troubling is that black, Asian and minority ethnic women, and those in economically deprived areas, are more severely affected. Women from ethnic backgrounds remain four times more likely to die during or after pregnancy, and those from Asian backgrounds are twice as likely to die compared with Caucasian women. Those are figures not seen since the early 2000s.

The UK Government's stated ambition was to halve maternal mortality rates between 2010 and 2025, yet the numbers clearly paint a different picture. It is clear that with maternal deaths rising, more partners and spouses are being left in the unenviable and heart-wrenching circumstance of bringing up a newborn, planning a funeral and adjusting to life without their significant other. When dealing with such a trio of issues, the last thing many will want to be thinking and worrying about is leave from their employment. Parental leave is something we should be proud of in this country, but it is by no means perfect. Making it easier and more accessible for individuals in what can be incredibly difficult circumstances is something I am sure colleagues across the House will support.

When doing a deep dive into the issue of leave, I was shocked at just how low the take-up of shared parental leave is in this country. Only 1% of eligible employee mothers, at a time when maternal mortality rights are rising, and only 5% of eligible employees take up any shared parental leave, according to the parental rights survey of 2019. For many, even the process of getting set up on the scheme is too arduous, with nearly 10% of eligible mothers and fathers stating that it was too complex to set up and manage. Furthermore, due to the strict eligibility criteria for SPL, approximately 40% of working fathers are left without any leave entitlement. That includes, but is not limited to, fathers whose partner is not working or not entitled to maternity leave, fathers who are in insecure work, fathers who changed jobs after their partner became pregnant, and those fathers who are on lower incomes.

The Childhood Bereavement Network has made the important point that parents of babies may be particularly at risk of financial strain because they are younger. Their partner, who they have lost in childbirth, may have had less time to build up earnings, make mortgage payments or contribute to pension schemes, and is less likely to have planned future finances. Dads who are currently not entitled to SPL because of their own or their partner's insecure employment prior to death may therefore be among the most vulnerable financially.

We have heard a lot about the stats and figures behind this issue, but it is important to name and understand the lived experiences behind those figures. I want to read,

in his own words, what happened to Simon Thorpe. His lived experience means that now, as an employer himself, he supports this change in the law:

"My wife and I had our first child in August 2020 and 6 months later my wife was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I worked for a medium-sized charity in the north west as general manager, and I immediately asked my chairman to go part-time and work flexibly so I could help out with childcare and hospital appointments. Working flexibly had become the new normal during covid anyway. My chairman and board agreed, and to be honest they didn't have a choice, but I expect many other employers would not have been able to be so flexible.

After five months, it became clear I couldn't carry on working in such a responsible position, and manage the childcare and hospital treatment requirements of my wife, so I resigned and left work in October 2021 and became a full-time carer and parent. Fortunately my wife was receiving full sick pay from her employer so I could afford to give up work.

My wife died in August 2022, and by not having a job I was in a better position to immediately deal with the aftermath, especially the childcare. Looking after my two-year-old son was the single most important task. However, as an employer myself, if one of my staff had been in my position of losing a partner, I would have been able to offer our standard three to five days' compassionate leave. I now know first-hand that this would be totally inadequate, and would not even allow time to hold a funeral. It's true that after the funeral is when bereavement often hits hardest. I'm sure some employers would be as flexible as possible and offer a period of unpaid leave. Three to five days might be fine for a distant relative, sibling, or even a parent, but for loss of a spouse or even a child it is completely unthinkable that a person could return usefully to the workplace. The only other option would be to be signed off sick by a GP.

I don't think any legislation can 'fix' bereavement and every person responds to bereavement in a different way. There is no prescribable timescale for overcoming a significant loss and being ready to return to work. However, providing a statutory basis for leave following loss of a spouse, particularly in the case where there is a dependent child, seems a positive step. After all, there is two-week statutory paternity leave on birth of a child, but it is equally significant should a parent die that the surviving parent is able to be present at home in the immediate aftermath. It's not just the emotional impact, it's the practical aspects of organising a funeral, the "deathocracy" paperwork that goes on and on—probate, wills, liaising with school or preschool and so on. In these moments thinking about work is the last thing on one's mind, but of course for many there will be a financial pressure, although Bereavement Support Payment has been a most unexpected source of income for me."

The Bill sets out the following changes. It would make shared parental leave and pay for a father or partner, where the mother of the child has died, a day-one employment right. While I recognise that there is already provision in law for shared parental leave in the case of bereavement, that is subject to a strict continuity of employment test, as the Minister knows. As it stands, for a mother's partner to take shared parental leave, they must have been working for at least 26 weeks of the 66 weeks before the baby was due, and they must have earned at least £390 in total across any 30 of the 66 weeks. The partner must also have been employed continuously by the same employer for at least 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before the due date. They must also stay with the same employer until they start their leave period.

In short, that is a lot of fixed conditions in a world where people change jobs and careers more frequently than in previous generations. The Bill would allow the Secretary of State to remove that test through regulations. That would effectively close the loophole that, for example, resulted in the constituent of the hon. Member for Broxtowe not being entitled to shared parental leave.

According to research carried out by the Childhood Bereavement Network, a child's need for stability following a parent's death makes it vital for the surviving parent to be able to respond flexibly to them. The child's adjustment is often closely associated with the parent's capacity to care for them, including being physically available to them.

We know that, thankfully, only a small percentage of families each year find themselves in such a position. Therefore, after discussions with the Minister and his officials, it is envisaged that the Bill would not require a money resolution due to the relatively small financial cost incurred by the Government, as it links to leave only. However, as I stressed earlier in my speech, this is a first step. I have learned throughout my time in this place to not let the perfect get in the way of the good.

While the Bill aims to give a day-one right to leave to those in insecure work, I hope it will open a broader debate on the employment rights of not just those who work in secure roles, but the growing number of constituents who work in insecure roles. According to a report published by the TUC, the number of people in insecure work has increased from 3.2 million in 2016 to 3.9 million last year. Furthermore, there has been a startling 132% increase in absolute terms of black, Asian and minority ethnic persons in insecure work. Over the space of a decade, that figure has jumped from 360,241 in 2011 to 836,339. We also know that maternal mortality rates have been rising among the BAME community. Dads in insecure work, such as agency work and zero-hours contracts, are not eligible for leave, and those who are self-employed have little to no protections should they find themselves in such a situation.

I recognise that the Bill focuses on those in insecure work, but it is important to have a broad debate on paternity and maternity rights. That is especially so when the figures are as clear as day in highlighting the rapid rise in insecure work and mortality rates among pregnant women. I hope that if the Bill passes its Second Reading, it will open up that important debate.

At present, there is a loophole in legislation that is leaving some parents and guardians without sufficient time to grieve, plan and adjust to life without the mother of their child. I urge colleagues to give due consideration to the Bill's passing at Second Reading. As I have stated, the Bill would make a massive difference to a small number of cases each year where families experience life-changing circumstances. Those are circumstances that none of us would want for anyone; thankfully, many never face them. Whether it is Aaron and his young son, or anyone who faces this tapestry of grief and joy, staring at a life never planned, I believe it is this place's job to make life that little bit easier. I would argue that that is the very least we could do.

9.50 am

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): I pay tribute to the cross-party efforts led by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) and the hon. Member for Ogmere (Chris Elmore) to correct an injustice for parents dealing with the challenges of losing their partner and gaining a child and then not qualifying for child leave or pay. They may even risk losing their livelihood. I pay particular tribute to individual campaigners such as the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe, Aaron Horsey, who had the courage and conviction to

take up the cause on behalf of others while having to deal with the loss of Bernadette and bringing up his son Tim.

The backdrop to this important Bill—how we as a society handle bereavement—needs some attention. Death and grief are too often taboos that society struggles to handle, but all our lives will be affected by bereavement at some point, whatever our age, background, religion or belief. We must do more to provide support for those who are bereaved and, indeed, those who are facing bereavement.

As a Christian, I recall Zechariah 7:10 in the Bible: “oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor”.

Much debate, attention and action is directed to helping support the poor, the stranger and the fatherless, but perhaps less attention and action is given to the widow or the widower. I recall a number of young widowers known to me—such as Guy Hordern—who have had to face bereavement while raising small children without their wife and the mother alongside them, and then also having to face insecurity of employment.

I also pay tribute to the UK Commission on Bereavement and its 2022 report, “Bereavement is everyone's business”. Bishops are not always in politicians' good books, as the debate in the other place this week has demonstrated, but there are times for praise, and I want to praise the noble Lord Bishop of London, the chair of the commission. She said:

“All of us will experience grief through the course of our lives. It is a truly universal human experience, part and parcel of being mortal. And as with every aspect of life, we all experience it differently.”

She continued:

“The pandemic...had a profound effect on how those affected have experienced bereavement. Many people have been unable to see family and friends and...had limited access to formal support after their loved one died. Feeling alone in their grief due to lockdown or having to shield or self-isolate has had a devastating impact. At the same time, the pandemic has also spotlighted this universal human experience and presented an important opportunity to consider how well equipped we are”—

or perhaps are not—

“to support people through a bereavement and how we should work together to improve that support both now and in the future.”

In that context, the UK Commission on Bereavement was founded, bringing together 16 commissioners and an advisory group.

Through the commission's work, taking detailed written and oral evidence from well over 1,000 people, it has conducted one of the largest ever consultations of bereaved people and professionals working with them. The commission saw time and again that we need to do more “as a whole society to support all those affected by bereavement.”

However, ongoing taboos around grief and uncertainty about how to help inhibit support throughout our communities, in schools, colleges and workplaces, even among those whose job puts them in contact with bereaved people every day.

The report states:

“For those who need it, there are significant challenges to accessing formal emotional support. There's not enough of it, it's not accessible to all who need it, and certain groups in society are particularly poorly served. However, in addition to significant shortcomings in the provision of emotional support, people affected by bereavement often find it hard to get the support that

[Fiona Bruce]

they need with the ‘practical’ challenges they face day-to-day—from registering a death to accessing adequate financial support. Overall, many people are not getting the right support at the right time, with potentially serious consequences in all areas, from health and wellbeing to education and employment and even long term economic outcomes. We must seize the opportunity to change this for the better”.

This Bill is such an opportunity.

We must not lose sight of the fact that all our lives will be touched by bereavement. It is incumbent upon us all to work together to improve the experiences of bereaved people. The commission’s report set out clear recommendations for achieving that. The UK Government should establish and deliver a cross-departmental strategy for bereavement, as I believe the commission recommended.

By making grief taboo, fearing it and locking it away, we make it all the harder to comprehend and to support each other through it. We make it harder for people to access the help they need, be it simple flexibility from an employer, help with funeral costs or access to specialist bereavement support services. It is important that we do all we can to support those who suffer in this way.

Much in that report was not directly related to the Bill, so I will not test Mr Speaker’s patience further. Bereavement can often trigger financial insecurity and poverty. Many people who experience bereavement are at particular risk of financial hardship and changes to their material circumstances and living conditions. That is especially the case for bereaved parents or spouses, where the bereavement commonly results in the loss of household income, and sometimes even in the bereaved person or family losing their home. Such pressures add significantly to the stress already experienced. Overall, people are not getting the right support they need. A parent needs particular support in the early days, weeks and months with their child, and even more so when they have lost a partner.

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): The hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) made an incredibly touching speech. I think everyone in the House supports the Bill. My hon. Friend has been a leader in small businesses. On the fairly made point by the hon. Member for Ogmore on shared parental leave, how does my hon. Friend think small employers should approach these issues?

**Fiona Bruce:** For many years in my previous life I was a probate solicitor, so many bereaved people came to see me. There is real room for compassion when employers are faced with someone who has recently been bereaved. We all need to look at what we can do to support them. Other employees are probably more than willing to chip in and give the support that they can, which would be especially needed in a small business. That is also why, for many years, I have championed family hubs. I am delighted that Department for Education family hubs and start for life funding has enabled 75 family hubs to open and provide vital services for families with younger children. We need to ensure the hubs enable bereavement counselling and emotional and relational support for widowed parents, especially after tragic and traumatic loss in childbirth.

When enacted, the Bill will plug a vital gap in shared parental leave and pay for those who have not completed the six months of continuous service with an employer necessary to qualify. Hon. Members on both sides of

the House have served their constituents and us well by shining a light on this issue and making it our business to sort it out. This Bill sends a wider message that bereavement is everyone’s business.

9.59 am

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate and to support the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). The only thing I wrestled with before making this contribution was making sure that I said “the hon. Member for Ogmore”, not “the hon. Member for Elmore”. I have achieved my purpose, and I am pleased to support him.

The hon. Gentleman rightly encapsulated the benefit of these Friday debates and the process for considering private Members’ Bills, with which I have not had an awful lot of engagement during my time in Parliament. I will come on to that. This morning, we can consider Bills of constitutional import and of infrastructural import for Stoke-on-Trent South, as well as a Bill on the theological pursuit of freedom of belief and justice, which was introduced by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and a Bill with practical and meaningful import introduced by the hon. Member for Ogmore, who is right to suggest that it will not affect the masses. However, masses of people in our country should be greatly appreciative of the fact that he has taken a step this morning so that, should sorrow or tragedy strike their family, this issue has been considered. He is laying the foundation stone to ensure that support will be there in such difficult circumstances.

We should not have to stand here and reflect on the regressive facts that he has shared with us. The statistics over the past 20 years have got worse for mothers in childbirth who have needed the state to respond appropriately, so I am glad that he is taking action and has introduced the Bill. As a Northern Ireland Member, however, I reflect on the extent of the Bill. As it stands, it appropriately enables Ministers to make regulations that will amend Acts that apply to England, Scotland and Wales. I say, gently at this stage, that I can imagine that that is because our rights in Northern Ireland, which mirror entirely the employment rights of an Act of Parliament applying to England, Scotland and Wales, were proceeded with through an Order in Council. It might be worth considering—if, indeed, it is procedurally possible—whether the Bill, if it completes Second Reading, could be amended to include Orders in Council. The Order in Council in Northern Ireland and the relevant Act in England, Scotland and Wales are exactly the same. With appropriate processes for legislative consent, there would be no barrier, in my mind, to anyone from Northern Ireland seeking to introduce the provisions in the Bill. There would be no political reason or rationale for not doing so. I make that point gently and constructively. I hope that when the Bill receives further consideration, a very slight augmentation may provide for inclusion across this United Kingdom of such an important measure.

10.3 am

**Darren Henry** (Broxtowe) (Con): I should like to begin by giving my heartfelt thanks to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for securing a Second Reading for the Bill. I have been campaigning to make this change in law since the issue was first brought to my

attention by a constituent in February 2022, so I was delighted to find out that the hon. Member had introduced a Bill to do that.

As has been evident in previous debates, including on my ten-minute rule Bill on this topic, in which we received support from Members from every major political party, this is a measure that parties can get behind. This is truly a cross-party Bill; there is support for this issue right across the House. It is not divisive or controversial—it simply seeks to allow individuals who have lost their partners in childbirth the right to have time to spend with their new-born child, without the need to have been previously employed for the 26-week requirement.

I have told Aaron's story in the House on various occasions, but will continue to do so until the change is enacted in law. In February 2022, Aaron, who is in the Public Gallery today, came to my constituency surgery in Stapleford in Broxtowe. In his arms was Tim, his three-week-old son. Tim's mother Bernadette had tragically passed away during childbirth. Aaron, however, had not been employed by his company for the 26 weeks required by law to access shared parental leave and pay. I have since that meeting felt that it was my purpose in this House, as well as representing my constituency, to right this wrong.

In our modern society, people should not be forced to choose between their families and their jobs. Providing the security that allows a parent to take time off with their new-born child, knowing they will return to their job, is essential. That is no less important for the sole surviving parent than it would be for the birthing partner. As a father, I cannot imagine being in the same situation as Aaron. We must do more to ensure that as much support as possible is in place for parents who find themselves in that incredibly difficult position.

Aaron was lucky, because his company was kind enough to allow him the time he needed, but others may not be in that position. Instead of sitting back quietly, however, Aaron was determined to make a change so that others did not find themselves unable to take leave. He has campaigned alongside me for this change in law for two years, and I thank him for the bravery and determination he continues to show.

This Bill is fairly unique in that it gives something we cannot often grant as Members of Parliament: time. Specifically, it gives time to spend with a newborn following tragic circumstances. It is time that, if missed, cannot be regained. Research shows that babies undergo huge growth, brain development and neuron pruning in the first two years of their lives. The brain development of infants, including their social, emotional and cognitive development, often depends on a loving bond or attachment relationship with a primary caregiver, usually a parent. Researchers also found increasing evidence in fields such as neurobiology and development psychology studies, that a lack of consistency in parental presence, such as if the remaining parent is unable to take leave from work, can lead to long-term mental health problems, and to reduced overall potential and happiness.

The evidence is clear that individuals who have lost their partner in childbirth being able to take leave is a necessity for themselves and their child. We have a duty to ensure that that right is written in law and not left up to the good will of individual companies. The negative impact on businesses that employ individuals in these circumstances has been raised as a concern in this area.

Some may have trepidation that such a change in law would cripple small businesses that cannot afford this type of leave. To that point, I say that an incredibly small quantity of people and businesses would be affected; this is not an issue that affects thousands. Furthermore, if such leave is not allowed, businesses could face losing a valued employee—a situation that many would seek to avoid. I hope that the effect a change would have on businesses would be small in comparison to the benefit that would be gained by the individual receiving leave.

I am incredibly grateful that, thanks to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), we have the parliamentary time for today's vital debate. I also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who has been incredibly helpful in bringing the Bill to this stage. However, I must briefly put on the record my disappointment that this Bill will not include pay.

The Bill goes some way to ensuring that support is in place for the small amount of people who find themselves in this situation, but it could go further. It is my hope that we do get to a stage where leave and pay are granted to those who find themselves in situations such as Aaron's, and it is regrettable that pay is not included today. Leave, whether that be maternity leave, paternity leave or shared parental leave, was created to allow a new parent to spend essential time with their new-born child. In cases such as this, it seems that the people for whom these types of leave were created to help are often the ones missing out.

When faced with a life-altering set of circumstances, Aaron was affronted by having to cope with the challenges of being a new parent, the prospect of a new job, insecurity, and all while in the midst of extraordinary grief. That is more than many of us could handle. This Bill is not controversial; it simply seeks to allow individuals the right, under circumstances beyond their control, to take leave to be with their child. As I have mentioned previously, it is also not a Bill that will affect the vast amount of our population. It affects a small number in our society who need the help of this Government and their employers. If an individual falls through this gap, they could find themselves faced with the choice of losing their job or losing spending time with their new-born child—not a choice anybody should have to make.

To summarise, we have a gap in our law. It does not affect a huge amount of people in the UK, but those that it does affect feel the impact. The Bill will ensure that individuals who lose their partners in childbirth have the assurance that they will have leave, no matter how long they have been employed by their company, to take that crucial time to be with their child. The alternative may be companies losing valued employees and new fathers becoming unemployed during one of the hardest moments of their lives. We have the opportunity to change that today.

I will wind up my remarks today by thanking all those who have got us to this point: the hon. Member for Ogmore, the officials, the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my parliamentary team, Lillie Grant and Joshua Stefan, all those who have contributed today, and lastly, and most importantly, Aaron. Thank you.

10.11 am

**Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I commend the hon. Member for

[Jack Brereton]

Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for introducing this important bill, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry), who I understand has also attempted to introduce a similar Bill previously.

It is difficult for us to imagine the impact and trauma a family must go through on the loss of a mother during childbirth. Besides all the emotional impact of that loss of a loved one, the parent that remains has all the pressures of caring for the newly arrived baby and any other children without their other half. At a time when the family will be going through huge distress and the challenges of keeping the family going, it is only right that the father and other parent figures can be given all the support possible to get through such challenging circumstances.

As a parent myself with two young children, I would certainly find it near on impossible to cope with the loss of my wife and all that she does. I am sure Members across the House would agree that our other halves take on a huge amount, so to lose one in such a tragic circumstance is impossible to imagine. Though it is difficult for us to think about, those who lose their partner in childbirth must find a way of continuing life without them, and managing, without much thought for themselves, for the sake of their children and raising a newly born baby alone.

In those challenging circumstances, it is clear to me, as it will be to Members across the House, that time off work will be needed to sort out a number of issues and most importantly to care for and look after the newly arrived baby. As the father of two children, I know the round-the-clock attention new babies need from a parent. Such parents should have an equal right to be granted the same parental leave. The baby should be at the top of the list of priorities, without their parent having to worry about how they can juggle everything, cope alone and fight for time off work.

As the hon. Member for Ogmore said, to qualify for leave currently an individual must be continuously employed by the same employer for at least 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before the baby's due date. For someone to be denied this leave simply because of the length of time they have worked for an employer is totally outrageous. The Bill is likely to be of benefit to only a small number of people each year, as has been mentioned, but it is necessary to address the injustice of their exclusion from the parental leave they so desperately need. Although I recognise the potential impact of this change on employers, it is far outweighed by the impact on those families who find themselves in this circumstance.

This flexibility is also potentially beneficial for employers as it enables them to retain an employee in the workforce. Without that supportive approach, a parent may find themselves in the impossible situation of having no choice but to give up work to look after their new baby.

I fully support the Bill. Where a mother has died, removing the continuity of employment conditions for the father or partner will ensure that families who have been through such difficult trauma get the basic entitlement that they deserve and can bring up their new baby as a parent should. I hope the Bill has a successful passage through the House and the other place.

10.15 am

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): I suspect the population of the United Kingdom are not gripped by Parliament TV at the moment, but I wish they were, because debates such as this show the humanity of Members of the House. This whole discussion is based on humanity, and it says a lot about the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) that he has taken on a Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) has worked on to bring about positive change. When I became a Member of Parliament, I thought how difficult it was to change the lives of thousands of people in one go, but if we can change the life of one person in a positive way, even if it is in very tragic circumstances, it is a worthwhile thing for us to do, so I am pleased to take part in this debate.

I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am a practising solicitor and partner in a firm of solicitors. People have different views on whether that is a good or a bad thing, but I would like to think that I work hard as an MP. When we talk about employment rights, even in the most tragic of circumstances, I sometimes feel that the views of small employers, the backbone of our economy, are not represented, and I will give a few thoughts on that today. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe has rightly said, some of the commentary on the Bill has been about how employers would react to such circumstances. When I come down here to be a Member of Parliament, including on a Friday, I am very lucky that I have a wife who runs a business, looks after two children, looks after a dog, looks after a family, and does literally everything in respect of that. She has the pressures of life on her, and she maintains a business in challenging circumstances; we employ approximately 20 people. She is my template when I think what she would make of the Bill. We are a business that does not make vast fortunes of money; we rely on treasured and important employees being able to create incomes so that we can pay wages. None the less, I do not believe, unless my hon. Friend has been told something different, that a small business, even in the most challenging circumstances, would seek to terminate the employment of somebody who has gone through such a bereavement. We must have faith not only in the words that we say in this place, but in the humanity of the people we represent. Faced with these circumstances, the small businesses that I know up and down the country would, I think, rise to the challenge, and support in exactly the way that my hon. Friend has described.

It is sometimes difficult to talk in this Chamber about things of which we have no personal experience, but as Aaron is in the Public Gallery today, I can say that both he and Tim can be very proud and pleased that good will come from tragic circumstances.

On the wider issue, both parties share a commitment to shared parental leave and employment rights. I would like to say that it is not a political issue, but it is important to note that we have seen developments under this Government, such as carers' leave and flexible working, to try to respond to the challenges, many of which came from covid. Those developments ensure that the nuances of people's everyday lives are recognised and that they are supported, because they have much to contribute to our economy. In the circumstances we have heard about today, it is not anyone's fault that a person is put in that



position, but we cannot, through prejudice, hinder people who have so much to offer and so much to support local businesses with.

With regard to bereavement, the pandemic brought that very much to the fore for many of us. I have two children, Alexander and Teddy—we all take the opportunity to mention our children's names. I cannot imagine—no, it is too much to think about. I lost my dad during the pandemic. My dad, who was a very rumbustious, lively man, was a big part of my life. When he passed away, sadly the covid regulations were in place, so we were perhaps unable to come to terms with his death, or to celebrate his life and speak to his friends and wider family in the way we would have liked.

Bereavement, in its widest sense, affects people in different ways in the workplace, and I think there is an ongoing debate. My friend the hon. Member for Ogmores said that this is a starting point for the debate, and the issue of how bereavement impacts people is very important. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) also made a valid point on that subject.

**Darren Henry:** Does my hon. Friend agree that what is proposed would actually benefit the employers who provide that, because they would retain the employee in the workforce in the long term, rather than losing them, which would have a negative impact on their business?

**James Daly:** I completely agree. The great challenge in the modern economy is productivity. I cannot express how difficult it is to recruit good staff who are productive—it is genuinely incredibly difficult. That takes me back to the point that employers will do just about anything to retain productive staff, which is what we want to see.

I was here last Friday, when the House was debating a different subject, and the question often asked is why we should legislate on such matters. It is important that this House, and through it our democratic will, guides employers on what we feel are matters of importance and priority, and this is another example of a Bill that does that. Making employers aware that this is an issue that our democratically elected Parliament feels is important is incredibly important.

**Darren Henry:** Does my hon. Friend agree that businesses also need to consider leave and pay if they are to retain good staff?

**James Daly:** That is absolutely correct. Obviously there are bad employers, but the colleagues I know who run their own businesses, who value their employees, would certainly not resile from their responsibilities to those employees. I appreciate the point about legislation, but we must have faith that employers will rise to the challenge. I think very few employers—I am sure there are some bad examples—would resile from that challenge.

Before us we have a Bill that states Parliament's clear view that a grave injustice must be remedied. It is an honest Bill that says it is the start of a journey, a discussion not only about how we can build on the Bill, but how flexible working and other employment legislation can develop and respond to the modern economy. I have severe concerns about flexible working from home. My local authority tells me that a lot of people are no longer working in the town centre, which is having a hugely detrimental impact on the high street. The Bill is

part of sensible and pragmatic employment legislation, and part of an ongoing response to the modern economy and modern needs that understands the nuances and differences in people's lives.

Any Bill that touches a person's life in a positive way should be fought for, and this is a good Bill. I encourage the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), to think about the points our hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) made about bereavement counselling. There is in my constituency a wonderful charity that deals with the consequences for parents of suicide and supports parents and carers in those circumstances. In this ongoing debate, we need to think about how the state can invest in services that give people the best chance to come to terms with horrific events. We are a good Parliament, ours is a good country, and this debate shows that. It shows humanity and reflects our belief that employers will rise to the challenge the Bill sets. I think Aaron and Tim will forever be proud of what has happened here today.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

10.26 am

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly), who made some important points to which I will return. At the outset of my speech, however, I will take the opportunity to praise my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmores (Chris Elmore). He already has a reputation as an impressive and skilful operator in the House, and the way he presented his Bill today will only add to that reputation. Labour Members want his Bill to make progress today, and perhaps to open up a broader debate about employment rights.

Having taken through a private Member's Bill a long time ago, I know just how much work it takes to get such legislation through. The way my hon. Friend appears to have secured support across the House for the Bill to make progress today is certainly encouraging. The Bill is important because of the case the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) has raised many times in this place, and again today, which does him credit. I believe he has raised the case in Parliament at least three times previously—in a 10-minute rule Bill, in a question to the Prime Minister, and in an Adjournment debate in December. I congratulate him on taking up from his constituency advice surgery the case of Aaron Horsey and pursuing it as he has.

I share my hon. Friend's opinion that the situation Mr Horsey found himself in was truly awful. It certainly was not right that in those circumstances Mr Horsey was not entitled to any parental leave. Although he was clearly lucky in his employer, to whom we should give credit, it is right that we begin to close the loophole in the law that Mr Horsey's case has exposed. Obviously that cannot bring Mr Horsey's partner Bernadette back—and we pay tribute to and remember her today as well—but, although this is outside the scope of the Bill, her passing is a reminder of the need to keep maternal mortality at the forefront of our minds.

The Bill gives us a chance to consider the almost unimaginable grief of losing a partner who has just given birth to a new-born baby. It is clearly wrong to

[Gareth Thomas]

expect the other partner to bring up the baby alone while being worried about their employment status, and that needs to be resolved. Let me say again that I welcome the manner in which my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore has picked up the issue on which the hon. Member for Broxtowe has campaigned, and the fact that the House has an opportunity to begin to close that loophole.

Fortunately, the tragic scenario that Mr Horsey has brought to the House appears to be very rare—the death of a mother during or soon after childbirth is thankfully a very rare event in our country. Nevertheless, I understand that 261 mothers passed away within 42 days of giving birth between 2019 and 2021, and that is 261 too many. Each of those cases represents a tragic loss for their families and friends. In most of those cases the father or partner will have been eligible for shared parental leave because they met the eligibility requirements, and in most cases they could have taken over their partner’s parental leave and, crucially, the entitlement to statutory pay that would have been shared by both parents had the mother survived. In some cases, however, as my hon. Friend has explained, a father or partner who does not meet the continuity of employment test and is not entitled to shared parental leave is left in the awful position, potentially, of having to care for their new-born baby, while grieving the loss of their partner, and yet having no guarantee of parental leave. It is clearly right for us to close that gap.

Before I move on to the wider debate about rights to paternity leave and employment rights, I want to reflect on some of the other contributions that we have heard this morning. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) did the House a service by mentioning the work of the UK Commission on Bereavement and the challenges faced by her constituents when experiencing bereavements of this kind and then bringing up small children. She was also right to make a wider point about bereavement still being a taboo, and the difficulty of dealing with the issues of grief and loss that our friends and members of our communities feel. That needs to be explored. As she rightly said, thought must be given to how we provide better access to emotional support, and the bereavement commission is already doing important work to ensure that people have access to practical help and support and do not have to worry about their employment situation or, perhaps, access to benefits.

The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) was also supportive of the Bill and made some positive comments in the debate. The hon. Member for Broxtowe has been quietly impressive when speaking about this issue in the House. Normally I would be holding a surgery on a Friday, and I think it right for Members, when it is appropriate, to bring the individual problems of those who attend their surgeries to the Floor of the House. That is one of the unique things about our democracy and, despite all its challenges, it is why our democratic system continues to be arguably the best in the world.

I commend the hon. Member for Broxtowe for his support for Mr Horsey, who I hope will take some comfort from the cross-party support for the work of his Member of Parliament and, indeed, for this Bill. The hon. Gentleman rightly raised the question of

potential costs for employers and the fear that some might have about those costs, but he rightly noted that the cost implications are very limited, which is another reason to support the Bill.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) eloquently supported the case for the Bill. He rightly said how awful a prospect it would be for any of us to lose our partner, in any circumstance, particularly when our children are young and have round-the-clock needs. The trauma of losing a partner at the moment of a baby’s arrival is almost unimaginable.

The hon. Member for Bury North helpfully described the mutual humanity of Members on both sides of the House, and he spoke about the cross-party work to get the Bill to this stage. Cross-party work does not often get much attention and has plenty of detractors but, in this case, there is clear evidence of its benefits.

**James Daly:** I do not wish to put the hon. Gentleman on the spot, but I want to raise an issue in this ongoing conversation. Does he believe that the House should further consider bereavement leave? I mentioned the Big Fandango, a charity that supports families following a suicide. Older parents may well be grieving the loss of children in very tragic circumstances, so we need a wider debate on how we support people going through bereavement. This Bill is a good starting point.

**Gareth Thomas:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, and it is one of the reasons why I was particularly keen to praise the work of the UK Commission on Bereavement, which the hon. Member for Congleton raised. I hope there will be a debate, and perhaps the Backbench Business Committee will be receptive to the case for one.

In 2003, my party introduced the first entitlement to paternity leave. I was very pleased to vote for it and, indeed, to take paternity leave following the births of my children. I welcomed the Government’s introduction of shared parental leave but—and I say this gently, because I do not want to spoil the positive, cross-party discussions on this Bill—it has perhaps not gone as well as we might all have hoped, with just 2.8% of partners deciding to take it up.

My understanding is that the Government’s evaluation of shared parental leave has noted a series of problems. Some seven in 10 employers, while being aware of shared parental leave, are not actively promoting it to their employees, and a third of mothers and nearly half of fathers who did not take shared parental leave had not even heard of it. There are clearly issues with the take-up of shared parental leave and, if not today, it would be good to hear from the Minister how the Government plan to address those issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore has secured support across the House for this important Bill, which will address a very particular loophole. We certainly want to see it progress and have its Second Reading.

10.39 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):** May I first thank the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for bringing the Bill before the House, and all the other hon. Members who have spoken on this important matter today? He has been incredibly constructive and pragmatic in our

deliberations on what we should do in this area, and I thank him for that. It is always a pleasure to work with him on this issue, and we have worked together on a number of issues over the years.

I would like to express my wholehearted agreement with the intent behind the hon. Member's Bill. His speech was incredibly touching and he spoke passionately about the need for the Bill, but also about the devastating impact on individuals. His point about the future plans of one's life suddenly going to ashes was incredibly powerful, and I express my sympathy for Mr Thorpe, whom he referred to in his speech.

It is always a great pleasure to take forward legislation that makes a meaningful difference. I was lucky enough to take through Parliament two private Member's Bills prior to becoming a Minister. One was on parental bereavement leave, and people asked, "Why does this not exist in the first place?" When people say that to us, as I am sure they have said to the hon. Member about his Bill, we know we are on the right track. In my experience, we normally do not do these things on our own—we do them jointly—and his work with my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) has been really important in bringing the Bill forward.

It is clear that we should look at what more we can do to support employed parents who lose their partner around the time of their child's birth and who do not currently qualify for statutory leave entitlement because they do not meet continuity of service requirements—that is, they have not been in the job for the required length of time to qualify. The principle of this Bill has support across the House, and I was pleased to hear that reflected in the debate.

Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe, who has long campaigned on this issue. We met his constituent in my early days as a Minister, and I thank him for bringing it to the House's attention. We were always keen to do something when we could, and I am delighted to say that we now have the right time and space to do this. It was a pleasure to meet him and his constituent Mr Horsey, who is in the Gallery today, in the Department the year before last. I am sure the whole House will join me in expressing our condolences to Mr Horsey for the loss of his wife Bernadette and in sending our best wishes to him and their son Tim.

I will take the time to address some of the points raised by hon. Members today, but I will first put on the record why the Government support the intent behind this legislation. Losing a partner is a truly devastating experience for anyone. The combination of the terrible grief and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) said, loneliness in these situations—the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), called it "unimaginable", which is an apt description—with the challenges of caring for a new baby must be incredibly hard. My deepest sympathies go out to anyone who finds themselves in this terrible position.

The United Kingdom has a generous range of entitlements and protections designed to support parents to balance their family and work commitments and maintain their place in the labour market while raising their children—for example, maternity leave and pay, paternity leave and pay, and shared parental leave and pay, among others. Maternity leave is rightly available

from the first day of a woman's employment, recognising the special circumstances of pregnant women and new mothers.

Parental leave and shared parental leave are not day-one leave entitlements for mothers, fathers and partners; all parents must meet continuity of service requirements. As such, if a mother dies in the first year of a child's life, a father or partner who has not met continuity of service requirements for paternity leave or shared parental leave will not have the statutory right to take leave so that they can care for the child. In those tragic but, thankfully, rare circumstances, they will need to rely on the compassion of their employer to provide them with adequate leave and job security. As the hon. Member for Ogmores says, though, some of these people are falling through the cracks.

The intent of the Bill is to provide more support for the grieving and surviving parent when their spouse or partner has tragically passed away. The legislation will support people in those terrible circumstances to take time away from work to care for their new baby, without the risk and associated stress of being made to return to work before they are ready to do so. I am delighted that the Government are able to support this positive development in the parental leave and pay system.

However, as is the case with any legislation, it is crucial to ensure that it is not only well intentioned, but practical and effective in achieving its intended effect. It is therefore important that I set out to the House today, as I have previously discussed with the hon. Member for Ogmores, the Government's view that the Bill will require amendment in Committee to fully achieve its intended changes and operate effectively alongside existing parental leave legislation. I am delighted that the hon. Member has agreed to work with me to do that, and that we have a shared understanding of the need to create a legislative framework that not only supports families in their time of need, but does so in a way that is clear, fair and effective. Committee stage provides us with the opportunity to fine-tune the details of the Bill and address any potential gaps, issues or inconsistencies to ensure that it achieves its intended purpose. I will, of course, provide more information on the necessary changes ahead of Committee stage, but I will take a moment to highlight some of the areas in which we are considering amendments.

First, we will need to consider what type of parental leave best meets the intention of the Bill. Secondly, we will need to analyse whether it is right to confine its scope to the death of the mother, or whether it should make broader provision for the death of other parents. Thirdly, we need to make sure that the changes we make integrate well into the wider framework of parental leave legislation. Finally, we intend to remove the pay element from this entitlement—I will explain why shortly. The hon. Member for Ogmores and I are in agreement on the removal of the pay element. As Members will have seen, the text of his Bill does not refer to pay, although I hear and understand his clear ambition to include it at a future stage. I concur with his point, though, that we should never let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

All the UK's statutory parental pay entitlements have a continuity of service requirement, including statutory maternity pay, statutory paternity pay, statutory shared parental pay and statutory adoption pay. They are designed to ensure that a parent has made a reasonable

[Kevin Hollinrake]

contribution towards their employer's business before that employer is required to administer statutory parental payments. Continuity of service requirements are designed to achieve a balance between the needs of employers and those of working parents.

I will be able to give more details in Committee on the changes we intend to make to the Bill. In the spirit of collaboration, I encourage all Members to engage constructively in Committee. Our priority is to work together to deliver a piece of legislation that meets the needs of bereaved families, providing them with the support they require during one of life's most challenging chapters.

In response to the shadow Minister's points about workers' rights, the Government are committed to supporting the participation and progression of parents in the labour market to ensure that it is fair and works for parents. Our 2019 manifesto pledged changes to enhance workers' rights and support people to stay in work. The Government have delivered on those commitments by supporting a package of six private Members' Bills helping new parents, unpaid carers and hospitality workers; giving all employees easier access to flexible working; and giving workers a right to request a more predictable working pattern. We have been pleased with the successful progress of that legislation through Parliament, where it has received cross-party support, resulting in six Acts successfully receiving Royal Assent. The Government have already made good progress on laying secondary legislation in due course to implement those new Acts.

The Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023, for example, will give all employees with 26 weeks' continuous service the right to request flexible working, empowering employees to ask for a working arrangement that suits them and their unique circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

I take the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) about homeworking. Flexible working does not necessarily mean homeworking; it can mean different working times to suit people's parental responsibilities—for example, different times during holidays—and it does not necessarily mean that people have to work from home. He is right to say that workers should work where they are most effective, and where employers require them to be.

The Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Act 2023 will provide greater protection to women who are on maternity leave or an employee who is on adoption or shared parental leave in a redundancy situation.<sup>2</sup> That legislation will help to clamp down on poor or inappropriate practices, such as discriminating against pregnant women or new mothers, or waiting for a woman to return from maternity leave, and when the current protected period ends making her redundant.

The Employment (Allocations of Tips) Act 2023 will make it unlawful for businesses to hold back tips, gratuities and service charges from employees, ensuring that staff receive the tips they have earned. This package of legislation will increase workforce participation, protect vulnerable workers, and level the playing field, ensuring that unscrupulous businesses do not have a competitive advantage. The legislation builds on the strengths of our flexible and dynamic labour market, and gives

businesses the confidence to create jobs and invest in their workforce, allowing them to generate long-term prosperity and economic growth.

Protecting and enhancing workers' rights while supporting business to grow remains a priority for this Government. We are determined to build a high-skilled, high-productivity, high-wage economy. A key part of the UK's economic resilience is our strong, flexible, and dynamic labour market. It is a labour market that gives businesses the confidence to create jobs and invest in their workforce, and allows them to generate long-term prosperity and economic growth. It is a labour market that rightly bears down on unscrupulous employers, and protects those keeping to good working practices, promoting more competition in UK markets to build a high-skilled, high-productivity, high-wage economy.

**James Daly:** Does my hon. Friend agree with the point I raised in my speech, that we should not denigrate employers? Most employers in this country support their staff, are keen to invest in skills to improve productivity, and are keen to ensure that they take whatever steps necessary to keep employees who are key to the future of the business, no matter what personal circumstances someone is facing at that time.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** My hon. Friend has great experience, and it is great to hear from people with experience at the sharp end of business. It is not an easy place to be. I had a fairly long business career myself for 30 years before politics, and we know that people are our most precious assets. It is good business to look after our workforce, not only because of the individuals concerned and the loyalty that brings, but because of the loyalty of other members of the team when they see how someone is treating their staff. It is important to recognise that what we are legislating for is not a ceiling, but a floor. It is a minimum period of leave that people can be offered, and of course the minimum level of pay. Clearly an employer can pay more than that expected by law, and I know that many employers do so. I understand that Mr Horsey was well treated by his employer. That illustrates that most employers are good employers, and we in the House should always recognise that when we are legislating. We want a labour market that promotes competition and choice, so that consumers have confidence in markets, and businesses compete on a level playing field.

Turning to the specific points, the hon. Member for Ogmores raised a point about the numbers of people affected. Maternal deaths—the number of people who pass away during pregnancy or within 42 days of that—are around 290, as he said. Some will have continuity of service requirements. We therefore think that this legislation will benefit just under 50 people a year. That is our best guesstimate, because there are so many different moving parts, but that is the kind of number we are talking about. That is not a huge number, but the legislation is very important to those affected by it.

I noted the hon. Member's points principally about pay. It is a first step on the road, but it is a very important step, and future Governments—of whatever colour they may be—may go further. He also raised the complexity and take-up of shared parental leave. Take-up is in line with estimates and has doubled over the past few years. In July 2021, the shared parental leave tool was deployed.

1. [Official Report, 19 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 8MC.] (Correction)

2. [Official Report, 19 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 8MC.] (Correction)

The tool enables parents to check their eligibility and plan their leave, and it has been well received. I think that also covers the point raised by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Harrow West.

The hon. Member for Ogmores also asked why parents with other employment statuses, such as the self-employed, are not entitled to this support. The Government's support is focused on employed parents, as they do not generally have the same level of flexibility and autonomy over how and when they work as self-employed parents. Employees have a contractual requirement to work regular hours and have an employer who has control over when they work, where they work and how their work is done. Due to that, employees have the greatest level of employment protections, to balance the lack of flexibility that their employment type provides in other ways.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North talked in his intervention and his speech about the burdens on business. Obviously, all legislation should include an impact assessment, including a financial impact assessment on business. The impact assessment result was de minimis—I think that is below £5 million, which is not a significant impact. We therefore do not think that the changes will create a significant burden on businesses. We have engaged with business representative organisations and payroll professionals throughout the policy development of these changes. They have responded positively and understand how the changes will increase flexibility for families. We are working with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to plan communications with businesses to ensure that they fully understand the new arrangements, and we will continue to engage with them while we finalise guidance to ensure the smooth introduction of these changes.<sup>1</sup>

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton rightly talked about the UK Commission on Bereavement and the important work that it does. She also referred to a cross-departmental bereavement strategy, which may include bereavement counselling for people in key situations. That is a little outside my remit, but she may continue to press for that across Government.

**Fiona Bruce:** I would indeed support that. Not many people want to talk about bereavement—certainly not as death approaches—but there is a well understood concept, particularly in hospices, of such a thing as a good death, where families are encouraged to get together to talk, including with the person whose life on this earth is coming to an end, about how issues may be best resolved. Those might be differences that have occurred over many years, but can also be practical issues surrounding the death, where involving everyone is a good thing. Such work has a lot to commend it.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I thank my hon. Friend for those points. As the hon. Member for Ogmores stated, bereavement affects all of us. Society is probably more open than it was when I was a young child, and I think we are now better at dealing with these matters and getting them out in the open. There are good ways to deal with bereavement—better ways to deal with it than we experienced in the past—and some of the counselling offered by experts must be a good thing. We certainly had a lot of engagement on that during our consideration of the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018,

which I dealt with. That obviously covers the loss of a child, and in this context there is nothing more devastating than the death of a child.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe again on getting to where he has got with this legislation. I know he would have loved to have taken it through the House himself, but these things are a team effort. He understandably asked for an explanation as to why the entitlement will not include pay. In response, I flag that no statutory parental leave entitlement, including maternity leave, has pay available from an employee's first day in a new job. That is because, apart from small businesses, employers are required to contribute towards the cost of statutory parental pay, as well as meeting the costs and burdens associated with their employee's absence from work and the administration around that. I think he would accept that this legislation is a floor, not a ceiling, and that good employers will go further and in some cases much further than the legislation.

I thank the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for his comments. I am pleased he supports this legislation. Understandably, he talks about Northern Ireland, and my officials in the Box today have rightly had conversations with their counterparts in Northern Ireland, and we are keen to continue those discussions. Clearly employment law is a devolved matter for Northern Ireland.

**Gavin Robinson** *indicated dissent.*

**Kevin Hollinrake:** Employment law is a devolved matter for Northern Ireland, I understand, but we will continue those conversations. I note his point about an Order in Council, and we will take forward discussion on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) spoke passionately about this issue, and he reflected on what it would mean for him as a husband and father. He rightly talked about how this is a great injustice and how we need to address it, and I am pleased to tell him that that is exactly what we are doing.

To conclude, the Government support the Bill's intent as an important extension of support and protection for those parents who have to face one of the most challenging and tragic situations. The Government take pride in endorsing this private Member's Bill, allying our efforts with an unwavering commitment to bolstering workers' support and cultivating a high-skilled, high-productivity and high-wage economy. It is always good to see support from across the political spectrum, and no less than that has been on show today in this House. This is a hugely important measure, as has been clearly set out in today's discussion. Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe for his unwavering support and advocacy for parents who find themselves in this tragic position. He has been pivotal in bringing this issue to the forefront of our minds and this legislation forward. It is a pleasure to work again with the hon. Member for Ogmores, and I look forward to working with him to support the passage of the Bill.

11.2 am

**Chris Elmore:** With the leave of the House, I thank all the Members who have spoken today: the hon. Members for Bury North (James Daly), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and

1. [Official Report, 19 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 9MC.] (Correction)

[Chris Elmore]

for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), as well as the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). I thank the Minister for his closing remarks.

It is to the credit of the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) that he was able to convince an Opposition Whip to take forward a Bill from a Government Member, but actually this is not about party politics. Death and bereavement, as the hon. Member for Congleton said, affects every single one of us, and one of the misconceptions about politicians is that we are not human, but we all breathe and live the same lives and are impacted by many of the issues that the hon. Member for Broxtowe has championed over the past two years. I thank Members for their comments.

I want briefly to talk about what happened to Aaron and the 50 people in a year whom the Bill may impact, as the Minister referenced. I would rather this Bill was not needed, because I wish that there were no mortalities of mothers giving birth in this country, but the reality is that for those who face it, it becomes an unimaginable grief. There is the joy of having a child, while having to bury the person with whom they were planning the next chapter of life and the rest of their lives. Speaking as the parent of a child who will be three on Sunday, I cannot comprehend even three years into raising a toddler managing that without my wife. It is with that sense that I am glad there is cross-party support.

I am glad to have been able to work cross-party with the Minister to ensure that we make this progress. He and I worked on a number of issues over the years before he gained the dizzy heights of high office. As I said in my speech, we must not let the perfect get in the way of the good. I will carry on championing this issue with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West, who I hope will be on the Government Benches following the general election, to ensure that we bring about more change. I will also carry on working with Conservative Members to support people in bereavement, talk about it and ensure that the issue is always raised as something that everyone faces across the political divide.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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

## High Streets (Designation, Review and Improvement Plan) Bill

*Second Reading*

11.5 am

**Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): They say that first impressions count. Often for our towns, the first impression that visitors will consciously draw is of the high street. Certainly, it is the high street that most often leaves the lasting impression of what a town is all about. It is key to the town's character.

Strikingly, 72% of British adults surveyed by Nationwide Building Society went as far as saying that they judged the vitality of an area as a whole based on the high street alone. Some high streets are beautiful and thriving places, and there will be lessons to learn from them, but even some of those will be struggling against retail trends, not least in banking. That was the point of Nationwide's survey, because it makes much of its commitment to maintaining a local branch network. Its marketing strategy is an informed one: 71% of people told Nationwide that they still feel that their own local high street is an important part of the community. However, 67% said that theirs had declined, with 62% saying that it had been neglected; 54% said that their high street has insufficient variety, and only 38% said that their local high street adequately fulfils their shopping requirements. More than a fifth—21%—would go as far as describing their local high street as a generally unpleasant place in which to shop. That is deeply disappointing, not least because these findings are from a January 2020 survey, almost immediately prior to the covid lockdowns and all the challenges that have come since, including post-pandemic inflation and Putin's illegal war against Ukraine.

However disappointing the findings, they will not come as any great surprise to Members across the House. The state of our high streets is an issue that exercises us all, and is regularly raised by our constituents following the incessant move online and out of town. None the less, it will depress us all that the single most common word chosen to describe local high streets—and the only word picked by more than a fifth of respondents—was “sad”. The second-place word was “bleak”. This is not presented as a word cloud, but it is easily imaginable as one. The third most common word chosen by respondents when describing their local high street was “indifferent”. That is clearly not where we want to be, because the unique and localised character of our high street plays such a key role in defining the vitality of the surrounding wider communities. Nor does it give confidence to those wanting to visit or thinking of investing in our high street.

Fortunately, the survey results were not just a list of gripes. The survey went on to ask what people thought could be done constructively to improve things for the high street. The five key improvements that people want are: fewer empty shops, more big-name shops, more greenery, less litter, and better decorated shopfronts and signs.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I certainly recognise the picture that the hon. Member is painting. In Bristol we have 47 high streets and local centres. Some are thriving, but it has been very difficult to revitalise others.

Bristol City Council has been very active, and some of the things he mentioned are within the council's control, but others are down to the market. On addressing the empty shops, will he talk about what tools councils could use that would not cost huge amounts of money, to ensure that high streets can thrive in the way he would like?

**Jack Brereton:** I agree entirely that this is not just about local authorities. They play an integral and important role, but there are multiple stakeholders and partners—communities, businesses and property owners—that also play an important role. The importance of the Bill is in providing vision and focus through local authorities bringing together people and stakeholders in our high streets to come up with a plan of action to deal with some of these issues.

We must always pause to wonder whether a list of apparently quick and easy wins is indeed quick, easy and affordable to deliver. “Easier said than done” is often the narrative, but I fear that this has become an excuse for those who are avoiding taking difficult decisions and necessary action. Many of our high streets—for example, Market Street in Longton, a once bustling high street with many heritage buildings of iconic character—are now in a sorry state. Many owners are absent and take little or no responsibility for their property, in some cases deliberately allowing it to become derelict. I recently uncovered the fact that, shockingly, in the last 12 months, Stoke-on-Trent City Council has not issued a single section 215 enforcement notice against property owners who fail to maintain their properties. It is clear that action is needed.

**James Daly (Bury North) (Con):** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. His Bill would require local authorities to designate at least one and up to three high streets. Does the definition of high street refer specifically to streets, or does it take in all the streets in the wider town centre area?

**Jack Brereton:** I will explain some of that shortly, but the Bill focuses on the core retail centre that is seen in many of our town centres, which may be one or more streets—a collection of streets.

The purpose of the Bill is to place a duty on local government to pause to consider properly what can be done, and to develop an action plan that can be delivered and that will work toward getting our high streets back on track. Retailers and big-name shops will come only where there is demand and the conditions are right—where footfall is generated and physical retail that is neither online nor out-of-town is de-risked. People still value high streets as a place for retail, but that alone cannot be the solution. They want the right mix of shops and leisure in the right public realm, with other attractions, such as a temporary events, to encourage footfall and dwell times. The mix needs to be got right for each high street.

The biggest risk that big-name stores will face is that of being accused by some of gentrifying a high street—quite possibly the same people who accuse them of betraying any high street they leave. Such is life, but we must not be daunted, because as we all saw in the news this week, the prize for getting it right could include the welcome return to the high street of Woolworths in its new iteration. I honestly do not think anyone could misconstrue

the return of Woolies to the high street as gentrification—not without considerable bad faith, anyway. Plenty of us would champion its heartening reversal of decline. Sadly, the former Woolworths store in Longton in my constituency is in a very sorry state. The problem is not that it has not been reoccupied; it has been, but the occupiers after Woolworths have further neglected and detracted from the high street and now the store is empty again.

Most people are clear that they do not want high streets to be left in a spiral of decline, however “gritty” that makes them as urban spaces. They want the preservation of the historic fabric and character that a high street brings, alongside enhancements that make it relevant to the future and attract new and interesting uses. The reality of the decline of the former Woolworths in Longton is that the building has been raided more than once as a cannabis factory, with the raids taking place in a two-year period. At the time of the second closure in summer 2021, 1,500 cannabis plants were found and removed. Covid restrictions played a part in helping to conceal what was going on, and made people wary of going to our high streets, but even without covid, the building was a cannabis factory 22 months previously.

More recently, a boarded-up and abandoned takeaway on the other side of the road was raided for cannabis growing in the past eight weeks. That former takeaway has pointedly been reported in press coverage as being within sight of Longton police station. It is certainly my assertion that the police and crime prevention are key to preserving and enhancing the character of our high streets. Working alongside our excellent police, fire and crime commissioner for Staffordshire, Ben Adams, I have been delighted recently to secure safer streets funding, which will play a significant role in upgrading CCTV coverage in Longton, as well as enabling a number of other crime prevention measures such as gating off alleyways.

Our high streets need more footfall, not less, and more dwell time, not less. It is vital that people feel safe to visit. High streets need to be places in which people take pride and which they find pleasant to be in. The Bill is about bringing focus to our high streets, ensuring that local authorities think about the challenges they face and work with those who have an interest in our high streets to look at how we can begin to reverse their decline.

You will have noted, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I said, “Market Street” earlier, not “High Street”. At the risk of stating the obvious, my Bill is not intended merely to work from a list of those streets that are literally called, “High Street”. It seeks to require local authorities to designate a street as a high street for the purpose of the improvement plan. There is at least one designation, and up to three. Designations may be varied or withdrawn over time. It is not my intention that local authorities should be forced to designate an entire high street if one end is clearly different in nature—for example, residential—compared with the end of the street that is more traditionally for high street use. I make it clear that part of the intention is that adjoining streets can be included in the designated high street, or continuous streets with different names that form what is thought of locally as the high street.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work on this. I am interested in the point that he made about the broader town-centre area. My experience is that many adjoining streets can benefit from this kind of measure and, indeed, neighbouring shopping centres. I urge him to look at that and be as flexible as possible, as there is a risk of displacement activity and concentrating on a small area. I hope that he has thought about that.

**Jack Brereton:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that important point. I agree entirely that the side streets that make up the high street are just as important, and we do not want to see displacement. We want the whole area to be lifted and improved so that it attracts new uses to fill those empty spaces.

Local government should make the designation according to local circumstances, as long as an area is important to the local economy because of a concentration of high street uses. It is further specified that it should not include streets where the importance is considered to be derived principally from goods or services purchased in the course of business. High street consumer retail, including hospitality, is part of what makes the totemic importance of our streets. Defining high streets to the letter is impossible, and we must recognise their evolving nature and the need to attract alternative uses, which may not be primarily retail.

The Bill is not prescriptive by design. For example, one option would be to legislate for the definition of high streets based on the definition used by the Office for National Statistics in its pioneering and experimental work with the Ordnance Survey to map the location and characteristics of high streets in Great Britain. According to that working definition, a high street consists of

“15 or more retail addresses within 150 metres.”

That dataset aims to bound retail clusters using street names, while aiming deliberately to exclude retail functions such as retail parks, industrial estates and isolated shopping centres. By that definition, there are 6,969 high streets in Great Britain, of which 6,136 are in England. In London alone, the Office for National Statistics and Ordnance Survey map shows 1,204 high streets. More importantly, the west midlands has 604, including the sweep of Market Street, Times Square, The Strand, which includes my constituency office, and the pedestrianised Exchange shopping centre in Longton. Interestingly, it also manages to capture that part of City Road in Fenton, also in my constituency, that is primarily retail in character, while excluding the part that is not.

I am drawing attention to the ONS data work and the demo map on the Ordnance Survey website, because it may prove to be a useful starting point for local authorities. It also, of course, helps me to make the point that local authorities do not have to work from scratch on this. There is no intention to place an onerous burden on local authorities; the intent is to get local authorities to become familiar with the data and more proactive about the best practice for the improvement of local high streets, in collaboration with all those who have an interest in making our high streets the best places to be.

I rejected specifying the ONS and Ordnance Survey definition in the Bill, partly because it encompasses so many streets within its definition, and to designate and draw up improvement plans for them all would be

onerous. That task could be managed, however, with the stipulation that only up to three high streets per authority can be chosen. That said, I note that local authorities across England have designated nearly 10,000 conservation areas, so there may be room for greater possibility in the designations.

More fundamentally, the ONS and OS definition does not quite encompass what I would think of as a high street in parts of the country, including in my home city. But I stress that it is a great starting point for designating purposes and for the consultees on designations and improvement plans. As the ONS said in the 6 June 2019 article, “High streets in Great Britain”:

“The closure of branches of retailers across many high streets has led to worries about the decline of retail on the high street, and in turn anxiety about how high streets will develop in the future.”

In this context, it is important that good data on high streets are available to monitor the changes and inform policy responses. The article goes on to say:

“It should be noted that this high streets project is very much a work in progress.”

That is reiterated in the 10 August 2020 update, which says:

“We continue to develop our work which means that the data and results in this article are Experimental Statistics.”

At this experimental stage, it seems the right time to start a wider conversation with local government and local communities on which streets should be designated formally as high streets for the purpose of closer study, review and improvement plans. The requirement that at least one street be identified by each local authority ensures that every local authority will engage in this process, and the stipulation that only up to three can be designated at one time is designed to ensure that the task is not too onerous and is meaningful.

**James Daly:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, but is the point of this Bill to support retail on the high street? If that is the point, what does he feel are the challenges from the internet and changes in the market? Does he believe that part of this regeneration is about bringing housing and people closer to the high street? Many towns will have reams and reams of offices and other spaces above the retail shops on the ground floor. We need to bring people closer to the high street in order to make it thrive.

**Jack Brereton:** I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent point. He is absolutely right. While retail is an important aspect of this work, and we hope that this Bill will improve the retail environment on our high streets, it cannot just be about retail. The world has moved on, with online and out-of-town retail, and with the pandemic, which means that we must encourage alternative uses, such as hospitality, leisure and residential. As he says, many of the spaces above shops just lie empty and dormant. If we can encourage residential and business use of those spaces, that will really add to the vibrancy and vitality of our high streets.

**Kerry McCarthy:** The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent and very thorough speech. Does he share my concern that the whole concept of 15-minute cities has now been caught up in ridiculous conspiracy theories? What it is really about is the fact that we want people to be able to shop locally, to go out and enjoy leisure



facilities locally, and not always to have to travel out of town or into the city centre. If we have thriving local communities, everyone can get what they need in their local community.

**Jack Brereton:** The hon. Lady makes an interesting point, but I would say that it varies from place to place. Across the country we have various types of high street, in towns small and large, so it varies depending on the nature of the area and whether it is urban or more rural. It would depend on that right across the country.

As I say, there will no doubt be considerable pressure to designate a large number of high streets from the beginning of this Bill becoming an Act, but I fear that it would prove overwhelming and we should safeguard against this. I say that with a certain trepidation, because there are six historic market towns in the modern city of Stoke-on-Trent. The idea of designating more than three high streets is tempting, because each town has a high street that could, and indeed should, be designated at some point in a rolling process of improvements across the city. I accept that this may prove something to revisit at later stages of the Bill.

The eagle-eyed in the House will have noticed that, for the purposes of the Bill, high street uses mirror those already legislated for in part 10 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023. This encompasses a good range of what would ordinarily be seen as high street uses by the general public and does not specify an exact number of retail addresses within a certain distance, as attempted in the ONS's experimental definition.

Members will be interested to know that the ONS discovered what it calls

“one notable geographic feature in England”

in what was otherwise a distribution of retail addresses on high streets across the whole of Great Britain that showed no clear pattern across the country. The English feature—this is germane to an English Bill—is that there are hub towns with a higher proportion of retail addresses on their high streets. Hub towns are those that are identified in the official rural-urban classification for England as being important hubs for the rural areas around them because they provide services, employment and businesses. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs includes towns like Stone and Cheadle, in north Staffordshire, in this category. There will be a need for improvement plans to be consulted on beyond the immediate town and rural areas that depend on high streets' success in these hubs.

There is a great deal of data, and it is time for local authorities to use this to best effect and focus attention on preserving, enhancing and reviving our high streets. They should do this in concert with the communities they serve—both businesses and residential.

**Matt Rodda:** I wonder if the hon. Gentleman has considered the public transport implications of what he is saying, because he is making a very good point about hub towns and rural areas, and their connectivity to bigger towns or cities. In my county, one of the very important benefits we have is the existence of excellent bus services—Reading buses connect to neighbouring smaller towns—and I understand that there might be an issue in Staffordshire with the different level of bus provision. I wonder whether he would like to comment on the importance of public transport and its ability to help regenerate towns and cities.

**Jack Brereton:** I agree entirely that public transport is vital to many of our high streets and town centres, because connecting communities, whether urban or rural, is very important. In my area, the decline of bus services, which we have seen over a long period, particularly since the pandemic, has had an impact. I have been working to secure more investment into the area in order to address such issues, including through the bus service improvement plan funding, which has been vital in addressing that. In Stoke-on-Trent we have managed to secure £31 million of that funding, which will specifically address such issues. Across the country it is important to consider the impact of transport connections, whether bus, rail or other means, to town centres and high streets.

There are examples of work that is already underway and where such an approach has been taken under the high streets task force. There will be lessons for us all from those examples, including the warning that high streets will need to remain agile, which suggests that improvement plans need to avoid being overly prescriptive, as much as being non-existent. The task force has found that the most common recommendation it has needed to give for the development of a clear and compelling local vision is the need for “place activation”, alongside a compelling local vision and the requirement for more effective place marketing and branding.

In my own town of Longton we are starting to see things being turned around, thanks in particular to the proactive approach of Longton Exchange shopping centre, which has attracted new uses and new organisations such as Urban Wilderness, which is helping to develop a programme of creative activities and events. In addition, the levelling-up funding that we have secured is addressing sites such as the Crown Works, redeveloping that derelict Potteries site into new residential uses. I hope the Minister keeps his commitment to see Longton also benefit from levelling-up partnerships funding.

This issue is about more than just Government funding. As suggested by the high streets task force, such funding will not be enough to preserve high streets. As those of us with high streets in conservation areas already know, the requirement to preserve is insufficient to arrest and reverse deterioration. I was delighted that Market Street in Longton was included in the cross-city heritage action zone for the Potteries, which has subsequently matured into a partnership scheme in a conservation area. Although we have now started to see properties benefit from this grant scheme, it is frustrating that even with this dedicated national support from the Government and their heritage agencies, work on improving the street has none the less proved agonisingly slow. We had to contend with covid, of course, but even taking that into account is not enough to explain the delays.

It was surprising how little the city council knew about the owners of buildings that need repair and reoccupation, but also how blinkered it has proved to be about the severity of the danger than can sometimes be presented. One heritage building recently fell into the street and is still causing chaos, because an area of the street immediately before a major bus stop in the town centre has had to be fenced off. It is a wonder that no one was killed or injured. I had reported the building's increasingly precarious condition to the city council several months before its collapse, and was not alone in doing so, and this is on a street where a Government

[Jack Brereton]

scheme will make funding available to landlords to preserve and enhance heritage buildings and bring them back into use.

There is an urgent need to know much more about the physical state of our high streets and to liaise with owners and users to take things forward. Guidance and regulation from the Secretary of State are also important. I ask the House to note the role of Historic England, for example, in issuing guidance when designations and reviews of conservation areas are undertaken. I hope that the Office for Place, now based in Stoke-on-Trent, will have some role in this process, including for high streets.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the great deal of work by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on which we can usefully draw. The Government response of March 2022 to that Committee's sixth report, "Supporting our high streets after COVID-19", said:

"We want to create more vibrant, mixed use town centre areas which will attract people to shop, work and for leisure activities, ensuring they remain viable now and in the future. To do this we need a modernised and agile planning system—one which embraces digital technology, benefits communities and creates places in which people can take real pride."

The result of that desire was the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act, to which this Bill is a natural progression and complement.

In their response, the Government draw attention to the various support schemes and initiatives that they have provided to assist with the vitality of our high streets. Indeed, there are initiatives from a number of Departments. We have seen the future high streets fund, the high streets heritage action zones and so on, but these funds require largely reactive plans to be brought forward, rather than the proactive improvement plans we need from local government that recognise the importance of high streets as beacons for their whole area. There is also a need to know more about those high streets and to have good working relationships with the owners of the buildings, in order to preserve and enhance those buildings.

It is incumbent on local authorities to get the basics right. Nearly all of the top things people wanted to see in the nationwide survey are, arguably, within the remit and powers of local authorities to deliver. Taking action on the quality of the public realm, with more greenery and less litter, along with appropriate design codes and enforcement against unsightly shopfronts, signs and street clutter, will help to fill empty shops. If it does not do so—say, where the landlord is particularly obstructive or unco-operative—there are now powers for rental auctions to be to required.

The Bill is about getting local authorities to use the powers that are now in place to get on top of the challenges and take action on the issues that are important to high street users or that bring in new uses, whether that involves the big names or the quirky and family-owned independent local businesses that people want to see. They should consider totally different new uses, such as creative and digital start-ups. To get this right, we need more than

"an exercise in dolling the place up with fresh paint that lasts about twelve months",

which is how I have had one scheme—not in my constituency—described to me recently. In some instances, the local authority may need to get out of the way—for example, it could provide more flexibility by allowing more temporary event notices to be issued. However, without more detailed analysis than is usually in place, it will be hard to deliver the longer-term viability that we all want to see. A short-term, sticking-plaster approach frustrates us all, and it does not adequately achieve the Government's own objectives.

With the Bill, we will see proactive reviews and improvement plans for high streets that get closer to the root causes of decline and bring forward the physical improvements and event programmes that are likely needed to activate places where feet will fall. I particularly want to thank the Minister for all his support and the Department for bringing forward the Bill. I stress to the Government the importance of implementing it as soon as possible. This is a Bill to reverse the decline of our high streets, and I commend it to the House.

11.38 am

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a pleasure not only to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), but to support him in his endeavours with his private Member's Bill. I appreciate his eloquent and considered contribution this morning.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am learning very quickly that, on private Members' Bills Fridays, there is a collegiality in the House and a reciprocity in contributions, so I am very pleased to speak, recognising that I am doing so on a Bill that extends to England only. I did not want to intervene on the hon. Member to make this point, for fear of ruining his flow, but there is a wider point to make that extends beyond the scope of these days and beyond the constraints of money resolutions and so on: for as long as online retailers are paying significantly less in rates, tax and other burdens from Government than our high street retailers, we will not allow those high street retailers to flourish. When Marks & Spencer is paying in one year what Amazon pays in 20 years, we can see the challenges that are before those who wish to take the best aims of the hon. Member's Bill and revitalise our high streets.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to give local authorities the ability to designate not just one high street but up to three high streets—high street areas that go beyond one street, to put it another way—for this purpose. I represent the city of Belfast and when I think of our high streets, I think of Donegall Place, Royal Avenue and Ann Street, all of which are within our city centre and constitute a high street. All have had challenges in the last decade or so.

The historical Primark building, an old bank, had a fire that effectively shut down the entire centre and its connecting roads for around three years. It is a heritage building that was being restored, and the fire had a cataclysmic effect on the economy, on trade and on people's ability to meet and mingle in our city centre, so I entirely recognise the points that the hon. Gentleman makes.

In recognising what Belfast's high streets have to offer, I should note that none of them is in my constituency. We need to recognise the neighbourhoods in our cities.

The hon. Gentleman reflected on that within Stoke-on-Trent, where he can see six potential neighbourhoods that could constitute high street areas that should receive attention.

Some of the briefings in support of the Bill have quoted the Institute of Place Management and its co-chair, Professor Cathy Parker, who recognises that, in over 40% of the towns visited in pursuit of the high streets task force, there is no real partnership or governance to deliver the transformative change that our high streets need.

I declare my interest as a board member of EastSide Partnership, which does not touch on our town centre but is very much of east Belfast. As a partnership, it is solely focused on regeneration in all its forms. As a constituency MP, I am very proud of the partnership's work and of the small and singular contributions that I and many others have made over the years.

**James Daly:** The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point. Whether or not it is through this Bill, meaningful regeneration can happen only if people have pride in the area they either live in or come from, and that generally comes from a knowledge or understanding of the area's history and heritage. From his experience of being a board member, does he see that sense of history and heritage being used to drive regeneration in Belfast?

**Gavin Robinson:** I do. First we need pride, commitment, passion and knowledge of what went before and what we want to achieve in the future. I want to share the beauty of the partnership in bringing all those strands together. The partnership was born from the need to tackle social deprivation and has become regenerative, but not in the traditional sense of simple physical regeneration.

As a partnership, we support business improvement districts and traders' associations. Around the corner from my constituency office, work is happening on Belmont Road, Ballyhackamore and Newtownards Road. As arterial routes in my constituency, they all get support for their endeavours to make the best of their immediate location.

Within the broader neighbourhood, a recreational space spanning 16 km throughout the constituency, across three rivers, ties people together in an environmentally sustainable way that brings them out to mix and mingle. The Hub is in an area that was full of dilapidation, dereliction and social deprivation, and that was the target of much difficulty during the troubles. It has been totally transformed as an amazing civic space that celebrates C. S. Lewis, a son of Belfast who was brought up in my constituency and is world-renowned for his ability to write and speak theologically, as well as for being a professor and an author. It is a beautiful space and something that has completely transformed the area, which includes the Holywood Arches, which we are hoping to regenerate for business purposes.

At the bottom of Newtownards Road, there is a brand-new shared space—the Bridges doctors surgery—which is attended across the peace divide and which brings communities together for not only health, but physical regeneration through capital building and social investment funds. That delivers, on a neighbourhood basis, on exactly the aims of the Bill through shared experience, commitment and partnership.

At the other end of the constituency, in Ballybeen, round the corner from where I live, there is the second largest social housing estate in all of Northern Ireland—one that was blighted by the troubles. Ballybeen Square itself was full of dereliction until the predecessor of my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), Mrs Iris Robinson, totally regenerated the space in conjunction with the EastSide Partnership. It was done in a way that was connected with the local community. It provides a business hub, brings in council services and provides other community services, and it has transformed that area.

It is that passion and pride we have in our area and our ability to draw on our past, recognising not only the difficulties there have been but the vision and potential to deliver for our local people, that provide the elements for success. The intervention is absolutely right, and the point to highlight is that there are too few partnerships. Some 40% of towns need regeneration, and the high streets need to be reinvigorated. We do not need another committee set up for the sake of it. We do not do this because the high streets task force asked us to; we do it because we believe in our area and want to see it improved.

I share all that because I want to support the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South on his Bill, which will help to crystallise in a productive way the opportunity to reinvigorate high streets.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I thank the hon. Member for giving way. I was interested to hear what he said about the importance of preserving the history and legacy of our communities. On one of the longest high streets in my constituency—Church Road—which goes into the neighbouring constituency of Bristol West, hidden behind a Wetherspoons that has just closed we have an almost pristine art deco cinema. It opened in 1912 and was where the first silent films were shown. It has now become an asset of community value. The community is trying to buy it to turn it into a community hub. There are other people who are interested in turning it into housing. Although we have a great need for housing, having that as a centrepiece would encourage people to flock to Church Road to see that historical asset. I support what he was saying, because shops and housing are important, but those assets are important too.

**Gavin Robinson:** I thank the hon. Lady for that contribution because it allows me to move from CS Lewis Square, up the Holywood Road towards St Mark's Church in Dundela, Bunker Hill. That was C. S. Lewis's church, and it has his communion cup, which was donated by the family. Smack bang in the middle is the old Strand Cinema, which is now the Strand Arts Centre. For eight years—actually, from before I was a Member of Parliament, so for 10 years—I have been banging my head against a brick wall in support of the Strand Cinema, which is a beautiful pre-war, art deco cinema. There used to be one screen, probably the size of this Chamber, and it has now been divided into four screens—the old balcony is a separate screen.

We just secured £4.09 million from the levelling-up fund for the full restoration of Strand Arts Centre. I say genuinely to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) that if there is a connection we can make between the two—if we can share the plans and show

[Gavin Robinson]

exactly what they are doing and hoping to deliver in my constituency—I would be more than happy to share that with her.

All that comes through partnership, and it is the partnership element that I want to impress on the debate. I chair a subsidiary of our partnership, which is EastSide Tourism. It is all about encouraging people to visit east Belfast. When I was leader of our party group in the council, there was an opportunity to allocate £105 million for leisure transformation across the city. Through one political deal or another, I got £48 million of that for what is now my constituency. Part of that was used to restore the heritage baths in east Belfast, the old public baths where people used to go after a hard day or a week's work in the shipyard. They have now been completely restored and integrated into an all-singing, all-dancing, state-of-the-art leisure centre. You may remember the old slipper baths, Mr Deputy Speaker: there is only one tap, you get six inches of hot water, and you can put in as much cold as you like. If you want a long bath, it is going to be freezing.

That drawing together of a new, regenerative leisure facility and our old industrial past and heritage, through our tourism initiative and as part of the wider regenerative partnership within our neighbourhood, shows what can be achieved when we have the necessary passion, will and determination, recognising where we have been and where, as a community, we want to go. The Bill focuses, rightly, on high streets, but within our wider cities and spaces there are neighbourhoods and communities with a passionate desire to make their localities better than they are today, and that is what should lie at the heart of our aspirations for our cities.

11.50 am

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): I strongly welcome and support this Bill presented by my near neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) to improve our high streets. There are four micro market towns in my constituency and one large village, and we are well aware that, particularly in the case of big unitary authorities such as Cheshire East Council, development plans need to be made in close partnership with local people and local businesses, because they know their communities best. Councils such as Cheshire East need to listen to local people, and need to listen to them more.

In 2010, a campaign to prevent the car parking charges proposed by Cheshire East Council, under a different leadership, was successful because the then leadership recognised the detrimental effect that they would have on towns such as mine. Unfortunately, just yesterday, the current leadership implemented the charges. “Controversial” is not really the word to describe what has happened. There was opposition from more than 8,000 residents in the consultation. Of 8,384 representations, 8,127 were objections, 127 were neutral, and just 130 supported the proposals. Could anyone say that Cheshire East Council is really listening to local people?

That is why the Bill matters. I would describe Cheshire East Council in this respect as tin-eared. Its plans are short-sighted, and potentially detrimental to high streets throughout my constituency. Cheshire East Council

may be under funding pressures, but this is not the way to resolve them. Mike Muldoon, a hard-working and committed Sandbach councillor, contacted me this week—not for the first time—to say that such proposals would have a potentially detrimental impact on small restaurants, publicans, welfare outlets such as chemists, opticians and hairdressers, and shops and local businesses that enjoy the footfall of local people who can currently pop in and out quickly from their towns. At a demonstration in Sandbach, Councillor Muldoon spoke powerfully on my behalf about how wrong the charges would be. They would penalise local people—residents who come to shop and use facilities in their own town. They would harm small businesses, the lifeblood of our local economies, and stifle rather than strengthen the community spirit as people stayed away from local groups and events. They are also wrong because they would exacerbate parking on local side streets, to the considerable inconvenience of householders living nearby. My hon. Friend's Bill would help such issues to be handled in a considered and planned way, rather than through what looks like a knee-jerk reaction to raise funds off the back of local people, high street customers and businesses.

I fully support the proposals in the Bill to ensure that towns have a thought-through regeneration plan which is based on local people's priorities and put to local people for consultations that are actually listened to and meaningful. Too many consultations are held simply to tick a box to say that a consultation has happened. That has to stop. I look to the Bill to ensure that it does not happen.

I hope the Bill will also ensure that local authorities listen to local communities on other matters of concern in my constituency. One such case involves Holmes Chapel. Over many years, the parish council has produced thoughtful proposals on how to deal with traffic pressures in the centre, which are among local residents' biggest concerns. Over those many years, I have supported the parish council and residents, and I pay tribute to all those involved in developing those thoughtful plans. It is vital that principal authorities listen to such proposals; the Bill would promote that ethos and, I hope, result in a change of approach to the dialogue that needs to take place in such cases.

Holmes Chapel Parish Council has proposed to introduce traffic-calming measures such as roadway markings and gateway features, and lower speeds on London Road, which passes through the village centre, to make it a better place for shoppers and pedestrians, many of whom are elderly. I hope that the principal council officers and others will listen and now actually implement the proposals the parish council has been making for many years.

We need to make sure that our towns and high streets are accessible. My towns of Alsager, Congleton, Middlewich and Sandbach, and the large village of Holmes Chapel, are all thriving and have many independent local businesses. We want to keep them that way, and access to our community centres is essential. To ensure better access in Sandbach, a wonderful market town, a request has been made for a pedestrian crossing on The Hill. A main thoroughfare into the town, The Hill is a busy road containing a mixture of residential properties and shops. It was thought that a crossing was planned, but I am told by constituents—I pay particular tribute to Sarah Bradley for her campaign, although she is supported by

many residents in the area—that that is no longer the case and section 106 funds may be directed elsewhere. I urge the council to think again.

Bank closures are another issue, and I strongly support the campaign of our hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Miss Dines) to save our banks. Our local communities are being debanked, which is making it very hard for local people, especially those who are elderly and vulnerable, for charities and cash businesses to access the banking facilities they need. For example, Alsager in my constituency had two banks and two building societies but now has none. Let us ensure that we have a local voice supporting local banking.

We must ensure that towns such as Congleton remain vibrant, which is why my hon. Friend's Bill is so important. I am sorry to hear that Boots is closing the Bridge Street branch in the centre of town, and is focusing just on the branch in the retail park outside the centre of town, which has free parking. I wonder whether the plan to close is in the light of the car parking charges that are being introduced.

I will end there and leave it to other colleagues, I hope, to support my hon. Friend's Bill, which I very much support.

12 noon

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): If there is something that interests me—though not more than anything else—it is this issue. I am a firm believer that history, heritage and pride in an area are a central driver to regeneration. We can come up with all the policies in the world, but if those fundamentals are not there, there is failure. The emotional connection between the human being and where they live is central to our political life.

I am the very proud MP for Bury North, but I was brought up in another town in West Yorkshire that I will not name, which is part of my soul and who I am. People might ask, "How can that be?" but I am proud to say that. I will give hon. Members a clue: one of the reasons why I have been a season ticket holder at Huddersfield Town football club for many years is that it is a representation of an association with the pride, history and heritage of an area that means something to me. It was the first team to win the first division championship three times in a row in the 1920s.

As a young boy, when I shopped in the town where I was brought up, it was a place of wonderment. There were independent shops and it was thriving, full of cinemas and all sorts of other things. My heart bleeds now when I go there. I am not blaming anyone or trying to make a political point, but the centre is dying, and it never used to be like that. I wonder whether somehow we have lost the care and the feeling for a place.

In my own town of Bury we have secured levelling-up funding for the regeneration of the town centre. I have tried to persuade my local council that a building can be built in whatever shape, which might or might not be something, but people need to have an understanding of the history and how we have got here. I am asking my local authority to create signs, or something, that tell the story of Bury. A lot of people in Bury do not know their own story. If you do not know your own story, where are you going to go?

This is a really interesting debate, in which some interesting points have been put forward. My heart sank when the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy)

made the point about the art deco cinema. That is as important to regeneration as Marks and Spencer and Tesco. That is the thing that sparks people into life and gives that joint, collective, communal experience, where people go out, spend their money and invest in things.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) made a valid point about car parking charges—we could all discuss that separate issue for the rest of the debate. But the important thing is not that. I agree with every word that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) said. For the high street to be successful, the things around it have to be successful as well.

One of the things that I am proud of as a Member of Parliament is securing £1 million from the Minister's Department to buy Gigg Lane in my constituency. When the issue was first raised about getting £1 million of taxpayers' money to buy a football club, there was a bit of outrage. That football ground is the 12th oldest in the world, and it is less than a mile from the high street in the centre of Bury, but what does it do? It is the only place in Bury where 3,000 to 4,000 people come together every single fortnight. It is the ultimate football provider, and the costs and benefits for that million pounds involve not only how it makes people feel—Bury Football Club is back, as I am sure you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, and charging up through the league—but the preservation of a heritage asset. It brings people into the town centre to share experiences and to be interested in their town. It is an example of what we should do.

I was silently shouting when the hon. Member for Bristol East was talking. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will say, "Community ownership fund, community ownership fund," because that was the exact means for Gigg Lane, but I can give another example. The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) made a point about the levelling-up fund, but the latest round of the community ownership fund, which is how Gigg Lane was preserved, was also used to save the Co-op Hall theatre on the main street in Ramsbottom, a town in my constituency. This theatre is unique—one of only three in the country. It is an original 1870s co-op theatre where people went not just to listen to concerts, but to attend an anatomy class, for example. Whatever they wanted to do, they could go in there and do it.

The theatre has been laying untouched for 60 years on the top floor of a building in Ramsbottom. Nobody knew about it. While I cannot recommend highly enough the coffee shops, bars and independent retailers in Ramsbottom, if someone needs a reason to go there, it is an intact 1870s co-op theatre, part of the history and heritage of the industrialisation of the town. That is what regeneration is about. We need to link these things into what my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South has been talking about.

My constituency has the big town of Bury and the small town of Ramsbottom. We must face up to reality: without something dramatic in fiscal policy, the challenges for retail businesses in our high streets and towns compared with those for online businesses in terms of energy costs, rental costs—all those things—will prove too much for many businesses. We must think strongly about what our high streets will look like. I made this point to my hon. Friend, but we must find ways to make use of the empty buildings in town centres. In 2021, we introduced

[James Daly]

legislation—I think it was the class E regulations—to make it easier to turn shops and suchlike into residential property, and we must look at that. We cannot just have empty shops and empty spaces, because they present an opportunity for housing and regeneration to bring places back to life.

We have a free market economy—socialism hasn't got us yet, Mr Deputy Speaker—and long may that be the case. The question is, “Can the state regenerate anything?” If it is our job to release the potential of individuals and towns and places, what do we do? As a Conservative, I believe in releasing burdens, whether that be taxation, regulation or whatever. That is what we do to allow people to make their own decisions, invest their own money, and regenerate high streets through their own endeavour and their passion for the area in which they live or to which they come. However, a hugely important part of this debate is this idea of heritage culture—tapping into something and thinking honestly about what the state can invest in that will get people off their settees, away from watching “Coronation Street”, away from all the other stuff, and motivate them to come and do something.

When we pontificate in this place, we forget that when people vote, they act upon emotion. People are not going to say that regeneration has happened. I put in a bid to the levelling-up fund in Bury for a flexi-hall. It is going to be great. But a flexi-hall is a flexi-hall—it is a building that hopefully we can do something with, and hopefully it inspires. But what really inspires is what my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East was talking about regarding the partnerships in Belfast and the theatre he mentioned. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) is about to speak, and I am sure he can give an example of that, as can the Minister. That is what matters, and that is how the Government can intervene. It is terribly unfashionable, but as chair of the northern culture all-party group, let us invest in things that inspire people, give them belief in their town and area, and give them shared collective experiences. If we as the Government and working cross-party can do that, those town centres will be regenerated.

12.10 pm

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly), and I agree with so much of what he has said and what other Members have said. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on presenting this Bill to the House. His speech laid out in detail the issues and challenges that we face, and he is proving to be a vociferous champion for his high street.

British high streets should be vibrant hubs of commerce and community life, yet many are now facing unprecedented challenges in the wake of evolving consumer habits and economic shifts, particularly after the pandemic. Too many retail units lie boarded up, and the Bill recognises that reality and takes a proactive approach to try to breathe new life into some of those critical spaces, alongside other Government action. The Bill is not merely about preserving bricks and mortar structures; it is about preserving the beating heart of our communities. Too many businesses have closed their doors, and as a result jobs have gone too, affecting families and individuals.

Let me say a few words about the town centres and high streets of Crewe and Nantwich. Nantwich in my constituency would commonly be regarded as the more secure of the two, which is probably true. Even in Nantwich, however, we have seen more vacant units than we would like, and we cannot take the success of any of our high streets for granted. As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) mentioned, recent changes confirmed yesterday will increase parking charges in Nantwich and Crewe, which is going in the wrong direction. The council will probably lose more money if our high streets are not successful, and we need to encourage greater use of them, not make that even harder or more expensive for people. Even in Nantwich we have challenges, but there is no doubt that my constituents are particularly concerned about our town centre and high streets in Crewe. The history is a long and sometimes tortuous story. First there was a decision to construct a retail park within walking distance. That has seen businesses move and customers make use of the free parking near the big chain stores that we find there. Secondly, there was an ambition to build a new leisure and retail unit in the heart of town.

**James Daly:** Again, I apologise if this is slightly controversial, but does my hon. Friend think that out-of-town retail parks are an absolute disaster? Because I do in terms of town centre regeneration. They serve no purpose, and the same product can be delivered in a much more harmonious and better way in towns where such shops have traditionally been.

**Dr Mullan:** We must recognise the jobs and investment that retail parks sometimes create, but there is no doubt that they lack on the added value we get when those retail units are placed in more diverse communities. Certainly, as I have seen in this case, there might be an argument for an out-of-town retail park, but to place a retail park immediately next to a high street and town centre has created enormous challenges for that town centre over the years. In part to try to rebalance that, the plan was to build a new retail leisure centre in the heart of town, right on our high street, but as others have mentioned, the definition of a high street can involve multiple streets that make up the high street, and we could also see a street further out nearer the train station as a local high street.

Unfortunately, that plan led to a long period of the town centre being a big boarded up space, then a demolished space. That dragged down the purpose and vibe of the town, which is not surprising. Unfortunately, market changes as that delay has dragged on have led ultimately to the decision not to proceed with that plan in the short term, and potentially never to proceed with it. At the same time, that allowed us to build a new car park and bus station, which will open this year and will help and benefit the whole town centre. But that leaves us with the pressing priority to make use of that now vacant and derelict space, as otherwise it will carry on dragging down the rest of the town centre. I hope we see rapid progress from the Labour-led council this year to get that space back into use.

The Minister will understand that when it comes to challenges facing Crewe's retail sector and town centre it would be remiss of me not to mention the additional challenges that we face following the decision on HS2.

That has always divided opinion in the House on its overall merits, but everyone would recognise that Crewe in particular would benefit from investment and regeneration. There are short-term challenges because of the accounting changes that need to be made. I have spoken repeatedly to the Government about that, and I am optimistic that we can find a solution. Going past that, we need additional investment so that Crewe can make up the loss, which we did not expect, on the back of the decision on HS2.

I do not want to be too negative, because there absolutely are positives for our high streets in Crewe. We have a £22.9 million town deal, and we have £14.1 million from the future high streets fund. Some of the things we will do with that money include a programme to get vacant units in Crewe back into use—exactly the kind of challenges we have been discussing—and landscaping work to make the journey in, around and to the town centre and its high streets easier. It will help to bring back into use buildings that are not smack on the high street—they might be slightly further out, such as the Flag Lane Baths community centre, which is coming on board, and a new boxing club on Mirion Street. All those things encourage people to come into town, and to the high streets. That creates footfall, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North said. We have a football club in Crewe which, as he said of his football club, brings a lot of people into the town. We have started to construct a history centre, which will provide additional public space.

All those things are positive, but we must do more. The Bill seeks to do something different to tackle the crisis. I have worked closely as part of the town board with Cheshire East local authority, and I have seen the benefits of an engaged local authority—we do not see that everywhere—so, even if I do not agree with everything that it has done or think that it is perfect, I have seen its effort and willingness to engage.

Every local authority should be engaged in that process. The designation aspect of the Bill acknowledges the unique character of each town and each high street, emphasising that a one-size-fits-all approach is not the way forward. By conducting comprehensive and periodic reviews, we can ensure that the distinctive needs and opportunities of each community are met. As for the specific proposals in the Bill and things that we need to be careful about, as we have heard, it is said that each area needs between one and three high streets. As I have said, there are a number of high streets in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, who shares my local authority, has several in her constituency. Across Cheshire East there are probably dozens of high streets. It is right not to say that we have to get going on every single one, but I would not want a local authority to choose, for example, the three rosiest high streets, with the best possible outcome already on the table. I hope that the guidance ensures that the selection of high streets gives some consideration to those that will be of most benefit in tackling the issues that we have discussed.

I want briefly to talk about vacancies and absent landlords. I welcome the work that has been done—I know that the Minister is passionate about it—on high street auctions. It is shocking, when we try to engage with landlords to tackle issues in Crewe, only to discover that they could not care less. We cannot get hold of

them—the council cannot do so—or they might respond to one letter, but not to another. It is a free market, and people buy property. The state should be careful about designating exactly what it should do, but there must be limits for properties in locations of high community interest. We need to tackle that.

I want to touch on the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North about not thinking that this is all about freezing our high streets, or setting them in stone, or pushing back the tide. We have to accept that in the long run the retail footprint will shrink because of changes in online shopping. A smaller footprint is more sustainable in the long run, and we can think about replacements such as in-house living.

The legislation is an opportunity not only for inviting investment but for a firm political commitment to strengthening the fabric of our communities. It fosters political accountability and signals a commitment to the long-term wellbeing of our towns and high streets. I welcome its progress through the House, and I look forward to its becoming law, with benefits for multiple high streets across our country and our constituencies as a result.

12.19 pm

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): I am inspired to say a few words in this debate, because I want to talk about my home town of Gainsborough, which is directly affected by this issue. Gainsborough is a traditional market and industrial town in north Lincolnshire. It is a small town that suffered from industrial decline in the 1970s. We had a fantastic scheme to redevelop the old factory right in the middle of the town, Marshall's, which had been decaying for years. We turned it into a fantastic shopping centre, Marshall's Yard—the whole thing is going really well. We also have Morrisons outside, and Tesco, which has been put up next to Marshall's Yard.

That is all fantastic, but the problem is that it is sucking life away from the high street and the marketplace. A real issue for our town is that as we develop decaying industrial areas, or have more out-of-centre shopping centres, the inside of the town is decaying. It is a huge issue for all our towns. I have been fortunate enough to work with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), and to get £10 million in levelling-up funding for the Gainsborough South West ward, which is directly helping us. In an old town such as Gainsborough, one of the keys is to use heritage. We had many decaying shops, and we put a fantastic amount of work into creating beautiful new shopfronts, which lifts the whole area.

Another point I want to make is that in the marketplace—which, again, has slightly suffered from the fact that the trade is being sucked into Marshall's Yard—cars are not allowed to park. In France, Italy or Germany, cars are allowed to park in the marketplace, which brings in life. I know we are not supposed to have as many cars in the middle of towns as we used to, but Gainsborough is not London; it is a small town. Bringing in more life is quite important.

To sum all of this up, the Government have to work very carefully with the district councils at a very local level. West Lindsey District Council has a good record

[Sir Edward Leigh]

of working with central Government to try to ensure that we get development into the town, but I wonder whether having a Mayor for Lincolnshire is going to make a great deal of difference. As the Minister well knows, I am quite dubious about that idea: we are going to have a Mayor of Lincolnshire—a large rural area—as well as a county council, district councils, MPs and Ministers all competing for attention.

I am also worried about the consultation, which all veers towards the idea that we have to have a Mayor. When the Minister replies to this debate—this is one of the reasons I am speaking today—I want him to convince me that when he imposes a Mayor on Lincolnshire, who will need to have a salary and will be based in Lincoln, he is not going to suck power and resources from the really local authorities, the district councils, which are doing all the hard graft to improve our high streets.

12.22 pm

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on his success in the private Member's Bill ballot, and I am pleased to be responding on Second Reading of his Bill today. I start by thanking all Members who have taken part in the debate—the hon. Members for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Bury North (James Daly) and for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), and the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who have all talked about their local areas. A couple of themes have emerged: partnership, people working together and the importance of heritage.

The purpose of the Bill is to place new requirements on local authorities in relation to high streets, as part of which—as we have heard—it allows councils to designate streets in their areas. The legislation has similarities to part 10 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, which allows local authorities to designate high streets and town centres for other purposes. This Bill, however, allows designation for the purposes of establishing improvement plans. We can all agree that supporting the future of our high streets needs backing from all levels of government, and local authorities certainly have an important part to play.

That is especially true given that it feels that in recent years people have been tolling the funeral bell for our high streets. In that time we have had the Government's plan for the high street, the Build Back Better high streets strategy, and now the long-term plan for towns, but somebody walking through many of our town centres today would not know that. Unfortunately, it is all too common to see boarded-up shopfronts and closed shutters as fashion retailers, bank branches and countless small businesses on our high streets have been forced to shut up shop for good. Among those losses there have been success stories of individual shops and thriving high streets despite the odds, but it is hard not to look at the figures and think of decline.

Research carried out by the British Retail Consortium in 2023 found that 6,000 shops had closed for good in the previous five years. The sad truth is that the pain of losses is not felt equally. The BRC's figures for April revealed that nearly a fifth of shops in the north-east are standing empty, compared with one in 10 in the

south. Then there are the disparities between city centres and rural areas. Once again, the Government's claim to levelling up rings hollow.

With these closures come workers losing their livelihoods and communities unable to access essentials. Bustling high streets are more than the sum of their parts; they are places where communities come together. That is why we cannot have any more business as usual; we need to be imaginative about how we make our high streets work for communities today. That requires careful planning. Labour has been clear that we want to see local authorities in the driving seat, giving local leaders the powers and flexibility needed to turbocharge growth in their areas.

In difficult circumstances, the differences that Labour councils have made in transforming local high streets is testament to that potential. The Bradford city centre growth scheme has brought 70 vacant high street units back into commercial use. In Wolverhampton, the council has plans to transform a derelict site into a food and entertainment venue in the heart of the city.

For local communities to succeed, they need the right tools. It is no secret that 13 years of Tory economic mismanagement have left local authorities struggling. This Government's efforts to support high streets have involved a begging bowl approach that has pitted communities against each other, with old pots of money discontinued, packaged up and resold as new. Labour would put a stop to that micromanagement and empower communities to grow their local economies as they know best.

**Dr Mullan:** I recognise that there are challenges when there is a more public process for the allocation of funds, but I hope the hon. Member would accept that if her party was lucky enough to be in government, there would be a set pot of money. Even if behind the scenes her Government were making some tough decisions about who does and does not get it, they will not be giving everybody every bit of money that they want—unless, of course, Labour has further plans beyond the current £28 billion to ensure that every high street that wants money gets it.

**Liz Twist:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, but this matter is about planning and giving local authorities powers to decide what is best for their own areas. There is a challenge.

We will scrap business rates and bring in a fairer system, which would reduce the burden on high street premises. We will tackle antisocial behaviour by introducing new town centre police patrols and putting an end to the £200 rule that stops shoplifting being investigated.

I am pleased that the Bill recognises the importance of local authority plans, and we will not be opposing it today, but a number of questions remain to be answered, and I hope that the Minister or the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South can answer them. For example, clause 3 makes the improvement plan a material planning consideration, but it is not clear by what mechanism those improvement plans would have to be taken into account when producing the local plan, as councils are required to do. Can the Minister or the hon. Member tell us how the provisions in the Bill align with neighbourhood plans? We have already heard an intervention about that.



**James Daly:** I am genuinely interested, because the hon. Lady has criticised the Government, and a number of Members have pointed to examples where money, whether in Belfast or wherever, has been going specifically to projects linked to regeneration. She appears to be saying, “We do not believe in any of that. Our policy is simply to hope that the local authority will make the right decisions.” I can tell her that the Labour local authority in Huddersfield has been making the wrong decisions for the past 30 years. That is why the council and the town are in the state they are in.

**Liz Twist:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. As I said, I was interested to hear his earlier intervention on neighbourhood plans; that is one of the key things. We recognise the need to invest in order to make our high streets viable and lively, as many hon. Members have said, and I have already set out some of the steps that Labour would take to do that.

If we are to create welcoming, inclusive town centres that function as vital community spaces, those communities must have a say in their design. But to achieve that we need the return of a collaborative approach that empowers local authorities to thrive and play an active part. Labour has that vision, and I hope that the Government will adopt it.

12.30 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Breerton) on his success in the ballot and his sponsorship of this important and worthwhile private Member’s Bill. His unwavering commitment and efforts to champion our high streets, including those he mentioned in his remarks, has led to this matter being raised in the House. I thank other hon. Members for backing the Bill. I confirm that the Bill has the Government’s full support.

There are arguably few more visible barometers of a healthy local economy, local pride and quality of life than our high streets. I know that all too well from my experience as the Member of Parliament for Redcar and Cleveland. Like my hon. Friend, I am privileged and proud to represent the area where I grew up, but one of the reasons why I came into politics was that my area, my community, my town and my high street felt like places that had been forgotten and left behind by the incumbent political regime.

It can be hard for people who move around a lot, or perhaps those who live in a busy city, to understand what it feels like when a place we care about and where we have deep roots seems to have lost its way, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) said. I remember, when I was growing up, walking into Boro town centre with my mam and dad and hearing about Upton. It is probably how my niece and nephews feel now when I talk about Woolworths—although, as was said, it looks like Woolies may be coming back.

Our high streets are not just places where people shop and access goods and services; they are the heart of our community life. They are places where people come together. Their success is therefore vital to realising our ambitions to level up economic growth and opportunity across the country, both economically and socially. That is why the challenges that our town centres have been facing in recent years need to be taken seriously.

Some town centres have weathered dramatic shifts in consumer behaviour and the legacy of the pandemic, but many have struggled. We have seen the collapse of major high street retailers such as Debenhams, and high streets that were once the soul of our communities are now blighted by low footfall, high vacancy rates and antisocial behaviour. The Government are committed to working with local communities to help turn that around.

The Bill will play an important role in that mission, alongside other Government interventions, as part of a broader strategy to help high streets recalibrate themselves back towards their communities. That includes putting billions into high street regeneration and renewal, including: a new high street and towns taskforce as part of our long-term plan for towns; measures to bring vacant properties back into use and make town centres safer through a crackdown on antisocial behaviour; a new £2.5 million high street accelerator programme bringing together businesses and community organisations to develop a long-term vision for revitalising high streets; and significant planning flexibilities to ensure that they continue to thrive as centres where commerce and community meet.

We know that every high street is different and that local areas are best placed to understand their own problems and find the right solutions through strong local partnerships on the ground. Those partnerships are often key to transforming the fortunes of our town centres. We want to support councils as well as local businesses and local communities and ensure that they have everything they need to succeed, so that wherever someone is in the country, they have a high street that meets the needs of their community and one that they can be proud of.

In that vein, may I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), who explained to me the need for investment in Bolsover town centre? I am delighted that we were able to award Bolsover £15 million of levelling-up funding in the autumn statement in November. I hope that Bolsover can use that funding and this Bill to improve its high street.

One of the most important ways we can make that a reality for more communities is for councils to use their powers in order to drive improvements. That is the aim of this Bill. We know that, for example, section 215 powers, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, which require land to be cleaned up when it is detracting from the surroundings, are not always deployed as well as they could be. That will only become more significant when the new high street rental auction powers are introduced later this year, which will further bolster the regeneration tools available to local authorities.

The Bill will require local authorities to designate at least one high street, and up to three, in their area and create plans to improve them, which should be published every five years. In choosing their high streets, local authorities will need to identify streets of specific economic, social and cultural importance in their area, assess their condition, and come up with plans to preserve and enhance them. Local residents, businesses, community organisations and others will rightly have a real say in those action plans, and the local council will be accountable for delivering them.

**Dr Mullan:** Picking up on the remarks I made in my speech, what can we do to ensure that councils are designating and putting the work into high streets that need it, rather than picking ones that are, thankfully, flourishing and perhaps less in need of attention? Potentially, councils could seek to avoid doing the hard work that we want to be put into these designations.

**Jacob Young:** We will work with local authorities and, no doubt, Members of this House to establish the right guidance for local authorities in choosing their high streets. They will also be subject to consultation, which I am about to talk about.

The Bill will require councils to consult on which high streets are chosen, and we have heard some early pitches today. It is exciting to imagine the difference that this could make: fewer empty shops, more people visiting high streets and staying longer, and a boost to local pride and people's quality of life. As I said earlier, different areas have different challenges, so the improvements we can expect to see will vary. The focus in one area might be on tackling antisocial behaviour, whereas in another it could be on creating more green spaces to rest and socialise.

The Bill will create a duty on local authorities to take into account high street improvement plans when exercising their planning functions, which goes directly to the question from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). That will support the already strong protections for mixed-use high streets and complement the tools available to local authorities, such as the changes made to use class orders in 2020 to create the new commercial, business and service use class mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South. This brings together high street uses such as shops, restaurants and offices, and enables changes between these uses without planning applications.

The high street improvement plans will also reinforce measures in the national planning policy framework that require local plans and decision making to support town centres to adapt and grow over the long term. In addition, they will support the use of section 215 powers, requiring unsightly land or property to be cleaned up. We recognise that local areas will know best what their high street improvement plans should cover.

**James Daly:** Will my hon. Friend comment on what he defines as a high street? Bolton Street, in my constituency, backs on to the East Lancs railway, which is in the process of making an application for £3 million to the community ownership fund. It is not simply about the shops on a high street; heritage projects and others in the immediate vicinity can benefit from Government money in driving regeneration as well.

**Jacob Young:** We have already heard examples of how high streets could be defined from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, but I look forward to such an application to the community ownership fund. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North for his regular plugs for the fund.

Once the Bill has received Royal Assent, we will issue guidance on developing improvement plans. We would, of course, welcome any input on what the guidance should contain from hon. Members or other interested parties. We recognise that it takes time to implement

plans and see their impact. At the same time, it is important that the plans are meaningful and that they will not be neglected and left to gather dust. We believe that five years for reviewing and, if necessary, updating the improvement plans strikes the right balance, allowing enough time for them to take effect while ensuring that they remain relevant and central to the renewal and reinvigoration of our high streets. This is very much about local residents, businesses and communities seeing visible, meaningful improvements, but we recognise that that must not come at the cost of overburdening councils that are already under pressure. We will therefore ensure that local authorities have the extra funding they need to deliver the measures in the Bill effectively.

As I said earlier, the Bill builds on the extensive range of support we are already providing to truly level up our high streets, with local people in the driving seat.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** On his point about putting local people in the driving seat, will the Minister assure me that any powers or resources given to the Mayor of Lincolnshire will not suck resources away from West Lindsey District Council, which is the primary promoter of improvements on our high streets?

**Jacob Young:** I was going to come to that, but my right hon. Friend has brought it to my attention sooner. He mentions the landmark devolution deal for Greater Lincolnshire and that it comes with a Mayor, but he fails to mention the three quarters of a billion pounds that comes with that deal. I can assure him that we are giving more power and funding to communities like his in Greater Lincolnshire, and I urge him to support the introduction of a Mayor, which will be transformational for Greater Lincolnshire.

We are giving local authorities more support to truly level up their high streets. That support means more money, and we are investing billions of pounds in high streets that are sorely in need of a helping hand to get back on their feet. That includes our £1.1 billion long-term plan for towns—I am grateful to the shadow Minister for plugging that in her remarks—launched in October, which will power ambitious regeneration projects across the UK over the next decade. Through the plan, each town will develop a long-term plan for regeneration based on the priorities of local people, and receive a 10-year endowment-style fund worth £20 million to deliver transformational projects, from boosting the look and feel of town centres to protecting local heritage, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, to cracking down on anti-social behaviour. The plan will also establish a new high streets and towns taskforce to provide hands-on support and expert advice on place making, planning and design.

Our new towns unit, which was announced last week, headed by Adam Hawksbee, the Prime Minister's towns tsar, will ensure that local leaders have the control they need over decision making. This funding comes on top of the £2.35 billion we are investing through our town deals, £830 million in future high streets funding and the £4.8 billion being invested into communities through the levelling-up fund, unlocking the economic potential of communities across the country, like mine in Redcar.

In Redcar, £25 million of funding is being invested through the town deal in regenerating the high street, demolishing the old Woolworths and M&S buildings,

and creating a new leisure facility on the high street, as well as rejuvenating our much-loved seafront. Down the road in Eston, some of the £20 million of levelling-up funding we received is being invested in regenerating Eston Square and the precinct buildings. Not long after I was elected, I was given a book about the history of Eston by the former councillor, Ann Higgins. In the book, there was a picture of Mo Mowlam, one of my predecessors as MP for Redcar, meeting residents and businesses at the old James Finnigan Hall to discuss the deterioration of Eston town centre. More than two decades and four Members of Parliament later, we are finally delivering on that.

The funding demonstrates to the people of those towns, and others like them across the UK, that we are keeping the faith with them and delivering on the things that matter most to them. As I updated the House late last year, we have so far invested over £13 billion through all our levelling-up funding streams in regenerating communities nationwide, delivering real change in communities like Bury. I am so pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North plugged the community ownership fund in the way he did. His constituency has benefited from £1.5 million of investment directly into communities there, on top of the levelling-up funding of £20 million for Bury market and the flexi-hall.

Communities in Crewe and Nantwich are benefitting from £37 million through the towns fund and the future high streets fund. I was surprised to hear from my hon. Friends the Members for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) about Labour's new car parking charges. Sadly, Labour has done the same in Redcar, and I urge my hon. Friends to keep up their campaign on behalf of constituents and businesses in their communities.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for referencing the investment in his constituency, including in his cinema, and talking about the value of partnership working. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, whose Bill this is, mentioned the levelling-up partnership for Stoke. I assure him that, on top of the other funding that Stoke has already received, Longton remains part of our focus for the partnership.

Funding alone is not enough. To deliver real change, we are giving local people the power they need to make decisions on the ground about the future of their communities. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Act introduces high street rental auctions to drive forward regeneration through changes to compulsory purchase powers; provides more flexible pavement licences for businesses; empowers local people to tackle symptoms of decline by bringing vacant units back into use; increases co-operation on regeneration between landlords and local authorities; and makes town centre tenancies more accessible and affordable, helping to attract new businesses to these areas and supporting the creation of new jobs and growth to sustain prosperity in the long term.

We are also making it a priority to get the fundamentals right. Tackling the causes and impacts of antisocial behaviour is key to ensuring that people feel safe, which is why we are using our wider antisocial behaviour action plan, published in March 2023, to make the heart of our towns better places to be. Measures to tackle the visual markers of decline include reopening boarded-up shops, improving the look and feel of public

spaces, and giving tired public buildings a lick of paint. This includes the high street accelerator programme that I have the pleasure of leading, which will bring together businesses, residents and community organisations to develop a long-term vision for revitalising their town centre. Each of the 10 pilot schemes we have launched in towns such as Oldham, Scunthorpe and neighbouring Stoke will receive funding of £237,000 over two years to set up the partnership, develop the vision and begin to deliver change.

We have introduced significant planning flexibilities, so that local decision makers can make better use of the buildings in their town centre and ensure that our high streets remain places of social and commercial activity. Permitted development provides the freedom to change more premises from commercial to residential use, so that much needed homes can be created on high streets and in town centres.

Whether we are talking about smarter use of planning levers, getting boarded-up shops back up and running, making our streets safer, or investing billions in our town centres, we are breathing new life into our high streets, with local leaders, local people and businesses who know and love their communities best driving the changes that they know are needed to make a difference. The Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South builds on these significant efforts, and we are proud to support it. Like him, I appreciate just how much it matters to communities of the kind we represent. For them and for communities right across the country, this is about delivering on the commitments we have made to level up growth, opportunity and pride. We are sticking to our plans and staying the course, commencing the measures in the Bill at the appropriate time once the Bill has Royal Assent, and ensuring that local authorities have the right lead-in time and guidance to designate their high streets and create their improvement plans.

I am enormously grateful to my hon. Friend for introducing the Bill and to other hon. Members for their support and contributions during this debate. We are backing the Bill and backing our high streets. I commend the Bill to the House.

12.48 pm

**Jack Brereton:** I am very grateful for the Minister's kind words and for all his support and help in bringing the Bill forward. I am grateful also to all the hon. Members across the House who have shown their support today. We have heard some incredibly impassioned speeches, which just shows how much people care about their high streets and the towns, villages and communities in the constituencies they represent. Speaking for the Opposition, the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) referred to local plans and neighbourhood plans, and I think it is right that the Bill is part of that, but it is about due consideration being given to certain matters in those plans. The Bill is not about stopping development that sits outside its scope—new and exciting developments coming to our high streets. It is just about giving due consideration, so I do not think having the matters set out in the Bill will have a major impact.

Turning to Members' contributions, I particularly thank the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North for

[Jack Brereton]

raising the importance of those heritage and cultural assets—building vibrancy, creating footfall, and attracting people to our high streets. I was also particularly interested in what the hon. Member for Belfast East said about there being too few partnerships. That is what this Bill is trying to address: the need to bring people together to have that governance and those plans to help address some of the issues in our town centres.

To my hon. Friends over the border in Cheshire, particularly to my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), I say that it was absolutely shocking to hear about those plans to increase and create parking charges in some of their town centres. I know that that will have a major impact. I have enjoyed visiting some of the towns in the communities that they represent, and I know that those plans will have a damaging and detrimental impact on them. A number of Members referenced the fact that we have many out-of-town developments with free parking. That will only further emphasise the move towards those out-of-town retail spaces and cause more damage to our high streets and town centres just at a time when we do not need it. I entirely agree with them and wish them well with their campaigns. I wish to thank all Members across the House for their contributions, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who also mentioned the impact of out-of-town shopping areas.

I stress that we have been working hard to get this Bill together. I hope that we can continue to work across the House to bring it forward and take it through the other place and deliver what will I think be an important piece of legislation to get our high streets back on track—to revive them and to bring people back into our towns and communities so that they can thrive once again.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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

## British Citizenship (Northern Ireland) Bill

*Second Reading*

12.52 pm

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As a Back Bencher, the opportunity to table legislation of my own—to be able to proceed in this way with the leave of the House—is rare. Yes, we may question, challenge, probe, consider, support or oppose, but as a legislator the ability to legislate is constrained by the luck of the draw, the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job. For nine years, I have dutifully signed the ballot book for private Members and thought not another moment about it. Then I saw you take that ball, Madam Deputy Speaker, and read that number.

Today, in securing this opportunity, I wish to place on record my appreciation of the House staff, the Library, the Home Office Minister, who has been courteous and engaging in meeting me, and his officials, the Government Whips, His Majesty's Opposition and Members of Parliament representing all parties from Northern Ireland who have offered their support. To the Minister and his officials I say that what started as courteous may at times have become frustrating when they saw my name pop up in their inbox, but I greatly appreciate their fortitude and forbearance.

More particularly, however, I claim no creativity or ingenuity around the Bill itself. In moving Second Reading, I wish to place on record my appreciation for colleagues past and present, who have sought to secure this important principled change to laws governing citizenship of the United Kingdom for individuals inherently of these islands. Even a cursory glance at the House of Commons Library's briefing papers highlights that this has been a long and arduous road. My colleague in the other place, Lord Hay of Ballyore, commented last year that this conundrum was first raised in the House of Commons in 1985. Let me put that in context: it was before my first birthday. For a decade, he has been a passionate advocate for the changes proposed in the Bill, and has sought to complement and support the sustained and unparalleled efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell). A Member of this House since 2001, my hon. Friend has consistently and, some might say, with characteristic fervour, relentlessly tabled questions, pursued debates, encouraged Ministers, and expertly tilled the ground that is consequently so fertile today. His labour has not been in vain. Over the years he has collected the support of colleagues across the political spectrum, in the Conservative party, the Labour party, the Ulster Unionist party, the Social Democratic and Labour party and the Alliance party of Northern Ireland.

Let me explain the essence of the Bill. Colleagues will recognise, or should recognise, that through the Belfast agreement efforts were made to address issues of identity. While it was accepted and acknowledged that Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom was constitutionally settled, not only could those with a competing aspiration avail themselves of Irish identity, but the Republic of Ireland Government afforded them the opportunity to attain Irish citizenship.

**Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, whom I think of as my hon. Friend, on introducing such an important Bill. Does he agree that this issue affects people's lives? It is about their identity, their everyday lives and their right to have British citizenship, which should not be brought into question. Given our historic links with both the Republic and Northern Ireland, it is vital that we allow the Bill to proceed.

**Gavin Robinson:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman—my hon. Friend—for what he has said. I agree with him entirely, and I hope to draw on his point about our historic connections, which remain to this very day.

As I have said, the Republic of Ireland Government offered people in Northern Ireland the opportunity to attain Irish citizenship. Some hold that citizenship singularly, while others happily enjoy dual citizenship of both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. What was not settled at that time, however, was reciprocation in the other direction. As the House knows, our history and relationship are intertwined, and the Bill seeks to provide the final piece of that relationship jigsaw. Anyone who was born in the Republic of Ireland but lives in the United Kingdom and who satisfies the residency test should be able to avail himself of UK citizenship.

Those who say, "Sure, just apply for naturalisation in the normal way," fail to recognise or respond to the special relationship that our nations have. From 1801 our nations were one, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland accorded the same citizenship protections to us all. When partition occurred in 1921, the rights of those resident within the then Irish Free State to avail themselves of UK citizenship was contained through and continued within their dominion status. It was only when the Irish Republic was created and the British Nationality Act 1948 came into effect the following year that those entitlements were lost. Since 1949, that has meant that those who were born in the Republic of Ireland but since then have lived in, worked in and contributed to the United Kingdom throughout their lives are not able to attain British citizenship as their forefathers did.

As a proud Ulsterman, I remind colleagues that my Province contains nine counties, although only six of them are in the United Kingdom. While they did so before and have continued to do so since, the troubles in Northern Ireland perhaps most acutely provided a catalyst for families in Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan to move across the border to be with other relatives. Let us take, for example, my friend in the other place whom I mentioned earlier, Lord Hay of Ballyore. His lineage may best illustrate the point that I am trying to make. He was born in April 1950 in Donegal, but for the overwhelming majority of his life he has lived in Londonderry, Northern Ireland. He served on his local council from 1981, was elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998, and served as its Speaker from 2007 to 2014. That year, he was elevated to the House of Lords, and to this day he remains a peer of this realm and a legislator in our Parliament. Yet he is not a British citizen.

The question is: should anyone in that position—serving practically, materially and productively—be expected to pay a naturalisation fee of £1,580 and complete a "Life

in the UK" citizenship test? The notion that he, as a legislator of this Parliament—or anyone in similar circumstances—should have to complete a "Life in the UK" citizenship test does not make sense. It would be offensive to some individuals and contrary to the spirit of reciprocation offered through the Belfast agreement in 1998. It would be blind to our history and ignorant of the legal reality.

We enjoy a common travel area already between our nations. Irish citizens moving throughout the United Kingdom are already exempt from immigration formalities. They enjoy a range of related rights to work, vote and study, and access to education and healthcare as if they were already UK citizens. I quote the former Labour MP for Thurrock and a great friend of Northern Ireland, Andrew Mackinlay, when he debated this point in this House in 2009. He said:

"we have an opportunity, which the House will probably not have again for some years, to right a wrong, provide parity of treatment for people who are Irish...and allow them to identify with their Britishness."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2009; Vol. 496, c. 220.]

Well, 15 years later, I hope we can finally right that wrong.

This is not a coercive move. Nothing in this Bill requires somebody to avail themselves of citizenship should that not be their desire. Some will conclude that, with the same rights and entitlements already, it is unnecessary. We also know through Library research that some proceed to pay the naturalisation fee and complete a "Life in the UK" test, no matter how offensive or inappropriate that may appear, but each year the number remains in single figures, or there are none at all. We also know from 2021 census figures in Northern Ireland that some 40,400 people are living in Northern Ireland who were born in the Republic of Ireland. Furthermore, we know that circa 32,000 of them were born after 1948, and therefore could avail themselves of this Bill. Some 27,000 of those people currently hold a non-UK passport, and the remainder are split evenly between those holding a UK passport and those who continue to hold none.

It will be clear from the tenor of this speech that both the Bill and my interest lie in those who live in Northern Ireland who have been disenfranchised of their citizenship from 1949 onwards. However, I appreciate from discussions with the Government that, should the Bill proceed, they believe it could be enhanced with the removal of the restrictive scope that attached to either the year of commencement or the geographical location of Northern Ireland. I confirm my willingness to assent to both aspects. I say this firmly as a Unionist: UK citizenship, in principle, should apply across the United Kingdom, and need not be satisfied solely through the lens of our Province.

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee published a report on this issue in 2021, and it concluded:

"The Home Office must understand the historical connection between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and the personal ties, relationships, geopolitical realities and movement of people that prevail between the two countries today... Citizenship issues will not be addressed to the satisfaction of all traditions whilst the Home Office treats Ireland and the rest of the world as an amalgam. Instead, we need bespoke, granular solutions. Abolishing the fee for Irish citizens to naturalise as British would be a start. The need to complete the 'Life in the UK' test seems irrelevant and offensive, and attendance at the citizenship ceremony should be optional."

[Gavin Robinson]

I conclude by expressing my gratitude to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to colleagues. Although this is only the first hurdle of many, I believe this Bill offers a great opportunity to attain a practical conclusion to a long-standing, principled and constitutionally and politically important campaign.

I commend my private Member's Bill to the House.

1.5 pm

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): There is a real and sensitive issue at the heart of this Bill and debate. Although the Bill affects residents of Northern Ireland, the issues of identity and citizenship affect us all.

I begin by acknowledging the case made by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson)—or my hon. Friend, as I always call him and his DUP colleagues because we are so often on the same side of debates in this House, as we are today. I support this Bill and respect the points he makes. He has constituents who identify as British but have an Irish passport, simply because of having been born on the other side of an open border, and their only option is to naturalise. This is sensitive to people who have grown up, and lived for decades, identifying as British. For them, holding a British passport and not an Irish passport, so that their citizenship is consistent with their identity, is of profound and deep importance.

I also recognise that there are specific conditions laid down in law and in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement that shape the administrative landscape of Northern Ireland, with there being an open border with the Republic of Ireland—a border without immigration controls—a common travel area and no restrictions on working or living in the United Kingdom. The Government need to apply their administrative rules on routes to British citizenship fairly for all residents of the UK, whether they live in Coleraine or Congleton.

In discussing this issue, we need to be clear about what we mean by “national identity” and “citizenship.” National identity encompasses the shared values, culture, history and traditions that bind individuals within a nation. This profound sense of belonging and loyalty goes beyond legalities, forming the foundation of our unity as a people.

On the other hand, the administrative and legal status of citizenship is a formal recognition granted by the state. It involves adherence to specific laws, rights and duties, often outlined in a constitution or legal framework. Citizenship is a legal concept that provides individuals with certain rights and responsibilities within the borders of a nation.

Although national identity fosters a deep emotional connection, citizenship is a practical framework that governs our interactions within the state. Therefore, whether or not my hon. Friend's Bill is successful, it will not change his constituents' fundamental sense of British identity or the rights and freedoms under the Belfast/Good Friday agreement that give the people of Northern Ireland the freedom to identify as British or Irish, to co-exist and to complement their Britishness.

However, I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend's case and acknowledge that a key outworking of being British involves a sense of allegiance that is encapsulated

by holding a British passport in one's hand. Indeed, I travel frequently abroad in my role as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, and I have a great sense of pride every time I hold that passport in my hand, so I understand the importance of others being able to do so.

My hon. Friend is promoting a Bill that makes sense, which always helps. He always speaks sense. Its clauses make it clear that we are not dealing with a situation comparable to, say, residents of Coleraine and Congleton wanting to apply for citizenship having been born outside UK. The requirements of proposed section 4AA would make it specific to a person in Northern Ireland who has been resident pretty much continuously for a preceding period of five years.

To answer my own point regarding the need to satisfy administrative fairness across the UK, the qualifying period of five years' residency is equivalent to other applications for citizenship that could be made in Congleton. I therefore support the Bill.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** As I have no further takers, I call the shadow Minister.

1.10 pm

**Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): As the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) Belfast East so eloquently explained, the issue at the heart of this debate is a fairly simple one: that, notwithstanding commitments made by the UK and Irish Governments in the Good Friday agreement more than 25 years ago, questions about eligibility and access to citizenship rights for many people in Northern Ireland remain unresolved. He argued with conviction that the differential treatment of people depending on whether they were born in Northern Ireland or the Republic under British nationality law is unfair and should be addressed. Along with his Democratic Unionist party colleagues, he has argued for long-standing residents of Northern Ireland born in the Republic after 31 December 1948 to be recognised as citizens of the UK—if they consider themselves to be such—without the need to undertake a lengthy and costly process of applying to the Home Office for naturalisation.

These arguments have been heard in the House many times before—indeed, the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) introduced a private Member's Bill along similar lines as long ago as 2005—and Democratic Unionist party Members are not the only ones to have recognised the strength of feeling among many in Northern Ireland on this issue. In 2021, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee published a short report that concluded:

“The Government should abolish the naturalisation fee charged to Irish applicants who wish to naturalise as British citizens.”

It should be pointed out that the fees for registration or naturalisation are currently in the region of £1,500 per person, which is not by any means an insignificant sum.

In the Government's response to the Committee's report, they announced that it would “not be fair” to set such fees at different levels “depending on nationality”, ignoring the fact that there is already special recognition of the status of Irish nationals across the UK's immigration system. The Government also argued that naturalisation and citizenship fees are an important means by which the Home Office seeks to maintain the financial sustainability of the immigration system. That may not

in itself be an unreasonable position, but I do wonder whether the amounts of revenue involved are really all that significant to the Home Office in the context of an annual budget in excess of £20 billion.

As has been explained, the Bill would establish a separate stand-alone route to British citizenship for Irish nationals born after 1948 who have been resident in Northern Ireland, and hence in the UK, for significant periods of time. The explanatory notes state that application fees for the proposed new route

“would need to be agreed and set in secondary fees legislation, taking into account financial implications.”

There appears to be no expectation of a blanket fee exemption for applicants under the new rules. On that basis, assuming that the Government support the Bill, it might help the House if the Minister confirmed what criteria will be used in setting the level of application fees under the new system. Will the goals remain the same as those previously set out by the Government, and which I quoted, with respect to maintaining parity between citizenship and naturalisation applications across all nationalities? What provisions, if any, do the Government intend to make for individual exemptions to the usual fees under the new system, assuming that is introduced?

In the same report that I cited earlier, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee concluded that in addition to the fees, the mandatory “Life in the UK” test and the requirement to attend a citizenship ceremony should also be waived for Irish citizens seeking naturalisation in the UK. In their response to the Committee, the Government insisted that it was right to maintain these requirements for all applications and to limit the scope for exemptions to the special circumstances of a particular case, such as those who have long-term health reasons that would preclude their attendance. Their response, which was published in January 2022, added:

“In order to continue with ceremonies during the pandemic we worked with Local Authorities to develop and deliver virtual ceremonies, and we will assess their ongoing use as this immediate need reduces. They may be retained to allow a more inclusive approach for those who, due to long-term issues, might otherwise be excluded.”

If, as I understand it, the Government do not plan to oppose the Bill, could the Minister confirm, in light of the long-standing concerns about the “Life in the UK” test and the ceremony requirements, whether he envisages making specific provision to address these issues within the proposed new route to citizenship that the Bill envisages?

On behalf of His Majesty’s Opposition, I say in closing that the hon. Member for Belfast East has put forward strong and persuasive arguments in support of his Bill. The Government’s support will, I hope, be welcomed by Members who represent Northern Ireland’s communities in this House. On behalf of His Majesty’s Opposition, I am happy to add my party’s support to this Bill, too.

1.16 pm

**The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove):** May I start by congratulating my friend the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) on his success in the ballot? His nine years of trying have yielded a positive result, and it is terrific that we can debate this Bill today. I appreciate his bringing attention to this important issue about application processes

for Irish nationals to become British citizens. I am pleased to confirm that the Bill has the Government’s support, subject to some proposed changes in Committee, which I will address.

It has been a pleasure to work constructively with the hon. Gentleman to date on those points. He has eloquently set out the arguments and rationale for the Bill. He is also right to highlight that it responds directly to so many of the challenges raised by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, whose report he quoted from directly. It is in that spirit that I am pleased we have been engaging with the hon. Gentleman and that he agrees with the necessary changes that we require to take this Bill forward in Committee and beyond. That will mean that the current version of the Bill, which will be put to the House today, will be revised in Committee, with Members able to express their views and opinions on those amendments and then to debate and vote on them in the usual way.

That process will mean that the Bill will become marginally broader and more inclusive. First, it will be available to Irish nationals, regardless of how they became Irish, and not just to those born in Ireland. Secondly, it will not have a requirement that an Irish national must have been born after a certain date. Thirdly, qualifying residents will be able to be from any part of the United Kingdom, and not just Northern Ireland. We are confident that those changes will address equality concerns with the current version of the Bill, while still benefiting those whom the hon. Gentleman wanted to cover. The other requirements before the House today will not change.

The Government are clear in our support for the underlying principle of the Bill, and we will work with the hon. Gentleman to produce an amended version in Committee. When those changes have been made, the Bill will enjoy the Government’s full support. We are confident that the amended route will not undermine the integrity of the system; it is about introducing a more appropriate route for people who could otherwise seek to naturalise. It is, of course, possible that the route may yet be used proportionately more by people resident in Northern Ireland, but we think it is important that British citizenship reflects ties to the whole United Kingdom, not just one constituent part. It is our belief that a dedicated route for Irish citizens would reduce the burden for applicants, creating a more straightforward route to becoming a British citizen. That would potentially also allow for the charging of a lower fee, although no firm decision has been made, and that would form part of later secondary legislation, made through the fees Order, should the Bill attain Royal Assent. I suspect that the hon. Gentleman will be keen to have conversations with me on that point, and I am definitely willing to engage constructively as we take the Bill forward.

To respond directly to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), the “Life in the UK” test would not be a requirement with this Bill in place, and it is important to make that clear on the record this afternoon.

In conclusion, I again congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast East on his success in the ballot and for helping the Government to find a way to correct this issue in our nationality system. I am incredibly grateful for the constructive and good-natured way in which he always conducts his business in the House, but particularly

[Tom Pursglove]

so on this matter, working both with myself and with officials. The Bill will help reaffirm and reflect the unique position of Irish nationals in the UK and make a credible difference to those Irish nationals who wish also to be British citizens. As I have said, if the suggested amendments are made in Committee, we will firmly support the Bill. We wish it well as it travels through the House, and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman.

1.21 pm

**Gavin Robinson:** I appreciate all the contributions to the debate. Just to reflect on the private Member's Bill ballot, not only did I sign up nine years in a row, but I signed the same number nine years in a row—322 for anyone who is interested. I greatly appreciate the support of the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and, to dispel the myths of any cynics out there, I hope to be in a position to support her private Member's Bill in a moment or so, but my support was not conditional on what she said in this debate on my Bill, because hers is similarly as principled.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for his intervention and to the shadow Minister for his contribution. I hope he appreciated from my contribution that there was no ownership of this issue. It has been a long-standing campaign from a number of colleagues of mine and, indeed, from Members across the House, including colleagues of his.

Perceptively, the shadow Minister also raised the issue of fees, and the Minister graciously indicated that that is a discussion yet to be had, but it will come in secondary legislation should the Bill proceed. The Minister knows clearly where I shall start in that constructive discussion, and I suspect that he will not start in the same place, but hopefully we can be pragmatic. It is at least good for the Minister to know that the Opposition will be in a sensible place at the start of that discussion too, so he should bear that in mind—I say that in jest.

To the Minister, let me say that this has been a pleasure. He added further context to my reference earlier to the forbearance of officials and all those who have had to engage with me in the discussion of this Bill and the complexities around it. As I said in my contribution, what the Minister has outlined causes me no difficulty whatsoever from a Unionist perspective. I am totally content with where the Government believe this should go, but the constraints around an earlier published title meant that we have had to take a curvier route to, hopefully, the same destination.

I am grateful to have had this opportunity, and I look forward to continuing the engagement with officials. I trust that we will be able to land this, because it was only in 2009—15 years ago—that a former Labour MP said, “We need to take this opportunity now, because it may not come back for some time to come.”

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** What a good-natured and constructive debate we have had.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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

## International Freedom of Religion or Belief Bill

*Second Reading*

1.25 pm

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I declare an obvious interest: I am the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. However, the purpose of the Bill is for the sake of my successors, to ensure that the role and office is placed on a statutory footing. Why? One reason is that the landmark Truro review by the noble Lord Bishop of Winchester, previously the Bishop of Truro, recommended that it should happen. The Truro review was initiated by the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), and I thank him for his support for my work and this Bill. I also thank the current Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron, for his support for the Bill, and in particular the Minister of State present today, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), for coming to respond to this debate and for his support for my role.

In 2019 the noble Lord Bishop, then of Truro, was asked to review what more the then Foreign and Commonwealth Office could do to address the persecution of Christians around the world. The Truro review made practical recommendations for an enhanced response to the plight of persecuted Christians. I emphasise that those recommendations also covered people persecuted for holding other religions or beliefs, or no religious beliefs at all, as does my envoy role.

In particular, recommendation 6 was to specifically establish

“permanently, and in perpetuity, the role of Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief with appropriate resources and authority to work across FCO departments”.

That recommendation, along with the other 21 recommendations, was fully accepted by the Government, not least because it was—and remains—this Government's manifesto commitment to fully implement the Truro review. It was endorsed by the Prime Minister just last October, and I am pleased that it is supported on a cross-party basis by Members from every party in this House and across civil society. I am also very pleased to see the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), who will be responding to the debate on behalf of the Opposition, because she too has supported the work of the role of special envoy on many occasions.

The independent review of the progress made in implementing the Truro review's recommendations, which took place in 2022—three years into the implementation of the Truro review, which was published in 2019—stated that recommendation 6

“appears to contemplate a permanent Special Envoy position established by law rather than appointed by the Prime Minister... The establishment of such a permanent position has not occurred, and so ‘no substantial action has been taken, to date’ with respect to delivering this aspect of the Recommendation.”

I am honoured to be the special envoy, but I am very conscious that I hold that office at the discretion of the Prime Minister of the day. It has been my privilege to serve under three Prime Ministers, but there is no guarantee that such an appointment will be made under any future Prime Minister.



The Bill is an important measure to solidify the position and work of the special envoy. I am humbled to say that the role has acquired leading international standing, not just through my work but also that of my predecessors, my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) and Lord Ahmad—the first envoy, who has supported the Bill strongly and publicly. He made that clear at the launch two weeks ago of the latest Open Doors world watch list, a gathering of almost 100 Members of Parliament. By making the role statutory, the Bill would remove any risk of the envoy's role being at the whim or interest of any future Prime Minister, whatever their political colour.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): The House should pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her sterling and dedicated work over many years. Although she is talking about the mechanics of why her job is necessary, I hope that she will say a few words about what is actually going on in the world and the appalling religiously motivated attacks. In Nigeria's Benue state there were 119 attacks in 2023 alone, and 400 people were killed. In neighbouring Plateau state, 300 people were killed. The world seems to be ignoring these massacres. Black lives matter everywhere. They matter in Nigeria and everywhere, and we should talk much more about this, but that is not the fault of my hon. Friend, who has done so much in this field.

**Fiona Bruce:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I might come on to discuss how important it is to challenge the perception that this is somehow a niche interest, perhaps for those who have strong religious beliefs. It cannot become a niche interest, because hundreds of millions of men, women and children around the world suffer persecution and discrimination, whether under the hard arm of authoritarian regimes or at the ruthless whim of militant mobs, and they need not just our voices but our partnership; not just our words, but our actions; and not just our good will, but our good deeds. The Bill will help in the long term to support those actions and good deeds, which we need to take in partnership with others across the world.

Today we have an opportunity to deliver the sixth recommendation of the Truro review, and the recommendation of the experts who provided an independent review three years later. The Bill will provide in law the authority and permanence that is consistent with the significance of the issue internationally—exactly the point my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) has just made. If there is insufficient time to speak at length about the many atrocities being perpetrated across the world as we speak, I urge those listening to the debate to read the *Hansard* report of yesterday's Westminster Hall debate on religious persecution and the Open Doors world watch list 2024. That is one of many debates that we have hosted in the House.

I want to pay tribute to parliamentarians across the parties, because my work internationally shows that we are unique in this country in having such strong cross-party collaboration on this issue. There is no other Parliament in the world with so many parliamentarians who regards this as a critical issue, and who actively engage. The fact that there are about 170 members of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief—the biggest APPG in Parliament, I believe—is testament to that.

Enacting this Bill would, as I have said, provide in law the authority that is consistent with the importance of this issue and the leading global role that the UK plays, including through its Ministers—I know that the Minister of State who is present today is passionate about this issue—in championing that foundational human right. As we have recently celebrated the 75th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights, drawn up after the atrocities of the holocaust, and as we approach Holocaust Memorial Day tomorrow, what more fitting way could there be to demonstrate our commitment to article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights than to pass this Bill? Article 18 states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Passing the Bill would show that we are serious about advocating that fundamental human right for the long term.

Regrettably, too many Governments view FORB merely as a topic of niche interest, to be engaged in by a few of us with a particularly religious perspective on life. But FORB is not a niche topic and that perception has to change. We live in an increasingly unstable world in which there are increasingly authoritarian regimes. Religious belief is anathema to any authoritarian regime, as they demand undivided loyalty. We can promote change today by supporting the Bill. Indeed, FORB concerns should be core concerns at every international summit, because they are at the core of so many violations of human rights across the world today.

FORB is a foundational human right, and I give the example of women in Iran who bravely lead the charge against that brutal regime. Journalists and politicians alike have not fully grasped the fact that, at heart, their protests are about FORB violations. The imposition of religious dress codes is a FORB issue. It is FORB that the Iranian regime fears most, because FORB represents an existential threat for it. With angry crowds shouting, “Woman, Life, Freedom”, it is the full realisation and actualisation of freedom of religion or belief that will ensure not just respect for women, but for all of society. On that issue hangs the future of Iran.

We have become accustomed to countries paying lip service to FORB rights and obligations, and signing up to international agreements such as article 18 without honouring the obligations within them. It is simply not acceptable for a young girl to be kidnapped from her home and forcibly so-called married by being raped multiple times, and then when she goes to a police station or tries to get justice through the courts, to be turned away in a country that has signed up to article 18, with all of that happening simply because of her religious beliefs.

Without the freedom to believe or not to believe, it is hard to see how other human rights can make sense. Freedom of speech, assembly, movement and expression, and the right to equality before the law, to education, to privacy, to family life and to marriage—all those things and more are predicated and contingent on the right to thought, conscience and religion. Citizens cannot be truly free if they are not able to live according to their beliefs. Without the existence and expression of what has long been considered a sacred inner liberty, those other external rights lack grounding and legitimacy.

[*Fiona Bruce*]

Political social and economic freedoms cannot co-exist alongside major limitations on freedom of religion or belief. Freedom of religion or belief can exist without democracy, but it is hard to see how democracy can exist without freedom of religion or belief. That is why this work and this Bill are so important.

So why not support the Bill? The independent Truro review pointed out that the creation of the envoy role in statute

“would be unprecedented, as no special envoy position in the UK has thus far been established by law.”

Yet the argument about precedent is that it always takes a precedent being made the first time for good reason to create a long-standing precedent. There is good reason to do so here, as I hope I am stating. In reality, the unprecedented level of persecution across the world on account of what people believe, which is affecting hundreds of millions across swathes of religions and beliefs, makes the Bill so important. That was at the heart of the Truro review.

After he embarked on the review four years ago, the Bishop of Winchester stated that he was “shocked” by the scale, scope and severity of the abuse of FORB globally. The Pew Research Centre estimates that 83% of the world’s population lives in countries where there are some restrictions on religion or belief. A Christian is killed every two hours somewhere in the world, simply on account of their belief. The Open Doors world watch list 2024 sets out an increase again in the number of Christians persecuted—up to 365 million, which is one in seven across the world. As I have said, the issue does not just affect Christians but people of all faiths and beliefs.

I know that a number of colleagues wish to speak, but I turn briefly to pressing concerns about the violation of FORB. If we wanted to look at an example of why the precedent of a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief in this country is so important, we need only look over the Atlantic to be inspired by the United States’ International Religious Freedom Act, which permanently established the equivalent role of an ambassador-at-large for religious freedom and an office to support the role some 25 years ago.

In my role, I have had the privilege over the last three years to work closely, weekly and in some cases daily, with the US State Department. From 2022 to 2023, I was chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which is a growing alliance that now has 43 countries committed to working together, and following the end of my term, I am honoured to have been elected as vice chair. Having worked with the US State Department, I have seen its capacity, experience and knowledge, which has come only as a result of having an established office over many years, and its effective work to support international collaboration on the issue of freedom of religion or belief.

I will not speak for much longer, as I sense a number of colleagues wish to contribute. Marc Sidwell, the director of the Henry Jackson Society, wrote recently:

“To build on all that has been achieved, the Government should act decisively, follow the recommendation of the Truro Report and make championing international religious freedom an official duty of Whitehall, embedded in legislation. The law

which brought similar reforms to the US Government, the International Religious Freedom Act, is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, and shows the enduring value of such a commitment...

As America learned during the Cold War, the defence of religious freedom abroad is not just a humanitarian priority but a key component of standing up for the values of the free and democratic world. An increasing body of research shows that the price of religious repression is measured not just in human suffering, vast and appalling as that toll remains, but in the growth of intolerant, dangerous ideologies, as well as economic immiseration.

The global decline in religious freedom is both a humanitarian and a strategic crisis. By taking religious freedom seriously, we can see emerging threats more clearly, and understand better how to act against them.”

Professor Malcolm Evans was one of the independent reviewers of the Truro review, and he is a member of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office advisory group on human rights. I urge the Minister to look at convening a meeting of that advisory group soon. He attended a parliamentary event in this place last October on the publication of the report I just quoted from. He is an expert in this field—a professor who has worked for decades on the subject. He said:

“In particular, the establishment of the Office of the Special Envoy has been a real driver of, and catalyst, for change. What is needed is for that Office to have legislative grounding to ensure that this continues, that it has a more clearly defined position and that its impact continues to grow. This will also mean that the lens of freedom of religion or belief is used when engaging with foreign policy more generally: after all, a duty is a duty—and something that Government understands. Making it so will help support the development of detailed, focussed and clearly articulated policies and strategies which will complement, take up and lend further substance to what is already now in place.”

We need to secure the groundwork already in place here in the UK to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief. We need to build on the firm foundation that many here have laid. We must not risk slipping back. I ask colleagues to support the Bill.

1.47 pm

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): In the Book of St Matthew 7:16, it says,

“By their fruits you shall know them.”

Across this House, every one of us represents constituents, but some of us represent much more than just our constituents. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (*Fiona Bruce*), who embodies that piece of scripture. In all the years I have been here and in all the engagements we have had, she embodies that so fundamentally. The fact that, in December 2020, she was appointed as the Prime Minister’s special envoy on freedom of religion or belief was of no surprise to me, knowing her commitment personally and her passion for these issues, but the fact that she brings forward this Bill not about her, but about the continuation of the quest, the campaign or, in this context, the mission field, is very important indeed. I am delighted to rise in support of the Bill and the hon. Lady’s bringing it forward. She is small and quiet, but she is mighty, and she always has been mighty in her endeavours. She brings an assured and engaging zeal to these issues in the good times and the bad.

The hon. Lady rightfully mentioned the watch list launched last week in Parliament. That watch list captivates Members of Parliament each and every year. Some Members of Parliament go because they are concerned;

all Members of Parliament who go leave concerned. Some turn up just because they get scores of cards encouraging them to do so. But if they take the time to go and hear the plight of 371 million Christians throughout the world—and the issue is not just about Christians—they leave emboldened to ensure that we do what we can, with our relative luxury, to assist those around the world who do not have such fortunate circumstances.

Having a love of Jesus should not impact on people's ability to live freely, to work within their community or to talk about their feelings or faith, but that is what happens to many around the world. As I said, it is not just about Jesus; many in this world have a faith that is different from mine, but they suffer similarly. I say similarly because the same thing always occurs to me when I get the chance to attend the Open Doors events, which leave me annoyed but determined. I always think about how many people living among us in this country over-use and abuse the word "persecution" and never reflect on what is going on around the world. They have not a clue or an understanding about the key issues—and neither do I, but I open my heart and my ears to see them and hear them. I genuinely think those are important annual events that give us the opportunity not only to engage with like-minded people but to leave with a sense that, in whatever field we work or in whatever faith field we live, we have a contribution to make in this space.

The fact that the Prime Minister was able to lift the recommendation from the Bishop of Truro and appoint a special envoy is great. It has been impacted by a worldwide pandemic and probably has not achieved all that we wished to achieve, but the Prime Minister's current incumbent, the hon. Member for Congleton, trusts that the role can be put to good purpose for many years to come. There is a valid, valiant and purposeful role for the Prime Minister's special envoy for our nation to speak on these issues. Internationally, we are credited for our role, as she mentioned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has chaired the APPG for many years and who raises issues from around the world every Thursday in questions to the Leader of the House, recognises the importance of these issues and of our continually encouraging the Government to speak and act powerfully in this space. It is no surprise that that interest leads to our aid contributions and humanitarianism across the world being as powerful as they are.

We cannot overstate the issue, and neither should we underplay the importance of seeking to lift the proposal to place the role of a special envoy on a statutory footing. It has my full support, and I commend the hon. Member for Congleton for the steps that she takes in her role and for the Bill that she puts before us today.

1.53 pm

**Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for introducing this excellent Bill and for her fantastic opening speech. I can think of no one better in Parliament to bring forward this important Bill, given the outstanding work that she has been doing as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. I particularly commend my hon. Friend for the work she did in

July 2022, with the UK hosting the international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief, and for her work in chairing the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance.

Freedom of religion or belief should be a fundamental human right, but all too often, and increasingly so around the world today, we see people's freedoms challenged and worrying increases in the persecution of minority groups due to their faith. As my hon. Friend said, the Open Doors world watch list notes that 365 million Christians were subjected to high levels of persecution and discrimination last year—a rise of 25 million people since 2021. The Pew Research Centre has found that of 198 countries surveyed, Government or societal harassment was present in 155 against Christians, in 145 against Muslims and in 94 against Jews. In recent months, here in the UK we have seen a worrying number of incidents of antisemitic and Islamophobic hate.

I know that the Government, with my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, have been making huge efforts at home and abroad to tackle these worrying increases in suppression of religious freedoms. The conference held in London two years ago resulted in 35 countries signing statements on freedom of religion or belief, which I think is a testament to the interest and support around the world for these issues and the work that the UK and my hon. Friend have led. I know also from the Westminster Hall debate in September led by my hon. Friend of the significant interest across the House, and the significant work under way in which the UK is taking a leadership role internationally. We are bringing together some of our key partners and allies right around the world to highlight the injustices and persecution of minority groups, and with them to take action to address some of these concerns.

Although the focus is increasing on the issues of freedom of religion or belief, my hon. Friend is right to bring forward this important Bill. Making her role as special envoy for freedom of religion or belief a permanent one in statute is of major significance. As she said, it follows recommendation 6 of the Bishop of Truro's review, which was to establish the position of special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, which I believe was intended to mean "establish in law". Recommendation 6 states specifically that the Foreign Secretary should

"Establish suitable instruments / roles to monitor and implement such an approach, taking into consideration other international approaches, and specifically establishing permanently, and in perpetuity, the role of Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief with appropriate resources and authority to work across FCO departments supported by a Director General-level champion for FoRB."

The Government support that. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have expressed support for the Bill's intent, and the Conservative party manifesto committed to full implementation of the Truro review.

Most important, given that abuse of these vital freedoms is increasing around the world, the Bill sends a clear and strong message to countries where serious abuses are taking place—especially the 13 countries mentioned previously that are of particular concern—that we in the UK stand with all those minority groups and individual members of minority religions who are being persecuted. It demonstrates to the world the UK's full support and commitment to stand by those who are being oppressed and whose religious freedom is being restricted, right

[*Jack Brereton*]

around the world. The Bill is crucial to promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief, and the UK Government have stated that that is high priority for them.

Freedom of religion or belief is a key element of the UN declaration, article 18 of which sets out as an important pillar not only freedom of religion or belief, but freedom of thought, which I think is particularly important. It is vital that the UK, with its leading role in the UN Security Council, also takes a leading role both at home and abroad in promoting freedom of religion and belief right around the world. We need to bring to task those countries that oppress minority groups and have a total disregard for some of those freedoms, and make it clear that we will always highlight where we think wrongs need to be addressed. By putting that role into statute, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton said, shows that we are in this for the long term. We will not cease raising these concerns and highlighting them internationally. We will continue to stand by those religious minorities and oppressed groups right around the world, and continue to support them. I fully support the Bill and wish my hon. Friend well with its passage through this House and the other place.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** I call the shadow Minister.

2 pm

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for bringing forward this Bill today. Having been in many debates with her, I can say that her dedication and commitment to the cause of freedom of religion or belief is second to none. It is definitely a cause that is dear to her heart and to the hearts of many of us in the Chamber.

As the hon. Lady said, some might consider this to be a niche or perhaps even a Conservative-only issue, and I could not disagree more. Freedom of religion or belief is a core tenet of fundamental human rights and will always be at the heart of Labour's outlook on the world, and at the centre of the shaping of our foreign policy. My right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary has previously made that clear and has met representatives and organisations campaigning on this topic on many occasions. In his role and during these meetings, he has made it clear that Labour will ensure that the UK stands against persecution and oppression in any form, and will promote freedom of religion or belief as a key component of our foreign policy.

We know that article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has historically not received the same precedence as other human rights, is reflected in recommendation 6 of the review that the Bishop of Truro carried out in 2019. We know that this is something that we need to be aware of, perhaps elevating some rights above others. The recommendation says:

“Freedom of Religion or Belief is perhaps the most fundamental human right because so many others depend upon it... in the West we tend to set one right against another. But in much of the world this right is not in opposition to others but rather is the linchpin upon which others depend. And we in the West need to be awake

to such dependencies and not dismiss FoRB as irrelevant to other rights. If freedom of religion or belief is removed so many other rights are put in jeopardy too.”

The work that the hon. Lady and others in the House have done has been very relevant to this reminder from the then Bishop of Truro. Labour would like to put on record its thanks to him for his assiduous work in this regard, and for that seminal report on which so much of the work in Parliament in the years following has been based.

Although it is undeniable that, in many countries including the UK, religious freedom is something that we take for granted, and people can worship or choose not to worship—here, I would mention the Humanist Society, which does excellent work at an educational level to encourage the recognition of people who have no faith, as their right not to have a faith is also very important—we know that, in vast swathes of the world, there is not that level of tolerance. There is a growing trend in recent years of religious minorities being persecuted simply because of the beliefs that they hold and cherish so dearly.

I know that Members have often pointed out specific examples. I have been in debates where the hon. Member for Congleton has raised, for example, the treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority in the Xinjiang region of the People's Republic of China. I know that, in my brief on the Asia and Pacific area, there are many clear examples which need to be addressed. None the less, we know that the persecution of religious minorities happens in many parts of the world. I also wish to put on record the work of Lord Ahmad on particular issues in the Ahmadiyya community, which we know suffers disproportionately compared with other minorities.

The Opposition will not stand in the way of this Bill today. That said, there are a few considerations that we would like to put before the Public Bill Committee. How would we balance the other rights that may occasionally collide with this question of a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief? For example, there are sincere concerns about backsliding in any area relating to women and girls in any part of the world, with particular reference to their reproductive rights. Similarly, there are concerns about the message it may send to the global LGBT+ community. It will be important for the Committee to balance all those elements in any future consideration of the Bill. Although freedom of religion or belief does not necessarily conflict with either of these issues, concerns will be raised and it would be wrong to give the impression that we are putting rights in a hierarchy.

On a technical level, I also have reservations about appointing a special envoy on a statutory basis, as it might weaken the Government's flexibility and responsiveness in appointing special envoys, as and when required, to deal with the ever-changing global situation. We have seen that demonstrated in recent weeks with the Minister's appointment of a representative for humanitarian affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, a move called for and subsequently welcomed by the Labour party. These are the sorts of flexibilities that the Prime Minister of the day has at their disposal.

It is very fitting that we are having this debate on the Friday before Holocaust Memorial Day, which will be celebrated in my constituency on Sunday. The Community Security Trust, which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent

South (Jack Brereton) mentioned, as well as Tell MAMA and other organisations dealing with Islamophobia, do important work. It is important that we do not allow any of these matters to divide our communities here at home.

The House will continue to debate and scrutinise the situation facing freedom of religion or belief, and I would welcome the comments of both the Minister and the hon. Member for Congleton on the issues raised.

2.6 pm

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell):** I start by thanking the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for introducing the International Freedom of Religion or Belief Bill.

I also take this moment to express my gratitude to my hon. Friend for her tireless devotion to promoting and protecting FORB for everybody. My thanks also go to her deputy, David Burrowes, for his commitment to this important work.

Freedom of religion or belief remains a human rights priority for the British Government. The work of the special envoy, especially through the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, and the efforts across the Foreign Office network are making a difference around the world. The Bill seeks further to cement Britain's commitment to FORB by making statutory the role of the special envoy. The Bill states:

"The duties of the Special Envoy are to work to promote and protect international freedom of religion or belief...; raise awareness of cases of concern...and advocate for the rights of people...who are discriminated against or persecuted for their faith or belief; work with representatives of other governments, including other Special Envoys, to promote freedom of religion or belief around the world."

That has very much been the sense of the excellent speeches we have heard today.

The Bill covers the reporting requirements for the special envoy and how the terms and conditions of the role should be determined. Additionally, the Bill will establish an office of the special envoy:

"The principal duty of the Office is to support the work of the Special Envoy.

In establishing the Office, the Prime Minister must provide the Special Envoy with such staff, and such accommodation, equipment and other facilities, as the Prime Minister considers necessary for the carrying out of the Special Envoy's functions."

The Government's commitment to the role of special envoy is clear. Indeed, we have had three special envoys to date. I make it clear that the Bill does not establish a precedent for other similar roles. Uniquely, legislating for this post follows an independent report recommendation and a most important manifesto commitment. Today the Government deliver on that commitment, which is especially important given the internationally recognised leadership that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton has provided.

The Bill underlines our commitment to FORB, and, importantly, supports the implementation of recommendation 6 of the Bishop of Truro's 2019 review of the FCDO's work on FORB, which recommended that the role of special envoy for FORB be established "permanently, and in perpetuity". Implementation of the bishop's recommendations was, as I have said, a manifesto commitment, and we thank him very much

for his work. As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), there will be opportunities during the Bill's passage to consider any possible amendments to improve it, and my officials and I will work with my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton in that regard; but the Government will support the Bill today.

The current special envoy's terms of reference state that she will

"work with the Minister for Human Rights"

—my noble Friend Lord Ahmad—and

"through the Foreign Secretary, to the Prime Minister. The Envoy is asked to report twice yearly to the Prime Minister on progress, in addition to providing ad hoc reports on important issues arising, or following overseas visits as Special Envoy".

That is in line with what the Bill proposes.

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton on her work and accomplishments as chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, and on having been asked last year to continue her role for a second year. That was the first time such a request had been made in the organisation's history. Most notable is the expansion of the IRFBA's membership, with, now, 42 nations coming together to highlight violations and abuses of FORB and advocate for those who are being persecuted. The IRFBA-issued joint statements and campaigns that my hon. Friend has initiated underline the impact that we can have when we speak with one voice. The statements on countering antisemitism and the persecution of Christians were widely supported, with 16 countries supporting the statement of antisemitism and 22 countries supporting the statement on the persecution of Christians. The statements underline the ongoing concerns to the international community, and set out how to address and tackle those issues.

The monthly advocacy that the hon. Friend has initiated of highlighting individual cases of religious prisoners of conscience is another important and valuable piece of work that the IRFBA has initiated under her chairmanship. I was delighted to learn that of the people whose cases she publicly supported in 2022, two were released last year: Hannah Abdimalik, a Christian in Somaliland, and Shamil Khakimov, a Jehovah's Witness in Tajikistan. I also congratulate my hon. Friend on her efforts on the planning and implementation of a virtual global youth summit last October. It was quite an achievement to bring together 510 participants from 77 countries to fulfil a key priority following the international ministerial conference on FORB, held in London in 2022, which set out the need to inspire a new generation of FORB advocates.

At that conference we brought together more than 800 faith and belief leaders, human rights actors, and 100 Government delegations to agree on action to promote and protect FORB. My noble Friend Lord Ahmad announced new UK funding to support FORB defenders, including those persecuted because of their activism, as well as funding and expertise for countries prepared to make legislative changes to protect FORB. As a result of the conference, 47 Governments, international organisations and other entities made pledges to take action in support of FORB, and since the conference we have built on the momentum in a number of ways.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton has also continued to raise awareness of restrictions on the right to FORB across the world. She does that in many ways,

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

including calling debates in the House, as she did yesterday in initiating a Westminster Hall debate on the Open Doors world watch list report. She has also brought civil society experts together with FCDO officials in a series of country-specific roundtables, including, but not limited to, Iraq, Myanmar, Nigeria, Ukraine and Pakistan. Such debates and roundtables are vital to ensuring that these issues can be addressed and resolved. The British high commission in Islamabad, for example, is engaging with senior Government officials and civil society on the need to ensure the safety of the Christian community at this troubling time, and we want to see that work continued in every possible way.

All this demonstrates how committed the Government are to freedom of religion and belief, and how we continue to engage closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton in all the brilliant work that she does. Let me end by reiterating the Government's support for the role of special envoy for FORB and our support for the Bill, and congratulate my hon. Friend on her commitment and perseverance in bringing forward the Bill.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** With the leave of the House, I call Fiona Bruce.

2.15 pm

**Fiona Bruce:** Thank you; I will be very brief. I thank all colleagues across the House for their support for this Bill and their kind remarks and, in particular, the Minister of State for giving up his time to come to the House to confirm the Government's support. I thank the Prime Minister for his personal and active support for my role. I will also repeat the thanks that the Minister of State has relayed to David Burrowes, the Prime Minister's deputy special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, who works alongside me daily in this role and without whom I could not do it. In fact, I said that to him when I was approached to take up the role and he said, "You take it up and I will help you," and he has. The Bill would not be being brought forward today but for David's sterling work in this field.

I also thank Lord Alton of Liverpool for his work over many years on this issue. It was Lord Alton who first took me to a meeting of Aid to the Church in Need, where I heard at first hand of the atrocities that were being perpetrated against people around the world simply on account of their beliefs.

Finally, I thank Mervyn Thomas, the founder president of CSW. He started CSW 43 years ago and has worked on this issue ever since. He approached me within a few days of my entering this House as a Member of Parliament and asked whether he could discuss the issue with me. I pay tribute to him for all that he has done over the years. It is so encouraging to hear him say that there has never been a time at which those around the world concerned about abuses of freedom of religion or belief have been working more collaboratively. That is much needed, because there has never been a time when those abuses have been so great. This Bill and its safe passage will be an important step in strengthening the UK's work, in collaboration with others, towards a future in which freedom of religion or belief is honoured and stronger.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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

## Access to Telecommunications Networks Bill

*Second Reading*

2.17 pm

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Second time.

The Access to Telecommunications Networks Bill seeks to ensure that, wherever someone lives, they can choose which operator their mobile phone will connect to. We had a Westminster Hall debate on this on Wednesday, so there is an inevitable element of repetition, but if something is worth saying once, it is probably worth saying twice, and there was good cross-party support for improving and speeding up the roll-out of the shared rural network.

The network is the Government's scheme to increase 4G coverage from 91% to 95% of the UK land mass by 2025, and it is welcome, as is the Government's investment of half a billion pounds on new masts for total notspots where no signal is available. However, the roll-out is not progressing as quickly as we would like, so this Bill seeks to improve or speed up the rate at which people in places in my constituency such as Cockshutt, Woore or West Felton get a usable phone signal from more than one provider wherever they travel in the local area.

Improved rural coverage is really important for all sorts of reasons. Most importantly to me, it is one of the top issues raised by my constituents—I had a series of open meetings over the summer where it came up time and again as something that people find frustrating in their daily lives—and if it is their issue, it is my issue. That is one of the reasons why I have been so keen to pursue it in this place.

According to a survey for the Country Land and Business Association, 80% of rural business owners said that improved connectivity would make the single largest improvement to their business. That is partly because they struggle to recruit, which is linked to poor public transport, but it is also important for the people they might want to employ to be able to access a wider range of job opportunities and to work flexibly from home in a way that is not always currently available to people in rural areas.

Mobile phones have been cited as the default back-up option in a power cut once the copper landline network is switched off in the next couple of years. I emphasise how concerning that is, particularly to elderly constituents who might be a little less familiar with "voice over internet" technology, as well as everybody in the area who is worried about what happens when a big power cut occurs. Because we are rural, our power is not put back online as quickly as in some urban areas, and while back-up batteries for routers will last for one to two hours, we are sometimes off for much longer than that. Someone at home on their own in the dark and frightened might want to be able to call someone other than the emergency services in the event of a power cut. It is really important that people can access their mobile provider—whoever that might be—when the power is down.

Respondents to a survey recently conducted by Building Digital UK cited poor mobile coverage as a major factor exacerbating poor outcomes from agricultural injuries. I do not wish to dwell on disaster, but a couple

of years ago we saw a number of combine harvester fires across my constituency. If such people are in a partial notspot, they can already ring 999 from their phone, but in that situation they might want to call all sorts of other people to help them.

It is not just 999 calls that are needed. Just over a year ago, I did a shift with an ambulance crew, where the crew used a mobile signal to download patient data on to their tablets to help with patients' conditions. We visited an elderly lady near Ellesmere who was very poorly, and although we were quite close to the town centre, the crew could not download her medical record, so her care was necessarily compromised compared with what somebody in an urban area might expect.

Finally, improved rural coverage would reduce digital inequality, which is talked about a lot in this place. Many people do not feel that comfortable on a full broadband-connected computer but have learned how to use a phone—it is part of everyday life—and if they cannot use it as they move around on their daily routine, they are left out to a great extent.

We all understand that there are technical challenges to building masts in rural areas—not least in getting a power supply out there—and that that is why there is a disparity between rural and urban areas. That is a fact of life when living in a rural area—I think people do understand that—but North Shropshire is one of the worst served areas in the country. Less than 60% of premises have coverage indoors from all operators, when the average for the whole of the UK is 86%. Once we move away from the towns and into the villages, less than one in three can choose which operator they have in their home.

As we know—we have talked about this at length and the Minister acknowledged it in oral questions recently—the coverage data is very optimistic and does not always reflect what is happening on the ground. For example, in North Shropshire I have been to talk to people in Trefonen, where some maps say they should have coverage but that is not the lived experience. There is also a capacity issue whereby the coverage might be there but calls might drop out regularly because other people are linked up to that mast at the same time. The data we use to assess the success of the roll-out is therefore very important.

As I mentioned, the shared rural network has involved the four mobile network operators spending half a billion pounds to end partial notspots. Because EE already had an extensive network of mobile masts, it has already met its obligations even though the deadline was June 2024—it is six months ahead—but according to reports in *The Daily Telegraph*, the other three providers have requested a delay. That is down to a number of reasons, some of which are difficult to overcome, such as lack of planning resource, the logistical challenges I mentioned earlier, and issues over access to land. Those are impacting the delivery of the shared rural network. It is interesting that not a single mast that will be delivered by the Government for the total notspots has been built yet, according to the House of Commons Library briefing.

There are challenges that are difficult to overcome, but part of the problem is that EE has not shared its masts, because it has failed to reach agreement with the other mobile network operators. That is a commercial issue and was part of the commercial negotiations, so

whether EE was asking for too high a rate, or whether the other mobile operators were offering too low a rate, is a matter of perspective, but the reality is that we could have achieved better coverage without blighting the countryside with loads of additional masts if those operators had shared their network equipment effectively. That is where this Bill comes in, because it would ensure that operators share their equipment wherever possible, and would penalise them where they do not. The rate at which they would share it would be determined by Ofcom to help ease the commercial discussion along.

Sometimes sharing is not possible—sometimes a bigger, wider, stronger mast is needed and that might not be possible—and that brings me to the solution of rural roaming, which is strongly opposed by the industry. The industry argues that it causes shortened battery life, people might drop calls, it does not deal with total notspots and, perhaps most importantly, it would undermine future investment, presumably because competitive advantage would be undermined. However, an Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report in 2019 said that it would achieve an equivalent result to the shared rural network and be achievable in around 18 months. An Ofcom report in 2018 said that the cost did not appear disproportionate.

Since those reports, the shared rural network agreement has been signed, but there are significant concerns about the speed of roll-out, the quality of the data we are using to judge success, and the fact that this is yesterday's technology and we are not yet there in the countryside—while the rest of the country is hoping to get 5G or stand-alone 5G in the near future. The Bill would address those shortfalls by requiring the Secretary of State to improve rural roaming by incentivising companies to engage in that work.

In conclusion, I cannot emphasise enough—separately from the mechanism of this Bill—the importance of having better data so that when the shared rural network is assessed against its objectives, we can see what people are experiencing on the ground. We know that rural roaming will not happen unless we force the companies to do it, because they have already shown such strong resistance, and the Government have acknowledged that.

This Bill would work alongside the shared rural network by taking steps to improve the infrastructure sharing and encouraging rural roaming wherever possible. People might be with an operator that works at their home, and they could be out and about in their day when their mum falls over at home. She might call an ambulance, but she cannot get hold of that person to tell them. That is problematic in the modern age. We need to ensure that people in rural areas are connected wherever they go, not just when they are in their home or place of work.

2.28 pm

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): I will address a number of issues when responding for the official Opposition, and I take this opportunity to underline the importance of increasing access to broadband and the wider need for greater connectivity.

The Bill of the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) would have two effects, as I understand it. First, it would require mobile network operators to

[Matt Rodda]

share their network infrastructure for a reasonable price. Secondly, it would incentivise operators to allow customers of other companies to roam on to their network. As she mentioned, this is known as rural roaming, and it is similar to what happens when travelling abroad. These measures are intended to tackle partial notspots, but it is worth noting that the Bill would not address total notspots—areas that do not receive any coverage from any mobile network operator.

Turning to the first of those effects, there are occasional concerns about telecom networks having infrastructure access. As I understand it, one of the main issues is in areas, such as the city of Hull, where there is a monopoly company—in that case, KCOM—or in situations across the rest of the country where Openreach is the monopoly provider. Across the country, there have been repeated issues with the use of telecoms infrastructure, in particular the repeated digging up of roads. There are legitimate questions.

**Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): We are seeing this issue in my constituency at the moment, with roads being dug up. Virgin Media is creating absolute chaos across the constituency by digging up the roads, and the work it is doing to put things back to how they were is an utter disgrace. Does the hon. Gentleman—

2.30 pm

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

*Ordered,* That the debate be resumed on Friday 21 June.

## Business without Debate

### BUS SERVICES BILL

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

**Hon. Members:** Object.

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

### PUBLIC TRANSPORT (RURAL AREAS) BILL

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

**Hon. Members:** Object.

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

### PETS (MICROCHIPS) BILL

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

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February.*

## Trident

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Mike Wood.*)

2.31 pm

**Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): Last night was Burns night, and I found myself reflecting over a couplet from the bard's timeless "A Man's a Man for a' That":

"The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor, is king o' men for a' that."

I open this debate in a spirit of honesty, truth and transparency—a trinity that has been lacking in most of my exchanges thus far with the Ministry of Defence over mounting concerns about the UK's nuclear Trident programme. The spiralling costs of the programme, be they financial or human, demand an earnest response from Ministers—something that has hitherto eluded the MOD—but I am hoping for candour and honesty today, or in writing in the forthcoming weeks.

The economics of the Trident programme are more straightforward. As per the House of Commons Library, the total acquisition expenditure on the four Vanguard-class submarines housing the Trident missiles was £12.52 billion, which equates to approximately £21 billion in today's money. Additionally, annual in-service costs are currently estimated at 6% of the defence budget—based on current planned expenditure, that is another £3 billion for 2023-24.

Further, the cost of the design and manufacture of the new Dreadnought-class submarines is estimated at £31 billion, including inflation over the life of the programme. A £10 billion contingency has also been set aside, making the current potential total for replacement £41 billion. In-service costs are expected to continue at approximately 6% of defence expenditure. The National Audit Office has raised concerns about the impact of the MOD's nuclear programme based on the affordability of the Department's overall equipment plan, but these astronomical figures continue to be spent.

That brings me to the three pressing concerns surrounding the Trident programme that I will set out for the Minister today, the first of which is the dangers of radiation exposure and the issue of nuclear safety in Scotland. Secondly, based on those incidents, there is growing scepticism about the overall preparedness of the existing Vanguard fleet in the light of its allegedly dangerous and "rotting" state, referenced by Dominic Cummings, the former senior adviser to the former Prime Minister. Thirdly, as a consequence of the nuclear exposure hazards that the UK has imposed on the population of Scotland and a lack of transparency concerning the programme as a whole, I will set out why the nation of Scotland has much to gain by removing that nuclear arsenal from its waters.

First and foremost, I would like to provide a factual context to this debate. I was contacted by a whistleblower at the Coulport armaments depot who told me that there had been an emergency evacuation at the site due to a radiation leak. I raised this matter directly with the Defence Secretary, who then wrote to me on 10 January 2023. In that letter, the Defence Secretary denied that there had been any serious radiation breaches at Faslane or Coulport. He wrote:

"I can confirm that the alleged radiation incident referred to during defence questions in the Commons did not occur."



However, public concerns remain about the relocation of staff from building 201 at RNAD Coulport to building 41. The MOD has failed to confirm the date on which the staff at Coulport building 201 were first informed that they were being moving to building 41. The Defence Secretary also stated:

“no serious radiation breaches have occurred at His Majesty’s Naval Base Clyde or RNAD Coulport”.

However, that response implies there was a threshold for reporting radiation leaks.

As I said at the time, the Defence Secretary’s response raised more questions than it answered. It suggests that there were radiation breaches, but they fell below an unqualified serious threshold. What is that threshold? How is it defined, and what are the risks from non-serious radiation breaches? In response to a parliamentary written question about serious radiation breaches at the Clyde and Coulport ports, the Minister acknowledged:

“There have been historical events with minor radiological consequences at both His Majesty’s Naval Base Clyde and the Royal Naval Armaments Depot (RNAD) Coulport.”

That revealed 15 recorded radiation leaks at Coulport and a further 43 at Faslane in 2023 alone, although the MOD insists that none was considered serious. Surely further detail of each of these events and the risk they did or did not present to the immediate vicinity is necessary. Will the Minister commit to providing that information?

Will the UK Government continue in their attempts to minimise the number and scale of such events by referring us to obscure codes and categorisations to obfuscate risk or by invoking national security as both an excuse and a smokescreen? The latter were deployed six months ago when the Alba party submitted a freedom of information request asking how many convoys there had been each year for the last five years carrying materials from Atomic Weapons Establishment Aldermaston to Royal Naval Armaments Depot Coulport. Section 24, on national security, and section 26, on defence, of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 were invoked to withhold that information from Scotland and our people—the very people who are frequently placed at risk of exposure to radiation were to be kept in the dark.

Formulaic tests of public information versus national interest are simply not good enough. I would like to pointedly ask the Minister: approximately how much nuclear material has been transported between Aldermaston and Coulport in the last 12 months and in the past five years? How many convoys were used, and what is the frequency of such transports? How many workers are sufficiently close to be impacted by even low-level nuclear exposure? We need answers, and the people deserve the most basic of information. Even the details of potentially catastrophic incidents that have received media coverage are routinely denied to right hon. and hon. Members of the House and the public alike, on the spurious grounds that the Ministry does not comment on operational matters in respect of submarines.

It was recently reported that a Royal Navy nuclear submarine plunged towards its crush depth due to a concerning malfunction of its main depth gauge. It was finally reported last November, but the incident took place a year before that. We still have no specifics about where it took place, despite my personal request for information from the Ministry.

Turning to the preparedness of the Vanguard fleet itself, in September 2023, one of the Vanguard-class submarines returned from a patrol of more than six months. Defence commentators noted that it was double the three-month missions previously completed. Additionally, *Navy Lookout* reported that the returning submarine seemed to be missing exterior tiles and was covered in marine growth to an extent that had not been seen before. As of this year, the life expectancy of the current Vanguard fleet is repeatedly being extended, despite only three of the four vessels currently being seaworthy. I would like to credit *The National* newspaper in Scotland for its persistent and thorough reportage of the nuclear predicament in Scotland.

If it is the case that submarines are failing in seaworthiness and labouring under increased operational pressures, as is indicated by the malfunctioning of vital components, extended periods of deployment and missing exterior tiles, while radiation leaks are being under-reported, I ask the Minister in good faith, how are the people of Scotland or right hon. and hon. Members to place any trust in this Government? Specifically, how is the Dreadnought class to avoid exactly the same fate and, most critically, what additional safeguards are being taken to mitigate civilian exposure to nuclear contamination, given this shocking evidence?

Given that the chief adviser to an erstwhile Prime Minister has referred to the UK’s nuclear fleet as a “horror show”, I would hope that the Minister would come through with some degree of information and transparency, and not rely merely on obfuscation. That brings me to my third and final concern. The deficit in trust is one of the many reasons why the people of Scotland would benefit from becoming an independent state in lieu of being held in this Union against our will.

“Bairns not bombs” was one of the galvanising messages of the independence movement in the run-up to the 2014 referendum. That slogan embodied a persisting sentiment against nuclear weapons of mass destruction and their dangerous and corrosive impact on our country and the planet. Opinion poll after opinion poll shows that the majority of Scottish people oppose WMDs being hosted in Scotland. Whenever independence is mentioned to the UK Government, their immediate reaction is to attempt to assert that the Scottish economy is better served as part of the United Kingdom. Within the realm of defence manufacturing, such an argument is as far as from reality as possible. In October, the Government signed contracts totalling £4 billion to design and manufacture the world’s most advanced submarines. However much I disagree in principle with the so-called nuclear deterrent, it illustrates perfectly the fact that Scotland receives few of the manufacturing jobs, which are located in Barrow-in-Furness, Raynesway and Derby. The jobs, the growth and the capital are yet again directed anywhere but Scotland. Meanwhile, the rotting hulks of Dreadnought subs retired in the 1980s have been rusting away at Rosyth longer than they were in service. The people of Scotland have a precarious future, in which key economic infrastructure such as the Grangemouth oil refinery is threatened with closure.

While the current situation is bleak, I would not like to end my speech on a pessimistic note. Instead, I look towards the future with hope: a future where an independent Scotland can build on and benefit from its vast renewable energy potential, rather than host nuclear weapons;

[*Neale Hanvey*]

a future where there is a safe, feasible and practicable way to ensure that an independent Scotland will begin its life as a nuclear and WMD-free state from day one of independence; a future where the Government and the people of Scotland are no longer kept in the dark about the dangers placed in their midst by a remote, arrogant London Administration.

2.43 pm

**The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge):**

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (*Neale Hanvey*) for initiating this debate. We have had a number of exchanges on this matter including, for example, in Defence oral questions.

The key point is that every day since April 1969, there has been at least one nuclear-armed Royal Navy submarine at sea, helping to keep the United Kingdom safe—the whole of the United Kingdom. In January 1980, when the House debated the successor programme to Polaris, which led to Trident—the title of this debate—the Secretary of State for Defence, Lord Pym, boiled down the Government's position to one essential point. While acknowledging the “horrendous” nature of nuclear weapons and regretting that we could not “disinvent” them, he concluded that Britain needed to be a nuclear power because of what it would contribute to NATO's strategy of deterrence and, through that, to our own national security.

Essentially, that has been the position of every UK Government since then. The renewal of the nuclear deterrent was approved by an overwhelming majority of 355 votes in this House in 2016, and it remains this Government's position today. In 1980 the debate was framed by the cold war, but in 2024 the threats facing our country have multiplied and become far more complex. The number of nuclear states has grown, while Putin's aggression and intransigence have set back the prospect of nuclear disarmament more broadly. Russia still holds around 6,000 warheads, and we face a much more assertive, nuclear-armed China. North Korea remains hellbent on honing its nuclear capabilities at the expense of the wellbeing of its own people, while Iran has repeatedly violated its international nuclear obligations and has enriched uranium far beyond what it needs for civilian purposes.

Significantly, our competitors are investing in novel nuclear technologies, including new warfighting nuclear systems, to integrate into their military strategies and doctrines. If we measure the need for an effective nuclear deterrent by the number of nuclear-armed states overtly working against the UK's national interest, it is clear that the need to deter has never been greater. Let us not forget that a credible nuclear capability is about more than merely countering nuclear threats; it is about deterring all of the most extreme threats to our nation. That is why the Government are investing in upgrading our nuclear infrastructure to support the next generation Dreadnought-class submarines and replacement warheads. These will be some of the most advanced nuclear systems ever built, which sends a clear message to any would-be adversary.

Four Dreadnought submarines will replace the Vanguard-class submarines that have maintained our nuclear deterrent since 1992. They will give us an independent, continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent well

into the second half of the century, and progress is on track to deliver the first of the Dreadnought submarines into service in the early 2030s. At £31 billion, it is correct to say that the estimated cost of the programme is significant, but we cannot develop this type of world-leading capability on the cheap, and we must also weigh that against the terrible cost of war, which is what the nuclear deterrent deters from happening.

Not only will the programme keep us safe; it is fuelling economic growth around the country. The submarines are being built by BAE Systems in Barrow-in-Furness. They will be maintained by Babcock in Devonport and on the Clyde. Their nuclear reactors are designed and built by Rolls-Royce in Derby. Our nuclear warheads are designed, manufactured and maintained by the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Berkshire. Hundreds of companies form the network of supply chains, and the stationing of our submarines at His Majesty's Naval Base Clyde will ensure that it remains one of the largest employment sites in Scotland, bringing significant benefits to the local economy. Directly and indirectly, the nuclear deterrent is responsible for thousands of jobs in Scotland.

In preparation for the delivery of Dreadnought, we are carrying out a £1.4 billion upgrade of our nuclear facilities at HMNB Clyde. We are committed to replacing our current nuclear warheads and are working with the US to refresh the Trident II D5 missile. [*Interruption.*] If the hon. Gentleman wishes to intervene, he is more than welcome to do so.

**Neale Hanvey:** I thank the Minister for unexpectedly allowing an intervention. He says that he is working with the US, but the reality is that the US controls the nuclear deterrent that the UK provides.

**James Cartlidge:** That is wholly erroneous. Yes, we have a very, very close working relationship with the United States. We recently celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Polaris agreement. With the United States we secured the freedom of Europe in the second world war, and with the United States we are continuing to secure the freedom of our United Kingdom by deterring the most significant threat that we could face.

I emphasise that while we continue to invest in our nuclear deterrent, the Government remain fully committed to the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons. As a country, we have a strong record on disarmament, having unilaterally reduced our nuclear forces significantly from their cold war peak. We now have the smallest nuclear warhead stockpile of the five nuclear weapons states recognised under the non-proliferation treaty, and we are the only state to have reduced its deterrent capability to a single nuclear weapons system. However, other states have not followed our example, and as we survey the dangers facing our world today, our assessment is that further unilateral disarmament would only undermine our security and that of our allies. Nevertheless, we will continue to see opportunities to advance multilateral disarmament under the framework of the non-proliferation treaty.

Our nuclear deterrent deters aggression and coercion and helps to preserve peace.

**Neale Hanvey:** I thank the Minister for giving way a final time. I will not take too much time, but I did express a number of specific concerns that relate to the people of Scotland and their concerns about hosting

these weapons on their shores. The Minister has made the business case, albeit perhaps not the moral case, for hosting WMDs, but he has not responded to any of my concerns about hosting these weapons in Scotland. Will he commit to respond in writing and in detail to the points I have put to him today?

**James Cartlidge:** I did respond in detail to the written questions the hon. Gentleman tabled last May about those incidents, and the Secretary of State wrote to him about the allegations that were printed. We rejected them.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the moral case, and I have made the moral case: it is about peace, it is about deterrence. If he does not understand that, let me put on the record the fact that it is the policy of his party to withdraw from NATO, not just to disarm. Let us ask ourselves what greater folly there could be in the current international situation than for the United Kingdom to

withdraw from NATO. How would the Kremlin react? What would the people of Ukraine think—the people we have done so much to help remain free?

Peace is not cheap. That is why we support our deterrent, whose existence has kept us and our allies safe for decades, and we remain fully committed to investing in it. Of course, we absolutely hope never to have to use our arsenal, but in our more dangerous world, I strongly agree with Lord Pym when he told this House, 44 years ago almost to the day, that irrespective of the nature of the threat we face, it is better to have “effective options” than accept defeat. Or, as I would put it sincerely, the best way to avoid a war is to deter it from happening in the first place.

*Question put and agreed to.*

2.51 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Petition

Friday 26 January 2024

## OBSERVATIONS

### TRANSPORT

#### Blue Badge drivers in Low Traffic Neighbourhoods

*The petition of Mike Spenser,*

Declares that Blue Badge drivers should be able to drive in Low Traffic Neighbourhoods without being fined; further declares that fining causes Blue Badge drivers physical hardship, anxiety and mental health issues; further that it is wrongly assumed that many disabled people can walk or cycle.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitions and make it mandatory to include in the DVLA Vehicle Registration Database, along with names & addresses of vehicle owner, an exemption marker for those with Blue Badges and life-threatening conditions from Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and time restrictions without clear justification; and that this information must be used by all local councils and private enforcement companies as to not issue PCNs to these drivers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 10 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 7P.]

[P002896]

*Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman):*

The introduction of traffic management measures, including low-traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs), is a matter for local authorities. It is for them to ensure that any restrictions are developed in a way that enables them to meet their obligations under equalities legislation, including considering the impact on disabled people.

LTNs can be implemented using traffic sign restrictions or physical measures, such as planters. Local authorities already have the ability to exempt Blue Badge holders from traffic sign restrictions, and therefore from any enforcement action. In England, the Blue Badge scheme is entirely a matter for each local authority.

Drivers who are disabled must tell the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA), but it is important to note that the DVLA database does not hold a record of Blue Badge holder details. Blue Badges are registered to individuals, rather than a specific vehicle, and therefore can be used in any vehicle in which the badge holder is travelling.

The Government believe that effective traffic management should not be about dictating travel choices; rather, it should be about enabling more choice in how people make their journeys, and all such initiatives must work for residents, businesses and emergency services.

It was for this reason that the Prime Minister announced a review of LTNs, to look at how they are working and whether they are providing the appropriate choices for walking, wheeling and cycling that we want to see, without unfairly penalising motorists. The Government want to ensure that changes to local roads are made after the views of communities have been properly considered and are implemented in a way that does not dictate how people should travel.



# PETITION

Friday 26 January 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>TRANSPORT</b> .....	7P
Blue Badge drivers in Low Traffic	
Neighbourhoods.....	7P

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