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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Friday 19 April 2024

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

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

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

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

Pet Abduction Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before we begin, I remind Members of the differences between Report and Third Reading. The scope of the debate on Report is the new clauses and amendments that have been selected. The scope of the Third Reading debate to follow will be the whole Bill as it stands after Report. Members may wish to consider those points and then decide at which stage or stages they want to try to catch my eye.

New Clause 1

GUIDANCE

“(1) The Secretary of State must publish guidance on the enforcement of the provisions of this Act.

(2) Before issuing guidance under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must consult the Crown Prosecution Service.”—(*Sir Christopher Chope.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

9.36 am

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 1, in clause 1, page 1, line 2, after “if” insert “without lawful authority or a reasonable excuse”.

This amendment seeks to ensure that an offence is only committed if the acts complained of are shown to have been made without lawful authority or a reasonable excuse, so that it is not necessary for the person alleged to have committed the offence to prove their innocence.

Amendment 2, page 1, line 3, after “to” insert “permanently”.

This amendment seeks to ensure that only acts where the dog is permanently removed from lawful control would fall under the offence.

Amendment 3, page 1, line 3, leave out “any person” and insert “its keeper”.

This amendment seeks to ensure that only where a dog is removed from the lawful control of its registered keeper falls under the offence, rather than removal from any person.

Amendment 4, page 1, line 5, after “to” insert “permanently”.

This amendment seeks to ensure that only acts where the dog is detained so as to permanently keep it would fall under the offence.

Amendment 5, page 1, line 5, leave out from “of” to end of line 6 and insert “its keeper”.

This amendment seeks to ensure that only where a dog is detained so as to keep it from its registered keeper falls under the offence.

Amendment 6, page 1, leave out lines 21 to 23.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Amendment 7, page 2, line 16, leave out “(3)”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 6.

Amendment 8, page 2, line 30, at end insert—

“(aa) references to a dog are only to a dog which—

(i) has been implanted with a microchip pursuant to the Microchipping of Cats and Dogs (England) Regulations 2023; or

(ii) has been certified as exempt from such an implant under those Regulations”.

The above Regulations provide for the compulsory microchipping of dogs and the recording of each dog's identity and its keeper's contact details on a database. This amendment ensures that the offence of dog abduction can only be made in respect of dogs which have been microchipped (or are certified as exempt) in accordance with those Regulations and will thereby incentivise keepers to comply with the rules about microchipping.

Amendment 9, page 2, line 34, at end insert—

“(aa) “keeper” has the meaning given to it under the Microchipping of Cats and Dogs (England) Regulations 2023”.

This amendment ensures that “keeper” is intended to have the same meaning as under the specified Regulations.

Amendment 10, page 2, line 39, leave out clause 2.

This amendment removes the offence of cat abduction.

Amendment 11, in clause 3, page 3, line 36, leave out “or 2”.

This amendment is consequential on the removal of clause 2 from the Bill.

Amendment 12, page 4, line 5, leave out “or 2”.

This amendment is consequential on the removal of clause 2 from the Bill.

Amendment 13, page 4, line 8, leave out “or 2(5)”.

This amendment is consequential on the removal of clause 2 from the Bill.

Amendment 14, page 4, line 38, leave out “or 2”.

This amendment is consequential on the removal of clause 2 from the Bill.

Amendment 15, page 5, line 6, leave out “and 2”.

This amendment is consequential on the removal of clause 2 from the Bill.

Amendment 19, page 5, line 6, leave out

“come into force in relation to England”.

and insert

“, so far as they extend to England and Wales, come into force”.

This is a technical amendment to ensure that it is clear how the commencement of clauses 1 and 2 operates in so far as those clauses extend to England and Wales (rather than just in relation to England).

Amendment 21, page 5, line 7, at end insert

“provided that the Secretary of State has fulfilled the requirement to publish the guidance required by section [Guidance]”.

Amendment 16, page 5, line 11, leave out “and 2”.

This amendment is consequential on the removal of clause 2 from the Bill.

Amendment 20, page 5, line 11, leave out “in relation” and insert

“so far as they extend”.

This is a technical amendment to ensure that the commencement of clauses 1 and 2 is dealt with in the same way throughout clause 6.

Sir Christopher Chope: Before I begin to address the issues, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I, on behalf of myself and many others, express our condolences to Mr Speaker, who I know is unable to be present today because he is attending his father’s funeral? I had the privilege of serving with Doug Hoyle in this House from 1983 until 1992, and he was an exemplar for Back-Bench activity during that time. Our sympathies are very much with Mr Speaker.

Turning to the amendments, and particularly new clause 1, I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, with whom I was privileged to have a meeting last week to discuss my amendments. They will have a better understanding of the way I work than quite a lot of other colleagues. I am pleased that as a result of that meeting there was essentially an agreement—an acceptance—that we must try to link communications about the appalling incidents of pet abduction or theft to the need for people to microchip their loved animals, particularly dogs and cats. In the course of that discussion, it was pointed out by the Minister of State that before the Bill is to become law, it will be necessary for guidance to be discussed with the Crown Prosecution Service regarding exactly what the enforcement provisions would be. I hope that in responding to this debate, my right hon. Friend will expand on that point.

Following that discussion, I thought I would table a new clause about guidance, so that any references in the debate could include references to the specific issue of guidance that would be issued following the enactment of the Bill. I would like that guidance to set out clearly the position for people who do not microchip their cats and dogs. Microchipping of dogs is mandatory and has been since 2010, but we know that something between 5% and 10% of the 9.5 million dogs in this country are not microchipped. In early June, it will be mandatory for all cats to be microchipped, and probably about 70% have been microchipped by now.

I hope that we can send out a message, in discussing this important legislation, that if someone does not have their cat or dog microchipped, they should not expect the law to rush to their assistance in the event of their cat or dog being abducted. Apart from anything else, if they complain to the police that their dog or cat has been abducted and it has not been microchipped, it is all the more difficult to identify it, search for it and so on. On that great principle of English equity, it seems to me that if someone seeks the protection of the law, they should come with clean hands. In this context, that means they should be able to say that they have complied with the law in respect of the pets for which they have responsibility and have microchipped them. I hope people will realise that if they do not—I hope that the Government will point this out in the guidance—have their pets microchipped, they will not be able to take advantage of the benefits and special provisions in this legislation.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a fair point that if people want help when their dogs have been stolen, they should have them properly chipped in accordance with the regulations. I do not think puppies are included in that. It is important that we think about the pet owners for whom we are trying to get this Bill through. I know that he is not seeking in any way to block it, but these people would almost certainly have complied with the law, and I understand that the amendment would make it far more difficult for the police. While I understand the sentiments, I hope he will not press this to a Division.

Sir Christopher Chope: I will hold my counsel on that until I hear the Minister’s response. If I said now that I agree with the Minister before he has even said anything, I would be closing off an important option. Despite the temptation from my right hon. Friend, I will not do that. She herself has said to me in private that she thinks there is a lot to be said for what I am trying to achieve on microchipping. I have a specific amendment linking microchipping to the text of the Bill. The guidance is perhaps another way of achieving the same objective.

My right hon. Friend reminds me that when the Bill came out of Committee, it was originally put on the list of Bills to be considered without debate on a Friday, on the basis that everything that could have been said about it had already been said and it should now proceed directly to the statute book. It was with wry amusement that I saw that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), the promotor of the Bill, has now taken advantage of the opportunity provided by having a debate on Report to put down her own amendments to the Bill. She could not have done that if her original intention of having the Bill go through all remaining stages on the nod had been implemented. I hope she will thank me for that.

Since the Bill was first produced, the Government have brought forward some important new measures related to microchipping to deal with the problems of the conflicting or complementary microchipping databases. The pet theft taskforce was commissioned to look into these issues of pet abduction, and it strongly recommended that something be done to ensure that there is one consistent database for microchipping that is accessible to vets, the police and local authorities. I was pleased to see that the Government have issued guidance, and that there will potentially be new regulations, on that. When we met, the Minister told me that that will come into force before the end of this year. Hopefully that will make the use of the microchip database easier and reduce the costs of enforcement.

Obviously, the priority that a Bill or an issue has in the House depends largely on the views of right hon. and hon. Members. The Government obviously believe that pet abduction is an important issue, as indeed it is, but we need to keep it in context with the burden on the enforcement authorities of bringing in new laws and, with that, new penalties and essentially new pressure for prosecutions. That is why the guidance will be important.

9.45 am

The latest figures that I have show that in 2020, with 9.6 million dogs in the country, there were only 2,000 reports of dog theft. By contrast, the latest figures show that in England and Wales in 2022-23, 130,521 motor vehicle thefts were reported—one every five minutes.

We therefore need to keep the issue in context. There seems to be an exponential increase in the incidence of motor vehicle theft and an inability of the police and the prosecuting authorities to investigate thoroughly and prosecute the perpetrators. The number of motor vehicle thefts being resolved by the prosecution and enforcement authorities seems to be derisively low. I therefore do not think we should have guidance that essentially says to the police that dealing with the potential prosecution or investigation of a theft of an unmicrochipped dog or cat should take precedence over trying to find the perpetrators—often gangs—who are stealing motor vehicles to order off the streets, and in some cases even from people's garages or drives.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. Perhaps he might consider that the instances of motor vehicles being stolen to order are a symptom of organised crime, just as we recognise that pet theft is now a key contributor to organised crime.

Sir Christopher Chope: I accept that behind the incidence of pet theft there is organised crime, but in the latest figures that we have, that organised crime has resulted in only some 2,000 incidents of dog theft, compared with more than 130,000 incidents of motor vehicle theft, many of which have been stolen to order. I accept that some of the pet theft we are experiencing is because pets of increasing value are being stolen to order, so I am not saying that we should not deal with that; I am saying that we should ensure that the guidance issued reflects the public priorities and does not divert too much police resource away to concentrate on pet theft rather than other crimes such as motor vehicle theft.

That is the background to new clause 1, which would require the Secretary of State to publish guidance on the enforcement of the provisions of the Act. I hope that in responding, my hon. Friend the Minister will say that he will do that anyway, so there will be no need to include this provision in the Bill.

In our discussion, one of the points made by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State was that he would prefer the Bill to go through the House totally unamended. I suspect, however, that that aspiration has been abandoned, because the promoter of the Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, has tabled her own amendments. They seem perfectly reasonable, but that would mean the Bill would be amended in this place. If the Bill is to be amended, one or two of her amendments could be complemented by other amendments, should they be necessary. In that respect there has been a development since our meeting, when nobody declared a need for the Bill to be amended. My hon. Friend will speak in due course.

I will speak briefly to some of my other points. The Bill, as drafted, states:

“A person (A) commits the offence of dog abduction if they—

(a) take a dog so as to remove it from the lawful control of any person,

or

(b) detain a dog so as to keep it from the lawful control of any person who is entitled to...it”.

It is only after having been arrested for that offence that a person could take advantage of the defence, under clause 1(2), that before the alleged abduction the pet was living in the same household as that person.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As the House will be aware, very serious events have taken place overnight in the middle east, with Israel apparently striking targets in Iran. That could lead to further, very serious escalation. As a former armed forces Minister and now a member of the Defence Committee, may I take this opportunity to say that it is important, as the House is fortuitously sitting today, that a Minister from either the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office or the Ministry of Defence comes to the House as soon as possible to make a statement on exactly what we know about the attacks and what the Government believe the implications might be? Madam Deputy Speaker, have you or the Speaker's Office had any indication that the Government intend to make such a statement, and, if so, at what time?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As he says, he is an ex-armed forces Minister. There has been no indication either to myself or to the Speaker's Office, so far as I am aware, that the Government intend to make a statement. Certainly, at the conference meeting this morning there was no indication that the Government intended to make a statement, but Government Front Benchers will have heard his point.

Mr Francois: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do not for one moment wish to push my luck, but under the circumstances I believe that a statement is very important. As you know, the Government can interrupt business at any time to make a statement. Such is the importance of these events—and I notified the office of the Leader of the House that I would make this point of order—that I believe, before the House rises this afternoon, a Minister should come to the House to tell us everything that the Government know about what is going on. I will leave it at that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his further point of order. I note that he has informed the Leader of the House of his strong views on the matter, so I think he is right that at this stage we leave that there.

Sir Christopher Chope: I take it from the ruling you have just made, Madam Deputy Speaker, that, unfortunately, there was no application for an urgent question on the matter that my right hon. Friend raises. If there had been such an application, in the circumstances it is likely to have been granted. Perhaps the Government, when thinking about whether they will make a statement, should take into account that so far they have been very lucky that there was not an application for an urgent question in the required timescale. They were probably prepared for such an eventuality, so it would be reasonable for the Government to come along and volunteer a statement, as my right hon. Friend has requested.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is rather pushing his luck. Could he return to his speech on the Bill?

Sir Christopher Chope: You are quite right, Madam Deputy Speaker, to emphasise the importance of the Bill we are discussing. This is not the only occasion when, compared with what is happening in the rest of

the world, the legislation we are discussing seems to many people to be relatively unimportant, but pet abduction is a very important subject for those who are directly affected by it.

Before the point of order, I was seeking to make the point that people should not be charged or arrested for dog abduction if it is clear at the time of the initial investigation that, at the time of the taking or detention of the dog, the person who took or detained the dog, the person from whom lawful control was taken and the dog all lived together in the same household. Why should a household in that situation be faced with having to defend themselves against arrest and prosecution by using this defence? Surely it would be better and fairer to require that someone only commits an offence if they abduct a dog without lawful authority or a reasonable excuse. That is the background to my putting forward new clause 1. We increasingly put the cart before the horse in accusing people of crimes and then forcing them to defend themselves against the allegations, instead of requiring the prosecuting authorities to look into possible defences or excuses before making an arrest or instituting a prosecution.

Amendment 2 is designed to test out whether an offence is committed if a dog is not permanently removed from someone's lawful control. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments in response to that.

Amendment 3 is designed to ensure that an offence is committed only where a dog is removed from the lawful control of its registered keeper, rather than where it is taken from any other person. I know it will be said that if someone is a dog walker or running some kennels and is not the registered keeper, the offence of pet abduction should equally apply, but in those circumstances the more serious offence of theft should be applied under the Theft Act 1968. Again, that would emphasise the distinction between somebody who is a registered keeper and whose details are set out on the microchip database, and another person to whom the dog has been given for safe keeping, for whatever reason.

Amendment 4 would test out the distinction between the requirement of permanence where someone is depriving an owner of their dog, which in essence comes under the Theft Act 1968, and the less stringent requirements under this Bill. Amendment 5 is a similar amendment to ensure that only where a dog is detained so as to keep it from its registered owner would there be an offence. Amendment 6 is consequential on amendment 1, and amendment 7 is consequential on amendment 6.

10 am

That brings me to amendment 8, which deals with the key point that caused me to get engaged on Report, because we have a great opportunity to link this new offence of pet abduction to the microchipping requirements. As I understand it, there are very few prosecutions for people keeping dogs or cats without complying with the microchipping requirements. The microchipping requirement in respect of cats does not become law until early June, but that law is already well in place in respect of dogs. As with all these things, there is a danger that the Government make regulations or legislate and then no proper enforcement takes place. Why, after 10-plus years, are probably the best part of 1 million dogs that should be microchipped still not? What is being done about that? Why is nothing being done about it?

My amendment provides an opportunity to get the Government to explain why microchipping is a good idea but only for 90%, not 100%, of dog owners.

Amendment 9 would give the word "keeper" the same meaning in the Bill as it has under the Microchipping of Cats and Dogs (England) Regulations 2023. Again, that is a sensible and modest amendment. Amendment 10 is a probing amendment to tease out from the Government what is happening in dealing with cat abduction. When they set up their taskforce, it recommended that dog abduction should become the subject of the pet abduction legislation and that at some future stage references to cats and other pets could be made. When I think of other pets, I think particularly of our old next-door neighbour—sadly, she has died—who was a great lover of tortoises and had lots of them. She was the subject of a cruel theft of her tortoises and I hoped that in due course tortoises would come within the scope of this legislation, as they can do under the provisions of clause 3.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I declare an interest, as a cat owner—my cat is called Hetty. Part of the reason that cats have been provided for specifically in the Bill, a move I supported, was the excellent campaign run by Cats Protection. The briefing I have received from Battersea shows that there were 379 pet cat thefts in 2022. I am not sure of the equivalent figure for tortoises, but I suspect it was a lot smaller.

Sir Christopher Chope: I suspect that the incidence of theft of tortoises is much higher, if we look at the percentage of thefts in the relative populations. My hon. Friend says there were only 379 cases of cat theft, and my understanding is that there are 10.5 million cats, so if we work out the percentage of cat owners who find that they have been deprived of their cat, I suspect that it is much lower than the percentage of tortoise owners who find that their tortoise has been abducted.

However, I think what my hon. Friend's point shows is that, in the context of 10.5 million cats, 379 thefts is hardly a really serious issue. He is a cat owner; I am not—my family are dog lovers, but the two are not necessarily incompatible. I recognise the importance of microchipping cats. Obviously, this legislation will not get on to the statute book until after the microchipping of cats has become mandatory, and until there are criminal penalties if that is not complied with.

I am proud to have visited the premises of the Cats Protection League in my constituency, in Ferndown, which is a very important centre for the rehoming of cats, and that is one of the great tasks that that important charity undertakes. I am not against cats, but I tabled this amendment to test the Government's thinking. The original taskforce set up to look into these issues reached the conclusion that dogs should take precedence, but the Government subsequently gave way because of behind-the-scenes lobbying by interest groups—not as a result of public consultation—and supported the extension of the legislation to cats.

The taskforce's advice was to start off with dogs and then extend the measures to cats. All I am doing is, in a sense, repeating what the taskforce said. The essence of my amendments 10, 11 and so on is that they would enable cats to be included at a later stage under the provisions of clause 3, thereby bringing the Bill into

conformity with the recommendations of the pet abduction taskforce. If the Government do not want to do that—I understand why they may not—then so be it, but I still think that is worth exploring in debate. That is why I tabled the amendments, including amendment 13, which is consequential on the removal of clause 2, as are amendments 14 and 15.

The next amendment on the amendment paper is amendment 19, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, who promotes the Bill. She says:

“This is a technical amendment to ensure that it is clear how the commencement of clauses 1 and 2 operates in so far as those clauses extend to England and Wales (rather than just in relation to England).”

Who could possibly object to that? However, when Back Benchers bring forward legislation and do not get it drafted by Government lawyers, there is always something faulty with it, and Ministers delight in saying at the Dispatch Box, “We agree with the intent, but the wording is inadequate.” The question I throw out for debate and discussion is this: why did the Government lawyers who drafted the Bill for my hon. Friend not get it right in the first place? Why did they leave it until so late in the day before insisting that this amendment, and Amendment 20, be included in the Bill? When she addresses her amendments, I hope that she can explain the background to that situation. It shows that instead of being all-knowing and beyond criticism, Government drafters have some of the same frailties as Members of the House when trying to draft legislation, even with all the expertise that the Public Bill Office is able to bring to bear when assisting us in that task.

Amendment 21 links back to my new clause 1, which would make the commencement of the legislation contingent on the necessary guidance having been issued. From discussions I had with the ministerial team, it seems that is the intent, but the amendment would put that in the Bill. Amendment 16 is consequential, and I have already referred to amendment 20, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West.

That is a quick run-through of the amendments. I hope it will generate a proper debate and discussion, and enable people who take an interest in the matter to become more familiar with the issues around microchipping, including the importance of ensuring that cats and dogs are microchipped, the burden on the enforcement authorities, and the deterrence that microchipping provides against those who are minded to engage in the theft of pets. I hope those issues can be shared more widely across the country. There is a lot more detail behind the Bill, but there is no need for me to go into any more of that at the moment. If the Government cannot accept new clause 1, I hope they will be able to provide undertakings that its measures will be implemented voluntarily.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for passing on his condolences to Mr Speaker. As he said, Doug Hoyle was a great parliamentarian and a very kind person, who was always there with a ready smile and good advice to all of us. I pass on our condolences to Mr Speaker from the whole House.

10.15 am

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I am delighted to have another opportunity to speak about this important Bill, and to speak to amendments 19 and 20, which are minor technical amendments in my name. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for his interest in the matter. I hope he will forgive me when I say that his amendments seem to fall into two broad groups: laudable concern about microchipping; and legal issues about the offence as drafted.

I will start with my hon. Friend’s amendments concerning microchipping. It is very clear that he has a great passion for ensuring that keepers microchip their pets. I am sure that we can all get behind that as a general point; that is a very responsible way for dog and cat owners to behave. Microchipping is a safe and reliable way of identifying animals. Whether they are found as strays, or whether, in keeping with the topic of this debate, they are recovered having been abducted, the microchip should be a lifeline to help them get home. That is obviously good for the animal and good for the keeper.

I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend’s wishes to ensure that we are more responsible and that we encourage microchipping, although I do not agree with his trying to lever those principles into the Bill. The microchipping of dogs has been compulsory in England since 2016, nine years ago. It has also been compulsory in Northern Ireland since 2012. As he rightly points out, microchipping has been a success story: around 90% of dogs in the UK are already microchipped. There is also good evidence that microchipping works. The Government’s recent post-implementation review of the Microchipping of Dogs (England) Regulations 2015 concluded that the introduction of the regulations had increased microchipping and reunification rates, with obvious benefits for animal welfare and pet owners.

I am delighted that these benefits are soon to be extended to cats, through the Microchipping of Cats and Dogs (England) Regulations 2023. I agree with my hon. Friend when he says that all cats over 20 weeks in England will need to be microchipped from 10 June of this year, in a couple of months’ time, before—this is the key point—the Bill comes into effect. Indeed, already, more than 70% of cats in the UK are microchipped; the levels are similar in England and Northern Ireland. The amendments that my hon. Friend seeks to make today are totally unnecessary, because we will be overtaken by events in relation to the microchipping of cats.

The effectiveness of microchipping relies on keepers ensuring that the information on the microchip is up to date. That is what the police and the rescue centres need: accurate information to enable them to reunite the keepers with their animals swiftly and efficiently. As I keep saying, I could not agree with my hon. Friend more on the importance of that, but I do not think that it has anything to do with the Bill. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will want to go into more detail about ways in which he intends to encourage more microchipping.

I understand my hon. Friend’s motivation for his amendments 3, 5, and 8 to 16 to further incentivise compliance with microchipping, but as I have already made clear, there is a high level of compliance already,

and further legislation is coming down the track shortly. There is also an effective enforcement mechanism: where a dog in England is found not to have a microchip, police in local authorities have the power to issue a notice. That notice will require the keeper to get that dog microchipped within 21 days. That will apply unless the dog has been certified as exempt from the microchipping, perhaps by reasons relating to health, and it is an offence to fail to comply with that notice. A person would be liable for a fine of up to £500, and the same regulatory regime will soon come into force and apply to cats.

As I have said, these amendments are not necessary, because we will soon be overtaken by events. However, far more importantly, amendments 3, 5, and 8 to 16 would restrict the scope of this Bill considerably. Amendments 10 to 16 would remove cats from the Pet Abduction Bill entirely, as well as removing certain dogs from the scope of the offence. I regard that as a very retrograde step indeed, and one that I would oppose entirely. This legislation has been a long time coming. It has been very carefully considered by the pet theft taskforce, involving three Government Departments, and to seek to undermine it in this way is entirely wrong.

Sir Christopher Chope: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Anna Firth: No, I will not give way. My hon. Friend had a very long time to speak and I would like to get through my remarks.

Cats are among the most beloved pets in the UK. There are around 11 million pet cats across the country, and a quarter of households have them. I must declare an immediate interest here, as I have two wonderful cats, Merlin and Marmalade, who are appalled by these amendments, which would take them entirely out of the protection of the Bill.

We heard impassioned stories on Second Reading about the importance of cats to people and the heartache it would cause them if they were lost. We heard about Mrs Landingham, the cat of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), and Liesl von Cat, the cat of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon). We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) about her beloved ragdoll cat and we have of course heard about Cats Protections today.

The “Cat Theft Report 2022” from Pet Theft Awareness shows that cat theft increased by 40% in 2021 and more than quadrupled between 2015 and 2022. This is a growing problem. Cats deserve the same protection as dogs.

Sir Christopher Chope: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Anna Firth: I have already said to my hon. Friend that I will not give way at this point—

Sir Christopher Chope: At all?

Anna Firth: Oh—I will give way.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. It is a debate, and I wondered if instead of giving percentage increases she could give put a figure on the number of cat thefts.

Anna Firth: My hon. Friend is right to suggest that it is small. It is a matter of hundreds, not thousands. The point that I am making is that it is increasing. I do not believe that cats deserve less protection. As we heard on Second Reading from the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who is not in her place, Bengal cats, which have a value of thousands of pounds, are among the cats being stolen. We can check *Hansard*, but from memory they might be worth as much as £5,000. The number of cats may be small, but the value of the cats both to the owner and in actual fact is significant.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good point. It is about not just numbers but the emotional impact on families. I declare an interest, as I lost a kitten at the age of four. It still comes into my mind when I think about this Bill and how important it is. It had an emotional impact on my whole family. Numbers do not give the full flavour of the impact on the community across the United Kingdom who are cat lovers as well as dog lovers.

Anna Firth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point. She is absolutely right. Whether someone’s cat is a mongrel, a rescue cat or a stray cat that they have rightly adopted and looked after, or—I have just checked *Hansard*—a £5,000 Bengal cat, to the owner they are a member of the family, and they deserve the same protection. Merlin and Marmalade deserve exactly the same protection as my precious Cavapoochon, Lottie.

James Wild: The House of Commons Library helpfully prepares a brief for these debates and it refers to Pet Theft Awareness, which conducted freedom of information requests across a number of forces. Some of the biggest forces, including Greater Manchester and others, did not respond, but taking the figures from the Metropolitan police and applying them at the same percentage rate, we get a figure of around 1,500 cat thefts a year, rather than the 500 or so that were referred to.

Anna Firth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing that more accurate information to the Chamber and illustrating that we are talking about a figure in the thousands for cats, just as for dogs. If we were to remove cat abduction from the Bill, as per the amendments from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, we would be sending a clear message that cats do not matter as much as dogs. That would be wholly wrong. It would certainly be met with a great deal of resistance from my constituents in Southend West.

While I am on the subject of cats, I would like to correct the record. It has come to my attention that, in Committee on Wednesday 31 January, responding to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Dover about indoor pedigree cats such as ragdolls, I inadvertently misspoke. When speaking about extending some of the dog provisions to holding indoor cats, I said that clause 3 should enable further provisions to be made, but that is not the case. The enabling power in the clause relates only to the abduction of animals commonly kept as pets other than dogs and cats. I want to make that clear. However, as I said clearly in Committee, and as I assured hon. Members then and now, clause 2 already applies in relation to the taking of a ragdoll cat.

The amendments would exclude certain categories of dog. Although amendment 8 acknowledges that dogs can temporarily be exempt from microchipping requirements for medical reasons, it does not recognise that puppies do not have to be microchipped until they are eight weeks old. Were the amendment to be accepted, a person taking or detaining puppies would be entirely exempt from the offence of dog abduction, yet we know that high-value puppies may be the subject of organised crime. Yesterday, I consulted the police and crime commissioner for Essex, Roger Hirst, about the Bill, and he reminded me—as an Essex MP, you may recall this case, Madam Deputy Speaker—that a litter of blue merle French bulldog puppies, valued at £100,000, in nearby Basildon was stolen in its entirety, in a clear case of organised crime. To exclude puppies from the Bill would be another extremely retrograde step.

The amendment would have the same effect in relation to dogs that have been imported into England by their keeper for a holiday of less than 30 days, as the 2023 regulations do not require them to be microchipped. It would also exclude certain working dogs, such as police and Army dogs, that do not have to be microchipped until they are three months old; they would be unprotected before then.

In addition, there is a risk in relying on a definition laid down in secondary legislation that is crucial to the interpretation of the Bill. There is a risk of unintended consequences in the application of the offences were the secondary legislation to be amended. Furthermore, the Microchipping of Cats and Dogs (England) Regulations do not apply in Northern Ireland, which has its own microchipping legislation. As a result, if the amendment were made, the abduction of most dogs in Northern Ireland would be excluded from the scope of the dog abduction offence—another backward step.

It is important to recognise that the abduction offences in the Bill are deliberately framed around the broad concept of lawful control. By not using terms like “keeper” or “owner”, the Bill recognises that different people have lawful control of our dogs at different times. By changing the wording as proposed in amendments 3, 5 and 9, a person taking a dog so as to remove it from the lawful control of a dog walker, for example, would not be committing an offence. I do not believe it is right for a dog to be afforded different levels of protection in law according to the individual the dog happens to be with at any given time. We know that dogs are commonly abducted from parks or gardens, when they may well be under the lawful control of a dog sitter, a dog walker, or another member of the family. Why should a dog that is stolen or abducted in those circumstances be dealt with differently? I do not believe that it should be, and think most people in this country would agree.

In summary, I believe that abducting a dog is an abhorrent crime—I think we can all get behind that idea—regardless of whom the dog was taken from, and exactly the same is true for cats. Although I am of course sympathetic to the underlying intention of amendments 3, 5 and 8 to 16, they move the Bill far away from its intended spirit. We simply cannot create a two-tier system in which only microchipped animals are in scope of the legislation. Given that the legislation implicitly recognises that cats and dogs are sentient beings, it is absolutely not right for only those that are microchipped to be protected, so I urge my hon. Friend

the Member for Christchurch not to press those amendments. I will leave it to the Minister to address my hon. Friend’s new clause 1 and amendment 21.

10.30 am

Let me address swiftly my hon. Friend’s amendments 1, 6 and 7, which fall into the broad basket of legal amendments. The explanatory statements to the amendments suggest that he is seeking to ensure that the person alleged to have committed an offence is not required to prove their innocence if they had a reasonable excuse or lawful authority for the act constituting the alleged offence. I am pleased to say again that he and I agree in principle: the burden in a criminal case should always rest on the prosecution—that is a well and long-established principle of our English law—but, in my opinion, the Bill does just that. Its drafting is such that the prosecution does bear, as usual, the burden of proof. What he is referring to is the fact that the Bill places an evidential burden on the defendant in relation to the defences of reasonable excuse or lawful authority, in that they need to produce sufficient evidence to raise that issue, but the burden of proving the offence remains fairly and squarely on the prosecution. My worry with the wording of the amendments is that they could introduce more uncertainty about the kind of burden that might be imposed, and could impose more of a burden on the defendant. For those reasons, I urge him not to press amendments 1, 6 and 7.

I turn now to amendments 2 and 4, which are also legal amendments. They seek to restrict the offences to situations where a dog is removed or detained permanently from a person’s lawful control. The pet theft taskforce suggested an offence of pet abduction in order to move away from the formal ingredients needed to prove theft, one of which is the intention to permanently deprive, because that is more difficult to prove in relation to pets. Putting that back into the Bill takes us back to a place we want to move away from. Again, I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch to withdraw those amendments.

Finally, let me turn to my two minor technical amendments, 19 and 20, to clause 6. You will recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) tabled in Committee an amendment relating to the commencement, which was agreed to, so the original Bill was changed slightly. That is the main driver for my two minor technical amendments, which are practically stylistic in content. They intend to clarify the Bill’s drafting in respect of the commencement of clauses 1 and 2, which introduce the new offences of cat and dog abduction. The amendments confirm that those clauses, so far as they extend to England and Wales, will come into force three months after the Bill receives Royal Assent. They also confirm that clauses 1 and 2, so far as they extend to Northern Ireland, will come into force on a date appointed in an order by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs of Northern Ireland. For clarity, the amendments are stylistic and do not in any way change the policy of the Bill. I urge hon. Members to support those minor clarifications of the Bill.

Dr Cameron: I rise to support the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) and the amendments in her name, and to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher

Chope) for all the effort, thought and consideration he has put into the work he has done. As I mentioned, I lost my kitten when I was aged four, when microchipping was not a thing—it is one of my most prominent childhood memories. It still stays with me, but if microchipping had been possible then, we might have found that kitten and come back together as a family. It was such an issue for a young girl—losing my very first pet—so I thank my hon. Friend for all of his consideration. Microchipping is extremely important, as he says, and I am very glad that the Government will bring forward legislation in the near future.

I wish to speak briefly about a role that I had over the past few years until recently—that of chair of the all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group. I praise and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West for taking this Bill through Parliament. During my time as chair of that group, we were able to bring Lucy's law into legislation, and it made such a huge difference to animal lovers right across the United Kingdom. I have chaired a number of all-party parliamentary groups, and that is one of the most popular that I ever chaired: during the pandemic, up to 500 members attended the meetings online, and well over 100 people would attend every single meeting in Parliament itself. We must recognise that the UK is most definitely a country of dog lovers.

I also pay tribute to the local animal welfare sanctuary in Bothwell, just next to my constituency, which I visit very regularly. It covers the whole of South Lanarkshire, including my constituency, and I thank it for its work.

When I chaired the dog advisory welfare APPG, pet theft was a huge issue not only because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West said, some of the dogs stolen were extremely highly pedigreed and valuable, but because the fate of some of the dogs was heinous. Often, people were taking the dogs as bait for dog-fighting purposes. The horrendous stories that we heard in that APPG underscore how vital it is that this legislation moves forward. It is an excellent step forward, and I think it sends a message to those who would try to abduct pets, particularly dogs and cats, that it is not acceptable. We wish to underscore that, and this Government have a mandate to do so.

Before closing, I wish to give my condolences to Mr Speaker for his loss. I did not have the privilege of personally knowing his father, but from my understanding, he has been a great servant to politics across both Houses. I wanted to pass on my condolences today, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Let me begin by saying that Labour strongly supports the measures to tackle pet theft and abduction, and I thank the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) again for introducing the Bill. Let me also echo the comments about Doug Hoyle, and the condolences to Mr Speaker.

Much of the discussion in Committee was about timing—a subject that has come up again this morning—but I will start by addressing amendments that have already been discussed, particularly amendment 10, which would effectively remove cats from the scope of the Bill. The hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) seems to play an important role in this place on Fridays. Along with some of my colleagues, I have felt frustrated on occasion by the degree of challenge that he presents,

but I think it important for legislation to be properly challenged, so I thank him for the points that he has raised this morning, especially in relation to the amendments relating to dogs, which open up a range of wider issues.

I will not go through the amendments in detail one by one, because the hon. Member for Southend West dealt very effectively with many of those points and I found myself in agreement with her on all of them, but there are bigger issues involved in the way in which we register and track dogs. All this is complicated, and I know from talking to vets in my shadow ministerial role that they worry about being dragged into ownership disputes as a consequence. I think it is part of a wider discussion, and I am certainly not opposed to our having that discussion, but I agree with the hon. Lady that there is a danger of our being drawn into delays and also into diminishing the scope of the Bill, which I think would be disappointing. Labour will therefore not support the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Christchurch.

Amendment 10, which relates to cats, strikes me as something much more fundamental, and we oppose it strongly. As my colleagues and I have argued throughout the long saga of this Bill and its predecessor, cat theft is a real issue. I note the discussion about numbers, but I suspect that there is a degree of under-reporting—the offence does not currently exist, so why would anyone report it?

Those who advocate for cats are, unsurprisingly, appalled by the prospect of the Bill's being savaged in this way. Cats Protection tells me that

“with 11 million owned cats in the UK, we know how much cats mean to families and how devastating their theft is—both to the humans who love them and the cats themselves.”

It says:

“In just a few weeks of running some supporter actions, we had over 40,000 cat lovers get involved in campaigning for cats to be included in any pet theft legislation including over 10,000 letters to MPs. It is imperative that cats are included in the Bill.”

I am sure the hon. Member for Christchurch will say that a campaigning organisation making the case effectively does not necessarily lead to good law, but I think the point we can take from what it has said is that there is considerable public interest in the issue, and an expectation that action will be taken.

As for the microchipping issues that have been raised, I genuinely believe that they can be resolved. After all, we do not look at other theft offences and say that we will not tackle them because what was stolen could not be microchipped.

There was a particular irony in the discussion in Committee about timing and whether the Bill could be implemented within three months. I think Conservative Members know exactly what I am going to say: this could have been done fully two years ago. We need not have been here today. This is yet another private Member's Bill that has appeared as a result of the Government's abandonment of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. It seems to me that the real question about this Pet Abduction Bill is, “Who abducted the kept animals Bill, and for what purpose?” I have asked that question repeatedly but have never been given an answer, and I am certain that I will not be given one today. It is just another of those DEFRA mysteries—like the mystery of how the Secretary of State comes to override the advice of his permanent secretary, but that is one for another day.

The Government's decision to ditch that major piece of animal welfare legislation has caused enormous disappointment to the animal welfare charities that had worked so hard on it for years, to pet owners and to members of the public, all of whom care deeply about protecting animals against cruelty. Most importantly, of course, it has allowed the mistreatment of animals to continue. We will never know how many animals might not have been abducted had this legislation been passed earlier—I am not the only person to have said that.

The same point was made powerfully earlier this month in a report by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee:

“The Government's withdrawal of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill stalled progress on key animal welfare issues. These delays have allowed the continuation of poor animal welfare practices. The Department must ensure that every provision from the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill is brought into force during the current Parliament. We welcome the introduction of Private Members' bills that will take forward vital animal welfare measures, but note that the Government was relying heavily on Members who were successful in the Private Members' bill ballot being willing to take on its handout bills to deliver its manifesto promises, rather than committing to bringing forward the legislation itself. While on this occasion it may prove successful, it was nonetheless a risky strategy.”

That is why we are here today, discussing this issue with a piece of legislation that, frankly, is at risk because of the process we are going through. There is no guarantee, given political uncertainty and the febrile nature of politics at the moment, that there will be time for the Bill to reach the statute book. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is right to make those observations, and it is deeply regrettable that, contrary to what the Government promised in their May 2021 action plan for animals, they have failed to take leadership in cracking down on the rising rates of pet abduction.

Labour will not be supporting the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Christchurch, but I hope that the Bill can proceed intact to Third Reading and beyond.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): First, may I from the Government Benches send our condolences to Mr Speaker, who is unable to be here today because he is attending his father's funeral? We send our sympathies to him.

It is a pleasure to speak about this Bill, which is so important to many people. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for his considered attention to the Bill, not only today but previously and in the meetings that I and my right hon. Friend the Minister of State held with him in consideration of the points he has brought to the House. I also thank him for his support of some of the measures that we are bringing forward in the Bill. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) for her considered responses and her contributions on Report.

Let me start by addressing amendments 1, 6 and 7. As was eloquently outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, the Bill already makes it clear that prosecutors bear the burden of proof. We want to create suitable offences that will crack down on cases of dog and cat abduction, and I agree with my hon. Friend's assessment that amendments 2 and 4 would undermine the scope for prosecutions to be

brought for the offences of dog and cat abductions. I, too, urge my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch to withdraw amendments 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7 on the basis of the points that I have made and the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West.

New clause 1 and amendments 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 16 and 21 have already been discussed. I commend the dedication of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch to microchipping. I know he has a branch of Cats Protection in his constituency, as does my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), who rightly contributed to this debate, stating that Cats Protection has been instrumental in supporting the extension of the compulsory microchipping requirements to cats. I am pleased about both the extension and its support for this issue.

From the first moment that an offence of dog abduction was introduced in this place, MPs and stakeholders alike have asked for it to be extended to cats. The Department has received a significant number of letters from the public and parliamentary questions from right hon. and hon. Members in support of this proposal. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West that the Government cannot support removing cats from the scope of the Bill. However, I understand that the desire of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch to remove cats from the scope of the Bill was guided by the laudable intention of incentivising microchipping. I am pleased that we very much agree on the importance of microchipping, which is the best way to reunite people with lost and abducted animals.

The Government made microchipping compulsory for dogs in England in 2016, and we are now extending the benefits of that legislation to cats. From 10 June, all owned cats in England over the age of 20 weeks must be microchipped and registered on a compliant database. Microchipping is a safe, simple and effective procedure. The average cost is £25, plus an average £10 registration over the lifetime of the animal. Microchipping undeniably helps to bring displaced pets home. In the UK, around 90% of dogs have been microchipped. In 2023, more than 70% of cats have already been voluntarily microchipped.

Our post-implementation review of the Microchipping of Dogs (England) Regulations 2015—the predecessor to the 2023 regulations—showed that this legislation has had a positive effect on reunification rates. Stray dogs that have been microchipped and have up-to-date database records are more than twice as likely to be reunited with their keeper than stray dogs without a microchip. Police and local authorities can and do issue notices requiring a dog to be microchipped where it is not already. That has been demonstrated to be an effective mechanism to support compliance.

Since we introduced the English compulsory cat microchipping legislation, we have been working closely with a number of animal welfare stakeholders to develop a co-ordinated communications campaign to explain to cat owners the benefits of microchipping and the new legal requirements. Last summer, we even enlisted the support of our chief mouser Larry the cat, who himself was once an un-microchipped stray, before being taken in and rehomed by Battersea Dogs and Cats Home. Larry's tweet on International Cat Day, explaining the importance of microchipping for reuniting pets with their owners, received half a million impressions.

I am also grateful to stakeholders who have helped to spread the message at the start of our 100-day countdown campaign to the introduction of these measures. With just over 50 days to go before the 10 June deadline, we are ramping up our communications strategy with stakeholders for that final push. I urge anyone who has not yet microchipped their cat to do so as quickly as possible. Our communications around the new cat microchipping rules, as well as around this Bill, will provide a clear message that microchipping will help bring abducted pets back home sooner.

However, compulsory cat microchipping is just one of a number of planned microchipping reforms. Last month, we published our response to the consultation on English pet microchipping reform. We are committing to a number of improvements to the microchipping regime around three themes: first, making it easier for approved users to access records; secondly, improving the accuracy of records; and thirdly, standardising database operator processes. Those reforms will implement one of the key recommendations of the pet theft taskforce that more robust processes should be in place to stop stolen pets being registered to new keepers by ensuring that the current keeper has up to 28 days to object to a transfer of keepership request made to a database operator before any transfer can go through, and by preventing database operators from creating a duplicate microchip record for a pet. We are also making all database operators record whether a pet is reported as missing. That will assist enforcement bodies and flag concerns to a database operator, should they receive a transfer of keepership request. We are looking to legislate specifically to deal with that issue in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West has eloquently outlined how the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch would overly restrict the Bill, and the Government cannot support them. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch rightly made some points on guidance in his new clause 1 and amendment 21 and asked for statutory guidance to be issued by the Secretary of State. I agree that guidance will be essential for frontline workers enforcing new pet abduction offences, ensuring that those are used appropriately. The Government are committed to working with key stakeholders to ensure that appropriate guidance relating to this Bill will be available before the Bill's offences come into force. The cross-Government pet theft taskforce already establishes relationships with police officers, operational partners and animal welfare organisations working in the area, so we have a network already in place, and I can confirm that conversations are already under way. I will ensure that the points that my hon. Friend has rightly raised are part of the conversations that are already under way. Enforcers will have the support and information they need to effectively implement the legislation once it comes into force without the need to legally require enforcement guidance.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is concerned about people benefiting from the legislation when they have shirked their responsibility to have their pets microchipped. I assure the House that we are doing work with police colleagues to make them aware that, in the event that they recover an abducted cat or dog that is not microchipped, they have the power to issue a notice under the English microchipping regulations requiring those pets to be microchipped within 21 days.

For completeness, failing to comply with such a notice is an offence and subject to a fine of £500. In addition, the Microchipping of Cats and Dogs (England) Regulations 2023 provide for the police to be able to take the animal in question to be microchipped without the keeper's consent, and allow the costs associated with that to be recovered. The enforcement regime for the English microchipping legislation is designed to ensure that an animal will end up being microchipped if it is found not to be. We understand that most people comply with such a notice where issued, so only a small number of such cases are taken through the courts.

In addition to the existing enforcement mechanism, we are considering enabling penalty notices for the offence of not microchipping a cat or dog through the Animal (Penalty Notices) (England) Regulations 2023. In summary, I cannot, therefore, commit that we will work—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry; I can commit—I want to reiterate that—that we will be working closely with enforcement partners to ensure that my hon. Friend's concerns are addressed. We are working at speed to prepare for this engagement.

On the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, I thank her for bringing forward these minor, technical adjustments to the Bill. The Government support them and agree that their clarity help to progress the Bill, specifically in relation to clauses 1 and 2. I urge all hon. Members to support them.

Sir Christopher Chope: With the leave of the House, I will respond to the debate. We have made great progress, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for facilitating that. My amendments—particularly amendments 10 to 15—were designed to address the problem of potential waste of police and local authority enforcement resources in trying to trace pets that had not been microchipped. My hon. Friend, in saying what he did about the guidance and advice that will be given to enforcement authorities, got to the core of my concerns.

It has never been my intention to be anti-cat. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) suggested that I do not think that cats matter. I will not put myself into a category where cats do not matter, because I have enough emails coming in already on other issues. *[Laughter.]* Cats do matter, and so do dogs—and, for the sake of completeness, so do tortoises.

I have never been against including cats in the Bill, but I have been nervous about doing so when many cats are still not microchipped. From 10 June, that will be compulsory and, as the Minister said, there will be stronger enforcement measures. Given the number of local authorities issuing notices, I do not think they are applying their minds to it, but perhaps when they link that in with the prospect of complaints if cats have been abducted, they will realise that there is a strong link between the two issues. I hope that the consequence of all this debate will be that we have a much better, more complete database, and that more cats and even more dogs will be microchipped. Having a million-plus dogs not microchipped at the moment is unacceptable.

One cannot always say on a Friday that we have made progress, but I think that we have on this issue. In the light of that, I beg to ask leave to withdraw new clause 1.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 6

COMMENCEMENT

Amendments made: 19, page 5, line 6, leave out “come into force in relation to England” and insert

“, so far as they extend to England and Wales, come into force”.

This is a technical amendment to ensure that it is clear how the commencement of clauses 1 and 2 operates in so far as those clauses extend to England and Wales (rather than just in relation to England).

Amendment 20, page 5, line 11, leave out “in relation” and insert

“so far as they extend”.—(*Anna Firth.*)

This is a technical amendment to ensure that the commencement of clauses 1 and 2 is dealt with in the same way throughout clause 6.

Third Reading

11 am

Anna Firth: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

May I put on the record, on behalf of everybody in Southend West, our condolences to Mr Speaker and his family on the loss of his esteemed father, Doug Hoyle?

I am delighted to present this Bill for its Third Reading. I am grateful to all Members who have engaged so passionately and shared their stories at all stages, and I will keep my remarks as brief as I can so that other Members can get in. I will start, as I did on Second Reading, by taking a moment to reflect on my predecessor, Sir David Amess, who was a true titan when it came to championing our pets, particularly dogs. As I mentioned on Second Reading, he chaired and spoke in the last debate that we had in this place on pet reform, and I know that he would be so proud that Southend West is playing a pivotal role in bringing forward this legislation. I, too, am proud to be building on his legacy again today.

When I introduced the Bill, I started by saying that Britain is a nation of animal lovers and that pets are part of our families. I believe that our discussions, both today and at all previous stages, have illustrated that perfectly. We are showing that cats and dogs are not just items, and that abducting them causes real distress to families and individuals, because actions speak far louder than words. This Bill will send a signal that we take animal welfare seriously in the UK.

One wonderful thing about the House is that we are often united when it comes to issues of animal welfare. We are united in sending a signal to the world that we believe in, and are proud of, our record on animal welfare. Of course, I have lots of people to thank. I thank the people who have made significant contributions in this area over many years, including my right hon. Friends the Members for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and for Witham (Priti Patel); my hon. Friends the Members for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and for Ipswich (Tom Hunt); the former Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), with whom I was at Bar school; my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke); Dr Daniel Allen; and Debbie Matthews, the daughter of the late Sir Bruce Forsyth.

I thank the many organisations that have given input and support, including the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, which is so ably led by Chris and Lorraine Platt; the Stolen and Missing Pets Alliance; Pet Theft Awareness; Cats Protection, which we have heard about again today; the Dogs Trust; Battersea Dogs and Cats Home; Refuge; and of course Southend’s own Tilly’s Angels, which prompted me to take this Bill on board.

I also thank the brilliant Essex police, fire and crime commissioner, Roger Hirst, for his help and support, and, more importantly, for all that he does to tackle pet abduction in Essex. Tackling pet abduction, in particular dog theft, is a key objective in his police and crime plan. As a result of his focus and the extra resources he deploys, we have seen a 10% reduction in the dog theft figures over the past year. He does fantastic work. If anyone in Essex wants to help him to keep fighting pet abduction, they will have the opportunity to do so on 2 May.

I want to emphasise the timely nature of the Bill. Since Second Reading, new figures have been released by Direct Line showing a 6% uptick in the number of dogs abducted in the past year, with only one in six found and returned. That is the lowest recovery level since 2015. Those figures should concern us all, because of the number of pets who are traumatised and separated from their owners, most of them permanently. Families are going without a beloved member of the family. As I have said throughout, that is exactly what our pets are.

We have also seen distressing articles in my local paper about attempted pet abductions, which also seem to be on the rise. Only last month, my local paper, the brilliant *Southend Echo*, carried an article about two thugs in Benfleet who jumped out of their van and hit a pensioner over the head with a lump of wood in an attempt to force him to hand over his beloved cocker spaniel. Thankfully, the pensioner incurred only minor injuries and the dog was unharmed, but he was obviously deeply shaken. This week, there has been a report of another incident in Benfleet; a man was attacked by two men in Woodside Park who were attempting to steal his dog. Those reports underline how important it is that we get the Bill on the statute book, and that the police start taking action to enforce it. These really are shocking incidents, and I implore all hon. and right hon. Members to back the Bill.

Pets need to be recognised in law for the sentient beings they are. Their place in society needs to be properly recognised by the law of the land. The Bill is the opportunity to do that. I hope all Members support it.

11.7 am

Ben Everitt: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) on her work on the Bill, which is much needed, and I am very pleased to speak in favour of it.

We are a nation of dog and cat owners, and many Members will be able to say that those animals are like family, and to speak about the fact that they play such an important role in our life and the life of our children. I do not know where Marmalade and Merlin came from, the newly famous Southend West residents, but Magic and Ninja came from Cats Protection, which has had so many mentions today. I know, through Magic and Ninja, what an impact cats can have on families, in particular children.

In Milton Keynes, we have an abundance of green spaces, with miles and miles of lake shoreline and canal towpaths—ideal for walking dogs. If you need to walk a dog, come to Milton Keynes. But that brings with it the added risk of pet theft. As an animal lover, and the representative of a beautiful constituency in which to walk the dog, I have to say that the very idea of stealing pets, often for profit and breeding, is sick.

The Bill fills a gap that has existed in law for far too long. Until now, pet theft was categorised as a type of property theft. That is in no way reflective of the nature of the crime and its impact on victims. We spoke briefly about the link with organised crime. It is increasingly worrying that, like other types of theft, such as the theft of farm machinery and prestige vehicles, pet theft seems to be done to order by gangs of organised criminals. The supply chain of organised crime is obviously horrendous. To think that pet theft is financing it is abhorrent.

In Milton Keynes and the wider Thames Valley, our rural crime taskforce has recently been nearly doubled in size, which will be a significant comfort to the many legitimate breeders based in our villages. I applaud our police and crime commissioner, Matthew Barber, for making that decision.

It is critical that the punishment for this crime is enough to deter individuals and groups from engaging in this despicable criminal activity. The Bill ensures exactly that; I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and the Government for the work that they have done to develop it so far. Under the legislation, offenders will face the possibility of up to five years in prison, a fine or both. The spectre of such punishment should have the desired effect. Organised crime groups profit particularly from the trade in pedigree cats, but such groups will think twice about offending, should the Bill become law.

The Bill addresses differences in the behaviour of dogs and cats really well. Dogs spend much more time indoors than cats. Try keeping cats indoors. They tend to roam outside freely, at their own will, visiting neighbours—“Six Dinner Sid” springs to mind. The Bill understands that distinction, and ensures that for cats, the offence applies only when a cat is taken, not when it is detained. That will mean police can focus on cases of clear criminality without undue interference. He is no longer in his place, but my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) raised concerns about police time; this aspect of the legislation goes some way to ease those concerns. This is sensible and practical law-making. The new offences mean that we can start to record the crimes with better accuracy. As we have heard, some forces record these crimes specifically, and others do not. We will be able to spot patterns that could be linked to certain factors, such as organised crime.

This Conservative Government can be proud of their achievements on animal welfare. The Bill will widen the scope of the Government’s action plan on animal welfare. It is another step forward in putting the UK at the forefront of animal welfare globally. Toughening the country’s laws against animal cruelty is a key priority. That is why we have already passed legislation such as the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021, which raises the maximum sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years, and the landmark Animal Welfare

(Sentencing) Act 2022, which became law two years ago and formally recognises animals as sentient beings in domestic law. The Bill almost acts as a strong-arm extension of that Act. Pets are sentient beings, whom we have to love and cherish as our own. We need laws that recognise that fact and, crucially, protect them. In that regard, this Government have delivered and then some.

Our progress on animal welfare does not stop there. We have also passed legislation requiring the microchipping of cats, as we heard from the Minister; cat owners must microchip their cats by June this year. That will make it easier to pick up cats that have been abducted, and to identify stray pets, so that they can be reunited with their owners.

It is always a pleasure to speak in support of Bills that have clear cross-party support and cut through party political battle lines. Issues such as these remind us of the common ground we have in this place, and that we can put party politics aside to make progress on areas of policy such as animal welfare, which matters to millions of people across the country.

11.14 am

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) on her work on this Bill. She has worked tirelessly on this issue, and I have been pleased to support her at every stage, including by serving on the Public Bill Committee.

We are a nation of animal lovers. As the owner of three dogs—I will not name them again, as they are already extensively recorded in *Hansard*—I can say that this Bill provides us all with greater confidence that those who would seek to steal our beloved pets will pay the price. Our pets are not just possessions, as the law has previously treated them. In the Bill, we are acknowledging the important relationship we all have with our pets, who are cherished members of our family. The theft of a pet is an incredibly distressing experience, for both the pet and its owner, so it is no surprise that the vast majority of the public support making pet theft a specific offence.

My constituency postbag regularly contains correspondence from constituents who have concerns about animal welfare, be it puppy smuggling, dog-on-dog attacks or the theft of a beloved family pet—an issue that the Bill addresses. I have yet to meet anyone who does not acknowledge that the theft of a family pet would cause far more pain and anguish than that of a wallet, purse or phone. Pets simply have far more than simply monetary value to us, and it is right that the law seeks to acknowledge that, and marks them out as different from inanimate objects.

In preparing for today’s debate, I checked with Durham police on the rate of pet theft in their area, and was pleased to learn that it has fallen significantly, from 66 recorded thefts in 2019 to only nine in 2023. Although I welcome that reduction, nine is still many, and this Bill will send out a real signal to further address the issue. Although Durham has had a welcome reduction in such thefts, parts of our country sadly still see worrying levels of pet theft. Pets will be stolen purely for the selfish retention of the animal, depriving the family it belongs to of the pet’s companionship, and inflicting a

sense of loss. Alternatively, pets may be stolen for onward sale, breeding or fighting. Whatever the reason for a theft, it is unlikely that the place the animal ends up in will be better than the loving home it has been taken from.

The Bill must be seen in the context of the wide range of animal protection legislation we have enacted, which recognises animal sentience; increases sentences for animal cruelty; gives new protections to service animals; revamps local authority licensing; implements Lucy's law; bans third-party puppy and kitten sales; and mandates microchipping for cats and dogs. Of course, we must also not forget the Bill, which I was proud to support, bought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) to deal with puppy, kitten and ferret smuggling.

In conclusion, our pets are our constituents' dearest companions and most loyal friends, and we need a specific offence with specific penalties for their theft. I wholeheartedly support this Bill, and look forward to it completing its remaining stages today.

11.18 am

Mr Francois: While we earnestly await a statement from the Government on the Israeli strikes against Iran last night, I wanted to take the opportunity to pay full tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) for her wonderful work on this Bill. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), who mentioned that he had read the names of his three pets into *Hansard*. If he is like most of us, he will now have sent each pet a copy of *Hansard* so that they know they were mentioned, and we hope that went down well with them.

I will come on to praise my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West at the end, but perhaps I may briefly tell the House about some other people who I know will be very pleased to see this legislation pass in the House today. Let me begin with a great friend, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who, unfortunately, is detained on other important business today. The issue before us has always been close to his heart. He has had some horror stories from his constituency about pet theft, so I know that he, a former leader of our party, will be delighted at my hon. Friend's success with this Bill.

Next is our very proactive and hard-working police, fire and crime commissioner in Essex, Mr Roger Hirst, who takes this issue very seriously, ably supported by our dynamic chief constable, Mr Harrington—perhaps his dynamism is due in part to the fact that he used to be a paratrooper. Between them, they have ensured that Essex police are now fully integrated into the national pet taskforce, tackling crime through the review of all investigations, the introduction of a proactive ability to respond to intelligence and joined-up working with partners, including Crimestoppers, the RSPCA and DogWatch. As a practical example, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West tells me that this proactive approach was put into action earlier this year when police released footage of the dachshund, Twiglet, struggling to get away from a thief. With help from the public, the police were able to return Twiglet safely home to her family. I will allow my hon. Friend to send Twiglet the *Hansard*.

I declare an interest. In my boyhood, I had a pet dachshund called Tiger—my parents had a sense of humour, Madam Deputy Speaker. I loved that little dog dearly. When I told him that I was taking him out for a walk, he went completely bananas. I have fond memories of Tiger and, if he were still with us, he, too, would be delighted. Unfortunately, he has passed away, so there is no one to send the *Hansard* to.

I also thank the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, of which my hon. Friend and I are avid supporters, brilliantly led by Lorraine and Chris Platt and their team, who are absolutely passionate about animal welfare—the clue is in the name. They, too, will be delighted that this legislation is going through.

Finally, I know that our great friend Sir David Amess would have been delighted to see this day. David, as the whole House well knew, was passionate about animal welfare. One of his great skills, as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, was working cross-party; it was forming coalitions for the common good. I look up at his plaque and across to that of Jo Cox, who also died in the service of this House. She once said that we had more in common. This is a nation of animal lovers and what my hon. Friend has done brilliantly today is to get cross-party support. She has motivated that sense of having more in common across the House to do something that will make animals safer. They cannot speak for themselves; we must do it in their lieu. She has done brilliantly, and she had another win recently on banning zombie knives. I will, if I may, be presumptuous and say that, if David were still with us and somehow my hon. Friend were still the MP, he would be very proud of what she has done today. She is turning out to be an incredibly worthy successor to my great friend and she has come up with an incredibly worthy piece of legislation. I and Members across the House wish her Bill godspeed.

11.23 am

James Wild: I echo what my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) has said about Sir David. Like other Members, I strongly welcome this legislation. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) on her work. I am pleased that her Bill has made it to this stage, with wide-ranging support in North West Norfolk and, obviously, across the country.

The Bill introduces new criminal offences in relation to the taking or detaining of a dog or cat from the lawful control of any person. As I mentioned in an intervention, I declare an interest as the owner of a cat, Hetty, and I pay tribute again to the Cat Protection League for its successful campaign, which I supported, to ensure that cats are in the Bill, in clause 2, along with dogs.

Someone found guilty of abducting a dog or a cat under these new offences will be liable to a maximum of five years imprisonment, a fine, or both, which is a significant step forward and aligns with animal cruelty offences covered by the Animal Welfare Act 2006. I am pleased that the Bill includes an enabling power to allow these provisions to be extended to other animals commonly kept as pets—a bid has been made for tortoises already in the debate.

Pets are stolen for many reasons: because of the breakdown of relationships, or for breeding, resale, extortion or even dog fighting. Those thefts have a traumatic

effect on the owners and the pets, so it is right that pet theft is tackled through the creation of specific offences. The origins of the Bill are in the work of the pet theft taskforce, which recommended the creation of the specific offence of pet abduction, which is being implemented through this legislation, because the Theft Act itself was not proving effective.

There has been discussion during the debate about the scale of the problem. The taskforce concluded that reliable data on pet theft was limited. The most accurate figures that I could find for my area, Norfolk, was through an FOI response from Norfolk police, which showed that, between 2019 and 2023, 40 cats and 85 dogs were recorded as stolen. Overall, Battersea reports around 1,300 dog thefts and nearly 400 cat thefts in 2022. That is likely to be significantly underreported, for obvious reasons. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West mentioned, it is about the individual cases; there do not need to be tens of thousands of cases for this to be important legislation. However, I welcome the Bill's intention to improve the recording and monitoring of these offences.

When we legislate and pass important powers such as these, it is important that they come into effect rapidly, so I welcome the amendment that my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) secured in Committee, which set a date for the legislation to come into effect three months after Royal Assent.

In 2019, the manifesto that I was proud to stand on committed to improving animal welfare standards, and this Bill delivers on that commitment. As a nation of animal lovers with a proud history of championing and taking action on animal welfare, the Government have already passed a host of measures, including CCTV becoming mandatory in slaughterhouses, compulsory microchipping and tougher sentences for animal cruelty.

To conclude, around a third of households own a dog, and a quarter of households have a cat. We need to protect these family members, and this legislation does just that. I therefore commend my hon. Friend for her hard work in bringing the Bill forward, and I look forward to supporting it through its final stages.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

11.27 am

Daniel Zeichner: Let me reiterate how strongly we in Labour support these measures. I again thank the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) for bringing the Bill forward. I also echo her comments, and those of others, about Sir David Amess. I think he absolutely would have been thrilled to see this legislation going forward today. I would also echo the hon. Lady's comments about the many animal welfare charities that work so hard on this and provide such excellent briefings. Again, I think they too will be very pleased to see the legislation going forward.

As has been said, we are a nation of animal lovers. Pets are very much a cherished part of our families. We know that companion animals are sentient beings who can experience pain, fear and distress, just as we can, and we can all imagine—some Members have spoken passionately about it today—the heartbreak that is experienced by any pet owner when their beloved animal is abducted.

Yet—we talked about the numbers earlier—the Kennel Club estimated that there were 2,355 cases of dog theft in 2020, amounting to approximately 196 dogs stolen every month. As we have heard, cats are also increasingly victims of this crime, with a report by Pet Theft Awareness finding that, in 2021, police recorded a 40% increase, and a quadrupling since 2015.

As we have heard throughout this process, the law, as it currently stands, is ill-equipped to deal with the problem. Under the Theft Act 1968, pets are wrongly treated as inanimate objects. Their value is diminished to that of physical property, like a TV or a toaster, and that cannot be allowed to continue. That is why the pet theft taskforce recommended in 2021 that a new offence of pet abduction be created—a new kind of offence that would put the emphasis on the welfare of the animal abducted and pay due regard to their status as sentient beings.

That is what the Bill does, with those two new criminal offences of dog abduction and cat abduction attracting up to five years imprisonment, a fine, or both, to deter those who are looking to exploit animals for financial gain by stealing them from their owners and selling them, or using them for breeding. Through the creation of those specific offences, pet owners will now have a clear legal framework by which they can ensure that their cases are actively investigated. Creating those specific offences will also require police to collate better data, allowing any patterns emerging to be properly analysed. Collating more accurate data will help to formulate the best prevention strategies.

I am delighted that we have managed to ensure that cats are covered as well as dogs. With compulsory microchipping, it should soon be much easier for anyone attempting to ascertain whether a cat is owned or lost to establish those details. I am also pleased that there is an enabling power, so that the appropriate national authorities may create pet abduction offences in respect of more species of animal where there is significant evidence of incidents involving the unlawful taking or detaining of animals of that species, or a significant increase in the number of such incidents. I note in passing that the amendment is a sensible, simple future-proofing provision, like the amendment we proposed to the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill, which went through this House earlier this year, but which the Government chose to reject.

Although we welcome the Bill, the Government have fallen far short of the lofty claims on animal welfare that they trumpeted at the last election. There has been none of the promised action to stop British farmers being undercut by low-welfare imports—a huge issue for farmers, consumers and animal welfare, which the Government have ignored. Indeed, when I challenged the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's questions this week, he actually cited some of the trade deals as things to be proud of—quite incredible, given the damage we know they will do. There has been no implementation of promised regulations banning electric shock collars for cats and dogs, no sign of the promised consultation on banning snares, and no action on banning hunting trophy imports, which is why last month another private Member's Bill was before the House, this one promoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), seeking to do exactly what the Government promised in their 2019 manifesto.

I could go on—you will not want me to, Madam Deputy Speaker—but so many promises made by the Government in their 2019 manifesto and their 2021 action plan for animals have been abandoned for no good reason, but only to avoid more splits in an already divided Conservative party. Labour believes in introducing the strongest possible legal protection for animals that depend entirely on us. I am proud that it was a Labour Government who brought in the landmark Animal Welfare Act 2006—still this nation’s leading piece of animal welfare legislation. I am proud that it was a Labour Government who banned cosmetic testing on animals, ended fur farming and stopped the hunting of wild mammals with dogs. If we are fortunate enough to form the next Government, we will advance that proud legacy by promoting the highest standards of animal welfare, not only for cats and dogs but for all animals. In the meantime, we will continue to support private Members’ Bills, including this one.

11.32 am

Robbie Moore: I am pleased to speak again on this important Bill. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) for expertly guiding the Bill through the House. She has been a passionate advocate of measures to improve animal welfare, and I congratulate her on introducing this important piece of legislation. Given how strongly the late Sir David Amess championed animal welfare causes, it is especially poignant that it is my hon. Friend who has championed this Bill. Sir David expressed the hope that this place would come together to enable animal welfare Bills to get on to the statute book quickly, and I think he would have been delighted to see this Bill get this far.

To say that we are a nation of pet and animal lovers is an understatement. More than half of all adults own at least one pet. Cats and dogs are the firm favourites, with at least 29% and 24% of adults owning a dog or cat respectively. Whether it is Joe or Pip, the sheepdogs who help me on my farm, or Harvey the cat, who belongs to Max in my team, I assure the House that my team and I are also animal lovers. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) is right to say how important the Bill is, alongside referencing how beautiful his constituency is for dog walkers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) is another strong animal lover, and I shall have to read his comments in *Hansard* about the various pets he has owed. I am pleased to see that he too welcomes the Bill, as does my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), who I know has worked closely with Cats Protection to ensure that the Bill works its way through this House. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) for, quite rightly, mentioning our right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who has championed the Bill. I am pleased to hear that Twiglet was reunited with its owner. The coronavirus pandemic in 2020 led to many households deciding to buy or adopt new pets in their homes, many for the first time. Those pets helped to provide owners with emotional support during those difficult times. As we have heard, it was in that period that there were concerns about increases in pet theft. The Government’s response was to set up the pet theft taskforce. The Bill builds on the work done by the pet

theft taskforce in 2021. It acts on one of its key recommendations—to deliver a pet abduction offence—and it helps to improve the recording of unlawful taking of cats and dogs.

In 2021, the Government made a commitment to crack down on pet theft in our action plan on animal welfare. Our support for the Bill demonstrates that commitment. We further strengthened the Bill by accepting the amendment from my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) in Committee, which added a commencement date for England. We have said it before and I will say it again: the unlawful taking of a pet is an abhorrent crime, and it is right that the perpetrators are brought to justice. The Bill recognises that. We have given the Bill a thorough review, not only on Report but through all its stages. I cannot thank right hon. and hon. Members enough for their engagement and support. I am delighted with the support of Members of the House, and I look forward to seeing the Bill on the statute book very soon.

11.36 am

Anna Firth: With the leave of the House, I thank everyone here for their contributions to the debate, and I extend that thanks to Members who are unable to be here but who contributed to past debates. In particular, I thank those who attended Second Reading and/or Committee stage, including the hon. Members for West Ham (Ms Brown), for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for Bootle (Peter Dowd), for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather); my right hon. Friends the Members for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey); my right hon. and learned Friends the Members for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) and for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland); and my hon. Friends the Members for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), for Bury North (James Daly), for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson), for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and for West Dorset (Chris Loder)—and I of course thank my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson). It really has been a huge cross-party effort.

I would like to echo the thanks to those who have spoken today. It has been wonderful to hear many of the points that we talked about at length on Second Reading refreshed, echoed and underlined so ably. To my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), I give my regards to Magic and Ninja. I thank him for reminding us again of “Six Dinner Sid” and the beauty of his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), who is such an able advocate for cats, reminded us of the figures from Cats Protection.

I thank my hon. Friend—I hope I can pronounce the constituency correctly—the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—*[Interruption.]* Almost. I thank her for speaking so movingly on Report about cats and their sentience, and her experience with her kitten. It will stay with me for a long time. My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington is such a true animal lover and has backed the Bill right from the beginning. With uncharacteristic modesty, he did not mention Clemmie, Peppy and Ebony today, but please send my regards to them.

Finally, I thank very much my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) for coming today and for everything he said, including the wonderful tribute to my predecessor. I cannot help but think of the saying that people sometimes become like their pets. He mentioned that he had a dachshund called Tiger, and the way he champions his causes in this place brings that magnificent beast to mind.

Mr Francois: Is my hon. Friend saying I am like him because he was tiger-like or because he was small?

Anna Firth: I was of course being nothing but wholly complimentary. It was about the strength, tenaciousness and effectiveness with which my right hon. Friend makes his points—and that killer blow he so often brings to mind with his advocacy.

Of course, I must thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for his interest in this matter, for campaigning on microchipping and for the progress that we have made on that today. Equally, I thank the Opposition for their support, particularly the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). I think back to all the stages of this brilliant cross-party cause for which he has been with us. In that spirit, I would like to take a photograph to celebrate this groundbreaking legislation leaving the Commons, and I invite everybody who wants to take part to Westminster Hall at 2.40 pm—everybody is absolutely welcome.

I thank the Clerks and the DEFRA officials for their advice, and the excellent team in my office, who have worked so hard to make this happen. Of course, special thanks go to my constituency neighbour and Comptroller of His Majesty's Household, my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), who is also a huge animal lover. Without her advice, we would not have got this and so many other private Members' Bills to this stage so swiftly. She is both the queen and the unsung hero of our sitting Fridays—I am not sure you can be both, but she manages it. I thank Lord Black of Brentwood for making the Bill a truly Essex affair by agreeing to take it through the other place. It will be in an incredibly safe pair of hands. I cannot help but observe that where Southend and Essex lead, the nation so often follows.

Once again, I thank everybody. Animal welfare unites this House. I look forward to the House sending a clear message that the abhorrent crime of pet abduction will not be tolerated and needs to come to an end; pets are so much more than just a piece of personal property. Through the Bill, I hope that that day comes very soon.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Building Societies Act 1986 (Amendment) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

Clause 1

THE FUNDING LIMIT: FUNDS TO BE DISREGARDED

11.42 am

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 2, page 2, line 9, leave out from “(9B)” to end of line 11 and insert

“may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.”

This amendment changes the procedure that applies to an SI containing regulations under new subsection (9B) of section 7 of the Building Societies Act 1986 (inserted by the Bill) so that it is subject to the affirmative procedure.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 1, page 2, line 10, leave out from “to” to end of line 11 and insert “approval by both Houses of Parliament”.

Julie Elliott: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. The variety of Bills is in the strange nature of this place. We are going from the warm and fluffy Bill that we have just discussed, which I am delighted has received its Third Reading, to what is rather a dry Bill—but an important one none the less.

Amendment 2, which stands in my name, changes the procedure that applies to statutory instruments relating to proposed new subsection (9B) to section 7 of the Building Societies Act 1986. They will be subject to the affirmative procedure, rather than to the negative procedure as the Bill currently states. I tabled the amendment after talking to colleagues on both sides of the House. On reflection, it provides for closer scrutiny of the potential changes that could be made via secondary legislation under the Bill. The amendment does not change the immensely positive effect that I believe the Bill will have on the building society sector by bringing it in line with current practices, nor does it change the Bill's aims, which will, in my view, enormously improve opportunities for people to get on the housing ladder. The result of the Bill will be a better landscape for first-time buyers, and the amendment just improves scrutiny.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I rise very much to support amendment 2 in the name of the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott). I am grateful to her for effectively taking forward my amendment 1, which we were told was defective because, although it would achieve exactly the same purpose, it does not use the normal wording that Government drafters like.

After some discussion, it was agreed by the hon. Lady and the Minister that it was sensible to use the affirmative procedure in relation to these delegated powers, and that affirmative procedure is now reflected in amendment 2. It could have been reflected in amendment 1, but what is important is the substance of the matter. These are potentially very significant changes that could be made, and if they are to be made, it is important that they are open to proper scrutiny.

As we know, the negative procedure does not really enable proper scrutiny. As an example, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will recall that legislation was brought forward at the end of last year extending the breeds covered by the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 to include dogs of the XL bully type. I tabled an early-day motion to try to amend that. That early-day motion was on the Order Paper, but it was never accepted or debated, meaning that that change, which affected hundreds of thousands of dogs and their owners, was made without any proper scrutiny in Parliament. That is why it is important to have the affirmative procedure where possible, and I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for having brought forward this amendment, which I support.

Amendment 2 agreed to.

Third Reading

11.46 am

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It is a pleasure to bring this Bill back for further debate, as it now exists in an amended form. It is a key moment for a Bill that is important to the building society sector, and I must thank all colleagues from both sides of the House who have taken part as the Bill has gone through its various stages—they have been so supportive of the Bill. I am going to keep my remarks short so that if other Members wish to speak, they can do so, and to try to make sure that the Bill's progress is as smooth as possible.

The Building Societies Act 1986 (Amendment) Bill will help level the playing field between building societies and banks, and will support building societies to be able to lend more money in a safe and secure way. To trade as a building society, the Building Societies Act 1986 requires the company to obtain a minimum of 50% of funding from its members—what is known as the wholesale funding limit. This Bill does not change that, and it does not dilute the unique ownership model of building societies. The fundamental nature of a building society—being run in the interests of its members—is not changed by the Bill; in fact, that is what makes the sector so special.

What the Bill does is disregard the following from the 50% wholesale funding limit: Bank of England liquidity insurance facilities, debt instruments raised to meet the minimum regulatory requirement for own funds and eligible liabilities requirements, and sums received under sale and repurchase agreements with a view to complying with Prudential Regulation Authority rules. This means that in times of national economic crisis, building societies will have more options within their gift for remaining comfortably solvent, and will therefore continue to serve in their members' interests. The Bill is designed to allow future Governments to respond to the financial landscape of the day. That is why it does not specifically define funds, but instead defers the specification of funds to a later date through secondary legislation passed in this House. All the responses from the sector to the Government's 2021 consultation on this issue, in advance of the Edinburgh reforms, were positive. Those reforms make the sector more robust.

The Bill also seeks to modernise the sector. It amends the 1986 Act to explicitly allow the option of real-time virtual member participation, bringing the sector in line

with the requirements that the Companies Act 2006 places on businesses. It also enables the Treasury to introduce more flexibility for societies in relation to common sales and the execution of documents, in line with companies law.

The Bill is important because it would achieve a great deal in a very succinct manner, allowing the sector to operate on a more level playing field with banks. This is positive for a number of reasons, but especially in view of the sector's support for first-time buyers. More than half building society lending goes to first-time buyers, and since 2020 building societies just in my region, the north-east and Cumbria, have lent them some £3.4 billion.

This Bill follows a number of previous private Members' Bills—including that of my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick), which received Royal Assent last year—that continue to modernise the sector. I will not restate all the facts that I presented on Second Reading, powerful as they are, but it is important to acknowledge that, while the housing sector has recovered significantly since the record low mortgage approvals during the covid pandemic and has recovered from the acute economic shock caused by the last Conservative Administration, mortgage approvals are currently still below the level that that we saw before the pandemic. That is why I think that a Bill such as this, which gives more choice to the building society sector to operate in the interests of its members, is a good thing.

As I have said, the sector has a strong record in supporting first-time buyers, and given that every £10 million of lending could support an additional 20,000 mortgages, I am proud to be introducing a Bill with the potential not just to support the housing sector and the wider economy, but to allow building societies to help more people on their journey to home ownership. I have spoken to many constituents in Sunderland who are struggling to get on to the housing ladder—young couples and families who just want the chance to have a place that is theirs and in which they can feel comfortable, away from a volatile and often unfair rental market. The Government's failure to reform the sector is a debate to be had elsewhere on another day, but I expect this Bill to do more to support a sector that often goes above and beyond to support its members, and to help people get on to the housing ladder and secure a future for themselves. Its passing would be a landmark moment for the sector, and I look forward to seeing the positive effects that it would bring.

11.52 am

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on presenting the Bill and bringing it this far. Having presented a private Member's Bill myself, I know all about the joy, and the ups and downs, of the process.

Building societies are financial institutions with the principal purpose of providing residential mortgages, and are funded substantially by their members. I have seen at first hand how their membership system brings people together, and gives many a shared sense of interest and purpose. Darlington—this will come as no surprise—is home to Darlington Building Society, which has been serving the people of Darlington and the surrounding area since 1856. Its commitment to our

[Peter Gibson]

community is second to none; indeed, only last night at the Tees Business Awards event it walked away with the Community Champion award, which recognises its contribution to our community. While many high streets are seeing the loss of financial institutions, just a few months ago the Minister himself opened a new branch of Darlington Building Society in High Row.

Darlington is also the birthplace of the railways—bear with me here—and some years ago Darlington Building Society commissioned a children’s book by Peter Barron, the former editor of *The Northern Echo*, to tell the story of Darly the engine. As we approach the 200th anniversary of the railways—a very big year for us—the building society, in collaboration with the west end composer Stuart Brayson and Darlington Operatic Society, is turning the story of Darly into a musical, which will premier in September next year. I am proud to represent a town with such a strong track record of supporting our community.

The Bill is about putting building societies such as Darlington Building Society on a more level playing field with banks, in relation to their capital raising and corporate governance requirements, so that they can compete more effectively in the financial services sector and better support their members. It will help to deliver key asks from the sector itself. I welcome the provisions in the Bill, which largely mirror proposals that the Government consulted on during 2022, and I welcome that both the Government and the building society sector are supporting it. Indeed, Andrew Craddock, chief executive officer of Darlington Building Society, has also voiced his support stating:

“Darlington Building Society supports the proposed reforms to the Building Societies Act. The modernisation will cut archaic red tape by removing outdated corporate governance requirements, which building societies face but banks don’t.”

As a vital part of our financial framework, and with a deep-rooted interest in communities in Darlington, I believe the Bill will help building societies to survive and thrive. It is right that we do all we can to ensure that businesses flourish, so the cutting of red tape is welcome, as is the removing of outdated, bureaucratic governance systems that are not faced by big banks.

To conclude, I welcome the Bill as a way of ensuring that building societies are embraced and enabled to do business with fewer hurdles and red tape. It sorts out certain questions about funding, and it levels the playing field. I am pleased to support the Bill, and trust that the House will give it its full support.

11.56 am

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Every day is a school day, and I am delighted to learn about Darly the engine. I am equally excited about the forthcoming musical, and it is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson). I thank the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) for her efforts in getting the Bill through its initial stages. It is a Bill we can all get behind because it benefits our constituents, and I am pleased to give it my backing. At the back end of 2021, the Government ran a consultation on amendments that could improve the Building Societies Act 1986. The responses were pretty positive, and I am glad that the Bill reflects many of them.

Building societies play a unique role in the UK economy, serving around 25 million people and going back nearly a quarter of a century, particularly in Darlington. In my constituency, I was pleased to visit a branch of Nationwide Building Society late last year, to receive assurances that it was going to stay open—I am happy to place that on the record in this place—but more to see the impact that it has in the community. It is more than just banking services. People go in there for a chat, or more than a chat. Older members of our community are going in there and having lessons on online banking, how to use an iPad, and receiving advice on countering fraud, either online or on the phone. There is a real place in our communities for building societies.

As member-owned financial institutions, building societies are known for delivering excellent services, particularly on mortgage lending, often to a high level of customer satisfaction. For that reason, anything we can do in Parliament to ensure they remain competitive in the financial sector must be a good thing for both our economy and for local communities. The Bill will rightly put building societies on a more even keel with banks. In a broad sense, the Bill is about levelling the playing field in the financial sector, helping building societies to increase their lending capacity. That can be hugely helpful to first-time buyers, and more people on the housing ladder is something that Members across the House can get behind. In Milton Keynes, getting people on the property ladder is a real priority: it is incredibly frustrating that the average cost of a new-build house in Milton Keynes is about £475,000, while the average cost of any house sold in Milton Keynes last year was about £335,000. Access to finance and anything we can do to support that is a key part of any solution.

On the role that building societies play in mortgage-lending services, according to the Building Societies Association, they are responsible for a third of first-time buyer mortgage completions. It stands to reason that if we can increase the fundraising capacity for building societies, we can get even more people on the housing ladder. As clause 1 describes, the proposed changes can get us there.

The Bill is another good example of cross-party collaboration, with colleagues across the House recognising its clear benefits. From both personal experience and engagement with our constituents, Members can attest to the pivotal role that building societies play in our communities. Strengthening building societies is bound to have a positive economic consequence across the board. I look forward to seeing the Bill progress into law.

12 noon

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Con): I place on record my thanks to the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) for bringing a pragmatic and important Bill to the House, and I give it my full support today. As always, she works assiduously in making lives better for people across the United Kingdom and in her constituency, and she works in an extremely positive manner across parties to achieve her aims, and I thank her for that, too.

As others have mentioned, building societies are extremely important to the fabric of the financial institutions in our constituencies. I make regular visits to the Nationwide

Building Society branch in East Kilbride, as I did just a few months ago. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), I was reassured to find out that my local branch had no plans to close and was thriving in the community. Many people were coming in to speak and to chat, as well as for socialisation and reassurance regarding finance and debt and how to engage with the new digital banking sector. The reach-out into the community is second to none.

I was impressed by that, particularly as I have had terrible news from East Kilbride just this week that the Royal Bank of Scotland is closing its branch there. That follows on from the bad news just last month that the Bank of Scotland is closing in Strathaven and Lesmahagow, leaving those communities without essential banking, particularly as those branches are the last banks in those local communities. It is distressing for the residents. I am pleased to be able to raise their concerns today and to praise Nationwide for the work it is doing and its assurance that it wants to be at the heart of our community for the foreseeable future.

I declare a personal interest, as my first mortgage was with that building society. I did not know an awful lot about finance or mortgages at the time, but Nationwide took the time to go through the different options with me, and I felt reassured by the manager. Having that face-to-face contact is so important. For first-time buyers who are not sure about the steps to take in getting their first mortgage—it is such a pivotal part of our life journey—these institutions play such an important role in our local communities.

I also place on record my thanks for the work that Nationwide is doing on mental health. I am part of the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, chaired by Martin Lewis. We know that there is a huge link between mental health and finance. Debt, in particular, correlates with people's mental health spiralling downwards, and we need to make sure we address those issues through all our banking institutions.

As has already been said, this is an important Bill, which places building societies on par with banks for corporate governance and solvency, and will keep them competitive and at the heart of our communities for the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

12.4 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott). As we all know, it is sheer luck to come top of the private Member's Bill ballot, but drafting a Bill that generates strong cross-party support and becomes law is the result of tremendous hard work. This is a classic private Member's Bill that, as she suggested, might look technical in nature but will make a huge difference to those people affected. The Bill is also true to Labour and Co-operative values, and we in the Labour party are delighted to support it.

My hon. Friend has worked painstakingly over many months to draft and develop the Bill, engaging with Treasury civil servants and Ministers. She has also worked closely with Labour's sister party, the Co-operative party, and the wider mutual sector, including the Building Societies Association and Nationwide. We have heard

excellent contributions in the debate that have highlighted the importance of the sector and the positive impact that the Bill will have for communities and families, not least in the context of bank branch closures across the country.

Building societies and mutuals have a long and proud tradition of supporting working people in accessing affordable finance. Today, the sector continues to play a crucial role in promoting financial responsibility and resilience among its members. Building societies also enable families to get on the housing ladder. As we have heard, they direct a significant proportion of their lending to first-time buyers, and the Bill could unlock significant additional lending capacity from building societies, supporting more working people to become homeowners, not least in my constituency of Bristol North West, where so many people are struggling to buy their first home.

Since the Bill first came before the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) has launched the Labour party's financial services review. That landmark review outlines Labour's plan to work hand in hand with businesses and the financial services sector to drive economic prosperity. It also reaffirms what the first priority will be of a Labour Government: to provide a secure platform for growth, which builds on the strengths of our economy and gives citizens across the UK financial stability. To deliver on those priorities, a key aspect of the review is Labour's commitment that the next Labour Government will aim to double the size of the co-operative and mutual financial services sector under. The Bill is an important step towards achieving that aim, as it will help to level the playing field for banks and building societies.

While Labour strongly welcomes the measures in the Bill, we believe that further legislation is necessary to deliver on our ambitions and ensure benefits for communities across the country. That is why our review set out measures that will help to underpin rapid mutual financial services growth, including new requirements on regulators and policymakers to: consider properly the needs of mutuals and actively reduce barriers to their growth; support credit unions in offering more products; and strengthen the small and medium-sized enterprises bank referral scheme, in order to support businesses in securing financial resources from co-operatives and mutuals.

Labour's ambition, working together with the Co-operative party and the wider co-operative and mutual sector, is clear: to support the sector, so that the vital contribution that it makes to our economy can go further and drive much needed growth in the future. Labour recognises that the Bill is an important step forward, and we are delighted to give it our full support. May I once again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central on her excellent work?

12.8 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): Let me first congratulate the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on reaching the Third Reading of her important Bill, which will help to ensure the future growth and success of the building society sector. She is a strong advocate for the sector, and has introduced a Bill that will help it to grow and compete with retail banks, so that it can continue to provide vital diversity to the UK financial services sector.

[*Gareth Davies*]

I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), and for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), and especially my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), who I was delighted to join back in November to open the Darlington Building Society in the middle of town. I saw from him and the employees just how impactful they are in his community, and I am sure that they will go from strength to strength.

Peter Gibson: While the Minister is on his feet, I wonder whether he could outline to the House the gift he received from Robin Blair, our veteran fruiterer and vegetable trader in our historic market hall, who joined him on that opening day.

Gareth Davies: I was not expecting an intervention on that of all subjects, but I did enjoy the satsumas that were provided by the very nice gentleman, who I understand is an institution in the town of Darlington.

As I was saying, building societies are important to all our communities, not least mine in Grantham and Bourne. In Grantham I have the Nationwide Building Society, the Nottingham Building Society and the Melton Mowbray Building Society, a new branch of which is opening in Bourne in April.

Today I wish to outline a few things: first, the Government's support for the mutuals sector; secondly, the importance of mutuals to our overall financial services sector; and, finally, how this Bill will further support the future growth and success of mutuals. The Government want to promote the growth of mutuals, which make a vital contribution to the UK economy. As outlined in the mutuals prospectus, there are over 9,000 mutuals operating throughout the country, with a combined annual turnover of some £88 billion in 2022, which equates to 3.5% of UK GDP. However, beyond their vital financial contribution to the UK economy, mutuals play an important role in supporting people across the country. Their unique ownership model means that these businesses are rooted in their local communities, and working to make society better.

It is for those reasons that the Government are committed to supporting the growth and success of the mutual sector. For example, last summer the Government amended the Credit Unions Act 1979 so that credit unions in Great Britain can offer a greater range of products and services. Moreover, as the hon. Member for Sunderland Central said, last year the Government supported the private Member's Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick), which achieved Royal Assent in June 2023. The Co-operatives, Mutuals and Friendly Societies Act 2023 will allow the Treasury to pursue further secondary legislation to give co-operatives, mutual insurers and friendly societies greater flexibility in deciding what to do with their surplus capital and the restrictions on their assets. The Government continue to develop a modern and supportive business environment for mutuals. As part of that, we have asked the Law Commission to conduct reviews of the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 and the Friendly Societies Act 1992.

Building societies are perhaps one of the best-known types of mutuals. There are 42 building societies operating throughout the country, providing mortgage and savings

products to around 26 million members. They play an essential role in supporting their members in building savings habits and buying their own home, as the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) outlined. That cause is supported by Members from across the House, but particularly by the hon. Member for Sunderland Central, who has consistently championed the importance of supporting first-time buyers—not just in her constituency, but across the country.

Building societies are especially well represented in communities outside the south-east. For example, the Melton Mowbray Building Society provides vital support in all areas neighbouring my constituency, and I note that the Newcastle Building Society has a significant presence in the constituency of hon. Member for Sunderland Central. It builds on a 160-year history, and its amazing commitment to its members in the communities in which it operates remains strong. It has partnered with the citizens advice fund to provide expert advice to members, answering questions on a variety of important issues. She also has the Yorkshire Building Society in her constituency, which has done great work on financial literacy through its Money Minds programme.

It is clear that building societies contribute to the wellbeing of communities throughout our country, including in the constituency of the hon. Member for Sunderland Central. The Government are fully supportive of this private Member's Bill, which will help the sector to compete more effectively with retail banks, so that building societies can continue to work.

This Bill is about enabling building societies to grow and compete with retail banks. We are achieving that by updating the legislation in three short ways. First, the Bill excludes three specified sources of funding from the 50% wholesale funding limit for building societies. This will provide them with greater flexibility in raising additional wholesale funding, while still operating within the mutual model. The detail of the funds will be further specified by the Treasury through secondary legislation in due course. Furthermore, the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Sunderland Central means that the statutory instruments will be subject to the affirmative procedure, allowing for greater parliamentary scrutiny; that comes on the back of very constructive work from across the House. The amendment does not change the policy outcome of the Bill in any way, but simply amends the parliamentary procedure that will be followed when subsequent regulations are made.

Secondly, the Bill allows for the option of real-time virtual participation at building society meetings. This will improve meeting accessibility and promote wider membership engagement, should the members of any building society choose to permit virtual participation under their rules.

Finally, the Bill will provide His Majesty's Treasury with the power to further align constitutional provisions. Specifically, it will align provisions in part 2 of the Building Societies Act 1986 on common seals and the execution of documents with modifications made to company law. This will remove outdated and burdensome legislative requirements, and update the 1986 Act, in line with modernisations made to company law.

In conclusion, the Government fully support the hon. Lady's Bill. We recognise the importance of the building society sector, which supports people and communities across the country. I extend my thanks to the hon. Lady

for introducing the Bill and for progressing it to Third Reading. She can be assured that the Government share the vision set out in the Bill for supporting the future growth and prosperity of the building society sector.

12.16 pm

Julie Elliott: With the leave of the House, I would like to thank all Members who contributed at various stages of the Bill. On Second Reading, I had not expected the political history lesson we had from Members on both sides of the Chamber, but it was quite entertaining. It is an honour to have a debate on a Bill on which everybody agrees; everybody can see the very tangible benefits it will have for all our constituents.

It has taken a lot of work from a lot of people to get to this point. I thank not only colleagues who have taken part at every stage, but Treasury officials, who have been extremely helpful; the Clerks, whose advice, support and guidance is, as always in this place, invaluable; the Whips; the Building Societies Association; and our sister party, the Co-operative party. They have all contributed, and helped with advice and support, as I have taken the Bill through the House. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Zoological Society of London (Leases) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

12.19 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call Sir Christopher Chope to move amendment 1.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Not moved, sir.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you. Consideration is complete. [*Interruption.*] I understand that King's consent will need to be signified for Third Reading.

Sir Christopher Chope: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can we move on to the next business, please?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Technically, no—not at this moment.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. At what point can we make speeches on the Bill?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Once the Third Reading debate has commenced.

Third Reading

King's consent signified.

12.20 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

In answer to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who had an amendment down on the amendment paper, may I just say that that was the subject of a great deal of discussion and debate between the Ministry, the sponsors and myself?

Dr Coffey: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch for having, in effect, withdrawn his amendment, following various discussions. Will my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) explain why it is important and timely that we ensure the Bill receives its Third Reading today and progresses to the other place?

Bob Blackman: Let me explain the situation with the length of lease, which is the point of contention. It was the subject of discussion and debate with the Ministry. The Minister's original proposal was for a 100-year lease extension, which would not have allowed the Zoological Society of London to get the investment required to lengthen the lease and renovate the site of London zoo. It has literally had its big animals moved up to Whipsnade zoo so that they can roam freely, as we would all like. That means the cages in which they were kept are now redundant and need to be completely removed, with modern facilities provided. As a result, we have agreed the compromise at 150 years.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): For clarity, will my hon. Friend outline when the ZSL's current lease commenced?

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, but I do not have that detail to hand. What is important is that the lease is ongoing and therefore running out. In respect of the Crown Estate's

[Bob Blackman]

provision, London zoo was unfortunately left out when we did the extension to Kew gardens, so this Bill seeks to be in keeping with the provision for Kew gardens, as for other parts of the Crown Estate. That is the crucial element.

It has been a privilege to take this Bill—my third private Member's Bill—through Parliament. Since visiting the zoo in January 2023, I have worked with a range of people to get to this stage, without whom it would not have been possible. The zoo is situated in Regent's Park and is home to more than 14,000 animals. It is a true London landmark. If colleagues have not visited, I recommend it as an abundantly enjoyable, interesting and captivating day out, with the added bonus of being only a short tube journey from this place. Every year, tourists from London and the wider UK, and indeed from around the globe, visit the zoo, which contributes to the UK's wider economy, as visitors are more likely to spend money in the surrounding areas, particularly as the zoo is only a stone's throw from many of London's cultural hotspots.

Peter Gibson: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on an important topic. That visitor economy is essential to all parts of our country, but it is really important to London. Does he know how many international visitors travel to visit the zoo each year?

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I will come to that point in a few moments. The key point is that the zoo contributes £24 million to the local economy, as well as making the income it needs to maintain its research and keeps threatened species safe. Community outreach projects are instrumental in the philosophy of the zoo. On my visit, I was very impressed by the new garden area, where volunteers with complex needs can spend the day gardening and visiting the animals for much-needed respite and wellbeing.

The zoo has also recently implemented a community access scheme to enable those on income support and other benefits to visit for as little as £3. In the recent February half-term, 50,000 visits were facilitated through that scheme. It is essential that everyone, regardless of where they live, has access to nature and outdoor space. I am therefore pleased that ZSL is committed to providing access to those who need the extra help so that no one is left out.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The reputation of the wider zoo sector has come in for a bit of examination in recent decades, and it has been criticised, perhaps correctly, for enclosures that were too small, and concerns were raised that we were starting to look at animals as objects for entertainment, rather than considering the preservation of rare species. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend expanded a little on the steps that this zoo has taken to move away from the outdated approaches of zoological societies in the past and to lead the fight to retain really rare species for reintroduction in the wild.

Bob Blackman: Clearly, the decision has been made to move the larger animals to Whipsnade zoo, which ZSL also runs, so that they have the space they need to

roam in and feel more like they are in the wild, while still being protected. That means those facilities at London zoo are now redundant and—this is precisely the reason for the Bill—need to be replaced with modern facilities for other protected species, and so that visitors can see them in suitable accommodation. Those species obviously do not need to roam, but they will be given modern facilities. I encourage other zoos across the country, and indeed across the world, to consider the same thing.

Jerome Mayhew: My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. This brings me to the zoo's built structures. The zoo has been in that location for well over 100 years—perhaps it is 200 years—and some of the structures that I saw when I visited as a child are of considerable architectural merit, and perhaps historic merit. What steps is the zoo taking to ensure that its structures are appropriate for modern usage and that its listed buildings, if there are any, are protected and that the architectural merit of the historical Victorian enclosures is recognised?

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Clearly, many of these structures are protected, which is one reason why it is so expensive to bring them up to modern standards while retaining the original architecture. If it were a simple case of demolishing and putting in new facilities, there would be less cost. That is why a very large investment is required, which the zoo cannot raise from its own resources; it has to borrow the money, and as a result it needs a lease that is long enough for investors to know that the revenue will come in from visitors and other attractions and that they will recover their funds. This is why the Bill is so vital for safeguarding London zoo for the future.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): My hon. Friend will be well aware that ZSL has highlighted that the existing lease conditions are limiting its ability to fundraise, to create partnerships, to expand its support programmes and, of course, to invest in that vital renovation of the physical infrastructure. Can he confirm that this law would not automatically extend the lease to 150 years in and of itself, but would allow the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to offer this lease, so it is not automatic but a step in the right direction to enable that support for the zoo?

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. That is what we hope to hear from the Minister later on. Clearly, we are in a position whereby we are making the offer, but we will have to see about that negotiation to ensure that there is suitable protection so that, were such terrible events to occur such that ZSL should no longer have the lease, it would be removed. However, it has operated very successfully on the site for many years, so I do not think that is likely.

Moving on, the educational offerings provide a critical supplement to classroom working for many children. In fact, many of us will have had the opportunity to visit the school as children. The workshops, which are specifically tailored to cater for all age groups and learning needs, educate children on such hugely important topics as wildlife conservation, climate change and the impact of pollution.

The zoo's research has perhaps benefited animals the most, shaping the future of many previously endangered species. Many animals at risk of extinction have participated in the zoo's breeding programme to ensure that they are saved for future generations. In 2021-22 alone, £17.4 million was spent on conservation science and field conservation programmes, with £38.5 million spent on conservation, animal care, breeding programmes and conservation translocations. I am pleased that, in the coming months, the zoo will be returning the previously endangered Guam kingfisher back into the wild, and only recently, over the Easter break, three endangered Asiatic lion cubs were born at the zoo to doting parents—seven-year-old mum Arya, and 14-year-old dad Bhanu.

The animals do not recognise working hours, annual leave or bank holidays; they need supervision and care 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to ensure that they are fed and cared for whenever needed. That emphasises the need for the dedicated and thorough programme that the zoo operates on. It is profoundly clear that the zoo is an integral part of society, and thus we must protect its heritage and position. I am pleased that we have made it to Third Reading, and I am confident that, hopefully on receiving Royal Assent, the future of the zoo will be much more stable, and a brighter, increasingly attractive opportunity for investment purposes.

Jerome Mayhew: Looking at the wording of the Bill, there is a question mark over its drafting, and I would be grateful if my hon. Friend could explain it to me. We can see in clause 1 that the Bill is

“in relation to certain land in Regent's Park”,

with the potential to substitute “150 years” for “60 years”. It is very specific; the potential powers are in relation to certain lands and leases relating to Regent's Park in London. Yet clause 2(1) states:

“This Act extends to England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.”

Can my hon. Friend clarify that for me? What is the need for the extension to the jurisdictions of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland when the lease is particular to Regent's Park in London?

Bob Blackman: Clearly, we are looking at a lease and leasehold law. That is the reason for clarifying that particular issue in that particular way.

I would like to thank Matthew Gould, the chief executive officer for ZSL. Matthew and I have crossed paths on several occasions prior to his appointments to his previous positions as the Government's first director general for digital and media at DCMS and as Britain's ambassador to Israel. Therefore, it feels fitting to have come full circle and to have worked with him on this Bill over the past year. His devotion to the welfare and happiness of the zoo's animals is steadfast, with a commitment to the research and development of species across the globe and to tackling the world's challenges, including the current biodiversity crisis.

My next thanks go to Vicky Godwin, senior public affairs officer for the zoo. Vicky has been on hand throughout the progress of the Bill, facilitating the discussions between the Department, my office and ZSL. She has also come in to provide support every step of the way, watching the debates at the Bill's various stages.

I am very grateful to my colleagues who helpfully sat on the Bill Committee and allowed the Bill to pass unanimously with no amendments. It was super to hear the support for London zoo from so many highly respected Members from both in and outside London. Some—such as a previous employee, my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin), who was a keeper at London zoo in his distant past—had a more vested interest. My hon. Friend's personal experiences that he shared in Committee were interesting, to put it mildly.

I also thank the Clerks in the Public Bill Office who bore with us through the process, informing my office on procedure and developments. I particularly thank them for their patience during the mad scramble to ensure that we had enough Members serving on the Committee ahead of the deadline. They often get overlooked in this place, but their work is crucial to ensuring the proceedings of the Chamber run smoothly, and we are all very grateful for all that they do.

The Minister and officials in her Department have supported the Bill throughout, for which I am exceptionally grateful. Their advice and assistance with drafting the Bill have been invaluable—indeed, they redrafted our original draft. It is great that the Government are supporting this worthy change in the lease, which benefits the zoo, the local area and obviously all the potential visitors. I have no doubt that should the Minister, or indeed any other colleague, wish to visit the zoo, they will be greeted with open arms and met with many friendly faces, both human and animal. I also thank my parliamentary assistant, Hattie Shoosmith. As always, when she drafts these speeches, she misses herself out of the thanks, but I put on record my thanks to her.

I will just remind colleagues about some of the endangered species and particular zoo animals that have been protected as a direct result of this Bill coming to fruition. The first is one of my favourite animals, Guy the gorilla. On Guy Fawkes day in 1947, a very small gorilla arrived at London zoo clutching a tin hot water bottle. At first, he would only respond to French, as he had spent the previous six months in the zoo in Paris. Guy became one of the zoo's best-loved characters—I remember seeing him as a young boy. When sparrows entered his enclosure, he would scoop them up gently and peer at them before letting them go. Tragically, he died of a heart attack after having a tooth extracted in 1978, and his statue is much loved by London zoo's visitors today.

The second is Goldie the eagle. I remember that in 1965, when I was in primary school, Goldie escaped. We became obsessed with Goldie for almost a fortnight; he appeared on TV and in the press, and was cheered wildly—even when mentioned in this place, in the House of Commons. Some 5,000 people caused traffic jams around Regent's Park as he flew from tree to tree. After 11 days and 19 and a half hours, he was finally recaptured and brought back to the zoo.

The only quagga to ever have been photographed alive was at London zoo. There are officially five photos of a quagga, providing the only insight into what a living quagga looked like after the species became extinct in 1883. Thousands of quagga once grazed the plains of southern Africa; today, they provide a reminder of the importance of wildlife conservation.

[Bob Blackman]

Pipaluk, a male polar bear, was born at London zoo on 1 December 1967. He was the only male polar bear cub successfully reared at the zoo. The name Pipaluk, meaning “little one”, was chosen from a list of Inuit names. Pipaluk’s parents, who had arrived from Moscow zoo in 1960 as young cubs, were called Sam and Sally—they were named after the zoo’s bear keeper, Sam Morton, and his fiancée. Pipaluk left London zoo in 1985 when the Mappin terraces, which housed all the bears, were closed, and very sadly died at the age of 22 in a zoo in Poland.

Peter Gibson: My hon. Friend is giving us fantastic stories of the remarkable work that London zoo is doing. Does he have any statistics about the number of animals it has been able to protect and return to the wild through its amazing conservation operations?

Bob Blackman: The reality is that there are 10,000 animals of various species in the zoo. I suspect I would try your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker, were I to list all of them, but I will talk about some of them.

Jumbo the elephant is believed to have been born in 1861. He arrived at the Jardin des Plantes zoo in Paris when he was still very small, and in 1865 he was sent to London zoo. On arrival there, he was in a dreadful condition, but after he was placed in the care of Matthew Scott, a former antelope keeper, Jumbo flourished. He was so famous, he has had a lasting impact on the English language, helping to make “jumbo” a synonym for big. A female African elephant, Alice, arrived a few months after Jumbo, and the two elephants became associated in the public mind. Jumbo was soon trained to give rides and became a great favourite, largely because he had such a good nature. By the early 1880s, he was nearly 11 feet tall. Sadly, Jumbo was killed in a railway accident in Canada in 1885.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I do not wish to appear churlish, and the hon. Gentleman will be fully aware that I have a personal interest in these matters, but it would be helpful if he were to relate the catalogue to the reasons for extending the lease.

Bob Blackman: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will take your remark into account.

The reality is that among the well over 10,000 animals at the zoo are many endangered species that could not be preserved were the zoo to cease operating. If we do not extend the lease, the zoo will not continue. Endangered species there include the Annam leaf turtle, the Asiatic lion, the Lake Oku clawed frog, the mountain chicken, the northern white-cheeked gibbon, the Philippine crocodile, the ring-tailed lemur, the Sumatran tiger, of which there are only 400 left in the world, the Waldrapp ibis, various species of gorilla, all of which are endangered, the white-naped mangabey, the Chinese giant salamander, and finally pangolins.

Jerome Mayhew: I very much hope that the Bill is passed and that by extending the lease we can secure the future of these endangered animals. Were that not to happen, though, what is plan B for the Zoological

Society, for the maintenance of its programmes and, indeed, for the future of the animals its staff currently look after?

Bob Blackman: I have not mentioned the immense zoological research done at the zoo by world-famous scientists. For example, Darwin performed research at London zoo; he might not have come up with the theory of evolution without the zoo. Currently, thousands of scientists at the zoo do brilliant work and conduct wonderful research. I recommend that any colleague interested in zoological research visits the zoo and sees some of the work being done there, and I urge them to recognise that were the zoo not to have visitor attractions that bring in revenue, it would cease to exist. If we do not extend the lease, the zoo will continue to run down, it will not have the investment that it requires, and it will be unable to continue its excellent work. Unless we pass the Bill and it becomes law, the zoo will not be able to raise the money that it needs to do all that wonderful work and preserve endangered species across the world, which will unfortunately become extinct. That is the harsh reality, and that is why the Bill is so important.

Let me end by reminding Members of the vital contribution that London zoo and the Zoological Society of London have made to our world over the last 200 years. As I have said, Charles Darwin conducted many of his studies at London zoo, and without it we would not have the theory of evolution.

Another notable character connected with the zoo is Winnie the Pooh. Lieutenant Harry Colebourn was a member of the Royal Canadian Army Veterinary Corps during the great war, and while travelling across Canada to join his regiment and serve in the war, he bought a female black bear cub in White River, Ontario from a hunter who had killed her mother. Colebourn named the bear Winnie after his then home town, the city of Winnipeg, and when his regiment was sent by train to England in 1914, Winnie accompanied him. She became a pet, and an unofficial mascot to the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade during its time on Salisbury plain. Colebourn was not, however, permitted to take her with him when the brigade was deployed to the battlefields of France. He left her in the keeping of London zoo on 9 December 1914, hoping to return after the war to reclaim her.

Colebourn served heroically during the war, rising to the rank of captain. Although he visited his beloved Winnie when he was on leave from France, he ultimately decided that the zoo was the best place for her to live, and in 1919 he donated her permanently in gratitude for her care. Among the children of London who continued to be smitten by Winnie in the coming years was a young boy called Christopher Robin, who repeatedly begged his father, the author A. A. Milne, to take him to the zoo. He would feed Winnie spoonfuls of condensed milk in between big, furry hugs—and from that came the stories of Winnie-the-Pooh. As we know, the late Queen was a great fan of Winnie-the-Pooh as well.

Peter Gibson: May I ask my hon. Friend whether the zoo has a current royal patron, and if so, who it is?

Bob Blackman: The King is, of course, greatly enamoured of both wildlife and London zoo, and I am therefore delighted that he has given King’s consent to the Bill,

but the actual royal patron—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) is chuntering from a sedentary position. I will take an intervention from him if he will be good enough to make one.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is really a sort of point of order. I do not think it appropriate for anyone presenting a piece of legislation to claim the monarch's support or otherwise. That is not what royal confirmation means.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Obviously we want to ensure that we proceed effectively and properly, and I take his point and will adapt my remarks accordingly.

Sir Christopher Chope: In two years' time it will be the bicentenary of the Zoological Society of London. Are we not being rather churlish in discussing only an extension of the lease? Why do we not let the society have the freehold of London zoo?

Bob Blackman: My hon. Friend and I share the view that leasehold should be abolished completely, with freehold the norm and commonhold in flats. However, the zoo is part of the Crown Estate, so this is a matter for the Crown Estate. If the freehold were to be negotiated between the Crown Estate and the society, that too would be a matter for them, but it goes beyond the scope of the Bill.

Sir Christopher Chope: The Crown Estate has discretion to provide either an extension or a freehold. The Government are enabling those with long leases to acquire freeholds. Why are the Government not ensuring that the zoo can have the freehold? Why is there one standard for Crown Estate property and another standard for private landlords?

Bob Blackman *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. The hon. Gentleman was absolutely correct to say that that goes slightly wider than the scope of the Bill under discussion. I take his point, but that is perhaps a matter for another day.

Bob Blackman: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I take your guidance. I agree with my hon. Friend that that could and should be potentially negotiated. That is, of course, a matter for discussion with the Crown Estate. It may well be that, following the general election and a new Parliament, we might consider taking that forward in a future Bill and a future debate, but for today the debate is about the extension of the lease.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I, along with a number of other Members, have been involved with the Society of Antiquaries' discussions with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about extending the society's lease. I am very pleased that it successfully secured a 999-year lease extension. Was a similar length considered when my hon. Friend was putting together the Bill?

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We started with a provision to extend the lease from its current form to 100 years. The investors who were approached by ZSL to consider whether that

would allow them to do what is required said, "No, this is not enough. It would take a minimum of 150 years." So it is fair to say that, in the negotiations between the Department, ZSL and me, we have come to a compromise of an extension to the lease of 150 years. Were the Department and the Crown Estate so minded, we could look at a 999-year lease extension, but that is what the Bill's sponsors requested and what I am pleased to propose. I hope the House will go along with that proposal and that it can be put into law and come to fruition after the other place has had a look at it. If there is then another suggestion that we go for a much longer lease, that can be the subject of yet another Bill in the new Parliament and we could take that forward, if required. At the moment, it is not required, but as we know 999 years is effectively a freehold.

Jerome Mayhew: If any one of us are homeowners, we will know that periodic renovations are required to refresh a commercial offering or our own homes. It gives me some cause for concern that the Bill is based on the premise of a single renovation of the offer at Regent's Park. My hon. Friend suggests that the full 150-year extension is required to secure the current round of investment. Is it not rather shortsighted to bring forward a Bill that solves only today's problem and is blind to the entirely foreseeable problems that will come in 25, 40 or perhaps 50 years?

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. How long a lease extension will be granted for is obviously a matter for debate. The decision on how much funding is required is a matter for the operators who are considering what they want to do and why they want to do it. Clearly, matters may change in the future, but that is what is required to do the work that is required over a lengthy period. I believe that they have made the right assessment. Things can change, in which case that would lead, I think, to another negotiation and another consideration of what else is required. However, a 150-year lease extension allows substantial investment to be made over a number of years, so as matters change, the investment can be called down, utilised and built upon.

I will end my remarks there. I thank everybody for listening and for their interventions. I look forward to hearing colleagues, including the shadow Minister and my hon. Friend the Minister.

12.55 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a huge pleasure to speak on Third Reading. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on piloting this Bill on a subject that has been a passion of his for some time, and I am hopeful not only that we will give the Bill its Third Reading today, but that it will sail through the other place.

My hon. Friend has set out pretty well the reasons why this matters, but I think it worth adding some points on the strength of London zoo in what it brings to wildlife not just in this country but around the world, and why the extension of the lease matters. I sympathise with concerns about whether we should be looking to change the 1961 Act to allow for a freehold in this situation, but we have to be pragmatic in what we do. My understanding is that the Crown Estate's standard

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

lease for buildings is 150 years and, as a consequence, that is the sensible conclusion that my hon. Friend has put into the Bill. There is good reason for that, as has already been outlined, in terms of the potential not only to generate funds to undertake redevelopment, but to predict the future income necessary for many of the zoo's activities.

One thing that right hon. and hon. Members may not be aware of is that several London zoo buildings have had to be closed. Some have been closed in order then to provide better environments. A good example is the reptile house: it closed in October last year, and a brand new reptile experience was opened over the Easter recess. I must admit that, while bearded dragons may be lovely and glamorous, I am not particularly a fan of snakes, but I have overcome the fear that meant I could not even look at a picture of a snake. Nevertheless, the environment and habitat are absolutely key if those animals are to prosper, and the amount of careful work required is not cheap. Other buildings have simply been closed: London zoo has two listed buildings that need to be maintained to a certain standard, and as we know, the cost of doing so seems ever-increasing.

People should not think that London zoo can carry on as it is. In 1992, the ZSL council actually ordered that London zoo be closed because it was losing money. That would have been devastating for this great city of London, and for the ZSL, given the work that it does not just in this country, but around the world. That is why I am pleased that we have made the progress that we have. Ultimately, London zoo has to generate income in order to ensure that it can continue to function and operate.

On redevelopment, certain buildings have been closed simply because they are not necessarily safe either for the animals or for humans, so it is important that new sources of finance go into London zoo to ensure that the environment for animals is the best it can be, and that it can be a visitor attraction. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will explain that the zoo is the 10th most visited attraction in our great capital, but there has of course been significant investment beyond London. When the elephant house was closed down, for example, an appropriate environment was set up at Whippsnade zoo to reaccommodate them. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs hired the Mappin pavilion last year, when I gave a speech on the progress of the 25-year environment plan. Of course, this is done primarily for the animals, but it has to be attractive so that the organisation can thrive and raise funds.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East talked extensively about the research that is carried out. This is a vital part of zoos. It is only just over 30 years ago that this zoo could have closed. For the sake of global diversity, it is essential that we see our zoos thrive—and all the facilities that go with that and, as I said, the underpinning research.

My hon. Friend referred to the programme on Sumatran tigers, one of the most endangered species in the world. Mr Deputy Speaker, I had the great privilege last year of feeding one of those Sumatran tigers. I have to admit that it was somewhat at arm's length, understandably, and through bars, but it was an amazing experience. We need to recognise that the work that happens in this

country supports the work that is being done around the world, and that is why I shall continue to support any zoo. In particular, it is why I have been so keen to support my hon. Friend's Bill and to make sure that London zoo has an opportunity not only to keep these animals alive and well, but to thrive.

1.1 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on bringing forward this Bill and on the amazing way that he dealt with so many interventions on a range of technicalities that have pushed not only his knowledge, but the knowledge of all of us in respect of London zoo. We know that zoos have changed very much over the years. They are far from being what they once were: some of us would think they were cruel places where animals were kept in conditions that would now be deemed unacceptable. We have a proud record in this country of zoos and safari parks being places of education, protection, conservation and enjoyment.

The London Zoological Society might be a bit of a trek for many from my constituency of Darlington. I think our nearest zoo is at Flamingo Land, near Pickering, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). This debate is an excellent opportunity to highlight to my constituents who are coming to London for whatever reason that they could add London zoo to the list of places that they want to visit.

I know that much of the work that our zoos do, particularly London zoo, is groundbreaking and vital to conservation. They ensure that the children of the future can see animals such as Nelly the elephant, Bilbo the baboon, Fletchie the flamingo and, indeed, Patronella the pangolin, to observe their beauty and learn more about these amazing creatures, but we must ensure that worries about London zoo's lease are put to rest.

While preparing for this debate, it has been quite fascinating to learn that London zoo is leading the way in protecting pangolins, which are the most trafficked animal in the world, with one being poached almost every five minutes. London zoo is a leading partner in their protection, restoration and ecosystems and works alongside those living with these beautiful, shy and critically endangered creatures.

Ben Everitt: The work on pangolins is a great example of the international reach of our precious asset of London zoo. I wonder what the need is for that protection. Why are pangolins so endangered and what is it that we are doing in London and internationally to protect them?

Peter Gibson: I know very little about pangolins, but what I have read in preparation for this debate would indicate that they are trafficked for their scales and meat in the far east.

Dr Coffey: When I attended the convention on international trade in endangered species conference back in 2016, pangolins were the big issue. As my hon. Friend rightly says, people assume that their scales are of benefit, but they are also a delicacy. Pangolins are brilliant at protecting themselves against predators by rolling up into a ball. Unfortunately, that makes them the easiest animal to pick up and poach, and that is why the ongoing work is so critical.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her clarification. It is right that we do much in this place to protect animals, including the dogs and cats that we have done so much good work for already this morning by passing the Pet Abduction Bill. Indeed, through a relatively dry Bill about lease reform and the Crown Estate, we can do something that helps conservation around the world. We must help to ensure that London zoo can continue its good work by amending the Crown Estate Act 1961 and increase the society's lease on that land to 150 years. Then anxieties about its tenure can go away, and the society can continue to be a place of enjoyment, leading the way in all it does. I am pleased to support the Bill.

1.6 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on the progress made on the Bill, which has all our support. Of course we should extend the lease. To echo the point that has been made about London zoo, it is 200 years old—the oldest zoo in the world. It had humble beginnings, I am sure, as a sort of entertainment for the public, and it has become an incredibly important conservation charity of great global importance. While my hon. Friend was speaking, I thought of how, as barbarism took over the world, learning and culture retreated into the medieval monasteries. It is almost as if the endangered species of the world have been saved by some of these zoological institutions, and are then able to return. It was interesting to hear about the species that have been saved or preserved—kingfishers, tigers, the quagga. Well, I am sorry to hear that the zoo did not in fact help to save the quagga, but at least it has some photographs of it, which is encouraging. I did not know about the mountain chicken, and I had no idea of the story of Winnie the Pooh. I am only sorry that Winnie did not stay on Salisbury plain, which is part of my constituency, where we would have given him or her a happy life. It is a very good thing that Winnie ended up in London zoo, and we can all be very proud of that.

I commend the Bill. The zoo is an historic institution, which is one of the reasons we should be so proud of it, and it has a very bright future. I was encouraged to hear from my hon. Friend about the plans for the zoo. I was not aware that Matthew Gould had taken over as chief executive. I knew him slightly when I was a civil servant at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and he was in charge of the nation's digital policy. It is amazing how people move around in our elite. Why should he not be running the zoo? He is obviously doing a great job, and I commend the plans for it that I hear about, and the skills that he brings from his background. I am interested and inspired by what I hear about the modernisation of the zoo; it is looking forward, and using digital skills and immersive technology to give visitors an enhanced experience that gets them closer to the reality of the natural habitat that these animals come from, and to which we hope that they or their descendants will be able to return.

What I hear is encouraging. I totally agree with my hon. Friend's argument that to raise the capital that is needed for long-term investment on the site, the investors who finance that work will need certainty that the zoo will be around long enough. This change is the right thing

to do, and I echo the point that it would be nice if the zoo was there in perpetuity with a freehold. I commend the Bill. I am pleased that Members across the House support it, and I will be happy to do so myself.

1.9 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger). He gave an excellent speech, and I must say that there is a certain air of a Victorian zookeeper about him today. It is a pleasure to speak in favour of the Bill, which I support. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on bringing it forward; it is the right thing to do. This is a very small piece of legislation—a tiny blip on the legislative agenda, only a few lines long—but it is important that we amend the Crown Estate Act 1961 to increase the maximum term of lease.

As we have heard, the change we are making does not automatically grant ZSL a lease of 150 years, but crucially—I am looking at the Minister—it allows the Department to offer this length of lease in the future. This is important for so many reasons, as was capably covered by the previous speaker. It is a UK institution, but also a groundbreaker internationally as the world's first scientific zoo. The Zoological Society of London is an international conservation charity that saves animals that are on the brink of extinction, protects species and restores ecosystems. It is also much more than that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East described. The tourism that ZSL London zoo brings to the UK is phenomenal; it provides £24 million to our economy every year, and that is just its specific impact on tourism; there is its wider tourism pull, as one of many institutions in London that tourists come to.

Peter Gibson: My hon. Friend's constituency in Milton Keynes is far closer and much better connected to London than mine. I wonder if he knows how many of his constituents visit London zoo, and whether schools in Milton Keynes North engage with the zoo to learn about its conservation work.

Ben Everitt: That is a fantastic intervention. The short answer is no, so there is a huge opportunity for me to investigate whether schools in Milton Keynes North have taken the chance to visit ZSL London zoo. The educational benefits would be superb. On my hon. Friend's point about connectivity and getting to the zoo from his constituency and mine, I can only assume that he has not tried Avanti trains recently. On occasion, I am not sure that the journey from Darlington would be much slower than the journey from Milton Keynes.

London zoo is one of the many attractions—educational, leisure or otherwise—in London, but it can be proud of its position as the 10th most popular tourist attraction in London. The zoo is about more than just education and tourism. A core function of its output is conservation, and it has global reach. It has conservation activities in over 70 countries worldwide. We have seen the reintroduction of many species. All that work is born out of the premises that we seek to support through this lease extension.

On species reintroduction, I think in particular of the reintroduction of the partula snail. On conservation breeding programmes, I think obviously of the northern bald ibis, a species that has not been mentioned yet, and

[Ben Everitt]

the fen raft spider. The conservation breeding programme occurred partly due to the reintroduction of the partula snail. The work done with conservationists in other countries has meant a huge increase in support for wider reintroduction programmes, such as for griffon vultures, hihi birds and amur tigers.

We have already heard about Goldie the eagle and the story behind Winnie the Pooh, Jumbo the elephant—it was news to me that he added the word “jumbo” to our vocabulary—and Guy the gorilla. I was amused to hear that Guy the gorilla only understood French, and that there is now a statue—

Jerome Mayhew *rose*—

Ben Everitt: I will give way on foreign gorillas.

Jerome Mayhew: It is obviously a matter of deep concern for the House that Guy the gorilla spoke only French. I meant to intervene on my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) to ask whether Guy, at the end of his life, was bilingual.

Ben Everitt: We will never know, but perhaps a clue can be found in whether the statue of Guy the gorilla is wearing a beret.

This change to section 7 of the Crown Estate Act 1961—this small tweak to the lease length—will allow London zoo to operate in a much more future-proofed way. It has ambitions to create the world’s first campus for nature. It wants to reimagine the zoo as a series of natural landscapes and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East mentioned, it wants to make the zoo truly accessible for all. That goes to the heart of what we are doing: we want to share the benefits with everybody for generations.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way on that issue. One of the grounds for giving ZSL planning permission for further work is that it would make available facilities for people with special needs, and children from the local area, who could use both the garden area and other zoo premises at a reduced price. As I mentioned, allowing local people with special needs to come in for £3 is a great contribution to allowing community access. As we pursue these changes, it is vital that community access continues.

Ben Everitt: I am grateful for that intervention, which leads me to my winding-up remarks—[*Interruption.*] I can carry on if the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) wishes me to. The zoo is a jewel in the crown of not just London tourism, but conservation generally. If we succeed in this attempt to allow it to extend its lease and bring in finance to secure its physical assets—the site—and its conservation and education work, done here in London and across the world, that will be of benefit to generations to come.

1.18 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I join in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on bringing the Bill to this stage. Hopefully it will pass today and make its way through to become law. It is yet another private Member’s Bill that he has successfully shepherded through the House;

I will have to get some tips from him on how to follow his lead and come higher in the ballot.

I recognise the important role that the Zoological Society of London plays as an international conservation charity. It restores wildlife in the UK and around the world, saves animals threatened with extinction, protects species and ecosystems, and conducts a lot of research internationally with partners. It also plays a fundamental role in inspiring the next generation of conservationists, which is obviously key.

We are here to talk about the impact that the Bill could have on the zoo, and that brings us to the animals. In January, the annual stocktake took place at London zoo, which is no mean feat, given that it is home to over 300 different species, from the endangered Galapagos giant tortoises—we heard about tortoises in an earlier debate—and Asiatic lions, to critically endangered Chinese giant salamanders and Sumatran tigers. It is very good news that three Asiatic lion cubs were born only a few weeks ago. That is a major boost to conservation, given that there are only around 600 to 700 such lions living in the wild. People will be reassured that the annual stocktake, which involves checking how many animals there are and that they are still in the zoo, is part of the licence requirements to which the zoo is subject in order to ensure public protection.

The kernel of this Bill is about safeguarding the future of ZSL and its important work. The society has been very clear about the effect of the current lease’s limitations, particularly on its ability to fundraise and create new partnerships that will enable it to enhance its work, including the support programmes that are available and the great community programmes that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East talked about, such as discretionary access and cheaper tickets for local people to come to the zoo and see what is on offer. The benefits that a longer lease would offer have also been set out by the society. As we consider extending the lease, it is obviously important that we capture those benefits and then hold the society to account on delivering them, should it be granted the lease.

At its core, it is about having the world’s first campus for nature, with a centre of research and innovation that is dedicated to protecting biodiversity and strengthening nature, but it is also about enhancing technology. I came across Matthew Gould when he was head of NHSX, where he did a lot of work in developing apps and technology in the NHS. Bringing that knowledge and insight to the zoo in order to have more immersive experiences would be highly commendable.

The zoo is also looking at accessibility. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East talked about the offers to local communities, but this is a world institution. It is one of the most visited attractions in the country, and I want my constituents in North West Norfolk, including children and people with special needs, to be able to benefit from such offers. There are obviously travel costs involved, but coming to see such a great facility is invaluable for them.

As it happens, my first date with my wife was at London zoo.

Sir Chris Bryant: You animal.

James Wild: Check out my surname. We had a lovely time, and obviously it paid off. My wife and I were at the zoo a few weeks ago with one of her friends and her

young twins, and its ability to inspire is incredible. I watched those two little girls run off to look at the animals, and it was great. When my wife and I went on our first date, which was some time ago, we were a bit concerned about the state of the facilities. Some of the cages had signs to assure visitors that the animals were not in distress, even though they may have been pacing backwards and forwards. There was an urgent need for modernisation, and when I went back a few weeks ago I noted that some of the enclosures had been improved. I am thinking in particular of the penguin area, which is now a great facility and one of my favourite parts of the zoo.

A few Members have spoken about Guy the gorilla. I understand that his tooth decay was caused by him being fed sweets by people visiting the zoo, so it is very important that only zookeepers should feed the animals. It is important to get that on the record.

Bob Blackman: Gorillas are herbivores, so they should only be fed by keepers, as my hon. Friend rightly says. They should certainly not be fed sweets. Does he realise that gorillas share 98.4% of their DNA with human beings? They are very close to human beings. Just as tooth decay in humans is concerning, particularly among young children who eat sweets, the same thing applies to gorillas.

James Wild: My hon. Friend makes a very interesting observation.

Sir Chris Bryant: I bet Guy could get a dentist!

James Wild: From a sedentary position, the hon. Gentleman mentions dentistry. I could talk about the need for more dentists and dental vans in North West Norfolk, but that would obviously be beyond the scope of this debate—I will not encourage you to stand up to make me be quiet, Mr Deputy Speaker.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) has pointed out, this is an enabling power; there is no guarantee of an extension, with that coming back to the plans put forward by the ZSL to convince people that it is deserving of this extension. It will be held to account and so it will be able to go off to raise the funds to enhance this world-class facility.

To conclude, having opened in 1826, the zoo will soon be celebrating 200 years. This important Bill will help to ensure that it continues to play the crucial role it has had since then in protecting animals by providing better enclosures and better facilities for them, and ensuring that vital research continues, while remaining a leading visitor attraction where people can come to learn more about our wonderful world.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call Sir Chris Bryant.

1.25 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I concur.

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for introducing this Bill on the ZSL and the maximum lease term that may be granted to it, which has now reached its concluding

stages in the Commons. I also wish to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for casting his beady, expert eye over the Bill and for not moving his amendment, which led to a degree of shock and perhaps even gentle chaos. That should be seen as a tribute to his fearsome reputation for ruthless and relentless scrutiny. I would like to see that mantle of scrutiny taken up by my hon. Friends the Members for Devizes (Danny Kruger), for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), for North West Norfolk (James Wild), for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) and for Darlington (Peter Gibson), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey). It was good to hear her particular expertise, as a former Environment Secretary. I thank them for their scrutiny of the Bill.

James Wild: The amendment from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) was about differentiating between residential areas within the zoo and other properties. Obviously, some discussions have taken place that I was not privy to, so I would be grateful if the Minister elaborated on what residential properties there are within the zoo and whether they are purely there for the zookeepers. Obviously, there is no working time directive for animals, as I believe one of my colleagues said, so there is a case to be made in that regard, but it would be good to understand a little more about the footprint of the residential areas.

Julia Lopez: I will come on to that later in my speech. I understand that we are talking about three properties, but I will probably contradict myself later.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is the Government's sponsor of this Bill and our interest lies in the location of London zoo, in Regent's Park, where the proposed extension of the maximum lease term grantable will be enacted. Regent's Park is under the management of the Royal Parks charity, which is sponsored by my Department. Ultimately, the eight royal parks are owned by the Crown, with responsibility for them resting with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. I take an interest also as a London Member of Parliament, as the Tourism Minister—my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East mentioned that the zoo is an important part of the visitor economy, both locally and nationally—and as I have two young children who would benefit from visiting this tremendous attraction.

Ben Everitt: We have recognised the importance of London zoo as a tourist attraction in its own right, but what are the Minister's thoughts about its fit with the wider tourist ecosystem within London and within the UK?

Julia Lopez: This debate has proved that simply by talking about London zoo we can learn about all the other animal-based visitor attractions across the country, including Flamingo Land near Darlington.

The Bill proposes a small amendment to the Crown Estate Act 1961 to extend the maximum lease grantable to the ZSL from 60 years to 150 years. Although the lease was most recently renewed in 2021 by the current maximum term of 60 years, as any well-managed and forward-thinking organisation should do, the ZSL wished further to extend the maximum lease term, in order to secure longer-term investment and to continue to develop the historic site at Regent's Park.

James Wild: In an earlier intervention, I talked about the campaign that a number of colleagues were involved in on Burlington House, where a lot of expert societies are based. The freehold for that is the responsibility of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. We finally got agreement from the relevant Minister there to extend the lease to 999 years. I would be interested in any reflections that this Minister has on the comparison between that length of time and the 150 years proposed in the Bill.

Julia Lopez: My understanding, which I have gained during the course of this debate, is that the 150-year lease is specific to the Crown Estate. I imagine that is for all sorts of historical reasons, but I am happy to go into those by writing to my hon. Friend.

The Government view the extension of the maximum lease term grantable to be a relatively uncontroversial change that will positively impact the organisation, allowing it to build its resilience, develop strategic philanthropic relationships, and increase the scope of potential commercial partnerships that will ensure its continued growth. It is also important to note that establishing the mechanism for a longer lease term will bring the Zoological Society of London into line with similar organisations that hold leases on Crown Estate land, including the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. The maximum allowable lease for the Royal Botanic Gardens in respect of land in Kew gardens was extended from 31 years to 150 years following the introduction of a Bill in 2019.

Granting a maximum lease term of 150 years to the Zoological Society of London will significantly and positively impact the organisation's aims. For example, the society is at the forefront of efforts to reverse biodiversity loss, which is one of the biggest challenges of our time. A longer lease will allow for the creation of the world's first campus for nature, a trans-disciplinary centre of research and innovation dedicated to the protection of biodiversity and strengthening nature. It will also help to reimagine the zoo's landscape, providing ecosystem-driven spaces designed with an understanding of how each animal now thrives, and providing the assurance that our most at-risk species will be cared for and protected well into the future.

Jerome Mayhew: We talk a lot in this House and in Committees—I sit on the Environmental Audit Committee—about the challenges of biodiversity net loss across the world, as well as in this nation. About 70% of biodiversity has been lost since I was born in 1970, but a lot of that is driven by climate change. Would the Minister be able to expand a little on the zoo's plans to deal with climate change in its educational programmes, while also dealing with it in its programmes to protect the long-term future of those species?

Julia Lopez: My understanding is that part of the zoo's offer in relation to this lease extension is that it will deepen its partnerships and relationships with some of the nearby institutions, including local universities and other scientific institutions. I imagine that that shared learning will help to advance our understanding of climate change and its impact on biodiversity. I should also note that this Government, through the Environment Act 2021, brought in the concept of biodiversity net

gain, with the impact of construction on wildlife offset by commitments from developers to enhance our local environments.

The Zoological Society of London's future aims are befitting of an organisation of its high calibre. The society will extend and contribute to London's knowledge quarter, which I have just referred to: an established landscape of world-leading science and research institutions that spans from Camden Town to Holborn and Covent Garden. The Zoological Society of London has always worked closely with its neighbours—other world-class institutions including University College London and the Royal Veterinary College. The society wishes to deepen those connections to form a network of learning, knowledge sharing, and scientific exploration and practice. We are confident that the society has the ambition, expertise, place and drive to realise the opportunities ahead and bring this amazing, special campus to life.

As conservation zoos, both London zoo and its sister site at Whipsnade care for more extinct-in-the-wild species than any other zoo in the UK. London zoo is part of vital breeding programmes for more than 100 endangered species, from the Socorro dove to the Sumatran tiger. Limiting the maximum grantable lease term to 60 years would curtail the magnitude of the zoo's impact. As we have heard today, London zoo's animals have inspired a lifelong love of animals in its visitors for over two centuries. Some notable names include Winnie, an American black bear deposited at the zoo in 1914 at the start of the first world war. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has set out, she was visited by A. A. Milne and his son Christopher, and to this day lives on in the stories of Winnie-the-Pooh and Christopher Robin. As we have heard, there is also Guy the gorilla, spoken of lyrically by my hon. Friend.

Ben Everitt: Throughout the course of this debate, we have consistently referred to him as "Guy" the gorilla. However, he spoke French, so surely it should be pronounced "Ghee".

Julia Lopez: That surely has to be one of the best interventions on record. I apologise, but I must correct the record: I should have pronounced Guy the gorilla lyrically, like my hon. Friend.

Sir Chris Bryant: That is going in *Hansard*.

Julia Lopez: That is true. As we have heard, Guy the gorilla would at first respond only to French, having spent the six months preceding his arrival in a Parisian zoo. His statue remains much loved by the zoo's visitors. We have heard about Goldie the eagle, but I add to this collection my admiration for Ricky the rockhopper penguin, whom I met when I was keeper for the day. I now find myself heading to google the quagga, which I had not heard of before. The touching account of the life of Jumbo the elephant brought a solitary tear to my eye. That was quickly wiped away by the tales from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk of how the wild animals of London zoo lit inside his heart his inner wild animal.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport recognises the immense value that the Zoological Society of London has within London and the nation at large and wishes to support all initiatives to ensure it has a strong future.

Throughout its 195-year history, London zoo has solidified its reputation as an important and unique part of our capital's heritage, culture and tourism offer. It is the capital's 10th most-visited attraction and contributes more than £24 million annually to the local economy and more than £54 million to the national economy. It is also the world's oldest scientific zoo, operating since 1828, and a world-leading force in wildlife conservation and biodiversity.

Charles Darwin, with his significant contributions to our understanding of science, became a fellow of the Zoological Society of London in 1839. During his time at London zoo, he studied the behaviour of animals and developed his revolutionary theories. Today, Darwin's history is safeguarded in London zoo's library, and the zoo also safeguards the pangolin, on which there has been extensive debate. The issue is close to my heart, as my niece and nephew held a successful pangolin bake sale when they were most in the news. They are, as we have discussed, the world's most trafficked animal. Just to clarify for Members, that is because of their value as bush meat and as a delicacy, and their scales are used in traditional medicine and their skins are used for boots and belts.

James Wild: My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. The chief executive of the Zoological Society of London has said how the Bill will secure the future of ZSL and London zoo, ensuring that they continue to inspire and educate millions, to do world-leading science and conservation, and to keep strong an important and much-loved institution. Does she have a sense of the scale of the investment that extending the lease will unlock in terms of the modernisation and improvements that will come from the world-class research facility that will be created through the Bill?

Julia Lopez: As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, the Bill will unlock substantial investment in the site. It will lead to the renovation of historic listed buildings, but also the creation of new, more appropriate habitats, now that we understand more about the animals that they contain. I firmly believe that the zoo is a historical asset worth championing and protecting for future generations. From its beginning, many leading architects have contributed to the zoo's built environment. The collection of buildings includes two grade I and eight grade II and grade II* listed structures. The grade I listed penguin enclosure designed in the international modernist style by Berthold Lubetkin and constructed in 1934 is described by Historic England as:

"A key symbol of British (and International) Modern Movement architecture".

Advances in our understanding of animal welfare have shown that many of the current structures within the zoo's premises are simply no longer suitable for their intended purposes. Although the zoo has achieved many firsts—including the first reptile house, public aquarium, insect house and children's zoo—work is ongoing to reimagine those spaces in innovative and sustainable ways.

Throughout, the Zoological Society of London's efforts will ensure its central aims of conservation and care for endangered species remain at the core. The work of the society and the zoo supports the environmental principles

outlined in the Environment Act 2021. The continuing existence of the zoo will preserve wildlife and other natural assets within its built environment and champion measures to reduce biodiversity loss. It is also important to note that the extension of the lease does not equate to extension of land occupied, and the remainder of Regent's Park will be unaffected by the change.

There is reason to question our support of this Bill in respect of the impact on the public purse. I take this chance to confirm that neither the Zoological Society of London nor London zoo specifically receives any grant in aid from the Government. While the society is the recipient of research grants from Research England, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for international and domestic conservation work, those are applied for through official programmes. There would therefore be no significant impact on Government funding or accrual of public debt if the organisation's maximum lease term were to be extended.

As a charity, the Zoological Society of London raises the vast majority of its income from its members and visitors to its conservation zoos, including London zoo. Additional field projects, including its community access initiative and rhino bond scheme, are funded through partnerships with funders across the globe. Looking forward, in 2028 London Zoo will celebrate 200 years since its opening, and I am sure I am not alone in wishing it success in the next 200 years. Continued modernisation and redevelopment will allow its animals to thrive, including through the development of the biodiversity campus to champion the needs of nature across sectors and to increase public engagement and learning opportunities.

In addition to benefiting its animals, research and scientific aims, an extension of the Zoological Society of London's lease for London zoo will provide essential opportunities to access nature, respite and wellbeing for people of all ages and every background. In the February half-term last year, London zoo's community access scheme enabled over 50,000 people on low-income and other benefits to access the zoo for only £3. Accessibility is a core aim of the zoo, which also runs audio-described tours, sign-language tours and early opening mornings aimed at autistic and neurodiverse visitors.

Over 80,000 school students visit the zoo each year, learning about wildlife conservation and the effects of climate change and plastics pollution. Protecting the future of this organisation through the extension of the maximum lease term makes sure that it will continue to educate and inspire the next generation. The Government are committed to supporting the Zoological Society of London's ambitions to improve and invest to secure its continued role as a leader in the field. Extending the lease term is part of that much-needed support. We are sure that the Bill will offer the necessary support and protection to the Zoological Society of London and London zoo. I am very pleased to affirm our support for the Bill, and once again I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for bringing it to the House.

1.41 pm

Bob Blackman: With the leave of the House, I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for her contribution today and her support throughout the progress of the Bill, and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Rhondda

[Bob Blackman]

(Sir Chris Bryant), for his very brief expression of support for the Bill. It is great to pass the Bill on a cross-party footing in this House, which sends a signal to the other place that it has cross-party support.

I thank my right hon. and hon. Friends for the interventions that tested my knowledge of the position and for their contributions to the debate. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) who, when she was Environment Secretary, was heavily involved in the construction of the Bill and gave it her blessing.

I must also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who managed to propose an amendment to reduce the lease and then, during his speech, argue in favour of extending the lease. I know we often take contradictory positions in debate, and he managed to do that today. I am grateful to him for not pressing his amendment and so allowing us to move on to Third Reading.

I draw the House's attention to one of the problems raised during the debate: that because of its inefficient buildings, London zoo's energy costs rose from £1.4 million in 2021-22 to £3.7 million the following year. The fact is that these old buildings house many endangered species that need consistently high temperatures. Tigers cannot put a jumper on or fill a hot water bottle; they have to be provided with the heating appropriate to their species.

I thank Matthew Gould and his team for inviting me to take the Bill through its Commons stages. I reiterate my thanks to the Public Bill Office for its help, support and guidance during the Bill's progress, to my office and to my parliamentary assistant, Hattie Shoosmith, for her help in formulating my speeches. I also thank the Members who served on the Bill Committee: my hon.

Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes), the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal, my hon. Friends the Members for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), and for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), the Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), the hon. Members for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright).

All those Members gave their support, and although we were not able to have a full Second Reading debate, I think we have tested the Bill both in Committee and, very thoroughly, on Third Reading. I hope that it will now be passed without dissent, and that we can wish it Godspeed through the other place. No doubt their lordships will look at the *Hansard* report of our deliberations and allow it to proceed so that we can safeguard London zoo for the enjoyment of people long after we have all left this Earth. We all welcome its conservation work and scientific research, and, of course, the joy that people gain from visiting it to see endangered species and species that they would never see otherwise except on their television screens, and we all want to preserve that. We wish the Bill well, we wish London zoo well with its work, and I trust that we can ensure that the lease is extended as we wish it to be.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Off-Road Vehicles (Registration) Bill

Second Reading

1.46 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I have always believed that politicians and political parties should show leadership rather than simply following public opinion, and that that leadership should be based on well-known values, principles and policies that have been communicated at the time of election. However, I also believe that if it becomes clear that something is having a detrimental impact on our constituents, it is our job to listen to them and do whatever we can to alleviate any suffering.

The Bill may stand in my name, but I present it in honour of my constituent who lost his life when he was struck by an off-road vehicle. David Gow—also known as Davie—died on 12 February 2023. I did not get to meet Davie, but I know his brother Allan, and I met his son Craig when he approached me some time after his father's death. Craig Gow told me that his dad had been crossing the road to reach his home in High Possil when he was struck, on the road, by an off-road vehicle. That fact is not in dispute. An arrest was made but no charges have been brought, so I will say no more about what happened that day—which means that I cannot go into detail about why I think that the Bill would certainly reduce, if not prevent altogether, the incidence of similar tragedies. What I will say is that Davie Gow never got to celebrate his 80th birthday, and his family were left devastated.

I want to take a moment to celebrate Mr Gow's life by using the words of his son Craig, who said:

"I could be here all day. Firstly he was a devoted family man, a loyal friend and a fiercely independent and extremely intelligent man...full of life and full of carry on."

"Carry on" is Glaswegian for fun, I suppose. Craig also said his father was

"A real man's man. He...loved a game of Dominoes"

and

"a good crossword or Quiz show...and when younger he was a right good Football player. I miss him every day and I know I always will."

Mr Gow died where he had lived, in the flats that had previously been High Possil School, where he had been educated, as had his father, also David Gow. His grandchildren, Cameron and Jessica, lived nearby. Three generations of the Gow family either lived in the area or spent years being educated in the spot where Mr Gow died. He took great contentment from the fact that they all lived in the area, and I hope his family can gain some peace from knowing that his death was not in vain and that he has motivated me to introduce the Bill.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I join my hon. Friend in offering condolences to the Gow family, not least to Councillor Allan Gow, David's brother and a constituent of mine. Tragic accidents such as these can often be avoided, and if a registration scheme was in place, the police could much more easily track down and identify vehicle owners to ensure justice can be done. While I am sure that many Members will want to speak about their experiences, we should acknowledge

the work of our colleague in the Scottish Parliament, Bob Doris, who has taken up these issues on behalf of the Gow family and other constituents in the north of Glasgow.

Anne McLaughlin: I thank my hon. Friend for those words, and I echo what he says about our colleagues Bob Doris and Councillor Allan Gow. Constituents in Glasgow North East have been calling, emailing and messaging me about the antisocial and completely improper use of off-road vehicles, be that off-road motorbikes, quad bikes or high-powered electric motorcycles. They simply cannot get peace from them. Thus, my Bill calls for the compulsory registration of all off-road vehicles.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this Bill forward, because she has identified an important issue. The use of off-road motorbikes especially, but also of high-powered e-bikes—battery bikes—is a problem in Leyland. I was recently subject to some quite unpleasant antisocial behaviour from what looked like young men on off-road bikes with no registration. I had to follow them into the back of the Leyland estate, and, in being so discourteous to the people of Leyland, they nearly knocked a child down. Does the hon. Lady agree that anybody going out on the road on a vehicle that they should not be on, should think very hard?

Anne McLaughlin: I agree with the hon. Lady, although electric bikes are not—yet—included in the Bill. According to my mother, who is 84, anybody on a bicycle should have to have a registration plate, so that she can report them to the police when they whizz past, disorientating her, on the pavement. I have said to her, "I'm not including that, Mum", but I join the hon. Lady in urging users of all powered vehicles, and all pedal bikes, to be courteous and aware of pedestrians.

To be clear, the Bill is not a ban, or a clampdown, on fun. I know—well, I am told—that off-road biking is fun, and I would like there to be somewhere, possibly in my constituency, for people who use them for fun to be able to do so safely without disturbing the peace for residents. I also know that there are people who use them legitimately in their line of work, such as farmers and construction workers. This Bill is not about them; it is about the people who choose to use off-road vehicles antisocially, dangerously and completely improperly. I will explain what I mean by that when I share the experiences of some of my constituents.

A compulsory registration scheme could help to alleviate the widespread theft of off-road vehicles from both rural and urban areas, so my proposals could benefit those who use off-road vehicles correctly. Getting those vehicles registered would hardly be the biggest deal in the world. In fact, that would most likely take place when they are initially purchased from dealers, much like the way our cars are registered. We all have to do paperwork that we do not want to do, but if it is for the benefit of the wider community, surely that is not too much to ask. When we say "off-road vehicles" in the Bill, we are talking about any vehicles specifically designed to be used off-road—I suppose the clue is in the title—such as quad bikes, trail bikes, scramblers, and four-wheeled motorised buggies. The Bill gives the Secretary of State the scope to define that in a non-exhaustive list.

[Anne McLaughlin]

The hon. Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) mentioned electric bikes, which have become contentious as the technology moves on; there is a consultation on them at the moment. This Bill will include electric motorcycles, but not electric bicycles, which use electric motors as an aid to pedal power. However, if it was felt at some point in the future that the power in those bikes was sufficient to require registration, the Bill would allow them to be included by a future Secretary of State.

The Bill calls for all off-road vehicles to be registered in much the same way as cars. It calls for an identifying mark to be required on each of these vehicles, similar to a car registration plate but tailored to the size and shape of the vehicle. We need to consult on how they might be fixed to the vehicles and how that might affect their normal operation. The reason I am determined that a registration is displayed is that if we see a car without a registration plate, it will be immediately apparent that something is not right. It grabs our attention and, more importantly, that of the police. It needs to become the norm for off-road vehicles to have a visible mark, so that if it is removed or replaced and does not match an identifying mark from the body of the bike, the police can do something about it.

The Bill has scope for an exemptions list. I have deliberately kept that open, because much as I have consulted, the Secretary of State will be in a far better position to fully consult users; I note that there are some concerns in farming communities. Exemptions could be made for those who use the vehicles in association with professional sporting bodies. Motorsport is expensive, and anything that adds to the cost of enjoying it or deters people from taking part must be taken into consideration.

I have consulted widely with my constituents, who replied to my campaign in their hundreds. They are overwhelmingly in favour of the Bill, for reasons that will chime with many Members here. Children are unable to play outside because these vehicles are mounting the pavements or racing through the play parks at speeds of up to 60 mph. People are unable to sleep because it is happening through the night and the noise becomes unbearable. My constituents are unable to relax in their own home after a long day because they cannot even hear the TV.

Older people are nervous about going out. I have talked about my mum, but I heard from a constituent who likes to assist their 90-year-old, visually-impaired mum on a walk with the aid of her stroller. They cannot do that now because of the number of these bikes in the area.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this very important debate to the House. Time is limited, so I wanted to intervene to welcome the debate. She is raising the issue of significant antisocial behaviour offences committed up and down the country. We are all aware of them. As we discussed earlier, I can guarantee that I will set up a taskforce with the Home Office and key stakeholders to get to the heart of the issue. Some recent ASB work has been done by the Home Office, but I see no reason why we cannot build upon that to address this specific issue and the impact it has on communities across the country.

Anne McLaughlin: I very much appreciated the conversation with the Minister and his remarks. I am not somebody who stands here and says, “I demand that the law be changed immediately.” I welcome any progress that we can make towards this. A taskforce is an excellent idea, because, of course, I do not have all the answers. By bringing together experts and the people we need onside to make this work, progress will be made.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I put on the record my support for what the hon. Lady is seeking to do. Many of us in the House are blighted by this issue, and I welcome her bringing forward this legislation. I appreciate that time is short, but I put on the record my sincere thanks for the engagement with the Minister and the discussion about bringing forward a group to look in serious detail at this scourge on our streets. The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech, and I thank her sincerely for the Bill.

Anne McLaughlin: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Before the issue came to my attention, he was speaking about and campaigning on it, so I thank him for that on behalf of my constituents.

Littlehill golf course, in my constituency, is a fantastic facility, not least because it is accessible and affordable to low-income families, but it regularly becomes completely unusable when quad bikers get in and wreck the greens. I am bringing forward this Bill because those families deserve to be able to have their leisure time. The greens are kept beautifully and so much effort is put into them, but then someone, who nobody can identify, comes in and wrecks them.

How lucky are my Barmulloch constituents to have families of deer and other wildlife in Robroyston Park, in the heart of their urban community, in the middle of many tenements? They are not so lucky that off-road vehicles, speeding through unfettered at all times of the night and day, have scared away the animals—it would be tragic if they did not come back. My constituents call the police but it is hard to catch the culprits. However, if they can give the police a registration number, the police can catch up with the culprits later, if not at once. If such vehicles do not have a registration number, their drivers are in constant danger of being stopped by the police anyway and having their vehicle possibly confiscated, even if they are not using them improperly. Either way, the legislation would give the police and my constituents a far better chance of identifying the culprits.

Peter Gibson: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the ability of these vehicles to be registered and to display a registration plate as a means of identification. A compulsory registration scheme would, however, provide a deterrent to many off-road bikers seeking to abuse their vehicles because they would not be prepared to pay the money to register the vehicle in the first place.

Anne McLaughlin: My intention is not to make registration financially prohibitive, but the hon. Gentleman is right that such a scheme would be a deterrent in other ways. If people know they cannot go around unidentified any longer, then they are far less likely to get on to those vehicles in the first place.

The people of Barmulloch, Balornock, Wallacewell, Milton, Possilpark, Lambhill, Springburn and anywhere else in my constituency, or anybody else's constituency, deserve to live in peace and to be safe. These are good people because so many of those who replied to me expressed concerns about the people on the vehicles. While they are angry with them, they are also fearful that they too will end up injured or losing their lives, just as Davie Gow did.

I end by thanking the Public Bill Office for its incredible help—I am laughing because I needed a lot of help—and I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to present the Bill in honour of Davie Gow.

2.3 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I extend my sympathy and that of the whole House to the family of David Gow. I have suffered personally as a result of the actions of quad bikes and motorbikes, although my experience pales into insignificance in comparison with the consequences that the Gow family have suffered.

Before I came into the House, I ran an outdoor leisure company that had 36 locations around the United Kingdom. We were building on a new site in an urban park in the north of England, but during the construction phase it was terrorised—that is the best way to describe it—by teenaged boys on quad bikes and motorbikes. They were 100% boys or young men, riding through the public park and, after the site was opened, frightening paying members of the public who were walking around. It led to concern, fear, including fear of injury, and increased cost. Security concerns at the site meant that 24-hour dog patrols had to be recruited to protect this perfectly legitimate leisure activity. In my newly formed constituency of Broadland and Fakenham, I visited quite recently the premises of Matt Pope Motorcycles—I was actually there to help with an issue related to flooding—which sells off-road motorcycles. During our conversation, the owner talked about the risk of break-ins, and of theft of off-road motorcycles. In part that is because they are not registered and do not tend to have VIN numbers as other vehicles do, making them much more susceptible to theft, even from very legitimate sellers, such as Matt Pope Motorcycles. There is a significant problem here. I am very sympathetic to any legislation that we can collectively bring forward, or any progress towards legislation, to make it easier to discourage this deeply antisocial behaviour.

When we consider legislation, as we all do in this House, there is a very obvious two-stage test that we should apply. First we should ask: is the problem that we seek to solve due to a lack of powers for the enforcement authorities, or a lack of enforcement of powers by the enforcing bodies? If it is the former and not the latter, we move on to the next test, which is whether the legislation will solve the problem without doing more harm than good. We should apply that two-stage, common-sense test to every piece of legislation.

Let me turn to the first question: is the problem here the lack of powers for the police, or lack of enforcement of existing powers? I found two relevant sections in the Road Traffic Act 1988. The first is section 3, under which it is an offence for a person's driving, including on motorcycles and quad bikes, to cause alarm, distress

or annoyance to other pedestrians and road users. That is very straightforward. Section 34 deals specifically with off-road driving.

As an aside, Mr Deputy Speaker, one of the great pleasures of these Friday sittings is that the research we have to do in order to make speeches gives us quite a lot of insight into legislation. I now know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you do not commit an offence if you drive off the road, but only if you do so within 15 yards of the carriageway and for the purpose of parking. It is also interesting that in 1988, the unit of measurement used in legislation was yards, not metres, yet we decimalised in 1971. That was a slight tangent, but it was something that just sprung to mind.

Turning back to my argument, we have the offences for the police to enforce. We see in section 59(3) of the Police Reform Act 2002 what the police can do once that offence has been committed. Section 59(3)(a) is the power to stop those miscreants, and section 59(3)(b) is the power to seize the vehicles, so the police already have the powers to stop and to seize. Section 59(3)(d) is the power to use reasonable force to do so. Section 59(3)(c) is the power to enter domestic premises to enforce those powers. If we take those in combination, it is pretty clear that this is a problem not of police powers, but of enforcement. The question is therefore whether the Bill would help to increase enforcement. There is a very substantial argument that it would, for the reason the hon. Lady gave, which is that many of us who are exposed to this antisocial behaviour would be willing witnesses to the offence, and could take down a registration number and supply it to the police. It is then an issue of the police acting effectively at beat manager level.

Anne McLaughlin: Some of what the hon. Gentleman is talking about would apply in England and Wales only; that is one point. My feeling is that there are so many instances of this behaviour that the police would be kept incredibly busy. However, an offence of not displaying a registration, or of not registering one of these vehicle, could be preventive, as he says. The police would have to catch someone not displaying a registration plate only once for the vehicle to be taken off them. That would save the police from having to chase people multiple times for using the vehicles in antisocial ways.

Jerome Mayhew: I substantially agree with the hon. Lady. It is worth noting in passing that under the Police Reform Act 2002—I cannot bring the section number to mind—the police are required to give a warning for the first offence. It is only when they are satisfied either that a warning has been given in similar circumstances in the past 12 months, or that a warning has been received and ignored, that they move towards using the powers that I have set out. I agree that a requirement to display registration plates may well act as a disincentive to commission that kind of offence.

That brings us all back to the role of the police and what constitutes effective community policing. Just last week, I spent a morning out on the beat with the police, by car, to look at some of the crime hotspots in Broadland, and I am very pleased to say that there aren't any. Over the last decade, and particularly during the tenure of the excellent police and crime commissioner Giles Orpen-Smellie, crime has fallen significantly in Broadland. I was looking up the data, and in just the past year,

[*Jerome Mayhew*]

crime overall has fallen by 9.6% in Norfolk, and residential burglary is down by 7.1%, robbery by 9.2%, violence against the person by 12.7%, and stalking and harassment by 27.5%. That just goes to show that an effective police and crime commissioner such as Giles Orpen-Smellie, and a police force that focuses on antisocial behaviour being a gateway crime to other, more serious crime, and that gets involved early on, really does make a difference.

Anne McLaughlin: As I should have said in my speech, I understand that a lot of antisocial behaviour comes from having nothing to look forward to and few job prospects. I will not stand here and say, “This is all your fault.” We must get things right for the—primarily—young people who are involved in such antisocial behaviour. There are loads of examples in my constituency of getting it right, such as St Paul’s Youth Forum, which in 10 years has reduced youth offending from 160 cases to zero cases a year. There are many more examples. We have a responsibility to ensure that young people have fulfilment, excitement and satisfaction in life, so that they do not have to use off-road vehicles to get that excitement and satisfaction.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful for that further intervention. Of course, the hon. Lady is right that parenting is a difficult task. I speak as the not-particularly-brilliant parent of three children, although they are getting older now, at 20, 18 and 14—I am very pleased that I got that right at the first time of asking. The challenge for every parent, no matter where they live in the country, is not just to engage their children but to teach them how to make their own entertainment.

Guy Opperman: On the points made by my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), the way ahead is surely the example cited in the debate of my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) on 24 February by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), who set out in very eloquent terms how in North Antrim there was a pilot project for kids who had the problems identified by the hon. Lady and a passion for off-road vehicles—a passion identified by all of us in various different examples. There were locations where those individuals could do that pastime in a safe way, and there was education on appropriate usage. That is surely the way ahead for tackling antisocial behaviour in tricky circumstances.

Jerome Mayhew: The Minister is absolutely right, of course. I want to move on, but I will make one other point. Yes, it can be very boring growing up where activities are not laid on, but the vast majority of teenage people do not commit offences. They do not choose to create antisocial behaviour. We can understand why that may happen, but those reasons are not an excuse for that kind of behaviour.

I will draw my remarks to a close. I am very supportive of the Bill. I hear what the Minister says—that perhaps a taskforce is the right way to develop these ideas further, and that the Bill may not be quite in the form that is most appropriate for legislation—but I am very supportive of the views behind it. I will just make a technical point. If the Bill proceeds further, it should be

noted that there may be a drafting error in clause 1(3). It refers to section 21A(3)(e) of the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994. I think it may need to refer to section 21A(3)(a), but I could be wrong.

2.16 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I echo the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) on bringing the Bill forward. I recognise her work on this issue over many years, and the work of our colleague Bob Doris in the Scottish Parliament, who has been mentioned. The reason for that work is the experience of our constituents. I extend my condolences to the family and friends of David Gow, and particularly his brother Allan. Such tragic accidents are the worst manifestation of what can happen, but they are not the only outcome of the improper use of off-road vehicles. There are many near misses or non-fatal but life-changing injuries and accidents. Sometimes those injuries or fatalities involve animals—today’s business began with questions about the treatment and welfare of pets. There is also noise and air pollution. All of us will have heard our constituents’ concerns about those things.

Anne McLaughlin: My hon. Friend reminds me that I have loads of constituents—I do not know how I missed this out—who say they can no longer let their dogs run free off the lead when they are out for a walk because of off-road vehicles. That is outrageous, so I wanted to mention that. People told me that in their dozens.

Patrick Grady: I am sure those constituents would only be letting their dogs off the leash in areas where that is permitted; that is regulated by council byelaws. That issue is also sometimes a source of concern.

There are concerns about the exact use or purpose of the vehicles. Sometimes their use is about joyriding—the thrill of the noise and the speed—but sometimes the vehicles are used for quick getaways from the scenes of perhaps even more serious crimes, or for the transport of illicit substances off-road. Of course, police in on-road vehicles are not able to pursue them. We have heard about that, and many of us will have had personal experience of that. Regrettably, we sometimes see off-road vehicles being used along the canal in Glasgow, to the great concern of many pedestrians and cycle users. The new sculpture, *Bella the beithir*, the mythical animal that has taken up residence at the Stockingfield bridge, does not want to be disturbed by the noise of off-road vehicles when she is trying to sleep.

My hon. Friend proposes some pretty straightforward and useful reforms that would promote much more responsible use of off-road vehicles, and that would provide the police with additional powers to crack down on irresponsible use. The burden should not be high—she says it will not be high—on people who use such vehicles responsibly and for legitimate purposes. Certainly, they should have nothing to fear from the registration system. As she says, there could be legitimate exemptions from the measures in certain circumstances. As I think the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) said, the Bill would also have a deterrent effect on those, especially younger people, who do not understand the responsibility that comes with owning and operating such a vehicle.

Importantly, the Bill would strengthen the police's hand considerably. It would make it easier to seize unregistered vehicles on the first offence—a point elaborated on in an exchange of interventions—and easier to track vehicles that were being used improperly. I know from speaking to police in the north of Glasgow that the lack of powers in this area is a source of frustration.

Guy Opperman: The hon. Member is making an impassioned speech, and I put on record my condolences to the Gow family. There are two points to address some of his issues. First, there are thousands of law-abiding users, represented by groups such as the Auto-Cycle Union and the Green Lane Association, who would be keen to have the differentiation between the criminals clearly committing antisocial behaviour and other things, and the thousands upon thousands who are acting normally. The point that I want to take away with the taskforce is that there are already 38,000 of these vehicles up and down the country on the voluntary register. It is not very well known that we have that voluntary register and, with respect, if we could expand it dramatically through coercion, nudging and other methods, that would make a massive difference straightaway.

Patrick Grady: I thank the Minister for his constructive engagement in the debate. It is regrettable that time is so against us. I hope that progress can be made, with these external representative bodies having an opportunity to engage with his taskforce, and that he will engage constructively with colleagues in the devolved institutions. We are coming up against some of the clashes between devolved and reserved responsibilities. The police in Glasgow try to use antisocial behaviour powers and others that they have in legislation governed by Holyrood, but we know that they would prefer to see further progress made down here. In the interests of consensus and trying to make that progress, I will leave it there, in the hope that another couple of Members can make their points.

2.21 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): May I extend my condolences to the family of David Gow? I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) on securing the Bill on an issue of deep concern in Darlington. I prepared a fantastic speech that is so long I will not have time to get through it, but I will try to put some points on the record.

I warmly welcome the engagement that I have had with the Minister on this topic in the past few days. It is so refreshing to have had that engagement and to hear of his willingness to bring forward a taskforce, which might have some pilots across the country. May I suggest two locations for his taskforce to look at? One would be in Glasgow and the second would be in Darlington.

Guy Opperman: It is wonderful to be able to make policy for a Department for which I am not responsible. I am clearly responding for the Department for Transport—a worthy and honourable Department that I am delighted to represent—but so much of this issue is linked to the Home Office. I hope to sit down with the Policing Minister, who runs the ASB work being done presently.

There have been two laudable recommendations for potential pilot projects in Glasgow—I know Robroyston well, having spent some time there on 7 November 2009 for the by-election in which Ruth Davidson featured so honourably—and Darlington. I would be delighted to visit my hon. Friend in Darlington—he is just down the road from me—to see some of the problems at first hand and make those recommendations to the Policing Minister.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful for that intervention from the Minister, who was the first Minister to come and visit me in Darlington after I was elected. He has made repeated visits in his various roles, and he is always welcome as he treks up past my constituency. I would warmly welcome him meeting Darlington Borough Council's civic enforcement team as well as the operation endurance team from Darlington, and Durham constabulary. They have been doing amazing work in this area, but it is not enough.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I am conscious of the time and I am not sure whether the Minister will have time to wind up the debate, so I will waive my place in the debate and let my hon. Friend finish his speech. Does he agree that it would be great to get the Minister to commit to ensuring that the taskforce he is setting up, which is incredibly welcome, will, on behalf of rural communities such as mine, look at the blight of off-road vehicles on the green lanes that he mentioned? It is a good thing that many byways and bridlepaths have now been protected from off-road vehicles, but there are 7,000 miles of track in the UK—many of them are in Wiltshire—which are devastated by 4x4s, quad bikes and off-road vehicles, which are causing huge damage. Does he agree that it would be good if the taskforce reviewed the legislation so that we can try to get more of those lanes protected?

Peter Gibson: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. I represent an entirely urban constituency that faces the blight of this problem. I appreciate and understand that there are significant issues in the countryside from the use of these vehicles. There are also significant issues for our farming and rural constituencies with the theft of these vehicles. There was an intervention earlier about engagement, and I have recently met the National Motorcyclists Council and the Trail Riders Fellowship on this issue, but I put on the record and want to be absolutely clear that off-road bikes are meant to be used in a lawful manner for off-road biking, trail riding and competition. I have no desire to stop those legal and lawful activities.

I have no truck with the lawful use of off-road bikes; my concerns come from seeking to address the concerns of thousands of my residents whose lives are blighted by these vehicles. It is as clear as day to me that registering vehicles will help to end the terrorising of our streets and better enable police forces to tackle the problem of these bikes ripping through their communities.

Just to bring the House up to speed following my Westminster Hall debate on this issue, there was a discussion about whether farming communities would be opposed to registration. Following that debate, I wrote to the NFU. I had included parts of the letter

[Peter Gibson]

back from the NFU in my speech, but there will not be time to cover it. I will happily furnish the Minister with a copy of that letter.

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend will be conscious that the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023, which started as a private Member's Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), addresses a lot of those issues. As someone who represents the second-biggest constituency in England and who has many issues with byways open to all traffic, particularly in Slaley forest, I know that the practical reality is that the rural implications of this Bill are just as significant, albeit different.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful to the Minister for that intervention. It demonstrates where town and country can bring their respective voices to this place to tackle an issue that affects all communities.

Off-road bikes and quad bikes are great pieces of equipment. They are great for going scrambling or getting around rural farmland. Essentially, that is their legal and intended purpose. They were not designed to be used on our streets by people intent on causing terror and fear. They were not designed to be used by criminals wearing balaclavas or masks to evade police detection. They were not designed to create a noise nuisance and safety fear in our community, but in Darlington that is precisely what we see happening. I know from speaking to colleagues across the House that they see it too. These reckless bikers have no care for others, and nor do they seem to care about themselves when they opt not to wear a helmet, but instead a balaclava, for no other reason than to protect their identity. They sail through red lights, ride on pavements and display no lights—it is a miracle that we in Darlington have not seen the tragedy that the hon. Member for Glasgow North East has seen.

I have already paid tribute to the work of Durham constabulary and the Darlington civic enforcement team for their work on Operation Endurance using section 59 orders, but on its own that is not enough, and neither is registration nor tracking the vehicles. We need a co-ordinated approach from multiple Departments across Government to tackle this problem.

I will make one small political point. We have seen a tail-off in 101 calls to Durham police because of the call handling times. Durham constabulary is overseen by a Labour police and crime commissioner, and we have seen poor service and performance from her. That is why I am keen for us to see on 2 May the election of Rob Potts, the Conservative candidate to be Durham's police and crime commissioner. He has committed to endorsing Operation Endurance and reforming those 101 response times.

It is clear to me that when vehicles are registered, the possibility of people misusing them is less, so I support the Bill. This has been mentioned, but I recently learned of the voluntary scheme in—

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).
Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 17 May.

PUBLIC SECTOR EXIT PAYMENTS (LIMITATION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

GREEN BELT (PROTECTION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

AUTISM (EARLY IDENTIFICATION) 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.

HIGHER EDUCATION (STUDENT FINANCE AND SKILLS SHORTAGES) 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.

NUCLEAR VETERANS (COMPENSATION) 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.

MINERS' STRIKE (PARDONS) 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.

HEALTH AND EQUALITY ACTS (AMENDMENT) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

GREATER LONDON LOW EMISSION ZONE CHARGING (AMENDMENT) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (22 March),
That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 26 April.

WHISTLEBLOWING BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

HIGHWAYS ACT 1980 (AMENDMENT) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS ACT 1946
(AMENDMENT) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**DANGEROUS DOGS ACT 1991
(AMENDMENT) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**EXEMPTION FROM VALUE ADDED TAX
(MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**COVID-19 VACCINE DIAGNOSIS
AND TREATMENT BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**CARAVAN SITE LICENSING (EXEMPTION
OF MOTOR HOMES) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**NHS ENGLAND (ALTERNATIVE TREATMENT)
BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION
(PRIVATISATION) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**CHILDREN'S CLOTHING
(VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

REGULATORY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

BARNETT FORMULA (REPLACEMENT) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**RULE OF LAW (ENFORCEMENT BY PUBLIC
AUTHORITIES) BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION (OFFENCES) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE CO-FUNDING
AND CO-PAYMENT BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

CARAVAN SITES BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

**DOMESTIC ENERGY (VALUE ADDED TAX)
BILL**

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April.

VETERANS (NON-CUSTODIAL SENTENCES) 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.

PETITION**Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry**

2.35 pm

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of everyone affected by the infected blood scandal, particularly those who are my constituents in West Lancashire. I pay particular tribute to my constituent Rosemary Kirk, who bravely shared with me her story of how she lost her mother to this scandal, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), who has fought tirelessly for justice for those infected and affected. I also thank the Terrence Higgins Trust for its work in this area, and for its help and support to me on this issue. Too little movement has been made since we voted on this matter last December.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of West Lancashire,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002953]

Age-disputed Refugee Children

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

2.37 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a privilege to have secured this Adjournment debate on age-disputed refugee children. I should declare at the outset that I am an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees.

I know the Minister will agree that there are few issues more important than the safety of children, but the current system for dealing with age-disputed refugee children is letting many of them down, with their safety and wellbeing put at risk as a result. The Helen Bamber Foundation, the Humans for Rights Network and the Refugee Council have obtained data showing that over an 18-month period between January 2022 and June 2023, more than 1,300 children were wrongly assessed to be adults by the Home Office. Such incorrect assessments are usually the product of a short visual examination made by a border official almost immediately after the children arrive in the UK.

Incorrect assessments result in children being placed in adult accommodation and immigration detention, exposing them to significant safeguarding risks and denying them the support they need to rebuild a life that has already been distorted by trauma and hardship. Of specific concern are the cases of children being sent to Wethersfield or ending up in adult prisons. I will return to that point in greater detail later, but I will first explain why the current process for assessing the age of asylum seekers is problematic. Before I do so, I thank the Refugee Council for the information it has provided to me in advance of this debate. I also sincerely thank Omer, Motawakil and Amanual, three young refugees wrongly assessed as adults, who were kind enough to meet me earlier this afternoon to share their experiences and who are in the Gallery. I respectfully encourage the Minister to reach out to the Refugee Council to see whether it can facilitate a similar meeting for her, as I found my meeting both eye-opening and deeply moving.

Let me turn back to the issue of flawed assessment processes for children seeking asylum. The issue emerges from the fact that many children seeking asylum arrive here without a passport or birth certificate, often because they have never had such documentation or because it was taken from them during their journey to the UK. In other cases, they fled such trauma that they were unable to collect any of their documentation. I understand that if a young person arrives here without ID, it can be difficult to determine their age, and no system for doing so will be perfect, but charities also tell me of children arriving with ID, only to have it immediately set aside at the border.

As I understand it, the current model places the power to change a young asylum seeker's life in the hands of a border official conducting an age assessment based, according to Home Office guidance, on a person's "appearance and demeanour". If said border official believes that the asylum seeker is the age they claim to be—and different border officials' judgments will be hugely variable—they are placed into the care of the local authority, where further age assessments carried out by qualified social workers can take place if necessary, and where support networks are more readily available.

If, however, the border official believes that a person's appearance and demeanour very strongly suggest that they are significantly over 18, that person will face an age interview at a processing centre in Dover.

It is not just refugee charities that have raised concerns about this process. Even the Home Office's own guidance makes it clear that physical appearance is a notoriously unreliable basis for assessment of chronological age, and that demeanour can also be notoriously unreliable. What is more, the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration has described age assessments being undertaken at ports as "perfunctory".

Beyond the visual assessment, I am aware that many refugees who have been through the process have raised concerns about the interviews that have been undertaken. Their experiences include not being provided with the correct interpreter, being called liars and facing inappropriate comments about their physical appearance. This is unacceptable, and the reason it is so worrying is that the stakes are so high. When children are incorrectly assessed as adults, they are placed into poorly supervised adult accommodation, hotels and detention centres. The safeguarding risks for such children are obvious: some are as young as 14, sharing living accommodation with unrelated adults. Tragically, there have been multiple cases of these children being sexually and physically assaulted. Other children have witnessed suicide or self-harm by the traumatised adults they are living with, who are in need of help themselves.

Even if they avoid that, children in such settings still miss out on access to the pastoral and educational support that they need to rebuild their lives. Many have reported being stuck in their hotel rooms for days on end, with little or no information on how to challenge their age assessment and no certainty about their future. The toll this takes on their mental health and wellbeing is huge. Of the safeguarding referrals made to the Refugee Council relating to potential children staying in adult accommodation, the highest reported risk is suicide. The second highest risk is that the children abscond and we lose all sight of them, not knowing whether they have become homeless, destitute or exploited by someone offering them accommodation elsewhere. This is not alarmist: it is happening.

I am afraid to say that the Government's recent illegal migration legislation poses further risks—chief among them that children will be inadvertently sent to Rwanda. We know that last year, there were numerous cases of children who had been detained as adults being issued with notices of intent to remove them to Rwanda on flights that ultimately never took off. The Government recently rejected Baroness Lister's amendment to the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill, which would have ensured that children who had been wrongly assessed as adults by the Home Office would not be removed to Rwanda while that decision was still being challenged. In light of that, I would be grateful if the Minister could provide assurances that appeal rights regarding age assessments will be granted, and I implore her to ensure that people appealing their decision will not be removed until that process has taken place. Those seem like reasonable steps to avoid traumatised children wrongly being sent halfway across the world.

As well as addressing this issue, I am sure that in her response the Minister will want to talk about some of the measures the Government have put in place to

improve the age assessment process. I know that these include the recent authorisation of X-rays and MRI scans in what are being called scientific age assessments, and the establishment of a national age assessment board.

Will the Minister address the concerns of the Refugee Council that the national age assessment board will not work with people who have just arrived in the UK, and therefore will not impact initial age decisions? Can the Minister refer to any evidence showing that the use of X-rays or MRIs is more accurate than Merton-compliant age assessments carried out by qualified social workers, which are favoured by charities working in the refugee sector? Will the Minister explain what happens if an asylum seeker refuses an X-ray or MRI scan? There is an important principle that medical consent should not be sought from a person under duress. Given possible issues with the proposals put forward by the Government, will the Minister consider requests from the Refugee Council and others to limit the conduct of age assessments to fully qualified staff with relevant training?

On the safeguarding issues that I mentioned earlier, I hope the Minister will consider ensuring that the Home Office monitors what happens to people claiming to be children whom the Home Office has determined are adults, and establishing proper processes so that the Department can track the outcomes for those who are later found to be children. Even if the Minister chooses not to pursue those suggestions, I hope she will acknowledge that more needs to be done to improve the age assessment process for young asylum seekers.

I will end by reiterating what these children have been through. They have been driven away from their homes and the places they loved by violence and persecution, separated from family and friends, and forced to undertake an often perilous journey to the UK. Those children should not face new risks to their safety when they get here, and they should not be thrown into the terrifying limbo that is the adult asylum detention system. They should be greeted with fairness and decency when they reach these shores. I am sure the Minister would agree that those are fundamentally British values, so I look forward to hearing how the Government will uphold them when reforming age assessment processes for young asylum seekers.

2.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Laura Farris): I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) for securing this debate and for the sensitive way he presented these issues. Fairness and decency should indeed sit at the heart of our immigration and asylum system, particularly when it involves children. It might be helpful if I set out in general terms the Government's approach to age assessment. As he observed, the age of a person arriving in the United Kingdom would normally be established from the documents with which they travelled, but many who claim to be children do not have documentary evidence to support their age.

I am sure there is no real point of disagreement between the Government and the Opposition that there are serious safeguarding risks if individuals over the age of 18 are treated as children and placed in settings with children. We all know about the high-profile case in

Bournemouth last year of an adult man who was assessed as being 14 years old and in fact was wanted for a double murder in Serbia. We obviously want to avoid situations of that nature, and we are aware of other examples where pupils in schools have raised an alarm about an obviously mature adult who has joined their class purporting to be a child—indeed, in one case someone was reassessed to be 10 years older than their claimed age. That reduces the valuable resource and support that is available to genuine children, and undermines public confidence. Of course the Government have always been clear that there are serious equivalent safeguarding risks if true children are treated as adults.

I must point out that there are incentives for adults to claim to be under 18, as unaccompanied children generally receive a higher level of support than adults in several respects. That includes the accommodation and support they are provided with, the level of care they receive, perhaps including therapeutic care, the procedural and substantive treatment of their immigration claim, the arrangements that are needed to secure their possible removal, and whether or not they can be detained in immigration detention. The legislative reforms that the Government are bringing forward aim to make those assessments more consistent, reliable and robust from the outset.

Section 52 of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 makes provision for the scientific method of age assessment. This is a new and vital tool for the assessment of age that the Government need to get right. The full plans for integrating scientific age assessments into the existing process will be set out very shortly.

We accept that there is no single assessment method, scientific or otherwise, that can determine an individual's age. In response to the hon. Gentleman's challenge, scientific methods offer the opportunity for significant improvement, which is something we should welcome wherever we sit in respect of this debate. It should also be noted that the UK is one of the few European countries that do not currently employ any scientific methods of age assessment.

The Immigration (Age Assessments) Regulations 2024 came into force in January this year. They specify the use of X-rays and MRIs of certain body areas, including the wrist, to aid age estimation, as proposed in the recommendations of the Age Estimation Science Advisory Committee. I hope I can reassure the hon. Gentleman by saying that this is an expert committee, consisting of subject matter experts from a range of disciplines including social work, dentistry and radiology, and established by the Home Office's chief scientific adviser to provide expert advice on potential scientific methods of assessment, as well as ethics and best practice for their use.

Andrew Western: Can the Minister explain why the committee has encouraged the Government to abandon scientific methods of age assessment?

Laura Farris: Let me gently repeat that we are not going to do that. We are one of the only European countries that do not employ any scientific methods, and we are working towards the implementation of that. I think I gave a fair caveat by accepting that there is no single method that will ever be truly reliable, but a method can be used in conjunction with others. In due course I shall say something about the Merton test, to

which the hon. Gentleman referred in his speech. In our view, this is not just important but vital progress in the fair and accurate assessment of age, which is relevant to exactly the kinds of protection with which the hon. Gentleman is primarily concerned.

The combination of dental and skeletal images is important, as it increases the accuracy of the approach. The committee advocates a likelihood ratio method which offers a logical and consistent summary of the evidence and permits greater confidence in, particularly, the range of age assessment of whether the claimed age is possible. Given the scientific methods specified in the regulations, when an individual refuses to consent—without reasonable grounds—to the use of those methods, a decision maker must take that refusal as damaging the age-disputed person's credibility. This is referred to as a "negative inference". It would not automatically preclude the individual from being considered to be a child; that refusal would be taken into consideration alongside other evidence as part of the Merton-compliant age assessment process. None the less, it will be relevant.

Let me also clarify the current process of initial age investigations. The hon. Gentleman is correct: on the individual's arrival, the initial assessment is undertaken by an immigration officer. The threshold that must be applied is that immigration officers may treat an individual as an adult only when two members of Home Office staff determine that individual's physical appearance and demeanour strongly suggest that he or she is significantly over the age of 18. That is a deliberately high threshold. The principle of the benefit of the doubt is key: when there is doubt, an individual will be treated as a child pending further observation and consideration by a local authority. That approach was confirmed by the Supreme Court in the landmark case of *BF (Eritrea) v. Secretary of State for the Home Department* in 2021.

When doubt remains after the initial age assessment has been undertaken, the local authority will conduct a more in-depth assessment, known as the Merton-compliant age assessment, to which the hon. Gentleman has already referred. Merton assessments are holistic, social worker-led assessments that must adhere to principles that have been set out by the courts in the case of *R (on the application of B) v. London Borough of Merton*—a well-established public law case—as well as in subsequent case law. We know, however, that these tests are not sufficiently precise. They depend entirely on oral questions being put to the individual. In order to strengthen them, the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 allows local authorities to refer age assessments to designated officials of the Home Office who form the national age assessment board. The board, which was launched in March 2023, currently consists of 42 expert social workers, and aims to increase capacity and expertise in the system until we have scientific methods working alongside it. As well as conducting assessments for local authorities, the board supports them with training and best-practice advice.

Lastly, through the Illegal Migration Act 2023, the Government have taken steps to ensure that the process is as robust as possible. Section 58 of the Act introduces a regulation-making power that would allow the Secretary of State to set out the effect of a decision by an individual not to consent to the use of a specified scientific method for age assessment. Those regulations could, in the future, specify that a person who refuses to consent without reasonable grounds is to be treated as though

the decision maker had decided that they were over the age of 18. That power will not be used unless—and until—the Home Secretary determines that the science and analysis is sufficiently accurate to support providing for an automatic assumption of adulthood. Under section 57 of the 2023 Act, judicial reviews will not suspend removal, to avoid lengthy age disputes delaying or preventing removal of those who have been assessed to be adults.

In closing, once again I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate, raising what is indeed a sensitive issue, where accuracy really does matter. Whatever the dispute, I think that we agree on that point. Age assessment is critical not only to the integrity of our system, but, of course, to the protection of genuine children. We understand that it is crucial that these assessments are robust, consistent and well-evidenced to ensure that genuine children are not incorrectly treated as adults, and that adults are disincentivised from knowingly misrepresenting themselves as children.

Andrew Western: The Minister is being incredibly generous in giving way again. To further the attempts at accuracy, may I press her on the point I made about further monitoring of those whose claim of being a child is rejected at the border? At the moment, we have

no data showing how many of those decisions are overturned later, other than that pulled together by the charities I referred to earlier, who found that there were 1,300 between January 2022 and June 2023, and I understand that there have been some 600 since then. It would be incredibly helpful if the Government were to start tracking and monitoring that information. It would improve their own data and, I think, take us some way towards having greater certainty that they are on top of this issue.

Laura Farris: If the hon. Gentleman would be willing to write to the immigration Minister—I have tried to think about which of the two it would apply to, but I will get my office to clarify that—I will, of course, relay what has happened in this debate and ask them to reply specifically with reference to the numbers and mis-categorisations that the Refugee Council has drawn to his attention in that period. This is an important issue, and, as I have set out, one that the Government approach with the seriousness—and I hope the sensitivity—that this House would expect.

Question put and agreed to.

2.57 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 19 April 2024

CABINET OFFICE

State of the Estate: 2022-23

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): I have today laid before Parliament, pursuant to section 86 of the Climate Change Act 2008, the “State of the Estate in 2022-23”. This report describes the progress made on improving the efficiency and sustainability of the central Government estate and, where relevant, records the progress that Government have made since the previous year. The report is published on an annual basis, and this year highlights the following progress.

Government reduced their overall greenhouse gas emissions by 39%, compared to the 2017-18 baseline, with reductions in energy consumption saving the Government an estimated £163 million compared to the 2017-18 baseline.

Government as a whole reduced total waste by 16% from the 2017-18 baseline, exceeding the 15% target. In total, 5% of Departmental waste was sent to landfill, which therefore met the target of 5% maximum.

The Government Property Agency Government hubs have continued to grow in number during 2022-23, with the opening of Peterborough, Quay House, which brings together departments into this shared location, making more efficient use of space. Sixteen hubs are now in operation, with a combined floorspace of about 330,000 square metres, located in all four nations of the United Kingdom, providing a network of shared modern workspaces for the UK civil service.

Through the places for growth commitment, by March 2023, 12,075 roles had been relocated outside of London (this increased to 18,283 by 31 December 2023). This exceeds the programme’s interim 2025 milestone set out in the levelling-up White Paper of relocating 15,000 roles by 2025.

We are also seeing significant savings being achieved, demonstrating our commitment to running the UK estate in as efficient a manner as possible. We have disposed of no-longer-needed properties worth more than £1 billion, returning that money to the taxpayer to be reinvested.

Across Government and the wider public sector, services are delivering real improvements through more imaginative and integrated estate design, and through encouraging co-location and more efficient use of space. By 2030, Government property will have significantly contributed to economic growth, and supported improving the quality of public services, while at the same time helping to transform places and communities.

[HCWS419]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Administrative Earnings Threshold

The Minister for Employment (Jo Churchill): Further to written ministerial statement HCWS405, tabled on 15 April 2024, I can confirm we intend to lay the Universal Credit (Administrative Earnings Threshold) (Amendment) Regulations 2024 later today.

This will raise the administrative earnings threshold level, delivering on a commitment made in the spring Budget last year, to £892 per calendar month for individual customers and £1,437 per calendar month for couples in Great Britain. The new threshold levels would be equivalent to an individual working 18 hours per week at the national living wage or couples working a total of 29 hours per week at the national living wage. This change will mean that the threshold will have doubled since September 2022, when it was first increased from the equivalent of nine hours for a single person.

Combined with previous increases, this means 400,000 more customers will have more intensive support from our work coaches to help them to progress in work and move off welfare. This is why the Government have today laid regulations to amend Regulation 99(6) of the Universal Credit Regulations 2013 to raise the administrative earnings threshold level to £892 for individual claimants and £1,437 for couples in Great Britain, from 13 May 2024.

This is all part of our welfare reforms to make work pay and is backed up by our £2.5 billion back to work plan, which will help a million people find, stay and succeed in employment.

[HCWS418]

Work and Health Update

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): Together with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), later today we will publish a Command Paper launching the fit note reform call for evidence.

Good work is good for health. We know that work positively impacts people’s physical and mental health and wellbeing, and through our ambitious employment package, announced at the spring Budget in 2023, and our back to work plan, we are supporting people in their journey back to work by addressing their needs and empowering them to fulfil their potential.

However, there are currently 2.8 million people of working age who are economically inactive due to long-term sickness. We know that 10 million “not fit for work” fit notes are issued every year. This represents a missed opportunity to help people get the appropriate support they may need to remain in work. We should reform the fit note process so that it starts with an objective assessment of what someone can do with the right support, rather than what they cannot. A new fit note process will ensure people get the right help for their needs, reducing pressure on GPs and helping to free up thousands of GP appointments.

At autumn statement 2023, the Chancellor announced £24 million to begin designing and implementing fit note trailblazers in a number of integrated care systems in England. These trailblazers will test how to give people receiving a fit note for a prolonged period of time the support they need to stay in or get back to work. These trailblazers will build on the WorkWell service pilots providing integrated health and work support locally.

The call for evidence published today will gather evidence to assess the impact of the current fit note process in supporting work and health conversations. It asks stakeholders how they would like to see the fit note process change to better support people to start, stay and succeed in work.

While fit note policy and regulations apply to Great Britain, fit notes are delivered within health systems, which are devolved. Collaboration is key to achieving our ambitions, and we are committed to working with stakeholders across the United Kingdom as we progress fit note reform ahead of a formal consultation later this year. The call for evidence therefore seeks a broad range of views and ideas from those with lived experiences, healthcare professionals and employers.

This is an important part of our next generation of welfare reforms and the Government's ambition to improve health outcomes, and help people get access to the support they need to return to, remain and thrive in work.

[HCWS417]

Petitions

Friday 19 April 2024

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Road safety at the junction of B671 from Elton village onto the A605

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares deep concern regarding the ongoing hazards at the junction of B671 from Elton village onto the A605, which has seen a distressing history of road traffic accidents and fatalities; further that the lack of safety measures, such as a roundabout, speed restrictions, or traffic lights, raises significant alarm; notes that despite existing cameras monitoring an average speed of 60MPH, accidents persist, highlighting the inadequacy of current measures; further that urgent reconsideration of installing traffic lights and speed restrictions is imperative, not only for local residents' safety but also for commuters on the A605; further notes that given the success of traffic lights at the Barnwell A605 junction and their cost-effectiveness, their implementation should be swiftly considered; further declares that the financial and emotional toll of accidents, spanning back to the bypass construction in 1990, underscores the urgency for action; further notes that over the past two decades, our community has endured tragic losses from road accidents, with the first recorded in 2000, and the resulting injuries, fatalities, property damages, and strain on law enforcement and medical resources have been extensive, estimated to cost hundreds of thousands of pounds; further declares that immediate improvements are overdue, and we implore the authorities to prioritise the necessary measures to safeguard our roads and communities; and further that the introduction of the Elton bypass neglected pedestrian safety entirely, evidenced by the hazardous crossing conditions at the public footpaths.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to put pressure on the county council responsible and ask that this matter be addressed promptly, and consider appropriate measures to ensure the safety of local residents and commuters at the junction of B671 from Elton village onto the A605.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002958]

OBSERVATIONS

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Blackpool's Waterloo Road and Bond Street region

The petition of residents of the constituency of Blackpool South,

Declares that the Government and Blackpool Council should consider the need for regeneration funding to be provided for the area surrounding Waterloo Road and Bond Street in Blackpool.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that residents and business are adequately supported through relevant regeneration funds, and to ensure the Government works with Blackpool Council to ensure comprehensive plans to develop plans are prepared in conjunction with local stakeholders.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Scott Benton, *Official Report*, 19 February 2024; Vol. 745, c. 560.]

[P002912]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young):

Since the Government announced their commitment to work in partnership with Blackpool Council in March 2022, a concerted effort between Blackpool, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Homes England and other Government Departments has worked to ensure Blackpool has the right housing, economic and skills offer to achieve its vision to “Make Blackpool Better”—to be a great place to live and work, and to be one of the leading seaside destinations in the UK.

We also recognise that the local council, with all its local knowledge and understanding, is clearly the best placed organisation to take responsibility for, and deliver, many programmes locally.

I visited Blackpool in January and got the opportunity to see some of the fantastic work currently being undertaken locally to improve the standards of homes in the town, with Government support.

Blackpool has received more than £100 million of levelling-up funding since 2019, as well as the £40 million DLUHC-funded court relocation project, releasing Ministry of Justice-occupied land and safeguarding a £300 million private sector-led scheme set to bring up to 1,000 jobs to the town while also providing the town with a new modern courthouse.

Levelling-up funding includes £40 million from round 2 of the levelling-up fund to create a state-of-the-art learning centre called the “Multiversity” for over 1,000 people, which will replace the ageing Blackpool and the Fylde College facilities with new state-of-the-art facilities in the town centre. Another £15 million from round 3 of the fund will improve traffic flow, access to public transport, and infrastructure for cyclists and pedestrians.

The town is benefiting from nearly £40 million of investment from our towns fund which is being spent on a host of job-creating, tourism-boosting projects.

To unlock Blackpool's economic potential, there is a need for more and safer homes in well-designed neighbourhoods, which help attract and retain skilled residents in the town.

The Renters (Reform) Bill will apply a decent homes standard to the private rented sector for the first time. This will ensure tenants benefit from homes that are safe and decent, and support the Government's ambition to reduce the number of non-decent rented homes by 50% by 2030. The decent homes standard will help

landlords by simplifying and clarifying requirements and establishing a level playing field, backed up by consistent enforcement.

A pilot for the decent homes standard is running in Blackpool to improve standards in areas that are in greatest need as part of our mission to halve the number of non-decent homes by 2030.

Since 2021 Blackpool has been awarded:

£55,400,000 in levelling-up fund money (round 2—£40 million from January 2023 and round 3—£15.4 million from November 2023)

£90 million regeneration investment

£8,000,000 in capital regeneration project funding

£5,885,134 in UK shared prosperity fund funding

£778,638 in community renewal funding and

£39,500,000 town deal funding.

TREASURY

Pensioners' Personal Tax Allowance

The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk

Regrets that the Chancellor's Spring Budget ignored the fiscal drag that pensioners are experiencing due to the policy on freezing Personal Tax allowance until April 2028; declares that this policy disproportionately affects pensioners who do not gain from cuts to National Insurance; notes this policy creates poorer pensioners who are already impacted by the cost-of-living crisis.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the soaring costs of food and energy bills for pensioners when setting the Personal Tax allowance.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 19 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 904.]

[P002931]

Observation from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, (Nigel Huddleston):

The Government thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for submitting the petition on behalf of his constituents regarding pensioners and the income tax personal allowance.

The Government are committed to ensuring that older people are able to live with the dignity and respect they deserve, and the state pension is the foundation of state support for older people. Thanks to the Government honouring their commitment to the triple lock, the

basic and new state pensions increased by 8.5% this April, one of the largest ever cash increases in the state pension. This will support the income of over 12 million pensioners. The full rate of the new state pension is now worth £11,500 per year, while the full basic state pension is £3,700 higher, in cash terms, than in 2010. That is £990 more than if it had been uprated by prices, and £1,000 more than if it had been uprated by earnings.

The PA—the amount of income that each individual may receive before paying income tax—is currently set at a level high enough to ensure that those pensioners whose sole income is the full rate of the new state pension or basic state pension do not pay any income tax.

With respect to individuals above the state pension age who continue to work, many will pay a lower rate of tax on their income from work, as they do not pay national insurance.

The Government also provide pensioners with winter fuel payments, free eye tests, free NHS prescriptions, and free bus passes. The total support over 2022 to 2024 to help households and individuals with higher bills amounts to £96 billion—an average of £3,400 per UK household. This includes the cost of living payments in 2023-24, which helped more than 8 million UK households on eligible means-tested benefits, including pensioners receiving pension credit, 8 million pensioner households and 6 million people across the UK on eligible disability benefits.

The petitioners raise concerns about the PA being maintained at its current level until 2028. The Government have nearly doubled the PA since 2010—it is over 20% higher in real terms—ensuring some of the lowest earners do not pay income tax. Thanks to the PA, almost a quarter of individuals with taxable income will not pay income tax in 2024-25.

Due to the significant real terms increases to the PA, it is estimated there will be 1.8 million people taken out of income tax in 2024-25, compared to the threshold rising in line with inflation from 2010-11. This will include many pensioners.

The Government did make the difficult but necessary decision to maintain income tax thresholds at current levels to ensure the tax system supports strong public finances. Maintaining these thresholds is universal, progressive and fair. The highest earners will contribute more of the revenue.

As with all aspects of the tax system, the Government keep the PA under review and any decisions on future changes to the PA will be made by the Chancellor in the context of the wider public finances.

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