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HOUSE OF COMMONS
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Friday 17 January 2025

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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).

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

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

New Homes (Solar Generation) Bill

Second Reading

9.34 am

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I move the Bill with sunshine in my heart. I am an environmentalist, I have fought for years to improve the housing market in my town of Cheltenham, and I strongly believe that we all deserve a fairer deal on the cost of living. I was elected in July after campaigning on those three issues, and I move Second Reading of the Bill with those issues in mind. I thank hon. Members who have taken the time to attend today's debate, and I urge them to retain a sunny disposition for the next few hours. I am happy to take interventions from Members from across the House, but I hope hon. Members will not use them to throw too much shade. I promise a warm response regardless, and I hope the Minister will provide the same.

Today, we can all make a commitment to a brighter future by backing the sunshine Bill. It will be a future in which people have lower household bills; we are less reliant on dirty and expensive fossil fuels, often imported from abroad; and the country's energy supplies are more secure. This future is a vision supported by voters across political divides, as well as by industry.

Before I get to the core of my speech, I ask hon. Members to think back a few short years, to the start of the energy bills crisis. Householders endured a 54% rise in the energy price cap in April 2022, and bills remain 43% higher than they were before the crisis. That caused widespread fuel poverty. We witnessed another shocking increase in food bank use, businesses went bust, jobs were lost and family holiday plans were cancelled. The crisis also laid bare how short-sighted past ideological decisions were to slow down the roll-out of renewable technologies.

Imagine an alternative. Imagine that more homes included solar power generation during that crisis, and in the ongoing crisis. Bills could and should have been hundreds of pounds lower for everyone; householders would have been insulated against higher bills; and our nation would have been safer and stronger. Food banks would have been less busy, and the Government would not have been forced to give such large subsidies to ensure that people could get by.

At the heart of the discussion is a pressing need to tackle twin crises: the cost of living and climate change. As hon. Members will know, the climate change discussion often leads us to debate difficult trade-offs—the Government are grappling with those and they have my good wishes in doing so—but solar energy generation on new build homes is very much not in that category. The Bill helps us to tackle the cost of living and climate change—a clear win-win.

MCS Foundation research has shown that the payback period for a solar array on a three-bedroom semi-detached house is just four years, when that array is combined with other technologies that will be widely available in the next few years. Over a 25-year mortgage, the savings stand at a whopping £38,000. Solar technology also offers homeowners the chance to profit directly. The Energy Saving Trust estimates that a typical household could make between £270 and £400 a year.

On the environmental side, research by Solar Energy UK shows that buildings accounted for 20% of all UK emissions in 2023. The Government have placed building new homes at the heart of their agenda, which I support.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I genuinely welcome today's Second Reading of the Bill. Having brought two private Members' Bills through Parliament from the Back Benches, I wish the hon. Gentleman every success; it can be a long journey. Will he say more about the impact of solar panels on the environment and the green belt? In the shift towards using more solar panels, I fear many of the panels will be installed on prime agricultural land. I am disappointed that in Walsall, the planning inspector has just given permission for a battery storage facility on the edge of my constituency, right by a conservation area. I feel strongly that we need to look at alternative places for solar panels in order to protect communities and our green belt.

Max Wilkinson: The right hon. Lady is entirely right. She and Members across the House will have noted that the Campaign to Protect Rural England has taken a strong interest in this issue and in the Bill, for precisely the reasons she describes, with which I have a lot of sympathy. Efficient use of land and space in this country is extremely important.

If we are to achieve the new home building targets that the Government have set out, we must ensure that new build homes are equipped for the challenges of the future, which include climate change and looking after our environment. If we do not change the standards for new housing stock, we not only miss an economic opportunity but put the environment at risk. The Government's own advisory body, the Climate Change Committee, has advised that the UK will not meet its emissions targets without the "near complete decarbonisation" of housing stock. That is why it is so important that the new Government, specifically the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, have moved the conversation along, not least as shown by the answer to a question that I asked the right hon. Gentleman before Christmas, in which he said he was "very sympathetic" to the case for mandatory solar panels on new build homes. He is right.

The case for updating the regulations is irrefutable. The regulations that govern building work are set out in the Building Act 1984, which is the year I was born, and

[Max Wilkinson]

the Building Regulations 2010, which is so long ago that Members will be disturbed to learn that I still had a large Brylcreem bill in those days. The previous Government consulted on the future homes standard, but we were not able to respond before the general election. It is heartening that the current Government have promised a response and to pick up that work. There will of course be strong pushback from some developers, who will default to thinking about profit only. I understand that profit motive, but I urge developers to think about the planet and what their customers are demanding.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I am pleased to see the Bill in the House today, but am not quite so entranced by the hon. Member's puns, or by his making me feel completely and utterly ancient. Setting aside that niggly, on a serious point, does he agree that it is important for us to have a secure supply chain for solar panels, and that we eliminate the use of solar panels built by Uyghur people subject to forced labour in China?

Max Wilkinson: The hon. Member makes a very reasonable point. We need to be clear that our supply chains in this country are free from slave labour. That is a matter for Government procurement rules, and I understand that measures on that will come to the House in due course.

As I was saying, I understand the developers' motives and why some will push back, but developers know what we all know, which is that the technology already exists and that implementing the measures in the sunshine Bill will be relatively straightforward for them. Solar panel technology has been available for many years and the construction industry is accustomed to working with it. Mandating installation at the construction stage is logical; it removes the burden from homeowners, and places the responsibility with the developer.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the Bill to the House. It is so important that it almost feels like a no-brainer. Many of my residents share with me their frustration about trying to navigate the process of installing solar panels. There are questions about which provider to go with, how it works, and all the technical details. Does he agree that not only does the Bill have an environmental benefit, but it will—as he has started to explain—take that burden from residents and empower them? They will benefit from lower bills without all the faff.

Max Wilkinson: My hon. Friend is entirely right. As she knows, the Bill includes a recommendation to set an industry standard, so that consumers can have confidence in what they are buying. Not only is the burden removed from homeowners and responsibility placed with developer, but the Bill creates an efficiency saving in human resources and materials. It is an entirely logical step to take. Installing solar panels on roofs while the houses are being built is at least 10% cheaper than retrofitting.

There will be issues around cost, which Members might raise in interventions or in speeches, but Government estimates put the cost of mandatory solar panels on all new homes at around £5,200 per home. That sounds

like a lot of money in isolation, but the average cost of a new build in the final quarter of 2024 was far in excess of £400,000, so we are talking about little more than 1% of the price of a new build home. That is next to nothing in the context of a monthly mortgage repayment, if we take the figure in raw form, and it would be offset by lower bills.

This Bill would mandate that all new homes are built with solar generation technology covering the roof space—a minimum of 40% of the equivalent of the building's ground-floor area.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I too am interested in solar panels being mandated on public buildings. In my area, Rednock school has had solar panels retrofitted. Solar panels in educational facilities have two effects: they not only save money for the school, but teach young people about the issue. Also in my area, the NHS is looking to put solar panels on all south-facing roofs of hospitals. I wonder if we could extend the Bill to public buildings in general.

Max Wilkinson: I take the hon. Member's point on board entirely, and agree with him. This Bill is limited to residential new builds; I was very conscious that in the public sector, the cost of initial installation would be borne by the taxpayer. He was right to reference schools. In my constituency, Bournside school is installing a huge ground source heat pump. That is a national, leading case study. He is right that it is important that young people understand what is going on. With regard to industry standards, we need to make sure that there is an industry-wide regulator and a certification scheme. The industry needs proper regulation to give consumers confidence in the product.

Supply chains were mentioned. To give supply chains, the construction industry and developers time to adjust, the Bill proposes that the regulations apply from 1 October 2026. Ministers may have comments on whether that is a realistic timescale—they might want to make it longer. I am sure that there will be a discussion.

Reasonable exemptions need to apply, including for very tall buildings; for buildings on which it would not be economical to install solar panels, due to roof size or other factors; and for buildings that had other forms of renewable energy generation installed that were more appropriate for that setting. Where buildings cannot physically accommodate solar panels that cover at least 40% of the building's ground-floor area, the Bill requires that solar panels are installed to the maximum extent possible.

It is important to take part in some myth busting. To dispel one big myth about solar panels, they do not always need a clear, sunny day to work; they will continue to work in overcast, cloudy conditions. I think we can all agree that that is good news for this country. To dispel another myth, solar panels can be installed to good effect on north-facing roofs, although efficiency will be a little lower.

The overwhelming strength of the case for the measure means that the sunshine Bill has gathered support from industry. Over Christmas, several businesses and industry organisations signed an open letter to the Government in which they declared their support for the Bill. I am grateful for the support of the MCS Foundation, Solar Energy UK, Eco2Solar, E.ON Next and Ecotricity.

I am particularly grateful to the MCS Foundation for its assistance and advice on technical matters in these last few months.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for letting me interrupt his excellent speech, which is loaded with fantastic puns that I would be very proud of. What discussions has he had with industry on making sure that we have the correct skills pipeline, so that we have enough installers and other people required to ensure that solar panels are installed efficiently and effectively, and to maximise the economic benefit to this country?

Max Wilkinson: The hon. Member is absolutely right. He will recall that if we go back more than a decade, there was a thriving solar energy industry in this country. Sadly, we have taken steps back over the last few years when it comes to the skills pipeline. I know that issue is on this Government's agenda, and I welcome that. On the date on which we might look at this, we hope that further education colleges will put on courses to train people up, and that there would be more industry work, too.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will the hon. Member explain why his Bill excludes the use of solar thermal panels?

Max Wilkinson: The Bill focuses on solar photovoltaics. Solar thermal panels are a different type of technology and are not covered by the Bill.

I would also like to thank CPRE. The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) spoke earlier about the preservation of land and fields in green areas, and the CPRE is specifically interested from that perspective.

Wendy Morton: This is becoming increasingly worrying, because we are now starting to see policy on grey belt. I fear that if we do not thoroughly grasp the issue of where solar panels, battery storage and all the other renewables infrastructure should go, we risk green belt being all of a sudden redefined as grey belt, in a few years' time, and being built on.

Max Wilkinson: The right hon. Lady speaks powerfully for her constituency, which I know has a specific issue.

We mentioned housing developers, and one housing developer has put its head above the parapet to support the Bill. I am grateful for the support of Thakeham, and it is to be applauded for supporting the measure. Developers should support the Bill for sound business reasons. There is a clear market preference for homes with solar panels, and a relatively small proportion of the price will be rewarded with a decent payback, and customers want them.

Politically, there is demonstrable cross-party support. In the last Parliament, 79% of Members were found to be supportive, and I suspect the percentage is higher in this new Parliament. The climate barometer tracks support for mandatory solar panels on new builds and found a clear majority of support among all parties' voters, so doing this would place us at the centre of political gravity. Some 80% of Conservative voters, 89% of Labour voters, 92% of Liberal Democrat voters and 63% of Reform supporters responded to the survey in favour of

mandatory solar panels for new build homes. Those same constituents rightly look to us to make the right and logical decisions on these matters. They back the measure because all the evidence points to clear benefits at every level, including the Government's positive agenda on energy and climate.

MCS Foundation research has found that mandatory solar panels on 1.5 million homes would be the equivalent of two additional Sizewell C nuclear power stations, which should give us all pause for thought. For a country that struggles to build infrastructure, we must not look past these easier, small-scale wins.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing the Bill. He talks about the nuclear power that may not be needed if we have solar panels on houses. Does he have a view on how much pressure we could take off demand on green land for solar farms, because many people have concerns about that use of green land, if we had solar panels on new builds?

Max Wilkinson: My strong suspicion is that the market will help to decide the answer to that question, but it is inevitable that if we produce more energy from some sources, it will lower demand in other areas. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point.

I visited Hinkley Point on a school trip as an 11-year-old and was told, very excitedly, that a new Hinkley C was on the way. I regret to tell the House that I am now 40 and, on current projections, Hinkley C is not expected to generate any power until I am at least 44. On the point of time, the new homes built today will outlast us all. If we can make them work better for the planet, they will be a lasting testament to this House's efforts to tackle climate change, and they will offer protections against the energy shocks we have all endured too. That is what we have the chance to do today, if Ministers are willing to support the principles of the sunshine Bill. We cannot and should not let this opportunity pass us by, and it is our duty to build a political consensus here to match the consensus among members of the public.

So to paraphrase the great Morecambe and Wise in the song that shares the informal name we have given to this Bill, let our arms be as warm as the sun up above, and let us think about how much joy we can give to each brand new bright tomorrow—if only we can lower people's energy bills and help to tackle climate change too.

9.54 am

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for introducing the Bill. I will try not to cloud the Chamber too much with puns; I will leave it to other hon. Members to shower the room with them. *[Laughter.]* It's so painful.

I am glad that the Bill has been brought forward. There are so many good things in it, and I want to ensure that the country as a whole can embrace the future of solar power generation where people live, right in the heart of communities and on their homes. I have moved in the past year or so to ground level, as many people in my constituency know and frequently comment about on Facebook. I have lived most of my adult life in tower blocks, and one of the great things

[Kevin McKenna]

about 1960s council tower blocks is that there are fantastic views over everybody's roofs. In all the decades I lived in those tower blocks, it was apparent that we are missing out in this country. So much acreage on rooftops is empty and devoid of power generation, while other countries have leapt ahead and taken advantage.

At the same time, I have seen where this has not quite worked. I watched a new council housing block being built right next to the previous place I lived in. Over its rooftops, I saw the solar panels go in and then saw what the problems were, where the management company and the local council were not quite able to make it work and to generate power for people there. The solar panels were for a long time unused and not functioning. That is the sign of a technology that was not quite mature, and it is only in the past five years that that has happened.

When, like me, Members go around their constituencies, they will see lots of solar panels on houses and have lots of conversations with people in pubs who have installed them on their houses. Some people will have had a great experience and will talk at length about how it has reduced their bills, and unfortunately others tell of the problems and challenges of getting connected to the grid and making it work. That is not a reason not to do it, but it is a reason to have a clear eye as we go forward on this change. Hopefully, the Minister will talk about how we can ensure that this policy is successful in future.

There are loads of opportunities, but we should not lose sight of other opportunities as well. One of the most impressive things I have seen in my constituency from an industrial side is the cluster of factories around Kemsley paper mill from DS Smith. A third of the cardboard produced in the UK is recycled in that one location. It is part of a set of factories that use their waste products and heat to generate power themselves in a circular carbon economy. A key part is more traditional forms of power production. For instance, all the cardboard that is not used in those factories and that cannot be recycled is turned into electricity, and carbon capture is used. The carbon capture process is then used to support work in other factories, such as the production of plasterboard, and the waste heat is used.

The factories are already doing great work, and they want to expand further with solar power, particularly on an old landfill site, which is perfectly placed. That is a great opportunity, but there are also the factory roofs. Not all the buildings are suitable, but as we build on that cluster and can generate power locally, and as we build more homes around them and in that area to provide power, solar power has an important part to play. I very much want to see that we are able to change our building regulations and to ensure they meet the needs and opportunities from factories, but, at the same time, we must not close our eyes to the fact that there are many other ways of ensuring that we reach a zero-carbon future.

Fixing the housing crisis is absolutely not mutually exclusive with fixing the climate crisis. The hon. Member rightly identified the cost of living crisis and the climate crisis. I would add in the housing crisis as a third part of that, and I can see he does not disagree.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op):

This point has been made a few times, but it is almost as if there is a tension between protecting our natural environment and making progress on renewable energy sources. It is not a choice between the two; one is central to the other. As a former councillor, I know that it is vital that community voices are heard in this. If there is one thing that upsets local communities, it is when they are not involved in conversations on matters that directly impact them and the areas they live in. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Kevin McKenna: I wholeheartedly agree. I gave the example of a power generator on a roof not working, and that came down to the fact that the local community was not involved. The residents on the block saw no benefit from it, but it was causing them problems, including leaks in the roof and all sorts of other stuff. It is vital that we have not just a circular energy economy but a circular economic and monetary economy so that people see the benefits in their pockets as well as in the lights and heating in their homes.

I am keen to hear from the Minister what the Government plan to do to change the building regulations, meet the aspirations in the Bill and ensure that we have a comprehensive strategy to progress towards a zero-carbon, net zero future, while ensuring that that does not get in the way of tackling local environmental problems—biodiversity and so on—or the housing and cost of living crises. Those things are all joined up. That is how developers will work and deliver, and how we can ensure that that happens.

We all know that implementation is the tricky part of policy. The intention is very straightforward—and this Bill is full of great intentions—but getting the implementation right will be the challenge. We have had 14 years of hot and cold climate policy. Sometimes the previous Government went hell for leather on tackling climate change; at other points, they did not seem so certain. As well as developers, businesses and households have struggled with that, because they have not been sure of the direction of travel. I am hopeful that our new Government will now focus on stability as a key plank of our growth agenda, giving developers, communities and households the certainty they need to plan together. Everyone is looking for that framework.

Some areas and towns face greater challenges on housing and housing need. In Sheerness in my constituency, for example, the housing stock is of deteriorating quality. Much of it is post-war council housing, which, unsurprisingly in a coastal area, is not lasting and has high maintenance costs. We need a comprehensive renewal that brings in not just better housing, but the opportunity to leapfrog several stages in environmental learning and energy production, and ensures that energy production is brought into the heart of towns in my constituency and those of other hon. Members.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is speaking with great passion about his constituents—that is always great to hear. When it comes to new homes, we must consider their efficiency from top to bottom. The Bill will add solar panels to new homes—we all welcome that, and I am happy to support it—but we must go further by ensuring that our homes are as efficient, warm and cheap to heat as

possible. In Scotland, the private Member's Bill introduced by Alex Rowley MSP could mean that all homes in Scotland are built to the Passivhaus standard, which I think is the gold standard right now. Does my hon. Friend think that we should aspire to that?

Kevin McKenna: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for coming in on that point, and I very much agree. Although my constituency is generally not quite as cold and damp as parts of Scotland, it is pretty cold and damp, and when the wind comes along the Swale it can get quite cold, as people who live in north Kent will know. The quality of housing stock, including insulation, needs attention. That is what I mean by a comprehensive picture; it is about not just power generation, but ensuring that we do not waste power and that the effect is ultimately felt in people's pockets.

I know that other Members will talk with greater expertise and in greater depth about things happening in their constituencies and the opportunities that they see, and I look forward to listening to them. As we move forward, we must learn from past mistakes and from current great practice, and ensure that these policies actually work, unlike in the false starts of the past.

10.4 am

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) on his good fortune in securing a place in the ballot in order to introduce what is, without doubt, a very important Bill. I am, however, concerned about the scope of the Bill, and I will come to that in a moment, if I may—I do not propose to take very long. For many years, I have consistently opposed the installation of solar farms—of course, they are not farms at all—on agricultural land.

In east Kent, we are losing grade 1 agricultural land far too frequently, both to development and to be used for solar power generation. It is completely unnecessary. As I have said many times, both in this House and outside it, we have acres and acres of rooftops in public ownership, on public buildings—schools, hospitals and prisons—in addition to acres of car park space, which the French would be covering in solar panels. If we use all of that, I can see no need whatsoever to use for these purposes fine agricultural land that should be used for growing crops for feeding people. That is why I think that the scope of the Bill, good though it may be, does not go far enough. We must look, not just at new build, but at what exists and what can and should be done.

By the bye, I would go a stage further and say that we should not only be looking at solar panels, but at grey water systems. We waste gallons and gallons of water off the rooftops of this country, which of course cannot then soak into the land because we have covered it in tarmac, so it is not replenishing the aquifers. That water ought to be used for flushing lavatories and matters that do not require potable water. Again, I think there is a trick that may have been missed.

Quite clearly, what is going to happen is that the developers and the builders will scream like stuck pigs. For why? Let us take a development in Herne Bay in my constituency. I will not name the developer, because I would hate to upset Taylor Wimpey, but it has avoided installing electric vehicle charging points because there is a bit of wriggle room—the amount that it would add

to the cost of the property—that allows it to get off the hook. I do not doubt that installing solar panels initially would add to the first purchase price of the property, which of course might eat into profit, and we would hate to see that. But this is essential. We have to do this, and it is long past time. I notice that the Bill gives 2026 as the start date; I can see no reason whatsoever why we should not start immediately and say that, from now on, every new build should be fitted with photovoltaic panels.

There is another issue, which is the design of the technology. We all know that retrofitted solar panels are pretty unattractive—hideous, to be blunt about it. It surprises me that, in this day and age, those developing this technology have not gone far enough and fast enough to develop attractive panels that are simply roofs like any other roof. It has got to be possible to develop a photovoltaic tile that could be used on listed buildings, but that has not happened.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I just want to advise the right hon. Member that several products of the type he is referencing are available on the market at the moment.

Sir Roger Gale: If the hon. Gentleman can tell me of a photovoltaic tile that is acceptable to the people who are enforcing regulations relating to listed buildings, I would be delighted to hear it. That is what I was trying to come on to before I was interrupted.

Kent, a wonderful county, has very many grade II listed buildings, and at present, it is not permitted to use solar panels—or solar tiles, as I would like to see them—on those listed buildings. It is not even permitted on other buildings, outbuildings, cottages or whatever within the curtilage of a listed building. That rules out a considerable quantity of property that can and should accommodate solar panels.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): King's College in Cambridge, one of the oldest and most prestigious heritage buildings, now has a fine array of solar panels that it managed to get through planning permission. Does the right hon. Member agree that what we need in planning terms is for material weight to be given to climate change, as well as conservation status? That is where the crux of the matter is. It would allow all those who are responsible for listed homes or who have homes in conservation areas to do energy efficiency in the right way.

Sir Roger Gale: Up to a point, I agree with the hon. Lady, but only up to a point. I do not want to see the fine buildings of Kent smothered in hideous installations, so we have to find a way technically of making the panels acceptable. I accept entirely that retrofitting is much harder than new build. It is possible to inset photovoltaic panels into a new roof on a new build, but it is much harder to retrofit it attractively. I would like to see us make much more effort to go down that road, so that we come up with products that are acceptable across the board—not just for new build, but for existing buildings.

It is essential that this Bill has a Second Reading, and I will be supporting it today. There are flaws in it, but that is what the Committee stage is about, and we

[Sir Roger Gale]

should allow the Bill to go into Committee. If I may say to the hon. Member for Cheltenham, there is rather too much wriggle room. I can see canny developers finding ways of exploiting some of the exemptions, if we are not careful, that he has written into the Bill.

Sir Christopher Chope: Does my right hon. Friend agree that an unintended consequences of this Bill could be that it is no longer possible to build a new thatched house? In Dorset and Hampshire, we welcome people who are developing new thatched houses. How will that work with this Bill?

Sir Roger Gale: The Bill does accommodate exemptions, and my hon. Friend makes a case in point. In the village I live in, we have thatched buildings, and I would like to see more of them. There may be cases where an exemption should be permitted, but looking at the Bill as it stands, it seems that these loopholes are wide open to exploitation, and they will have to be tightened up. That, however, is the purpose of the Committee. Let us give the Bill its Second Reading, get it into Committee, amend it and bring it back on Report and Third Reading, and then let us see it become law.

10.13 am

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): One of my previous employers used to run a competition for schoolchildren. They asked them to draw a picture of a better future where we tackled our climate and ecological crises. The entries were displayed on a wall close to my office, and many times a day I passed them and looked at them.

Many young people had chosen to show a contrast. On one side of the page was often a burning world—now painfully familiar from our news feeds, as our dear friends in California find their world set alight, and I am also reminded to remember our neighbours here in the UK still reeling from our recent floods. The children's pictures were sadly a good predictor of the threat, but on the other side of the page, where they showed their hope for tomorrow, children often drew homes surrounded by trees with happy people playing outside in the sunshine. Without fail, on the rooftops of the houses in those pictures were solar panels. Our children understood that a bright and sustainable future depends on clean and sustainable energy.

Our Government's mission to make the UK a clean energy superpower is a direct response to the climate crisis and a clear mission to make energy secure and affordable. Photovoltaics fit the bill perfectly—simple, reliable and effective, they are the purest form of renewable energy, converting photons directly into electrical power, and we can place that power directly in the hands of homeowners.

The need for us to embrace solar power as part of a suite of energy technologies for a sustainable future is clear. Alongside offshore wind and underpinned by storage using green hydrogen, solar photovoltaic is a key technology for the UK to decarbonise its electricity and all the sectors and use cases that we electrify. While the use of land for solar generation is rightly contended, we have a vast and perfectly designed, yet barely tapped, resource on our rooftops.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Residents in my constituency are aghast that a mega 840 MW solar farm is being proposed by the Blenheim estate, which, people believe, has not allowed solar panels to be placed on the houses it has developed in the area. Does the hon. Member agree that placing solar panels on the roofs of houses is a much better way to diversify solar panels and build the community consent for the renewable transition that is part of the Government's mission?

Tom Collins: I fully agree. Many people have told me that, intuitively, they would like solar to be put on roofs first. I think there is strong consensus that that should be our direction.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) talked about some of the challenges of retrofitting. We need to listen to the social science, harness new initiatives such as GB Energy and activate local authorities to empower ordinary people to retrofit solar. We must develop ways for people to easily access trusted partners to help them decarbonise their homes and save money as a result.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): The average price to install solar panels post build is somewhere between £5,000 and £8,000. The majority of people do not have that kind of cash stuck down the back of the sofa. Does the hon. Member agree that supporting the Bill is an investment both in our environment and in reducing energy bills for all new homeowners, not just those who have the cash to do so?

Tom Collins: I agree. As we face a transition in a range of technologies—my professional background is in heat—it is important that we put consumers at the heart of that and ensure that it works for them, and that we find ways to make it accessible, easy, affordable and beneficial to embrace new technologies. There are new business models available that can help us do that—heat as a service, for example—and we need to embrace those. But whatever we do as we navigate the transition, it is vital that we put people at the heart of what we build.

Having worked in the energy sector for 20 years, there is one comment that I have heard, and uttered myself, very many times—more than I can possibly count: “We should be putting solar on every new home.” There are very few no-brainers in politics, but if any exist, surely that is one of them. We have the opportunity to make a crucial change, to stop growing the problem and start solving it. Putting solar power on every new home will save people money. It will boost our national renewable capacity. It will be a crucial step in our mission for clean energy. And it will mean that for our children, who hope for a better future for people and our planet, we can begin to deliver the homes that they have always dreamed of.

10.18 am

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for introducing the Bill. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Just after the general election, Ministers made the shock decision that the Sunnica solar farm in Ely and East Cambridgeshire would go ahead, despite the planning

inspector's recommendation that it should not. The farm will cover a vast area of our green space, using up prime farming land—land that could be set aside for the benefit of nature, and land that we might have used to build much-needed new homes. No sooner had that solar farm got permission than the lovely glossy leaflets for the next one came through the door about the next consultation, on an even bigger solar farm across my constituency, and others. Yet, as we have heard, we have acres and acres of roof space that we could put solar panels on. Why are we not doing that?

A couple of years ago, I was on a planning committee visit to a new housing estate that was being built, and I noticed that there was just one, or sometimes two, solar panel on each roof. I said to the developer, "Why just one or two? That's hardly making a dent in things." His answer was, "That was all we were required to do."

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, because I am a councillor on Mid Sussex district council. Some four years ago, I was sitting in training on a cross-party basis with Conservatives, Greens, Independents and Liberal Democrats, and we asked our planning officers, "Why can't we mandate that all new builds have solar panels on the roof?" We were told that we were not allowed to, because it was not in the NPPF as it stood at that time. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in order to make the case for house building and tackle the housing emergency, we need to be able to convince the public that we are building high-quality houses that are fit for a climate crisis and that are energy efficient to reduce bills?

Charlotte Cane: I entirely agree. We had a similar frustration when looked at revising our local plan, because we wanted to put things in about energy efficiency.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils' brilliant new joint local plan proposes that new homes should be net zero, with solar being the obvious way of delivering that, but that ambitious plan is now sat with the Government inspector, and we are in his hands. Does my hon. Friend agree that local authorities should be empowered to deliver on their net zero ambitions?

Charlotte Cane: I agree, because we were advised that we could not do what we wanted with our local plan, as it would have gone beyond the national planning policy framework. The local community want to do it, so we should be empowered to do it.

I entirely support the Bill, because it would make so much sense to everybody if we were to make sure that all new builds had adequate solar panels on them or, where appropriate, an alternative form of green energy production, so that people end up with houses that are not destroying the climate and where they can actually afford their fuel bills.

It is quite a long time ago now, but I remember when I bought my first house. I had carefully planned out all the costs to determine whether I could afford the mortgage and everything else, and then the winter came, I started getting my fuel bills and I thought, "Oops, this is a bit difficult." I do not want that to happen to people. I want them to move into their new house and have low energy bills.

It is not in this Bill, but the Government have the power to do this: we must make retrofitting solar panels a good deal easier. It must be made easier for people to get the connection certificates they need, because that is a problem, and I am already getting casework about it. I commend Cambridgeshire county council, because it has a scheme whereby local people can register to join in with a group purchase, on which the county council does the due diligence. That means that people know that the supplier and the contractor are good, responsible, reliable people and they also get the discount of bulk buying. I commend the council on that scheme.

The Bill is a brilliant start to making sure that this country can get to net zero and that people have warm homes that they can afford to heat.

10.24 am

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I begin by making a declaration of interest: my former employer, CPRE, the countryside charity, is a supporter of the Bill. Many of my constituents are also passionate supporters of the proposal for mandatory rooftop solar on new buildings; it is one of the issues on which I have had the most correspondence in recent months.

In North East Hertfordshire, the towns of Royston and Buntingford have seen rapid development in recent years, as have smaller villages such as Barkway, Puckeridge and Standon. In the near future, a new estate will be built on the edge of Letchworth Garden City and the town of Baldock is due to roughly double in size. At the same time, we face many challenging decisions locally to balance the need for renewable energy with the protection of our high-quality farmland, while also preserving and enhancing space for nature. It is therefore unsurprising that residents in North East Hertfordshire can see the common sense in making the best possible use of our finite land by putting the solar panels we need on rooftops.

Our approach to delivering the renewable energy we undoubtedly and desperately need has been far too laissez-faire.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): My constituency has also seen significant population growth; it has grown by 35% in the past 20 years. New estates in Didcot, Great Western Park, Wantage, Kingsgrove, Highcroft in Wallingford and Wellington Gate in Grove have not all sought the opportunity to have solar panels on the new houses. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we do not create the homes of the future now, there is a risk that we will have to retrofit them in future, at great expense, to reach our net zero targets and help residents with their bills?

Chris Hinchliff: I wholeheartedly agree.

As I was saying, we could suffer from the potentially profound impacts of competing demands for space for the homes we require, our commitment to protect 30% of our land for nature by 2030, and our fragile food security. Government figures show that with an industry average of 5 acres per megawatt, the proposed ground-mounted solar schemes put forward to date would, if they all went ahead, require a total land area roughly equivalent to Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester, Liverpool, Nottingham, Newcastle and Leeds combined. Yet at the

[Chris Hinchliff]

same time, academic analysis indicates that between suitable existing buildings and new construction, there is potential space for 117 GW of rooftop solar in England by 2050.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it was a shocking dereliction of duty when the previous Government cancelled the zero-carbon home programme, which would have allowed for the generation of around 3,000 MW if every house built since 2015 had had solar panels on it? Does he agree with my residents in Taunton and Wellington, who are aghast and want to see solar panels on the new houses being built in Comeytrove, Staplegrove and Monkton Heathfield?

Chris Hinchliff: I find myself, once again, in wholehearted agreement.

Ensuring that solar panels are installed on the rooftops of new buildings specifically could deliver a generating capacity over six times greater than that of Sizewell C. Clearly, if we start applying a strategic approach beginning with the provisions in the Bill, we can host the vast majority of the solar panels we need on our rooftops. Other nations are already proving that this can be done, with similar regulatory measures currently in place in Germany, China and Japan. Better yet, enacting this legislation would not only accelerate our progress toward meeting our climate targets, reducing the industrialisation of our countryside and protecting rural communities; it also offers the most effective way to ensure that the net zero transition lowers electricity bills for consumers.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; my former colleagues at the MCS Foundation have provided research in support of the Bill.

I want to pick up on the hon. Gentleman's point about timescales, because in my experience this issue is the one that is raised most commonly by residents wanting to see action. Why on earth, they say, are new homes being put up without solar panels on them? Time is of the essence, but is it not the case that we have already lost many opportunities to progress? Regulations were due to come into force in 2016 that would have required all new homes to have zero carbon standards. Those regulations were scrapped by the coalition Government.¹ [HON. MEMBERS: "No, they weren't."] The briefing I have had says that they were scrapped in 2014. [Interruption.] Either way, I am pleased to see cross-party support today to press ahead with this proposal at speed. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that speed is of the essence here to ensure that homes are not being put up without solar panels?

Chris Hinchliff: I agree that speed is of the essence in multiple ways, and I encourage the Government to move as quickly as possible.

Empowering households to generate the electricity that they use will help families to lower their bills far more rapidly than commercial schemes that feed into wholesale energy markets influenced by international commodity prices. This strikes me as a well-drafted Bill, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham

(Max Wilkinson) on its clarity and flexibility. The only thing that I might suggest is a widening of the provisions to cover commercial buildings as well, given the vast opportunities provided by warehousing space. It is estimated that we currently use only about 5% of warehouse rooftops for solar generation. Claims that the regulations would hinder innovation are clearly spurious, especially in view of the provisions for exemptions where other forms of renewable energy generation are installed.

It is high time that our country had common-sense standards for rooftop solar on new builds, and I hope that the whole House will support the Bill.

10.30 am

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) on his Bill. I do have some reservations about it, which I will go into shortly, but I am minded to support it today because this is a much better policy than the current Government line about having large-scale solar farms on all our farmland throughout the United Kingdom. I would much rather solar panels were put on new builds, and councils already have some powers enabling them to do that. Broxbourne council, which I used to lead, has engaged in extensive negotiations with developers, particularly at High Leigh, where we have managed to get solar panels on some of the houses. A large data centre is also being built, and we have managed to put some solar panels on that.

As I have said, I do have some concerns. I am all for taking on developers and ensuring that they pay for their section 106 negotiations and do their community work, and standing up for the residents we all represent. However, during many of the negotiations when I led the council, developers told me that they wanted to put solar panels on more houses but the distribution network operator had told them that there was not enough capacity. I said that no one would be able to see the top of the data centre, so why not cover the whole thing in solar panels? Why would anyone not want to do that? Why would anyone not support it? That was my negotiating position. The developers went away and had discussions with the DNO, which said that they could have only 25% because there was not enough capacity for more and the system would not be able to cope. We need to have a discussion about the capacity of the grid if we are going to do this. I know that the Bill focuses specifically on new build properties, but surely it is a good thing to be able to use the rooftops of all the large data centres and warehouses that are already available.

Dr Arthur: The hon. Gentleman is speaking passionately about his constituency, but does not cheaper battery technology mean that people do not have to sell their electricity back to the grid any more? They can keep it within their boundaries and use it themselves.

Lewis Cocking: I was about to mention battery technology, so I ask the hon. Gentleman to wait just a few seconds.

The Bill does go quite far in that its ambition relates to all houses, but I think we should go further. If we are putting solar panels on houses, we should require those houses to have battery storage as well, which might solve some of the problems involving grid connection and there being sufficient capacity. Battery technology

1.[Official Report, 21 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 976.] (Correction)

is a bit behind solar panel technology in terms of efficiency, and it is not quite there yet on cost-effectiveness, but we are definitely getting there. For example, it is more cost-effective to use the electricity in an electric car than to send it back to the grid. I urge the hon. Member for Cheltenham to consider that, because if we are taking this one step in installing solar panels, perhaps we should take one further step and require people to have battery storage as well.

I am concerned about the red tape we are going to create for new development. As I said, I am all for taking on developers—I see some councillors and former councillors in the Chamber, who have probably all had vociferous discussions like the ones I have had with developers about them doing their bit—but I am concerned about the pushback we might get in discussions on section 106 agreements. There are issues around viability, which I will not go into now, but I would not want to see developers telling their local councils and communities, “We can’t give you money for the new school or the doctor’s surgery because we’ve got to put solar panels on housing.” We need to give some thought to how that will work, because we all want the most community money possible for the roads, schools and GP surgeries that must come with new developments.

There will be some homes for which solar panels are not suitable. I am fully supportive of panels being installed on buildings that have an east-west facing roof, or on a block of flats. Where it is practical to do that, of course we should do it. As other Members have said, it is increasingly frustrating when we drive past a development to see a roof with only two solar panels on it, after the developers have gone through the whole cost of putting up the scaffolding and building the house. I suspect that is because of the issues around capacity, which we definitely need to look into, but come on. If they are already putting solar panels on half the roof, they should fill the whole roof with them, because that does not just help them; if they can sell the green electricity back to the grid, it helps everybody.

I have some reservations about where the money will come from. I would not want it to come from the resources that would have gone on schools, education and roads through section 106 agreements, so we need to look at that. We also need to look at distribution network operators and capacity, to make sure we can really harness the energy, but as this proposal is much better than having large-scale solar farms plastered all over our green belt and the countryside, I am minded to support the Bill’s Second Reading.

10.36 am

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for bringing forward this Bill on a subject of great importance. I know from personal experience the time and effort it must have taken to get to this stage.

I am sure Members on both sides of the House will agree that solar is a key tool in the renewable energy arsenal which, if used properly, can have a significant positive impact on tackling climate change and ensuring that we live in a more sustainable society. I am proud to represent a constituency that is taking the power of solar seriously. Constituents in Amber Valley regularly write to me wanting to know what is being done at both local and national level to tackle climate change. Even those

constituents who are not what any of us would call eco-warriors are invariably unopposed to solar on rooftops, and that is not, it seems, unique to Amber Valley. As I walked through Westminster underground station this morning, a billboard caught my eye. The MSC Foundation was advertising the fact that a recent YouGov survey found that three in four voters believe that solar panels should be mandatory on new homes.

When Labour took control of Amber Valley borough council in 2023, the council had no council homes whatsoever, as the previous Conservative-run council had sold all the housing stock 20 years earlier at below-market rates. To right that wrong, the council has started a new council house building programme, and while we started small, we are working towards a target of 30 new council homes, each fitted with solar panels. Indeed, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero last year witnessed four new builds resulting from that programme on his visit to the borough alongside the Mayor of the East Midlands. It is fair to say that we are committed in Amber Valley. Incorporating rooftop solar as part of our house building programme has been an important part of delivering cleaner energy and lower bills, and ensuring sustainability for our constituents.

When I first became a borough councillor in Amber Valley, I asked whether we could have a planning condition that solar panels must be installed on roofs, and I too was told that that was just not possible. That was totally perplexing to me, so I am sure that hon. Members can imagine that I am proud to be part of a Government who are spearheading the most ambitious house building programme in a generation, with a clear commitment to environmental sustainability.

Calum Miller: The hon. Lady speaks of the Government’s ambition, and there is one simple thing they could do. In December 2023, after lobbying from developers, the previous Conservative Government shamefully issued a written ministerial statement to prohibit a councillor in West Oxfordshire district council in my constituency from insisting on higher environmental standards for a net zero development. Does the hon. Lady agree that if the Government simply revoked that written ministerial statement, local councils across the country would have more freedom to set higher environmental standards? Will she encourage the Minister to respond to that point?

Linsey Farnsworth: I would encourage the Minister to respond, because I do not think that it is for me to do so. However, I do think we should be doing everything we can to move towards a better, more sustainable future.

Not only are we building 1.5 million new homes over this Parliament, but we are committed to an ambitious decarbonising agenda and harnessing renewable resources across the UK. The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero of course understands the importance of solar as part of our wider clean power mission, and the contribution that the energy efficiency of homes can make to our net zero emissions target. There is no doubt in my mind that rooftop solar plays a crucial role in that.

I support the notion behind the Bill. The Government are already working on future standards, particularly on the technical detail of solar, to ensure that they are

[*Linsey Farnsworth*]

appropriate. That will ensure that new homes and buildings embrace energy efficiency and are fit for a net zero future, and I look forward to the Government introducing those standards this year. I thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham for raising this important issue in the House today.

10.42 am

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): People in my constituency are passionate about protecting our environment, and they know that if we are to do that, we need to produce more renewable energy. However, in North East Hampshire, as in many other areas of the UK, we are also protective of our arable farming land, which is so essential for our food security.

Passing the sunshine Bill, which has been brought to the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), would challenge the presumption that the principal way to increase our solar capacity is through solar farms and large-scale industrial solar power generation. Prioritising solar panelling on new homes will allow us to create the right energy mix and to produce energy in a sustainable way. Not only that, but it will help us to address some of the challenges with economic growth. Reducing energy bills, especially for those in social housing or on lower incomes, is an essential part of tackling the recent cost of living crisis, and developing the industry through innovation is of course good for jobs.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): There has been a lot of conversation this morning about the benefit to homeowners of installing solar panels on new builds. If solar panels were included on new social housing, we would also be helping those who face the greatest challenge in paying energy bills, which have gone up since the energy price cap rise. That is an added benefit in the cost of living crisis.

Alex Brewer: My hon. Friend is of course correct. This should not be just about cost savings for those who can afford installation in the first place.

In North East Hampshire, we have some fantastic examples of community investment in renewables. Hart district council has installed 121 photovoltaic panels on the roof of its offices, generating as much as 57,000 kWh of electricity per year, which is enough to power around 20 average homes every year. Hart leisure centre has seen £200,000 of investment in solar panelling on its sports hall, which reduces the demand put on the energy grid as a result of heating the swimming pool.

If you will permit me a “Sliding Doors” moment, Madam Deputy Speaker, my house was built in 1961, when this technology was not around. Had solar panels of today’s quality been installed then, not only would our energy bills have been significantly lower, but we could have saved in the region of 800 tonnes of carbon—roughly equivalent to 140 London to Sydney return flights. Given the Government’s ambitious house building targets, and as retrofitting is more expensive than installing at the build stage, it makes sense to ensure that we do all we can right now to protect our environment, to reduce energy bills and to secure this industry for the future.

Each house built without renewable energy is a missed opportunity to save carbon and money, and to grow our economy. Furthermore, each house built without solar panels increases the pressure to put panels elsewhere, including in our fields. Sustainable energy development is critical, but in North East Hampshire, as elsewhere, we do not want it to come at the cost of our countryside and our agricultural land. That is why I support this Bill, which prioritises putting solar panels on the roofs of new homes.

10.45 am

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): This is an important debate; not only is it about solar, but it is about our climate and our environment. It matters to me, to my generation and to my constituents. My constituency mailbag is full of ideas about how we get clean energy and messages advocating for solar panels, so I know my constituents are interested in this debate.

There are many experts in my constituency. Just yesterday, I sat with a nuclear scientist from Wirral West, and there are many people who are passionate about the environment. In one quite brilliant architect, Colin Usher, we combine the expertise and the passion. He has brought intelligent design to bear in order to build super low energy use homes. Along with triple glazing, insulation and intelligent design, solar panels play an important part in those homes. The panels sit on the roof and heat the home, and excess energy is sold back to the national grid. So brilliant is the design that in the winter months, one of the people living in these homes pays just £10 for their energy. I hope we can expect future homes to meet that high standard.

I welcome the fact that the Government have already made a commitment to developing the next generation of homes with high energy standards and efficiency. It is better for our pocket and for the planet. Labour is clear that the crisis in our climate and in nature needs serious action. That is why, in the election, we committed to tripling solar power by 2030. Solar energy has an important role, and it is a part of GB Energy, which supports our mission to make our country a clean energy superpower. We are meeting our pledges with action: we are approving solar projects that will power the equivalent of almost 400,000 homes. I note that this Government, in just one week, has consented to more solar than the last Government installed in an entire year. That shows the marked difference this Government are already making in an area that the whole House is clearly passionate about.

I am pleased that the Minister is developing strong new standards, which will combine Labour’s ambition to build high-quality homes in the right places and the ambition to protect our environment. Our commitment to action will bring lower bills to my constituents. That is sorely needed after a difficult cost of living crisis, lasting for years, which has put pressure on household bills. In this way, we can really support our constituents. Through our meaningful action on more sustainable renewable sources of energy, we are making a difference to our climate.

It is pretty clear that the climate crisis does not respect rhetoric, weapons or borders; it does not care how many likes you get on social media or how viral your clip goes; it responds only to action, and the action

the Government are taking gives me hope for the future. Across my constituency, people are taking action, and doing their bit to shift us toward cleaner energy. We must meet their ambition for a greener, sunnier and more secure future.

10.49 am

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for bringing the Bill before the House. As an environmental campaigner for the past 22 years, I very much support any Bill, including my own Climate and Nature Bill—a shameless plug—that encourages the shift away from fossil fuels. However, I do not support every measure that increases the use of renewables, which is why the sunshine Bill is so important.

There are good ways and less good ways to meet our international commitments on carbon emissions and climate change. A less good way, as has already been mentioned by many hon. Members, is to cover large tracts of our countryside in solar panels without the agreement or co-operation of local communities.

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): I welcome the Bill, but the choice between solar farms and rooftop solar installations is not a zero-sum game; they both have a distinct role to play. In our most ambitious plans, solar farms would account for less than 1% of land cover. Does the hon. Lady agree with Tom Bradshaw, president of the National Farmers' Union, that solar farms represent a diversification opportunity for farmers that will also be good for the British public?

Dr Savage: I thank the hon. Member for the good points she raises, but I would like to see more solar panel installations that are motivated not by profit, but by concern for people and planet. That is my concern about some of the very large solar installations we are seeing proposed across the country, including in my constituency of South Cotswolds. We are rightly proud of our beautiful countryside, so a proposal for a 2,000-acre solar farm has provoked outrage and objections from nearby communities. Some 88% of respondents to an early consultation are against the plans. Some might say that their sacrifice is necessary for the greater good, but when I put myself in the shoes of nearby residents, I cannot agree.

I love my morning walks, which help to keep me sane—well, relatively. We need to be encouraging people to spend more time enjoying the outdoors, with all its benefits for mental and physical health, as well as strengthening the relationship between humans and the rest of nature. When I consider how I would feel if my cherished morning walk, through green fields, was instead going to be a walk through fields of black, shiny solar panels, past humming battery storage facilities, I would not be happy. Let us keep our countryside beautiful. It adds insult to injury for the people of Hullavington, Luckington and Sherston to see massive new warehouses and new homes springing up with not a solar panel in sight.

We need to meet our environmental goals in collaboration with people, not in opposition to them. My Climate and Nature Bill, which I will introduce next week, emphasises the need for public engagement on our journey to net zero. That journey will not be easy and will only be made

more difficult if people feel that net zero is something that is being imposed on them, by corporate interests or Government, without respect for the wishes of nearby residents. Where ground-mounted solar may be necessary, let us make it small scale and community led.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): The Government's housing targets mean that my area needs 9,500 new homes over the next 20 years, which thousands of my constituents are very worried about. Many of them would be far happier if they knew that the properties being built would meet the needs of local people, by being affordable to buy and cheap to run. Does my hon. Friend agree that the New Homes (Solar Generation) Bill is not only a no-brainer, but an essential part of gaining public support for house building?

Dr Savage: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend.

We also need to increase our national food security, decreasing our reliance on vulnerable international food supply chains and depending more on home-grown food, grown to trusted standards. Most farmers want to grow food, not solar panels. The need for a national land use framework is becoming ever more pressing.

We need a sensible long-term strategy for how we use our finite resource of land space in this country. I would like to see a much greater emphasis on multipurposing our land area. We need to get away from dividing up food production, housing and electricity generation. We can make much better use of our land when we take a multilayered approach. To that end, it makes sense to prioritise rooftop solar ahead of greenfield sites. Some 60% of UK solar targets could be delivered on rooftops by 2035. Generating energy at the source reduces the strain on the national grid, improves overall energy resilience and reduces the need for long, wasteful grid connections.

Generating energy at the source reduces the strain on the national grid, improves overall energy resilience and reduces the need for long, wasteful grid connections or ranks of electricity pylons marching across our countryside. Retrofitting solar panels to houses is costly and disruptive; it is so much more efficient and effective to install solar at the time of building. In Europe, they get this. The EU solar standard requires solar panels on new and existing public, commercial and residential buildings. The EU's goal is to increase the use of renewable energy and reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels, and it is working.

To me, the sunshine Bill is a win-win-win. It is a win for the UK, reducing our need for imported energy sources and improving our resilience and self-reliance; it is a win for householders, who can reduce their energy bills by generating their own electricity; and it is a win for the planet, supporting our transition away from fossil fuels. I will wholeheartedly support the sunshine Bill.

10.56 am

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for bringing forward this Bill, which deals with an issue that matters deeply to my constituents and to me. This winter we have seen the devastating impact that climate change

[Rosie Wrighting]

can have on communities, and colleagues and I have watched in horror as wildfires have spread through California and flooding has impacted my constituency and many areas across the UK. Now, more than ever, we must find ways to weave the pursuit of clean, home-grown energy into everything we do, and solar power will make a vital contribution.

I have had the pleasure of visiting many local schools in Kettering since being elected. On every visit, children have told me that they are worried about our local environment and the future of our world, and I feel those worries too. I was proud to stand on a manifesto that promised to make Britain a clean energy superpower, and which pledged to double onshore wind, triple solar power and quadruple offshore wind by 2030. I am even prouder to see the progress that this Labour Government have already made in delivering on those pledges.

Only two weeks after the election, when most of us, including me, still did not know the way from the Chamber to Portcullis House, the Secretary of State lifted the ban on onshore wind, established the 2030 mission control centre and consented to solar projects that will generate more than 1.3 GW—enough to power almost 400,000 homes. This is clearly a Government of delivery, who are working to drive forward and increase rooftop solar, which, where appropriate, will help accommodate the Government's 2030 clean power mission.

The potential for rooftop solar is huge, especially in constituencies such as mine, which is one of the fastest-growing areas in the UK and, of course, where the sun always shines. I have been contacted by many constituents about this issue, and they support the Government's aim to achieve 95% clean energy by 2030. I understand their desire for solar and the need for it on new builds, warehouses and the ground, so I am glad that this Government have committed to ensuring that local communities continue to have a voice in planning matters, and that communities hosting clean energy infrastructure will benefit from it.

The speed of house building in Kettering means that we are no strangers to irresponsible and difficult developers, so our commitments to the environment must go hand in hand with planning. I know that the Government will introduce standards on house building this year to ensure that our new homes and buildings are fit for a net zero future, but we also need to ensure that developers cannot shirk their responsibilities to the environment and to local residents. Our house building needs to be sustainable so that local people can trust that their needs, and the needs of the environment, are being met.

The Government's national planning policy framework is a lesson in how we can deliver the biggest boost to social and affordable housing in a generation while unlocking green energy and recognising the benefits of our best agricultural land, and all while making vital commitments to use planning to enhance the natural and local environment, protect valued landscapes, and recognise the character and beauty of the countryside.

I am grateful to have had this opportunity to put on the record my support for rooftop solar and for this Government's commitment to our environment in Kettering and beyond.

11 am

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): The 1.5° global temperature limit was passed for the first time ever in 2024. This politically significant milestone is a stark reminder that we must leave no stone unturned as we make the systemic changes required to every part of our economy for a safe future. Rooftop solar is one of the easiest of the changes that we can make. As the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) said, it is a “win-win-win” policy that helps cut people's bills and climate emissions, and helps strengthen our energy security.

Research and development of rooftop solar is already a British success story—we are world leaders—so it is time to take the next step and maximise deployment of on-site solar generation in new builds. That is the aim of the sunshine Bill, and I am pleased to have co-sponsored this proposal to create new jobs, to drive innovation yet further, and to generate abundant amounts of energy both while the sun shines and, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) pointed out, when it does not.

Making solar panels mandatory on suitable new homes is almost universally popular—other than with some major house builders. That is what I want to focus on during the short time available to me. Solar Energy UK estimates that, of the 15 GW of solar power capacity currently in place, around two thirds is on the ground and the remainder is on residential and commercial roofs. If we are to meet the Government's targets to ramp up solar capacity—which I hope we do—we should be looking up.

Some 80% of the buildings that we will have in 2050 have already been built, so we must work hard to retrofit them with renewables, but the remaining 20% have still to be built. For goodness' sake, let's build them right the first time. That is where private housing developers come into the mix. The British designer and “Grand Designs” presenter Kevin McCloud wrote last year that in 15 years' time the average profit on each new build home has rocketed from £6,000 to £63,000. I call on Ministers to stand up to the major house builders and ensure that they pay the cost of putting solar on every suitable new roof. The organisation 100% Renewable UK has calculated that mandatory solar panels and heat pumps in new homes would add around £8,000 to the cost of a new home—an amount that decreases as installations gather speed.

Clearly, housing developers can afford that cost, and neither they nor anyone else can afford the consequences of not meeting our solar or other climate targets. The Los Angeles wildfires are on track to be among the costliest in US history, as well as the most heartbreaking, with losses already expected to exceed £109.7 billion. Failing to decarbonise at speed, in line with the climate science, will dwarf the cost of future-proofing our homes. The moral case for acting is unequivocal, and so too is the economic one.

If Ministers are worried about the risk of solar costs being passed on to homebuyers, the Government could simply stop that happening. They could also offer interest-free loans for this technology, and make it easier for retail lenders to drive rooftop deployments. Property-linked finance or green mortgages can help consumers with the capital costs of installation, as could regulation to

incentivise low interest rates for green mortgages. These are all political choices that the Government could make.

The sunshine Bill is not just about solar panels but about—forgive me—shining some sunlight on who has the power. Making every home a mini power station would help rebalance that power towards communities. I therefore very much hope that the Government will today choose to back both a solar rooftop revolution and mandatory solar being included in the future homes standard, rather than choosing to protect the vested interests that are behind the vast and ultimately unsustainable house builders' profits.

11.5 am

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for introducing the Bill. I think it is laudable, and its heart is very much in the right place. We should think of the climate crisis in all matters of policy and in how we might contribute to the Government's goal of making Britain a clean energy superpower.

The Government, guided by the excellent work of the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, are already making great strides in combating the climate crisis, putting green energy at the heart of the country's future and supporting green industrial growth wherever we can. The Government have established Great British Energy, which means that we will need new green infrastructure sooner rather than later. When it comes specifically to solar energy, I was very pleased that, within just days of taking office, the Government approved three major, long-stalled, large solar farms in Lincolnshire and East Anglia, capable of generating 1.5 GW, or enough to power 500,000 homes. That was a clear statement of intent, and one that we can all be very proud of.

At the same time, the Secretary of State pledged a rooftop revolution, making it easier for newly built homes to come with solar panels from the off and to install solar panels on existing homes. A third of our solar generation capacity already comes from rooftop solar, it is an important part of the energy generation mix and I know that the Government fully believe in rooftop solar, as I do.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): The hon. Member talks a lot about the measures that are being put forward in the move towards net zero, but we need to go further. CPRE Hertfordshire says that 60% of our targets could be achieved through rooftop solar panels alone, and supporting the Bill will help to make sure that that revolution helps towards net zero for our planet and our people.

Adam Thompson: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, and I will cover some of those points shortly. I broadly agree with the sentiment of what she said.

The Bill's aims, in promoting the installation of solar panels on all new homes, feed into the Government's overall intent, and I am pleased about that. I note, however, that it is undeniable that solar farms, especially the larger ones, are much more efficient than rooftop solar for a whole spectrum of reasons. Rooftop solar panels are constrained by the size, orientation and

structural limitations of individual buildings, while solar farms are optimised for maximum energy generation. The difference in output can be as high as 30%. Economies of scale mean that the cost to install, maintain and centralise the supportive infrastructure notably reduces the ratio of cost per unit of energy generated by solar farms. That is not to say that I do not support rooftop solar, because I very much do, but solar farms are a highly scalable, cost-effective means through which to achieve the green energy transition.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): Is that not exactly the point—we need to do both, because that creates a subsidy for more opportunities to have rooftop solar panels?

Adam Thompson: I completely agree. It is not about one solution versus another, but a diverse, broad array of solutions, all feeding into a grand, greener future.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about a balance. My view is that solar is better on rooftops, but if he is so pro-solar installations, how many thousand acres in his constituency is he actively campaigning to see turned into ground-mounted solar?

Adam Thompson: I must say that I declare my support for those projects wherever they come up. Indeed, I will touch on some of them in a moment. I was recently asked by the media whether I would be happy to have pylons outside my house, to which I responded with a photograph of a pylon taken from a window in my house.

I have long felt that despite the great benefits solar farms bring, they have often been too difficult to bring forward. The UK has around 15 GW of solar energy generation capacity. In Germany, meanwhile, solar capacity grew by 14 GW in 2023 alone. It is clear that the UK's current planning regime and approach to building infrastructure constrains growth and sees us lag behind similar nations. If we want Britain to be a clean energy superpower, as I do, and leading the green energy revolution rather than just following it, we must tear down the barriers to growth and unlock our potential.

In my constituency, my Labour colleagues on Erewash borough council have, in their own small, local way, helped to be part of the change that we need. Since taking control of the council in 2023, they have approved several solar farms, while the previous Conservative administration always blocked them, and I am very proud of my colleagues for doing so. I was also very proud to tell the now Energy Secretary that information when he visited Erewash this time last year. The progression of these vital infrastructure projects, which are pivotal to the future of our country, must be driven by a national strategy and not held up by bureaucracy.

As I have said, the Bill's proposals are laudable. The drive to green energy generation along with this Government's ambition to make Britain a clean energy superpower could be, to this decade and to those to come, what the race for space was in the 1950s and 1960s—countries engaged in a great contest of scientific innovation and progress. There is nothing that I, as a former research scientist, could welcome more than the Government pursuing science, innovation and technology as a matter of not only core policy, but national pride.

[Adam Thompson]

This Government are committed to greatly expanding our provision of solar energy generation and have acknowledged many times the significant part that rooftop solar has to play in that expansion. I hope that supporters of this Bill are assured by the Government's genuine commitment on this front. The climate crisis and the housing crisis are both profound issues, worthy of the descriptor "crisis" and in need of immediate action. I know that many right hon. and hon. Members share the Government's commitment to act here, as I most certainly do.

11.11 am

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I pay tribute to my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for so boldly taking up this cause. His so-named sunshine Bill, which to my mind reflects his own disposition so brightly—as though it was his own glowing cranium—[*Laughter.*]

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I may only speculate what it was that attracted my hon. Friend to discuss a Bill regarding the promotion of shiny surfaces atop well-built structures—we can only guess. Does he agree that as this Bill moves forward, it is absolutely essential that the Government work across parties to build a consensus, including all those experts and those passionate in this subject, and to work together to ensure that it is successfully delivered for the betterment of all our residents?

Cameron Thomas: My hon. Friend has so eloquently put across the pragmatism that we can enjoy from Liberal Democrats in working across parties for the benefit of our constituents, and I thank him for that.

This undertaking by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham has been brought up consistently on doorsteps across the Tewkesbury constituency in recent years. Widely considered to be a blindingly obvious antidote to rising energy bills and the phasing out of fossil fuels, people have tended to ask, with an exasperated tone, why on earth new homes are not built with solar panels by mandate. As my hon. Friend has described, the public roundly support such measures, with one poll registering 70% support. Whether or not the New Homes (Solar Generation) Bill goes to a vote today, I hope that the Government will recognise the alignment with their environmental pledges and that they will take the ball and run with it.

11.14 am

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for introducing this Bill. Rooftop solar panels are a huge area of huge potential. On such a grey day, I also thank him for bringing all the sunshine.

I am pleased that the Government are already exploring rooftop solar panels on new build houses in the "Clean Power 2030" action plan, which aims to have at least 95% of Great Britain's electricity produced by clean energy by 2030. The Government relaunched the solar taskforce quickly after the general election, bringing together experts from the Government and industry.

The taskforce's road map is due to be published in the spring, and it will set out recommendations for how we can triple the UK's solar capacity by 2030. I look forward to that.

The pylon issue has been brought up. I grew up and lived in a home under a pylon for nearly 50 years, and I do not think it has done me any harm. I know that the Government are due to introduce further standards later this year. They will set our new homes and buildings on a path away from reliance on volatile fossil fuels, and they will ensure that those homes and buildings are fit for a net zero future. I am sure the Minister will expand on that.

As well as new builds, it is important that people know that assistance packages are out there to help them with installing solar panels on existing homes. That includes the energy company obligation, the warm homes local grant and the warm homes social housing fund. Owners of solar panels can also be paid for the surplus electricity their solar panels generate through the smart export guarantee, and there is a zero rate of VAT on residential solar panels.

Much of what has been covered in this debate is devolved, although Members may not have known that I was Welsh. To my constituents in Gower and across Wales, I point to the Welsh Government's Nest programme, which can provide free energy efficiency improvements, including solar panels, to those eligible.

The Bill states that it

"extends to England and Wales."

Of course, the hon. Member for Cheltenham will be aware that building regulations are devolved. What conversations has he had with the Welsh Government or Members of the Senedd about this? I am sure that the Welsh Labour Government would be delighted to work alongside the UK Labour Government—they probably are already doing so—to ensure that homes are more energy efficient and that our constituents have the opportunity to save money on their bills.

The important thing about the path forward is that the Government should work with house builders to get the best outcomes for both our environmental targets and our housing targets. We must also build high-quality, sustainable and affordable homes. As has been mentioned by many, the scope of the Bill does not cover roofs other than those on new builds, so I highlight the need for solar panels on all roofs. As the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) said, we must take the agricultural land that we need for food to feed our country into consideration, and we must strike a fair and right balance. I know that the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) has also raised that issue. I feel very passionately that we must not do down one or the other.

We must be aware that there are problems, particularly with tenant farmers and how they are being treated by companies. Where there are bad actors, I know that our Government—my Government—will seek to find them. I hope that the Government will work in collaboration with farmers, who may need to have a blend and have solar farms on their land, as well as with tenant farmers. I know that the Government are committed to find a workable way forward on this issue. I thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham for the chance to highlight it in this debate and for the sunshine he has brought.

11.18 am

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for energy security and net zero, I am delighted to support the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson): the sunshine Bill. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am beaming.

South Cambridgeshire is one of the fastest growing constituencies in the country in terms of house building and lab space. People constantly say to me, "Why are all of these new homes without solar panels on their roofs?" or "Why do these new homes only have one or two solar panels or only on part of the roofs?" Sadly, in 2025, developers are still required only to meet—not exceed—the Merton rule's inadequate 10% energy improvement standard. That is why Liberal Democrat councillors in my constituency have been pushing hard to change this at the local level. In fact, in the five years since they took control of the council, South Cambridgeshire has rapidly become the district with the highest number of solar panels fitted and with the fastest increase in planning applications that include solar panels.

It is the lack of ambition and political will at the national level that has held back the revolution in solar rooftops. That is why we are still building homes that are cold and damp and that have skyrocketing energy bills. The former Conservative Government disgracefully scrapped the zero carbon homes policy, and dithered and delayed on the future homes standard.

Cameron Thomas: Earlier, the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) lamented—in good faith—the drawdown of environmental pledges in 2016. Of course, that was not the coalition Government; what we saw and what we got is what happens when the Liberal Democrats are no longer there to hold people to account.

Pippa Heylings: It will not surprise anyone to hear that I agree wholeheartedly. The record has been corrected. It is vital that the Bill helps to repair that damage, and we look forward to the Minister's commitment to bringing about these changes.

As has been mentioned, the lack of ambition on the solar rooftop revolution has contributed to the barrier to public acceptance of larger scale solar farms. We are hearing people say, "Why not put panels on the rooftops of homes, industrial sites and commercial warehouses first?" We need a joined-up plan; we need the Government urgently to bring forward the much-promised land use framework and the National Energy System Operator's strategic spatial energy plan, which will show how much solar farm energy is still needed and where it would be best placed. In that way, we can meet all our needs.

The Bill is our chance to get this right. It is our chance for a cleaner, greener and more secure future that addresses the triple cost of living, housing and climate crises and takes people with us. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham.

11.22 am

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for bringing this sunshine to the Chamber today.

The horrific wildfires raging in California and the recent flooding that we saw provide yet more reminders that urgent action is needed to tackle the climate and

nature emergency. I am proud that, under this Labour Government, the UK is once again showing climate leadership. We know that we cannot tackle the housing crisis without tackling the climate crisis. Nor can we achieve our core growth mission or increase living standards without acknowledging the huge impact of climate change.

The built environment is responsible for 40% of emissions, and decarbonising our housing stock is essential. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on ClimateTech, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Steve Race), I was pleased to attend a recent event in Parliament, where we met start-ups working on innovative solutions to decarbonise the built environment. The Government's steadfast commitment to this agenda and to policies such as Great British Energy and the warm homes plan were warmly welcomed by the businesses I met.

Turning to my constituency, I want to share an example of how a local business can use the expansion of rooftop solar and of low-carbon heating and energy generation to help our Government achieve their mission of stimulating economic growth and raising living standards in all parts of the country. I recently visited a former Marks and Spencer on Mostyn street in Llandudno, which the owners are transforming into a massive indoor entertainment centre. That is exactly the kind of development that places such as Llandudno need. The owners have installed a huge solar array, which will save the business £32,000 a year and about 25 tonnes of carbon. For me, the most exciting part of that development is that the installation was part-funded by the local authority and done by a local business. We do not want just the cleaner, cheaper energy that rooftop solar will provide; we also want the jobs.

Luke Taylor: My hon. Friend speaks about precisely the jobs that the Bill would generate. I declare an interest in that between speeches I have been emailing to arrange the installation of a solar array on my home in the next couple of weeks. Although I will not benefit from the reduction in the cost of installation and of the panels themselves that the Bill would provide by boosting the market and demand for those skills, does she agree that the economic benefit and the skills brought to our residents are another incredibly positive reason why we should back the measures in the Bill and ensure they are implemented as soon as possible?

Claire Hughes: I absolutely agree, and that is why we need to get this right, not just on rooftop solar but on the skills for retrofitting and in low-carbon heating in general. A lot of work needs to be done to ensure that businesses have the skills so that we can expand and do what we need with this whole agenda.

We need to ensure that local businesses benefit from the jobs and supply chain opportunities that the expansion of low-carbon heating and rooftop solar would provide, because tackling climate change and increasing living standards go hand in hand. It is critical that we get this right across the piece.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

11.26 am

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for bringing this important issue to the House. It is good to see the Minister in his place—I know he and Ministers in his Department have had a busy week.

Solar energy has an essential role to play in decarbonising our power sector by putting otherwise unused roof space to good use. Solar panels are an effective technology for reducing carbon emissions, and the Bill proposes a forward-looking measure that would require the installation of solar PV generation equipment on new homes. Its Second Reading offers us an opportunity to debate the merits of the proposal and its potential contribution to our shared goal of reaching net zero by 2050.

While welcoming the Bill and its aims outlined this morning, I would like to add to the debate some possible unintended consequences of the Bill in its present form. I want to be a genuinely constructive voice in ensuring that the Bill gets to Committee—I hope the hon. Member sees that—but some areas could be strengthened. I appreciated his sunny disposition in bringing the legislation to the House today. I will try to be a ray of sunshine as I get through this speech. *[Interruption.]* I am in danger of misleading the House there. I hope to be a sunny ray of light in Committee should the Bill get through and we table amendments to it.

The previous Government supported solar energy generation where it was appropriate. Our efforts included a £50 million fund aimed at supporting rooftop solar installations to enhance on-farm energy security. The responsibility for advancing solar and renewable energy now rests with this Government, and we wish them luck in doing so while remaining sceptical about the abilities of GB Energy to see that through. Under the last Government's leadership, we delivered 2.5 million homes since 2010, including 1 million homes during our final term in office. That provided more people with the opportunity to own their homes and expanded options for renters.

Additionally, in November 2023, as has been outlined, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government announced expanded development rights, making it easier for homeowners and businesses to install rooftop solar panels without the need for planning permission in most cases. That was a positive step, and I hope to see such support continue. As the Government pledge to deliver 1.5 million homes in this Parliament, we must ask ourselves what impact the Bill would have on house building. Building costs are already high and projected to rise further. Even the chief executive of Homes England has admitted that delivering Labour's housing target may require two parliamentary terms, not one as the Minister outlined.

I also note that the implementation date of 1 October 2026 in clause 1 provides little time for the industry to adapt to the significant challenges the Bill introduces. Given the growing pressures on the industry, it is necessary to question whether the Government have considered and worked on the potential skills shortage, as an hon. Member raised earlier, and the feasibility of implementing the standards in this well-intentioned Bill.

We know that the UK has one of the oldest housing stocks among developed countries, with a particularly

complex system of housing tenure. Buildings owned by freeholders and occupied by a mix of leaseholders and tenants present ongoing challenges for successive Governments when implementing necessary updates and retrofits. Meanwhile, in the realm of housing development, where 1.4 million new units already have planning consent, developers continue to highlight issues, such as the cost of solar panels, as a significant obstacle to advancing new housing projects. We must therefore consider whether the additional costs imposed by the Bill could hinder progress in delivering housing. Could it add restrictions to house building plans, particularly when it comes into effect in 2026? We are open to the timescale that the Bill would implement.

Sir Roger Gale: Does my hon. Friend not accept that, while it is not remotely surprising that some developers are resistant on the grounds that the Bill will add to the costs of building property—it indubitably will—we should recognise the flipside of that coin, which is that it will enhance the value of the property and make its management and running much more affordable?

Paul Holmes: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. If he will allow me, I will elaborate on that further on in my oration this morning, when I will look at the other side of the coin. While absolutely taking into account that house builders will have concerns over costs and will claim concerns over costs, as we have seen various organisations do, we also have concerns about the ongoing maintenance costs of these technologies for those who buy the properties in the first place. There is a balance to strike, which we can look at further if the Bill goes into Committee.

Maintaining solar panels, as my right hon. Friend was tempting me to say, is not without challenges. Repairs often require scaffolding, which can be expensive. We worry that an unintended consequence of the Bill could be increased costs for residents, home owners and property owners. How will we support home owners facing frequent and costly repairs?

The updates to the national planning policy framework present an opportunity to consider how such requirements can be better embedded in planning law. I recognise that administrators face a challenging task. The framework contains approximately 19 chapters of guidance, which each local authority must reflect in its local plan after public examination, ensuring full alignment with those chapters. The complexity of the process, combined with consideration of local environmental factors, such as surface water run-off, and the need for materials to align with established practices, creates a considerable challenge.

To translate the aspirations outlined by Members into real-world outcomes, we must simplify the process for local authorities to enable them to fulfil their role as community leaders. Instead of requiring lengthy and costly procedures to prove compliance with planning law, we need to ensure that the relevant standards can be implemented efficiently. The previous Government consulted on a future homes standard to ensure that all new homes would be zero carbon-ready. That included provisions for solar panels where appropriate. We must also ensure that brownfield sites are prioritised for housing development and stand-alone solar power, rather than sacrificing valuable agricultural land, as we risk

seeing under the Government's proposals. I sincerely hope that they will build on the progress we saw as a result of the previous Government's consultation and the feedback gathered.

As we consider the Bill, it is important to recognise that not all buildings are suitable for solar panels. Factors such as structural strength, the direction and orientation of buildings and challenges with maintenance access must be taken into account. As I believe the hon. Member for Cheltenham has recognised, a one-size-fits-all mandate might lead to unintended consequences or inefficiencies. What discussions has he or the Government had and what consultations have taken place with the building industry during the drafting of this legislation? Collaboration with developers and stakeholders is critical to ensuring the successful implementation of such a policy. Consumer and local choice must also play a role in these decisions. I am concerned about the Labour Government's apparent intent to reduce the influence of local representatives on planning committees. Local people should have a say on what is built in their area—we have heard some examples from local council leadership across the country this morning.

If this Bill receives passes its Second Reading today, we will scrutinise it thoroughly to ensure that it balances the need to build more homes with the imperative of increasing energy efficiency and production. I welcome the proposed exemptions for buildings that cannot support solar due to roof positioning or other factors. Those exemptions need further scrutiny in Committee to ensure that they are comprehensive. Sensibly, the Bill allows for other renewable energy systems to be used where solar is not feasible; that is practical. However, the list of exemptions should not allow developers to adapt their designs in order to avoid installing solar panels, so that they can avoid what they claim are increased costs. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) and a number of colleagues on the Labour Benches mentioned, there remains a risk that house builders or developers will identify loopholes in the legislation that they can use to say, "We can't build solar on that, so we will do either a cheaper alternative or none at all." However, if Members in all parts of the House work together in Committee, we can strengthen the legislation to ensure that developers put these technologies on buildings across the country.

Caroline Voaden: When the zero carbon homes standard was scrapped by the Conservative Government in 2015, a Government report said that scrapping that standard was designed to reduce regulations on house builders. Many people said that the Conservative party had been put under considerable pressure by house builders who were very generous to that party. Will the shadow Minister reassure me that if this Bill reaches Committee, he will be in favour of putting pressure on the house builders to comply?

Paul Holmes: There I was, being nice about a Liberal Democrat-proposed Bill. As the hon. Lady knows, the Liberal Democrats are the bane of my life in my constituency, but I was being nice to the Liberal Democrat Member who introduced this Bill, and the hon. Lady has come back and been quite nasty to a Conservative. *[Interruption.]* Thank you very much.

As my speech clearly outlines, we in the Opposition will take a pragmatic approach to legislation that comes before the House, so that people will see the right measures brought in—for developers, if necessary—for new developments across the country. I am not going to be party political and talk about donations. The last Government had a very strong track record of reducing carbon emissions and making sure we delivered the homes that we need across the country. We will continue to be a constructive voice in Parliament, as I tried to outline to the hon. Member for Cheltenham. We will be very pragmatic and constructive in making sure that the aims of this Bill are realised, should it reach Committee. The hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) has my assurance on that, as the shadow Minister responsible for this policy area.

I fully support initiatives to encourage renewable energy and solar panel usage, but it is crucial to address the practical challenges we face. As has been mentioned, the national grid's infrastructure may not be equipped to handle a significant increase in capacity from solar generation alone. A recent article outlined that £60 billion of investment in the national grid is needed to make sure that solar energy can be put back into the grid in a sustainable way.

I will conclude—many will be pleased to hear—by reaffirming the Conservative party's strong commitment to the UK's target of reaching net zero by 2050. I am proud to say that we have already achieved a 50% reduction in emissions between 1990 and 2022 while growing our economy by 79%. As we continue on this journey, our policies must strike a balance between ambition and realism. I look forward to hearing more about the provisions in this Bill, and hope that this debate will bring us closer to solutions that support both its practical implementation and our environmental goals. I once again congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham, and look forward to seeing him—if he is lucky—in a Committee on this legislation. At the risk of being sanctioned, I promise him that I will be a ray of sunlight when we work together to ensure that this Bill is strengthened and becomes legislation.

11.39 am

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) on initiating this high-quality debate. It has been an honour to hear the many contributions that have been made.

New homes must be built with the years 2030, 2040 and 2050 in mind, not the year 2000, and I am glad that the national planning policy framework has been drafted in the context of the wider climate crisis, so that planning decisions on new homes apply a presumption in favour of sustainable development. I look forward to the sunshine that the Minister will bring at the end of the debate, along with, I hope, more details about supplementing the NPPF.

The domestic installation of solar panels has had a rough history in the UK since 2010. The previous Labour Government adopted zero-carbon homes regulations, but they were watered down in 2010 and largely scrapped in 2015. One million new homes have been built since 2010, most of them with minimal

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

standards for water and energy efficiency. Sooner or later those, along with all the much older homes, will have to be retrofitted.

All our constituents really care about the climate crisis. It is one of the most common topics in my mailbox; it is raised by children in schools, and by grandparents at residents' meetings. Yesterday evening I attended a meeting of Osterley and Wyke Green residents' association in my constituency, where we discussed solar panels. Many residents who live in conservation areas want to be able to install solar panels on their south-facing roofs where they face the road, and have asked me to see whether that is an issue of supplementary guidance or of national planning policy. I look forward to the Minister's response.

11.41 am

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): We have a housing shortage in North Norfolk. In particular, we need to build houses that are affordable to buy and cheap to run. Most of my constituents would be far happier with the current growth in house building if they knew that the properties were being built to meet the needs of local families, and that can be done. Some of the most energy-efficient, low-cost housing in my constituency has been built by housing associations, such as Broadland, that have constructed mixed developments containing both expensive and social housing, and it would be perfectly possible to do that at scale.

The new regulations on solar panel installation that the Bill would require the Secretary of State to create could help us to deal with some of the problems and frustrations about rooftop solar. One constituent complained to me about a lack of quality bird netting or deterrents on solar panels in his street, which has led to a large influx of pigeons that are causing a considerable nuisance to him and his neighbours. That may sound like a scene from a Hitchcock film, but it is causing daily frustration, and could be easily avoided if the provisions in the Bill were correctly applied. I cannot find any puns to add to that story.

Anyone who wants to tackle climate change knows that it makes sense to put solar panels on the roofs of new builds. Anyone who wants to move into a house with low or no energy costs knows it, and anyone who is worried about excess solar farms being installed in our fields knows it, too.

11.43 am

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Let me start by sincerely thanking the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) for introducing the Bill, for the constructive spirit in which he has engaged with me on it, and for his laudable efforts outside the Chamber—including his efforts as a local councillor, before coming to this place—to promote the further growth of solar power. I know it is a cause that he cares about, and his passion and commitment were evident in his opening remarks. I also thank all the other Members who have spoken this morning for their thoughtful and well-informed contributions. It has been a wide-ranging debate and the quality has been high—although the same cannot be said, I am afraid, for many of the puns that have been made throughout.

The Government are extremely sympathetic to the intention behind the Bill, namely to significantly boost the deployment of rooftop solar. That aim is clearly shared widely across the House, and for good reason. Self-generation and consumption through solar PV panels not only decreases emissions and delivers bill savings for householders, but provides security from fluctuations in wholesale electricity prices. As solar technology becomes more efficient and affordable, installing panels during construction is increasingly more cost-effective than retrofitting, a point that many Members touched on. The Government are, therefore, in complete agreement with the hon. Gentleman that solar energy has an integral role to play in improving the energy efficiency and reducing the carbon emissions of new homes.

However, we cannot support the Bill today. That is because the Government already intend to amend building regulations later this year as part of the introduction of future standards that will set more ambitious energy efficiency and carbon emissions requirements for new homes. The new standards will ensure that all new homes are future-proof, with low-carbon heating and very high-quality building fabric. Not only will they help us to deliver our commitment to reach net-zero emissions by 2050, but they will reduce bills, tackle fuel poverty, grow skills, foster diverse job markets and make Britain energy secure.

Let me make this absolutely clear to the House and to those watching our proceedings: solar energy will have an extremely important role to play in these standards. The Government's reservations about the Bill are not related to its objective; rather, they stem from recognition that the regulatory landscape being dealt with is incredibly complex and that we must take great care to get the technical detail right. My officials and I are working to develop the technical detail of the solar standards we intend to implement, with a view to ensuring that they are both ambitious and achievable. Our concern is that passing primary legislation that does not strike that balance correctly could have adverse effects, including on housing supply, the construction industry and local authorities.

Although the Bill is not inherently flawed, we are not convinced that it is the most appropriate means of proceeding, for reasons I shall set out shortly. None the less, the hon. Member for Cheltenham has done the House a great service by providing hon. Members with a valuable opportunity to debate this important issue. In the time available to me, I will try to give the House a sense of some of the practical challenges we have been wrestling with as we develop and refine our emerging proposals, and how they speak to potential weaknesses in the Bill.

As hon. Members will be aware, in December 2023 the previous Government published the future homes and buildings standards consultation, setting out proposals on what new standards should entail. The consultation closed in March last year. Over 2,000 responses were received, and some of the most detailed feedback the Department received related to the options set out in respect of solar. The hon. Gentleman has, I know, amassed a not inconsiderable amount of technical expertise when it comes to rooftop solar systems, and he has consulted with industry stakeholders, so he will be acutely aware that setting environmental standards for new homes is not something that Government can do in isolation. To

succeed, we must take industry with us, and crucially, we must also ensure that the standards we set are achievable on all sites across the country.

While it is certainly not dictatorial, the expert feedback to the consultation as well as our ongoing work with the industry-led future homes hub, where we have been considering matters such as design flexibility, has been invaluable in shaping the Government's thinking on what future standards should look like and how they should be implemented. The feedback to the consultation we received drew attention in particular to a number of practical considerations, which we believe it is essential to take into account when determining the precise role of solar in the new standards. I shall touch briefly on three, to illustrate the sort of practical issue my officials and I have been weighing up as we develop the forthcoming new standards, and in so doing give the House a sense of why we feel the Bill may not be the right way to achieve the objective we all share.

The first consideration relates to the ground floor area requirement. As hon. Members know, the future homes and buildings standards consultation set out two options for new homes; both included very high-quality building fabric and a heat pump. The first option also included several additional elements, notably solar panels equating to 40% of the ground-floor area. While respondents were very supportive of the inclusion of solar panels, widespread concerns were raised about the proposed level of solar coverage, which many argued would be virtually impossible to achieve on certain types of home—for example, those with dormer windows.

Clause 1(2) of the Bill sets out a requirement for the same level of solar coverage as was proposed in the consultation. Having thoroughly explored the evidence submitted during the consultation process, the Government have concluded that this level of ground-floor area coverage, rather than just being challenging for a small proportion of new supply, is simply not feasible for many new homes. Importantly, our concern is that setting a requirement at this level in law would result in a significant number of homes needing to apply for an exemption to the standards, which in turn could cause unmanageable workloads in local authorities, lead to significant bottlenecks in housing supply, and ultimately reduce the speed at which rooftop solar on new homes is rolled out.

Determining exemptions is by no means a trivial task. Solar panel systems must be designed carefully for each individual house, taking into account features such as roof shape and pitch, roof lights and dormers. As such, determining the number of solar panels a roof can reasonably accept is a technical design exercise for which many local planning authorities are simply not resourced to carry out in large numbers. Furthermore, any regulation would need to have an enforcement mechanism to deal with instances where unscrupulous developers simply did not comply. The Bill does not address that point, and again, we fear it could end up being another burden that will fall on overstretched local planning authorities. Alive as we are to these unintended consequences, the Government are determined to take an approach that is both ambitious and technically feasible so that widespread exemptions are not necessary.

The second issue relates to the timeframe for introducing the changes. Clause 1(1) stipulates that solar PV will be mandatory on new build homes from 1 October 2026.

While that may seem some way into the future, the design and specification of new housing developments is typically set some considerable time prior to construction. As a result, the Bill's proposed commencement date could risk a significant increase in costs and delays to housing delivery, as developers are forced to rapidly redesign, including sites already in train.

It is important to bear in mind that those in the industry cannot properly prepare for the new requirement until they have access to the final regulations and accompanying statutory guidance. Preparing the regulations and said guidance is not an insignificant task. They need to be drafted and consulted upon, with the consultation open for at least 12 weeks to align with standard protocol and to permit industry sufficient time to respond to such significant proposals.

Following the consultation, the regulations and guidance will need to be finalised and passed using the affirmative resolution process. It is therefore unlikely that the full detail will be available to the construction sector until the end of this year at the earliest, giving the sector only a few months to redesign and get supply chains prepared. These issues are particularly pertinent for small and medium-sized enterprises, which are less equipped to respond quickly. By potentially compressing this period to meet the proposed deadline, housing sites that are already under way may become unviable, leading to wasted investment, a negative impact on housing supply and disruption to numerous local communities across the country—outcomes that I am sure Members will agree we must try to avoid.

The third and final issue relates to transitional arrangements. Government typically minimise the disruption associated with the introduction of new building regulations by setting out associated transitional arrangements. These arrangements determine the limited conditions under which a building can be built to the previous standards. That gives industry time to adapt to new standards and allows work that is already under way to be completed without major disruption. When the 2021 standards were introduced, a six-month period was allowed between laying the regulations and the standards coming into force, followed by a 12-month transitional period. That meant the regulations were laid on 15 December 2021, with the transitional period ending on 15 June 2023.

This Bill does make provision for the Secretary of State to put in place transitional arrangements. However, our reading of the Bill is that those arrangements cannot contradict or override its main premise that new homes built from 1 October 2026 must be fitted with solar panels. As a result, we are concerned that there may not be sufficient time for appropriate transitional arrangements to be set. We believe it is vital that they are set, given that the construction sector typically plans ahead by at least two, if not three or even more, years. Providing merely a matter of weeks between publishing such significant legislation and its taking effect would not be realistic or fair, in our view.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I have been listening carefully to what the Minister has said. Does he agree that a vote on Second Reading is a vote on the principle of the Bill, and the objections that he has been raising are micro, technical ones? Does he not agree that the urgency of the climate crisis and the

[Ellie Chowns]

immense benefits associated with solar PV mean that he should stop raining on the parade of this Bill and give us the opportunity to vote on photons?

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Lady makes a fair challenge, but the Government do not intend to proceed on the basis of primary legislation. She might find that the primary legislation route is ultimately slower than the way in which we intend to introduce the future standards later this year. Speed is absolutely an issue we are grappling with, but I gently challenge the idea that this private Member's Bill is the fastest way to proceed, even leaving aside the points I have raised, which I do not consider to be minor or technical.

In contrast, the future homes standards consultation sets out two options for transitional arrangements, which we believe are far more robust. The first option involves a six-month period between the laying date of the regulations and the regulations coming into force. The second option involves a period of up to 12 months. That approach to transition will ensure that as many homes as possible are required to meet the new standards in a way that is structured and achievable.

It is our responsibility to ensure that the standards we set for new homes are ambitious, but also technically feasible and deliverable, as I have said. For the reasons I have set out, and others that I have not covered today, we believe that forthcoming future standards, developed as a clear and coherent response to the 2023 consultation, are a more appropriate and arguably faster means of achieving the Bill's aims, which we fully share with the hon. Member for Cheltenham.

Nesil Caliskan: Reflecting on the point made by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) about industry using excuses to push back on delivering homes, can the Minister give assurances that in their efforts the Government will push ahead with renewable energy, particularly solar, and do everything they can to ensure that industry and housing companies do not use viability as an excuse not to deliver the many new homes that we need?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am afraid that the time to go into it is not available to me, but I would mention the Government's intention to revise viability guidance this year to strengthen the section 106 developer contributions system rather than implementing the infrastructure levy that the previous Government devised. In lots of different respects, this Government are absolutely ensuring that developers are held to the commitments they make, and, as she will know, we gave significant weight to the benefits of renewable and low-carbon energy proposals more generally in the NPPF.

As I was saying, maintaining consistency with the established direction of travel is vital. There is a history of environmental standards being committed to and then withdrawn by previous Governments, which has understandably left industry reluctant to invest in preparing for new standards. However, since its announcement in 2019, the future homes standard has become a world-recognised framework, giving industry time to develop the necessary supply chains, skills and construction

practices, and many developers are already building to higher standards in anticipation of its roll-out. Introducing conflicting legislation at this stage could create significant confusion and risks reversing the confidence and momentum that we have worked hard to establish.

Let me reassure the House that it is our firm intention to legislate for future standards later this year, as I have made clear, and to increase rooftop solar deployment significantly as a result. I understand that hon. Members and industry will need more details about what the standards will entail before they can arrive at a judgment as to their efficacy. Although we need to take the necessary time to get that right, my intention is to set out further details as soon as I am able—in the not-too-distant future, I hope.

Ruth Cadbury: I understand that 1.5 million Germans live in flats that have solar panels on their balconies. Will the Minister consider that as an option, in both new and retrofitted housing, as he looks at this important work?

Matthew Pennycook: As I said, we will set out further details on the new standards in the not-too-distant future.

I reiterate my thanks to the hon. Member for Cheltenham for introducing this commendable Bill. Although the Government cannot support it for the reasons that I have given, we very much agree with the sentiment and ambition that have motivated it, and I recognise and appreciate all the dedicated work that I know he has put into it. For that reason, and assuming that he is willing, I would very much welcome an ongoing dialogue with him as the Government progress our work on the new standards, so that he has an opportunity to build on the important contribution that he has made in introducing this legislation, and to work closely with me and my officials prior to the introduction of our legislation so that his work and the views he has developed are properly incorporated and taken into account. On that basis, and given the widespread consensus on the objectives of the Bill, I hope that he will not seek to divide the House on its Second Reading.

11.58 am

Max Wilkinson: I thank the Minister for his generous words. Although I accept that I will not be cracking open a beer this evening to celebrate the Bill's passing—perhaps a bottle of Corona—this has been an important debate and it has demonstrated consensus across the House, save for the local difficulties of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), which we should not go into again.

A range of views were expressed about the energy mix. My view is that we need a mix of energy generation that includes all the things discussed today. I am pleased to hear that the matter will be up for future discussion and I look forward to working on it with the Government—particularly on the important point of applying pressure to developers in a way that gets the pragmatic outcome that we all deserve. I thank all Members for their contributions to the discussion.

11.59 am

The debate stood adjourned (Standing order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 11 July.

Licensing Hours Extension Bill

Second Reading

11.59 am

Andrew Ranger (Wrexham) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to stand before the House to bring forward a Bill that makes an amendment to the Licensing Act 2003 that will support our vibrant hospitality sector and help our communities come together to celebrate momentous moments in our national life. I am sure I can add a few more puns to our deliberations today. The Bill will do that by changing the procedure for licensing hours extensions in England and Wales, so that the measures are subject to the negative procedure rather than the affirmative procedure, as is currently the case.

Before proceeding in more detail, I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) who brought forward a similar Bill in the previous Parliament. It enjoyed wide support across the House, only for it to fall when Parliament was dissolved for the general election. I am pleased to be carrying forward the work that she started. I would also like to thank everyone who supported the Bill, particularly those who have come to the House today and all those who attended my drop-in last week, in collaboration with the British Beer and Pub Association and UKHospitality.

It is important to start talking about our pubs and hospitality industry, something I can claim to know a thing or two about having had a 30-year career in it before coming to this place. Pubs and other venues are so much more than just businesses. They are often a focal point of our communities, from one generation to the next, and where we gather for life's big and small moments. They are also fundamental to community cohesion. Two thirds of adults believe that our local pubs are vital to combatting loneliness and social isolation, according to a survey by YouGov in 2024.

It will come as a surprise to no one that I believe it is in Wrexham where the finest pubs and beers can be found. In no particular order, there are great pubs such as Saith Seren, the Acton Park, the Nags Head, the Red Lion in Marchwiel, the Crown in Llay, the Quarry Arms, the Buck in Bangor on Dee, the Cunliffe Arms, the George and Dragon in Brymbo, the Golden Lion in Coedpoeth and the Kings Mill. I will stop there.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I am delighted to hear that my hon. Friend will now have, I think, at least 12 free drinks in his constituency! Does he agree with me about the importance of community-owned and operated pubs, and the additional social value they can provide to local communities and groups?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before Mr Ranger returns to his feet, I should obviously reference all the fantastic pubs in Sussex Weald!

Andrew Ranger: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and thank him for that intervention. I get the feeling we are going to hear a lot of pub names today. I named just a few of the 78 pubs that span my constituency. I will not comment on how many of them I have personally visited, possibly more than once.

Hospitality is also vital to tourism in Wrexham. It contributes nearly £120 million to our local economy, and I know that that will be similarly true in other Members' constituencies. Since the arrival of two well-known Hollywood actors in Wrexham, we have welcomed visitors from far afield, eager to see the home of Wrexham AFC at the world-famous Racecourse Ground and, of course, to be pulled a pint by landlord Wayne at the Turf—there is another one. Accommodating the recent influx of visitors would never have been possible without pubs, cafes, restaurants and hotels stepping up to the plate. I know that that is the case across Britain, where dedicated staff work hard to deliver great service, food and drink to customers. I thank them for all they do, all year round.

Section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003 provides the ability for the Home Secretary to make an order extending licensing hours on a blanket basis, thereby allowing all licensed premises to open for longer at moments of important celebration.

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): *The Daily Telegraph* recently visited my constituency to interview people to report on the status and progress of the new Labour Government. This piece was largely conducted by interviewing people residing within, or emerging from, the Moon Under the Water public house on Watford High Street. Has my hon. Friend considered the implications of these proposals on the ability to do such easy journalism in constituencies such as mine?

Andrew Ranger: I had not considered that, but my hon. Friend makes a valid point.

Measures to extend hours provide the additional benefit of boosting the hospitality sector. Blanket licensing hours extensions introduced by the Secretary of State mean that businesses do not have to apply for individual extensions, should they wish to stay open longer to celebrate a particular event. Under normal circumstances, venues have to apply for a temporary event notice, which costs £21 for an application and involves considerable administrative work. The Bill will have the twofold impact of saving businesses time and money and meaning that local licensing authorities avoid the strain of being required to process large numbers of individual applications, possibly at very late notice.

Licensing hours extensions in England and Wales have been implemented on occasions, including royal weddings and jubilees and major sporting events, such as when the England men's football squad reached the finals of the Euros in 2020 and 2024. These events bring us together to share in these occasions, whether that is their joy, the perhaps inevitable trauma when England lose on penalties again, or the anticipated jubilation when Wales reach the world cup final or when Wrexham reach the FA cup final. There is generally less of an urgent issue with royal events, for which more notice is generally available. The situation is much more complicated with sporting events, when there can be only a few days' notice of a team reaching a semi-final or final. Unfortunately, that has led to significant occasions where it has not been possible for the Government to extend licensing hours.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): As we are in the business of name-checking, I am delighted to say that after a period of lamentable closure, the Half

[Sir Roger Gale]

Moon and Seven Stars in Preston, the village I live in, will be reopening its doors at 5 o'clock tonight, celebrating, I think, Pubs Day today—neither the hon. Gentleman nor I will be there, unfortunately. More seriously, the implications of this Bill are considerable for an industry that has been under great pressure for a long time, particularly since covid. Is it not the case that it is extraordinary that these hoops have to be jumped through to do what most people would regard as normal and sensible?

Andrew Ranger: I agree 100% with the right hon. Member. What he raises is what the Bill seeks to deal with, basically. I join him in celebrating the reopening of the pub in the area where he lives.

There have been times when the Government have not been able to extend licensing hours for significant occasions, because the required secondary legislation is subject to the affirmative procedure, which means that both Houses of Parliament need to approve the measure following a debate. As such, if Parliament is in recess, it is simply not possible to introduce such measures. A recent instance of that was when the Lionesses reached the final of the world cup in August 2023, during a parliamentary recess. That meant it was not possible for the Government to extend the hours for that momentous match. As a result, pubs and hospitality venues missed out on an historic and unforgettable occasion.

With the continued sporting success of our national teams on the world stage, my hope is that we will see more occasions in the near future where the need for such measures arises, including such events as the upcoming FIFA men's world cup in 2026 in North America, the 2027 rugby world cup in Australia, the FIFA women's world cup in 2027 in Brazil, and the International Cricket Council T20 world cup in 2026 in India and Sri Lanka. In the interests of parliamentary sportsmanship, we all want to see successes for our Scottish and Northern Irish teams, too.

I am sure that Members across the House will recognise the tough hand that the pubs and hospitality sector has been dealt over recent years. At the end of July 2024, the total number of licensed premises in Britain was just 99,000, some 45,000 of which were pubs. The number of licensed premises has plummeted by 30% over the past 20 years, and we have lost 25% of pubs since 2003. We should use our role as parliamentarians in this place, and the opportunities that affords us, to speak on behalf of the industry, and it is for that reason that I believe it is important that we are here today. Hospitality is crucial for not only local economies, but local opportunity. The sector supports more than 1 million jobs and provides great career opportunities and flexible working in all parts of the UK. I know from first-hand experience that somebody can go from washing pots to running the place.

I take this opportunity to address any concerns that Members may have about any reduction in parliamentary scrutiny. In the past, these orders have attracted no controversy or dissent, and I expect that to remain the case. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any hon. Members objecting to an extension of licensing hours for, say, a royal wedding. For that reason, I believe that the negative resolution procedure is entirely appropriate. Let me be

clear that this Bill does not take away the right to seek a debate. If any Members of the House or the other place objected to a certain extension, they would still have the ability to pray against it.

I also reassure the House that this amendment to the parliamentary process is the only change that this Bill seeks to make. It does not change the fundamental mechanics of how licensing hours extensions operate and are decided on. They will still be determined on a case-by-case basis by the Secretary of State and will be introduced only if the event in question is

“an occasion of exceptional international, national, or local significance”.

The word “exceptional” is important here. The Bill also does not alter the process for temporary event notices.

I believe that the Bill speaks for itself. It is a small amendment to the Licensing Act that will have a big effect by allowing for more efficient use of Parliament's valuable time. It is a simple but significant measure, and I am grateful to all colleagues for their support today and in the lead-up to this debate. Let us raise a glass to our pubs and hospitality industry. I commend the Bill to the House.

12.12 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I will try to be brief. I thank the hon. Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for bringing forward this important Bill. Pubs are incredibly important places for more than just enjoying a drink: they are at the heart of local communities up and down the country and bring people together in a truly unique way, which is ever more important in this modern world. The sector is also an integral part of our cultural heritage and a significant contributor to our economy, with almost 1 million people working in it.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I started my working life in licensed premises. From traditional pubs in Basildon and Billericay, such as the Chequers on Billericay High Street, to the more modern Beehive in Basildon, the bar at the Laindon Community Centre and the taproom at the Billericay Brewery, local pubs across our communities come in all shapes and sizes. Hard-working landlords, owners and staff make these local institutions what they are.

Our pubs have faced a tough time. During the last Parliament, I won the parliamentarian of the year award from the all-party parliamentary beer group for my work to push forward on the draught beer duty relief. This Bill is another small but important step to help our pubs. It is limited and sensible, and simplifying the process to allow pubs to open for key moments that bind our country together, whether it is a national celebration, a sporting event or a royal wedding, is a sensible step forward.

There are obviously bigger factors to decide whether pubs in this country stay open—this is not the day to go into VAT, national insurance and so on—but, through this Bill, the hon. Member for Wrexham presents the House with a real opportunity to make a meaningful difference and support our pubs in an immediate and practical way for the future. The Licensing Hours Extensions Bill is a targeted measure to allow pubs to remain open during those moments that can really instil national

pride in our country and bring us together in our public houses. Let us support it and work towards a thriving and resilient pub sector.

12.14 pm

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) on his private Member's Bill, and I am proud to be a named supporter.

As a Welsh MP, I know that few things unite Welsh people like supporting our rugby and football teams, and love for our local pubs runs deep. Places such as the Mayquay in Kinnel bay, the Mason's Arms in Denbigh and the Station in Colwyn bay are vibrant hubs of our communities, and they bring people together during moments of national significance. This Bill builds on that important role by ensuring that communities can gather for major events, while boosting local economies. I am sure that we have all heard from the hospitality sector in our constituencies about the challenges they have faced, particularly in recent years.

The hospitality industry is a fundamental part of Welsh culture, and it is vital to the economy of Clwyd North. However, pubs are closing at concerning rates across the UK, with the number of licensed premises down by 30% since 20 years ago. More needs to be done to encourage tourism in smaller pockets of the country, such as mine. In my view, supporting our pubs is a crucial step.

This Bill would bring together locals and visitors in north Wales during significant national sporting events, be they football, rugby or something else. I am proud to champion Welsh rugby union games at Parc Eirias in my constituency. I believe it is vital that we support such games in north Wales, and this Bill allows us more opportunity to celebrate successes together locally.

To be clear, this Bill is not about diminishing local authority control; it is about ensuring fairness and efficiency when large-scale events call for a national approach. Coming from a local authority background, I know that the provisions in the Bill would ease the pressures on councils and their licensing committees. It is a common-sense proposal that will unite communities, bolster the hospitality sector and reduce unnecessary bureaucracy. I urge Members from across the House to back this Bill.

12.16 pm

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I am absolutely delighted to support this Bill, which has been brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger). He is a great champion of pubs and of the hospitality trade in our communities in north Wales.

As a member of the all-party parliamentary group for beer and the APPG for hospitality and tourism, I am very well aware of the vital role that pubs play in our local economies. In my constituency of Bangor Aberconwy, we are proud to have 119 pubs and three breweries. Like my hon. Friend, I have not visited all of them yet, but I am dedicated to working on it.

Pubs in Bangor Aberconwy support 2,000 local jobs, many of which are filled by young people getting their first taste of the world of work and learning valuable

life skills, so it is my turn to do some name-checking. Pubs such as the Union in Bangor, the Albion in Conwy and the King's Head in Llandudno play a vital role in our communities by bringing people together over a pint, and no more so than during national sporting events.

The 5 June 2022 was a very special night. It was the night that Gareth Bale scored a 34th-minute screamer to secure Wales's place in the world cup finals for the first time since 1958. My whole family watched that match, and it was absolutely brilliant. There were Wales flags and kids everywhere, and, when he scored, there was beer everywhere too—I will never forget it. Although my national team's fortunes might have taken a bit of a turn since then, I hope that the Bill will make it easier for pubs and clubs across Wales to bring people together all over again to watch Wales in the world cup finals in the USA in 2026. I thought that I might be pushing my luck with that, but given that my hon. Friend mentioned it, I think he will agree that it would be an event of exceptional national significance, which we would all want to support.

In all seriousness, this Bill will make it easier for pubs to bring people together, celebrate national events, support the sector and streamline the process, while staying true to the spirit of the Licensing Act. I sincerely hope that Members on both sides of the House will join me in supporting the Bill.

12.18 pm

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): Northampton has a fantastic and varied hospitality sector, and this Bill will support local businesses across Northampton South. There are over 30 pubs in my constituency alone, and they employ nearly 1,500 people. I have been very fortunate to visit a number of them over the years, and I have now visited many on constituency visits, including the Deers Leap in Bellinge, which is the last community pub in the Eastern district; the Pomfret Arms, which has just reopened after being closed due to some disastrous flooding on the River Nene; the Britannia, where I pulled my first pint on camera—I think it is safe to say I will never make a good barman—and the White Hart in Great Houghton, which is part of the Everards brewery group. I started my career in construction by working for Pick Everard, which is owned by the Everard family, so the group is close to my heart.

Northampton is also home to a number of breweries: famously, Carlsberg—served here in the House—but also Phipps brewery, which serves pubs across our region. While I am talking about the pubs that will benefit from this Bill, I should give special mention to my local, the Artizan, which resides just over the border in the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend Member for Northampton North (Lucy Rigby).

The Bill may sound technical to my constituents, but at its heart it is about something far more important. The minor amendments proposed will mean that, whether Parliament is sitting or not, a decision can be made nationally to change licensing hours. As has been noted, it will enable hours to be changed during major sporting events, which is great news for the thousands of rugby and football fans in my town who follow Saints and Cobblers players when they are called up for national duty.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): We heard that licensing hours could not be extended for the Lionesses game because Parliament was not sitting. Does my hon. Friend agree that the changes in the Bill will give us the flexibility to ensure that, on such occasions, fans will be able watch games while supporting our pubs? We also have an opportunity today to progress legislation on the safety of fans in another way; my Bill is no. 15 on the list, and it would legislate to prevent—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Point beautifully made.

Mike Reader: I am looking forward to my hon. Friend's Bill—a much-needed piece of legislation.

The British Beer and Pub Association backs this change to the law because it knows that the industry needs it. And as a proud member, along with others in the House, of the all-party parliamentary beer group and the all-party parliamentary group for hospitality and tourism, I know that we need it, too. The Bill is about helping our pubs and communities to continue the proud tradition of celebrating British success together, and I fully support it.

12.22 pm

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for introducing the Bill—a small change, but one that will make a big difference to our communities. There are a few principal reasons why I support it. First, as others have said, it allows us to bring communities together at moments of national importance, making it a common-sense change that our communities would welcome. In many instances, they cannot believe the process that exists at the moment. Constituents across the country—certainly mine—would welcome this relatively minor change so that they can come together, support their local hospitality spots and mark those occasions.

Secondly, it will have a material positive impact on our local hospitality sector—pubs, but also restaurants and cafes. Our local businesses, particularly small businesses, seek flexibility above everything else, so that they can adapt and take up any opportunity for further income. They also want to play a part in our high streets and town centres. The change will bring that flexibility. I have 65 different hospitality spots in my constituency, which employ almost 1,000 people and make a contribution of more than £50 million. These small steps can make a big difference to them, and I am pleased to support them.

Finally, the Bill will relieve pressure on overstretched local authorities up and down the country. Councils talk about the burden of red tape, not just for local businesses but for themselves. The Bill will ensure not only that parliamentary time is spent well, but that existing pressures on council are relieved. For that reason, I very much support the Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

12.24 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) for introducing the Bill

today. I also commend the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) who led a version of the Bill in the previous Parliament before untimely events curtailed its progress. Speaking of untimely events, I think we can all agree on the collective disappointment when a pub is closed for or unable to show an important sporting event. I am sure hospitality venues up and down the country will welcome this legislation as providing certainty that they will be able to open for significant events.

At this point I must declare an interest as a regular patron of Stockton West's pubs. We have some of the best—no, the best—pubs in the country, and I know that they always welcome the opportunity to stay open a little later when circumstances allow. As mentioned already, when the England women's football team progressed to England's first world cup final since 1966, the request to extend licensing hours came in late and during a parliamentary recess, which made it impossible to grant the request, denying many businesses the opportunity to extend their licences and many punters the chance to gather and show their early-morning support. Ensuring that the Government can make the change swiftly while retaining the necessary safeguards is a sensible and measured approach. I hope it will resolve the issues that Governments have faced in the past and allow changes to be made when needed.

It may be unlikely, but I remain hopeful that one day the mighty Stockton Town will take advantage of those changes with a future appearance, late in the evening, in a champions league final. While I might have to wait a while for that, in the meantime I express our support for the change and look forward to taking advantage of it during the next international tournament.

12.26 pm

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): I feel quite intoxicated by the number of local licensed premises that have been mentioned this morning. It must have set some sort of record. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger) on his success in the ballot for private Members' Bills—in the 20 years I have been a Member I have never had any success in it. I also congratulate him on his decision to pick this worthwhile topic as the subject for his Bill and I recognise his long career in the hospitality sector, as well as his clear expertise in the area. I am also incredibly impressed by the detailed knowledge Members have of licensed premises in their constituencies. I note the mention of the all-party parliamentary group on beer, which is obviously an important group and has a large and thriving membership.

I am grateful for the contributions of other hon. Members to the debate. I note the contributions from the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), who I think it is fair to say has a great deal of experience in pubs, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd North (Gill German) who talked about the Welsh perspective. I admire the determination of my hon. Friend the Member for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes) to visit all her local pubs. I enjoyed hearing about the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) being the home of certain breweries. My hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Nesil Caliskan) reminded us of the importance of the Bill's proposals to restaurants,

cafes and the high street, talking about the 65 hospitality sites in her constituency and the 1,000 people employed by them.

I am pleased to say that there has been a high degree of consensus on this measure, and I can say from the outset that the Government support the Bill and will do what we can to facilitate its passage here and in the other place. I also pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) who led on this issue in the last Parliament, and managed to get her Bill through this place, although the general election intervened, unfortunately, before it could make its way on to the statute books.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham, in his excellent speech, set out a compelling case for the Bill. Section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003 already makes provision for the Secretary of State to make an order that relaxes licensing hours in England and Wales for

“an occasion of exceptional international, national, or local significance”.

In practice, the Home Secretary determines whether an occasion meets those criteria on a case-by-case basis, and orders must specify the dates and times of the relaxations.

First, such orders bring about benefits to businesses, which can stay open for longer and thus increase revenue. Secondly, communities also benefit, as they are able to come together to celebrate important events. Thirdly, orders benefit licensing authorities, which do not have to process large numbers of licence extensions individually, often in a very limited time period.

Of course, it is for businesses to decide whether they wish to take advantage of extensions, but if they do wish to stay open, a blanket licensing extension automatically means that they do not have to give a temporary event notice to their local authority, which saves them time as well as the associated fee.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): As a former licensing board member, I welcome this Bill. Pubs in Falkirk would certainly have benefited from extensions during the Euro 2020 and Euro 2024 finals, as well as for the world cup final in 2023, and I declare an interest as a member of the tartan army. We need to recognise the impact that extensions have on hospitality workers in the Bill. Would the Minister endorse Unite’s “Get Me Home Safely” campaign and encourage businesses who are going to benefit from this extension to make sure that their staff get home safely?

Dame Diana Johnson: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an important point about ensuring that those who work in hospitality are well protected and that getting them home is an important part of employers’ duty to keep their workforce safe. In the past, licensing hours have been relaxed for high-profile royal events, such as His Majesty the King’s coronation, Her Late Majesty the Queen’s 90th birthday and her platinum jubilee, as well as the royal weddings in 2018 and 2011. Licensing hours have also been extended for sporting events, including the FIFA world cup 2014, the Euro 2020 final and the Euro 2024 semi-final and final. When the Government have proposed extensions to licensing hours, they have received cross-party support in both Houses and have been passed unopposed.

As we have heard, the Licensing Act specifies that any order is subject to the affirmative procedure and needs to be approved by both Houses of Parliament before it comes into force. The Bill proposes to amend the Licensing Act so that these orders are subject to the negative resolution procedure, rather than the affirmative procedure. That will enable extensions to be implemented at short notice if necessary, including when Parliament is in recess. The current arrangements means that fast-paced extensions are simply not always possible. That is problematic in the context of sporting events, as the participation of national teams in the later stages of competitions is uncertain until the last moment.

I will provide an example to illustrate that. In 2021, the England men’s team made it through to the final of the delayed Euro 2020 tournament. With the help of the usual channels, the previous Government managed to push an order through Parliament in the three days between the semi-final and the final. To emphasise my earlier point, I note there was complete agreement across the House for the measure. In the summer of 2023, the England women’s team equally commendably reached the final of the world cup. However, that tournament took place in the summer when Parliament was in recess, so it was sadly not possible to extend licensing hours for the match. The Bill will rectify this issue and ensure that licensing hours can be extended at short notice when necessary, including when Parliament is in recess.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does the Minister not share my concern that this is a Bill of very limited ambition? Considering what she has said, surely there is a strong case for deregulating this whole area and for getting Parliament and the Government out of hospitality businesses’ hair.

Dame Diana Johnson: The measures before us are simple and straightforward, and the debate shows there is widespread agreement in the House about them. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will, in this case, not cause any problems to the Bill going forward.

The Bill will rectify the issues we have been discussing and streamline the parliamentary process, but it does not seek to alter the fundamental content of the Licensing Act 2003. However, the Government fully intend to plan ahead, so that wherever possible licensing hour extension orders in England and Wales can be brought in with time for full public consultation. The power in section 172 of the Licensing Act has, rightly, been used sparingly, and there is no intention to change the frequency with which the relevant powers are invoked.

As the Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention, it is important that I make clear that the police have generally been supportive of extensions for royal events, and that there have been no major increases in crime and disorder attributable to temporary extended drinking hours. However, the police have previously expressed some concerns about licensing extensions relating to sporting events, namely football. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the police have the opportunity to put forward their views, and we will always give due weight to any concerns raised before pressing ahead with an extension of licensing hours.

The Government recognise the importance of providing the police with ample time to put in place additional policing measures that may be necessary to minimise

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

any potential increase in crime and disorder as a result of any temporary licensing hours extension. To that end, the Government remain firmly committed to continuing to plan in advance, wherever possible.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham for bringing forward the legislation and those who have spoken in support of it. It is a simple measure that will free up parliamentary time, help the Government to continue to support businesses and local authorities, and allow for celebrations of important events in the life of the nation. The Government fully support the Bill, and it is very important to get it passed before last orders.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Andrew Ranger to wind up.

12.37 pm

Andrew Ranger: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions today and for the broad consensus across the House. I thought I knew quite a lot of hospitality venues across the country, but I have learned about a few more today, which has been good. I will be sure to try to visit them, if possible. I thank the Minister for her support and her comments.

In summary, the Bill introduces a simple, straightforward measure that will enable us to cut out an unnecessary administrative burden for businesses, use parliamentary time better and support our hospitality sector. I trust that all Members from across the House will be able to support the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Absent Voting (Elections in Scotland and Wales) Bill

Second Reading

12.38 pm

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Ensuring that electors can vote is fundamental to our democracy. Although most of us choose to vote in person, many people face barriers that prevent them from doing so. In October 2023, the online absent voting application services were launched, giving voters the option to apply online for their postal or proxy vote for the first time. The services allowed people the choice to apply online or to use the existing option to apply through a traditional paper application, should they wish. The services are currently available for electors in Great Britain for United Kingdom Parliament elections and for police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales. In England, voters can also use the services to apply for a postal or proxy vote in all local elections.

The value of the new online absent voting application services was made very clear in the 2024 general election, not long after their launch. Data published by the Government show that over 1.5 million people in Great Britain made an application to vote by post or by proxy vote in the run-up to the general election last year.

Between 22 May—the day the election was called—and the deadline for absent vote applications, 84% of postal vote applications and 93% of proxy vote applications were made using the online service. It is clear that electors found it effective, with over 90% of those using it during that period recording that they were satisfied with the service.

For voters in Scotland and Wales, the option to use the digital route for absent voting arrangements is limited. An elector in Scotland or Wales who wants a postal or proxy vote for a devolved Parliament or local election is still required to fill out a paper application form and physically send it in to be processed. The Bill would end the inconsistency and give voters in Scotland and Wales an equal choice in how they apply for an absent vote for use in the Scottish Parliament, Senedd Cymru and local elections.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. Does she agree that—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Please be seated, both of you. Ms Gilbert, when you take an intervention, which is your choice, you must sit down.

Graeme Downie: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill is vital to ensuring that everyone in Scotland, Wales and across the UK has every opportunity to vote in elections, and that we must continue to do all we can through schools and other means of encouragement to make sure that people fully understand the democratic process and that it is accessible at all times and in all ways?

Tracy Gilbert: Yes, I do agree. The Gould review and report made it clear that making voting accessible to everyone, particularly young and disabled people, is critical to encouraging as many people as possible to vote.

The Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru are both holding their parliamentary elections in May 2026, and it would be a great benefit to voters and electoral administrators alike if access to the online services were to be provided in time for those polls. This is not about forcing electors down a specific route to apply; all electors would continue to be able to make an absent vote application on paper if they wished. All the Bill would do is give them an additional option to apply online.

One consideration that I must emphasise is the importance of devolution. It is absolutely right that responsibility for local elections and elections to the Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru is devolved to those bodies. The Bill was carefully drafted to respect that, and the requirements for legislative consent in respect of relevant parts of the Bill will duly be followed. The Bill would give the Welsh and Scottish Governments powers to enable applications for postal and proxy votes for devolved elections to be made digitally through the new online services.

There are two further aspects to the Bill. First, regulations made under the Bill would require electors applying for an absent vote for devolved elections in Scotland and Wales to provide their national insurance number as part of their application. To be clear, that identity checking

requirement is not the same as voter identification at polling stations, where photographic identification must be produced. Instead, it is an up-front check at the point the postal or proxy vote application is made, and simply requires the applicant to provide their national insurance number. The same requirement applies to absent voting applications for reserved elections and has been in place for applications to register to vote for devolved and reserved elections since 2014.

Secondly, the Bill would align the renewal cycles for devolved elections with the three-year cycles in place for reserved elections. Instead of having to refresh their signature every five years, electors would instead have to reapply for their postal voting arrangement every three years. That is done to avoid confusing electors and to ensure that the signature held on file is recent.

The measures in the Bill have been discussed with Scottish and Welsh Ministers, who have agreed to every element. Through the Bill, we can end the divergence and remove burdens on voters in Scotland and Wales. The Bill will remove inconsistencies across our democracy and ensure that it is modern, secure, transparent and fair. I commend the Bill to the House.

12.44 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for bringing forward this important piece of Member's legislation. Having taken a Members' Bill through the Scottish Parliament a number of years ago, I know how daunting and time-consuming the process is, so I am very grateful to all colleagues who have tabled Bills, allowing us to debate so many important subjects.

With turnout at elections dropping across the country, it is important that we as legislators do everything we can to encourage and facilitate voters. We all have a role to play, whether that is speaking to young people in our constituencies about the importance of their vote and their democratic rights being respected, or bringing forward legislation that makes the process easier for all. We have to take those responsibilities seriously—in fact, to grasp them with both hands.

Postal and proxy votes are a vital component of our elections, as they make voting possible for voters who are perhaps ill or on holiday, or whose working hours make it difficult to get to a polling station. As we have heard, since October 2023, the online absent voter application service has been available to voters who wish to vote by post and wish to apply online. The option to apply using a paper form is, of course, still available to anyone who wishes to use it.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for bringing this Bill before the House. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) agree that the online service provides a vital resource for people with accessibility requirements—for those who are perhaps blind or partially sighted?

Patricia Ferguson: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is something I am particularly aware of in my constituency, which—as I will talk more about later on—has an ageing demographic. The online service is vital.

The option to apply by post is available for UK parliamentary elections and for police and fire commissioner elections in England and Wales. Voters in England can also use the service to apply for postal or proxy votes in local elections, but voters in Scotland and Wales currently have more limited options, as a paper form is still required for absent voting applications for a devolved Parliament or local election. The Bill will remove that restriction for voters in Scotland and Wales, and will also make the conduct of elections possibly cheaper and certainly more manageable for electoral administrators.

In Scotland, we use three different voting systems, which in and of itself can be complicating for voters. We ask them to vote by first past the post for elections to this place; we ask them to vote using the additional member system for elections to the Scottish Parliament; and we ask them to vote by single transferable vote for local authority elections. In spite of the fact that some of those methods have been in place since 1999, I have encountered voters over the piece who still find that confusing, so anything we can do to take away any complexity or complication from the process of voting must be very welcome.

The Bill is also respectful of the devolution settlement—something that is very important to me as a former Minister for Parliament in the Scottish Government. This Bill seeks to give the power to enact those parts of the system that are devolved to the Scottish and Welsh Governments, but importantly, it also allows enough time for the process to be introduced in time for the next round of Scottish and Welsh parliamentary elections in 2026.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab) *rose*—

Graeme Downie *rose*—

Patricia Ferguson: I give way.

Euan Stainbank: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that many young voters—especially first-time voters—at the most recent election in 2024 will believe that they have already signed up for a postal or proxy vote, and that this Bill will be the first step in allowing people to permanently register for all elections in Scotland and Wales online?

Patricia Ferguson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention—I was rather spoilt for choice. I absolutely agree: young people will think that. Young people are particularly used to signing up online and think that once they have done something online, it is probably there in perpetuity. In most cases, they are correct; in this, they are not. The Bill will help to resolve that issue.

I mentioned that we are going to have Scottish Parliament and Welsh parliamentary elections in 2026, but in Scotland, those elections will be quickly followed by local authority elections in 2027, so it is very important that the Bill is enacted in time for those elections to use this new system. This is a crucial step towards ensuring a consistent and straightforward voting process for people in Scotland and Wales.

Graeme Downie: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way—and other Members for not asking her to give way at the same time. During the most recent general election campaign, an awful lot of time was spent explaining to voters exactly which elections they were

[*Graeme Downie*]

signed up for, which ones they had postal votes for, where they had to sign up again, whether that could be done online, which confirmation they had to wait for and various other things. That caused extra complexity for returning officers and deputy returning officers in Fife, where there were many conversations, wasting a lot of time for candidates of all parties, to ensure that we all understood the process. Does she agree that this will make the process much simpler for everyone?

Patricia Ferguson: I agree that this will make it simpler. I think back to a number of conversations I heard or had on the doorstep on the issue. I thought I had begun to get my head around the situation, but I then heard colleagues who were knocking doors with me trying to explain it to citizens on the doorstep, and it became clear to me that perhaps I had not explained it properly to them. We all have a role to play, and anything we can do to make this process more obvious, more accessible and simpler will be very helpful.

I know from last year's general election, Deputy Presiding Officer—sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker; old habits die hard—how important postal and proxy votes are to voters in my communities of Glasgow West, which had the largest number of registered postal voters in the city of Glasgow. As I said earlier, that perhaps reflects the ageing demographic in parts of my constituency. Voters should never be hindered in casting their vote by an overly complicated system, and this Bill is a major step forward in reducing that complexity. It is vital that every eligible voter has easy access to the democratic process, and this Bill will help to achieve that.

I was first elected in 1999 to another Parliament, and over the years I have worked with many returning officers and seen for myself the work that they and their staff do, year in, year out. Even when there are not elections on, they are preparing, and ensuring that electoral registers are up to date and the processes for postal and proxy votes are in place. I thank all the returning officers I have worked with over the years and their staff for everything they do to make the process as efficient as possible. Hopefully, today, with the help of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith and her Bill, we will help them to make that process even better.

12.53 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): I commend the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) to ensure that we debated this issue today. We must continue to break down the barriers to voting, to ensure increased engagement with and turnout at every form of election in all the nations of the UK. In my first speech in the House, I referred to the issue of turnout at the general election. We all have a duty to look, across all the systems we have in place, at how we can increase engagement with the political process, and with voting.

I am acutely aware of the importance of increasing engagement with our elections. My constituency of Glasgow North saw a turnout of around 50% at the last general election. That may have been in part due to a summer election in a constituency that contains a large amount of student accommodation, at which people

are registered but not present. It remains incumbent on the House to continue to look at the electoral system to promote greater engagement in every election.

The Bill is important for making it easier to engage with our democracy for groups in Scotland and Wales who face barriers of accessibility to the voting system. I have mentioned the summer election happening while students were away, but when they are in student accommodation, they are away from their home, which may be where they are registered. Encouraging their access to proxy and postal voting is important in engaging them.

Graeme Downie: The point my hon. Friend makes about students during the summer is absolutely correct. Did he find on the doorstep, during the most recent general election, isolated incidents of families in Scotland having gone away on holiday, as it was during the Scottish school holidays, which are different from those in other parts of the United Kingdom? Does he also agree that the Bill proposed by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) would help us to deal with that problem, as well as helping to deal with the issue in places where there are increased numbers of students?

Martin Rhodes: I agree with my hon. Friend. An issue raised during the election was that the period for applying did not allow much time for many families to apply who had booked to go away at the beginning of the school holidays. The Bill would make online applications easier and speedier.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): As ever, my hon. Friend speaks passionately about his constituency, but the Bill benefits us not just in the summertime. My constituency has a by-election for Colinton, Oxcgangs and Fairmilehead next week on 23 January—I will not mention our candidate's name, Madam Deputy Speaker—but it is wintertime; the days are short, and it is cold. A lot of people, particularly older people, would benefit from the ability to vote by post or proxy when the weather is so cold. Does he agree that people would also benefit from the measures in wintertime?

Martin Rhodes: I agree that there are benefits from the Bill in all seasons. I realise that I have now set Members the challenge of intervening to speak about spring and autumn. In winter, there are fewer daylight hours and it is colder, and people may not want to go out in the dark. The Bill would make it easier for them to access postal and proxy voting.

There was reference in an earlier intervention to those who are blind or partially sighted and use screen readers. Applying online is much easier for them; it lifts barriers to their involvement and engagement in the electoral process.

Those are just some of the groups who would benefit if we passed this legislation, modernised access to the electoral system for the devolved Parliaments, and provided the ability to introduce such measures for local government elections, too.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) on bringing in the Bill. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes)

agree that the Bill demonstrates that Scotland's Labour MPs are ensuring that both of Scotland's Governments are working effectively for them?

Martin Rhodes: I certainly agree that it is important to see the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government working together.

Patricia Ferguson: On that point, is my hon. Friend as saddened and surprised as I am to see not a single SNP Member here? It strikes me that if they claim to be Scotland's party, they need to be here to talk about legislation that affects Scotland.

Martin Rhodes: My hon. Friend asks whether I am saddened and surprised; I am saddened.

It is important that while we make it easier to apply online for postal and proxy votes, we do not take away any ability to apply via paper, and I welcome the fact that the legislation does not do that. Many do not have access to digital means of applying, so it is welcome that the Bill creates additional ability to apply.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that people have a number of ways to access the democratic process, and that no one should be locked out of exercising their democratic right purely through a point of process?

Martin Rhodes: I absolutely agree, and it is important that we look to increase the ways in which people can access the voting system, because for many, digital is the usual way to apply for services, whether private or public. That is what they expect and their default. Similarly, there are groups of people for whom applying on paper, in writing and so on is their normal way of interacting with a whole range of services, whether private or public. It is important that all people find a way that they are comfortable with to access the electoral system.

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): We all agree that we need better systems and support for ensuring increased participation in democratic processes and elections. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill makes participation in elections more effective and easier, and makes the application process more reliable, which has the potential to drive up turnout at elections and improve our democracy?

Martin Rhodes: I agree with my hon. Friend—I am not used to agreeing with so many people. It seems unusual, but I will carry on. My hon. Friend makes an important point, and if we can increase participation by looking at the processes in place, we should welcome that. It is important to look at all the systems.

However, simply changing the systems and processes for accessing the voting system will not in itself reduce disengagement with the political process. There are bigger and wider issues than just the form of application, so while I very much welcome the Bill as a means by which we can help people to access the political process, we all need to think about how to engage people across our countries of the United Kingdom with it.

To conclude, the challenge we face across this House is finding new, more effective ways of engaging people and allowing them to fully participate in decision-making. I welcome this Bill as one small, but useful and effective, way in which we can achieve that.

1.3 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for introducing the Bill, and for the work that has gone in to it, which I welcome, particularly as a Welsh MP for a rural constituency.

Thinking about the history of parliamentary reform, my hon. Friend is a modern-day Chartist woman. She is a fantastic woman in this place, and she is absolutely right that voting—the mechanism by which people exercise their electoral preference or express their sense of civic duty—is the backbone of our democracy. Ensuring that electors can exercise that democratic right is essential, and an important part of it is recognising that many people face barriers that prevent them from voting in person.

Thanks to the online absent vote application services enabled by changes in the Elections Act 2022, voters have the option to apply online for a postal or proxy vote in Great Britain for UK parliamentary elections, police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales, and local elections in England. If electors do not wish to apply online for an absent voting arrangement, the existing option to apply via a traditional paper application remains available to them. These services allow people to choose whichever route they find easier.

However, as has already been pointed out, there is an anomaly for voters in Wales and Scotland, which limits the extent of the digital application option for absent voting arrangements. While electors living in Scotland or Wales can apply online for a postal or proxy vote for general elections, they cannot do so for devolved parliamentary or local elections. I feel very strongly about that. In the Senedd parliamentary reform is happening and a great deal of change will come about, and I feel that there should be equality for everyone in the United Kingdom in respect of devolution.

Graeme Downie: I think we both hope that this fantastic Bill is passed today and continues its parliamentary journey, but will my hon. Friend join me in urging both the Scottish Government and the Welsh Senedd to do all that they can to provide additional education and accessibility so that everyone can access the voting arrangements correctly?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I welcome that intervention, especially because we are talking about many groups who do not access their right to vote. I am proud of the fact that in Wales and Scotland people can vote from the age of 16. I used to be a schoolteacher, and I know how important it is to have that democratic conversation with young people so that they understand their rights. It is important for a strong message to come from both the Welsh Senedd and the Scottish Government, because their voices need to be heard, and the same applies to people who are unable to vote because of a disability. It is incumbent on our other Parliaments to proceed with what is a very big piece of work.

As it stands, my constituents in Gower—a rural constituency containing many remote areas—who wish to vote via post or proxy in the upcoming Senedd elections in 2026 will still be required to fill out a paper application form and physically send it to be processed. That is time-consuming and people do not always do it.

[*Tonia Antoniazzi*]

This lack of parity is unfair to electors in Wales and Scotland who should have the option of a digital route for absent voting arrangements in their devolved parliamentary or local elections. It is also not good for overall democratic health. We know that some people are deterred from voting if they encounter barriers in the run-up to an election or polling day.

That inconsistency presents a barrier to voting that would, in some cases, contribute to people not voting at all. I welcome the Bill because it seeks to end that disparity and give voters in Wales and Scotland equal choice in how they can apply for an absent vote in devolved and local elections. With both the Senedd Cymru and Scottish Parliament elections coming up in May 2026, we should be doing all that we can to remove disincentivising barriers and to make the process of electors exercising their right to vote as smooth as possible.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we should be doing everything we can to encourage political participation across the UK, to maintain our reputation as one of the world's strongest democracies?

Tonia Antoniazzi: That really is true. In the seven years I have been in this place, I have found that people sometimes shut the door in my face and say, "You're all the same." There is a growing disrespect for parliamentarians, which I find hard to understand. Our democracy is the backbone of the United Kingdom and of our devolved countries, and I think it is really important for us to be positive and engaging and to let people know that their voices are heard in this place, whoever they voted for.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith for how she has worked on the Bill. I understand that the measures within it have been discussed with Welsh and Scottish Ministers, and that is a wonderful way to make change happen. The Bill is also very carefully drafted to emphasise the importance of devolution and to respect the devolved nations' responsibility for their local and devolved parliamentary elections. The manner in which she has approached that, as well as the Bill itself, firmly aligns with the Government's intention to re-set the relationship between central and local governments as partners in delivering better outcomes for the communities that we, collectively, represent. The Government have already made welcome significant progress regarding that re-set. They have also noted how supporting the sector to modernise democratic engagement is key to that re-set. That is what the Bill does.

My constituents would really welcome the choice that the changes in the Bill would grant them in local and devolved elections. I thank the returning officers in Swansea and Gower for their hard work and for the even more hard work they will have with the upcoming Senedd reform in 2026. My constituents welcome the Bill and I thank my hon. Friend for bringing it to the House.

1.10 pm

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) on bringing forward this important Bill. The inconsistency that currently exists between

elections in England, Wales and Scotland is confusing and makes no sense—either for voters or for anybody else. As Labour Members have said, we all have a duty to do everything we can to encourage participation in our democracy, particularly at a time of alienation and when trust is low. The figures shared by my hon. Friend about the number of people who registered to vote online before the general election illustrate that point. There is clearly a demand. People want to use digital systems, just as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) said. People are used to interacting with systems and processes in that way, so that makes it very important.

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): As a fellow Welsh MP, I have to say that people are incredulous, when I speak to them on the doorstep, at the complexity of the system in Wales. A digital option is unavailable to them to participate in such important local and national elections. Does my hon. Friend agree that the maximum opportunity to vote in all elections in Wales and Scotland, in whichever way they choose, is crucial to create equality across the UK?

Claire Hughes: I absolutely agree. This democratic deficit really needs to be addressed. It is very important that that is done before the next Senedd and Scottish elections in 2026.

As other Members have said, there are real public transport challenges in largely rural constituencies such as mine. We also suffer a lot, would you believe, with bad weather, so having the options of postal votes and proxy votes is very important. We also have the university in Bangor and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North also said, having different options for students and young people is particularly important.

There are very many reasons to make it easier for people to vote by proxy and by post. As I said, it is urgent. I hope all Members see that and back the progression of the Bill.

1.13 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for bringing the Bill forward. We heard from her and from other hon. Members about the difficulties that voters in Scotland and Wales face due to the fact that, following the passage of the Elections Act 2022, the equivalent powers were not introduced for England and Wales.

I have been campaigning in elections since 1979. I hugely enjoy the interaction with voters, despite being shouted at occasionally. It is so important. We are linking their concerns for their communities and their families with our role as actual or potential elected representatives. The bit that gels all that together is the process of voting. The process of voting needs to be made as simple, easy and accessible as possible to everybody, so that everyone has equal access.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): The Royal National Institute of Blind People's report demonstrates that only 50% of blind and partially sighted people were satisfied with their experience of voting at the last general election. Does she hope, as I do, that the Bill

will make the process smoother, make it easier for people to apply for absent votes, and make some much-needed improvement on that figure?

Ruth Cadbury: I know that the RNIB has campaigned for many years to improve accessibility to elections for people with sight loss. I do not know whether this Bill will actually make the change that my hon. Friend desires, because it brings the Scottish and Welsh systems up to the standard that we have in England, and I know that the RNIB is not yet satisfied with the process. If people have chosen not to have a postal vote, a lot depends on whether the polling clerks at the election centre feel confident enough to help those with sight loss to vote if they do not want to do so with a family member, neighbour or friend.

I have stood as a candidate in 11 elections, and I have won every one of them. I have also campaigned in many more general elections, council elections, by-elections and London Assembly elections, and I have helped colleagues in by-elections across the country. When I first started, there was no such thing as online voter registration—in fact, there was no online anything. I attended statistics classes at university, and computing then involved stacks and stacks of cards—I do not know how many Members remember that. It took another 15 years, roughly, for most of us to understand what the internet was. It has only been since 2023, I think, that one can register online for a postal or proxy vote. We cannot underestimate the importance of being able to register for a postal or proxy vote with ease.

Graeme Downie: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech about accessibility and the need for proxy votes. I did some research on this issue prior to today, and I discussed with a constituent the difficulty that people with autistic spectrum disorder experience when voting. They have a lot of anxiety about going into polling stations and the potential complications that they face when making sure that they are able to exercise their democratic voice. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must do everything we can to support those with autistic spectrum disorder, to make voting as accessible as possible?

Ruth Cadbury: Absolutely. Many neurodiverse people find the process of voting difficult, and that is one example of why postal voting is so valuable to so many people.

Up until 2001, one needed approval from either a doctor or an employer to be able to get a postal vote. People could not just say that they would prefer, or would find it easier, to vote at home; they had to justify that, which was easier said than done. There were huge discrepancies in whether doctors could sign off such a request, and in whether employers were prepared to say that an employee would be away and unable to vote in person on election day. We have seen a huge improvement. Only 2% of voters had postal votes before the change, but the figure had grown to almost 20% by the time of the 2010 general election. We have, over the years, made postal voting easier.

The variation is quite high: 50% of voters in Sunderland vote by post, while only 8% of voters in Lewisham do so. The most important thing of all—and why postal votes make such a difference to engagement in our

democracy—is that 80% of people who have a postal vote use it. Would we not like that kind of overall voter turnout? That is hugely important.

Euan Stainbank: My hon. Friend is making a good point about turnout. Does she agree that although there may be multiple reasons why someone might not choose to come out and vote, ease in accessing a ballot should never be one of them?

Ruth Cadbury: I absolutely agree. That is why voters in Wales and Scotland need equality of access with voters in England, and I hope that the Government will support the Bill. In 2023, the then Government launched online voting applications for postal and proxy voting. If I have read the explanatory notes correctly, that is the discrepancy that the Bill is set to address.

We do not knock on doors only at elections—of course, we cannot get anybody to sign up for postal votes for the next election during the short campaign period. Most of us, and I hope all of us on the Labour Benches, are door knocking week in, week out, not just for the next election—and sometimes not even for the next election—but because, as elected representatives and community and party activists, we need and want to engage with our communities. Part of that conversation is, “I find it difficult to vote,” “I can’t vote,” or, “I missed the last vote because of this.” That is where we ask, “Well, what about a postal vote?”

Steve Race: Does my hon. Friend believe that the Bill will benefit the older voters we speak to on the doorstep, many of whom are digital natives and actively use online technology? Older voters in Scotland and Wales would, I am sure, like to use technology in the same way as older voters in England.

Ruth Cadbury: That is absolutely right. We must listen to older voters’ needs. Some are digitally excluded, which is why it is always a good idea to have paper copies of the form to give them, and to tell them what they need to do to get that application off. Others are not digitally excluded and, like my mother, have smartphones and do more and more things online. One thing that we have been doing, as I am sure have many colleagues, is having a QR code to hand, so that voters can put their phone over the QR code, which immediately opens up the form. Then, we say, “Goodbye and thank you very much”—we obviously do not have anything to do with their completion of the form. That makes it easier.

The problem with handing over a form or saying, “I suggest you go on the Government website,” is that, with the best will in the world, many people really do want to apply for a postal vote but life gets in the way, as it does for us all. Applying is not the most important thing when, say, the baby is crying, dinner is about to burn, or someone is late for work. We have found in England that the easier the technology, the more people apply for postal votes. As I have just said, if they have applied for and got that postal vote, they are more likely to use it. A lot of what I am saying also applies to proxy votes.

Patricia Ferguson: It was said earlier that the fact that last year’s general election occurred during the Scottish school holidays meant that, in the chaos and confusion that happens in most households preparing to go on

[*Patricia Ferguson*]

holiday, voting fell off the agenda for a lot of people who had perhaps thought about applying for a postal vote but not got around to doing it. Does my hon. Friend agree that, were another election like that to be called, the opportunity to do that chore by post might make a difference to a lot of people?

Ruth Cadbury: We were all aware and deeply conscious of how many Scottish voters were disadvantaged in the July 2024 election. As Scottish summer holidays start some weeks earlier than in England, many Scottish voters were disenfranchised. The Bill in itself will not change that, but like a broken record, I go back to the point that the easier we make applying for postal and proxy votes, the more people will do it, not when an election is imminent but at some point well before that. Then they will not be disenfranchised.

The Bill will make life a lot easier for electoral registration officers in Wales and Scotland, who have a terrible time dealing with two different sets of elections. Scottish and Welsh voters are able to apply for general election votes in the same way as English voters, but for some reason—I am happy to be corrected if I am wrong—a different application form is needed for the different levels of election, such as the Scottish Parliament election versus the UK general election.

Dr Arthur: It is more confusing than that. It is actually the same form with several different options, which explains the different scenarios. I recently applied for a postal vote, because there is a by-election in my constituency next week, and it is not a straightforward process. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is even more confusing than having two separate forms?

Ruth Cadbury: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is not just confusing for the voter; it is more difficult for the already stressed-out EROs. They have a difficult enough job, they often do not have enough colleagues with them, and if they do not do their job absolutely perfectly, there is the potential for mistakes to be made, which becomes challengeable. I endorse the Bill, because apart from anything else I want to make sure that every voter in every area gets an equal chance to apply for and get a postal vote or a proxy vote.

1.27 pm

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): First, I wish to apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for nicking his point in an intervention earlier. In mitigation, I am sure he will agree that it is hardly likely to rank particularly highly in the list of rude interactions between people from Dunfermline and Falkirk.

I declare an interest as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on fair elections, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for introducing the Bill. Like many hon. Members I am sure, for six months last year—all the way up to 9.30 pm on polling day on a remarkably damp 4 July—I was out chapping on doors, speaking to thousands of Falkirk residents, discussing their views and seeking to persuade them of the benefits that Labour representation could bring to the issues

they cared about. I have been doing that sort of thing since I was 15, which despite what some might say about my experience elsewhere has made me a bit of a canvassing veteran. I have stood in two elections and won both of them—I have nine to go to match the record of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury).

Fellow experienced canvassers will know that conversations on the doorstep can often stray from the alleged topic, and the question can change from why the person should vote in a particular way to how they can access their vote. That is often the case when you are the first person to chap on their door to talk to them about politics for a while, or perhaps ever. My team and I faced countless questions during the election about where the polling station is; whether people need to bring their polling cards; for the first time six months ago, whether they needed to take ID to the polling station; and how they could apply for a postal or proxy vote, especially in Scotland because it was during the start of the Scottish summer holidays, as colleagues have mentioned. I may swear by my powers of persuasion on the doorstep, but I have no doubt that in some of the elections I have participated in, the time it takes to apply for a postal or proxy vote has deterred some people, potentially even those who I thought to be guaranteed voters for Stainbank or alternative Labour representatives in Falkirk.

The Bill would provide easier access by giving powers to implement the same additional online registration option that was open to Scottish and Welsh voters in the 2024 elections for local and devolved elections, as in England. Looking at the substance and the context of the Bill, I am in some confusion about why legislative consent was not passed over as part of the Elections Act 2022. I would definitely be interested if anyone can provide some clarity on that. Currently, if someone wanted to do it in a oner and register for a postal and proxy vote for all elections for which they could cast a ballot in Scotland or Wales, they would have to do so on a paper application, despite the online option being available for a general election. That shows the contradiction that the Bill seeks to solve.

I hope we all agree that we should be making the right to vote in our elections as easy as possible, and we should recognise that the responsibility sits with the devolved Governments for devolved and local elections. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith on seeking to correct that with the urgency that it warrants before the 2026 Scottish and Welsh elections, and the 2027 Scottish local elections.

As a former councillor, like many colleagues who have spoken today, I remain concerned that turnout in local elections in Falkirk and across Scotland has been remarkably poor. It was 44.8% in 2022 across Scotland, down 2.1% from the previous election and nearly 10% from the first time we used the single transferable vote system in Scottish local elections in 2007. As I mentioned in an intervention, there are many reasons cited by those on the doorstep for choosing not to vote in election. Difficulties accessing a ballot paper should never be one of those.

It is a well-known fact that those who register for a postal ballot are far more likely to turn out. While researching my speech I found that that is true in my

seat. According to the Falkirk Valuation Joint Board, 81% of those registered for a postal vote in Falkirk in the 2024 election cast a ballot. Standardising the process for postal and proxy votes in UK, Scottish and local elections will ease applications. Importantly, the consistency that that will provide the electorate will give people confidence to register and use their vote time and again, especially first-time voters in the recent 2024 election who may be under the misapprehension that they have already competently registered for a postal and proxy vote for every election, including devolved and local elections.

Gill German: I am a mum to not one but two 16-year-olds, who I am pleased to say are newly eligible to vote in both the local and Senedd elections in Wales. Because of that, I know at first hand how all-encompassing exam periods are. Elections often occur at these times. Does my hon. Friend agree that allowing young people to apply for a postal or proxy vote online—a way that will be most familiar to most of them—is important to get around that issue?

Euan Stainbank: I wholeheartedly agree. I am a fantastic example, as I was sitting my higher English exam the first time I voted as a 16-year-old in 2016 in Scotland. Given the exam stress and other considerations in young people's lives and that online is the presumptive option to register for everything, it should be available to them. It will be essential in driving up turnout. We should extend that to UK elections as well, for the benefit of consistency.

The impression from the Electoral Commission report on voting systems and trust in voting is that, although trust remains high in the integrity of the electoral process in the UK, an increasing proportion of the electorate are concerned that our elections are not well run. Consistency, especially avoiding the appearance of arbitrary difference in the administration of elections, is an important feature to rebuild that trust.

Elections in the devolved nations of the United Kingdom can often be unduly different: for example, 16 and 17-year-olds can vote in Scotland for their MSP, but not for their MP in a general election. Members may be able to guess my age from this: I was permitted to vote for my MSP in the 2016 Scottish parliamentary election, but in the 2017 general election the following year I was unable to cast a ballot for my MP. With the passage of the Bill, I hope to see the options available to those in England extended to Scotland and Wales. Votes at 16 is an area for another day, and I hope that this Parliament will choose to converge with Wales and Scotland on that.

This inconsistency in voter eligibility in our electoral systems in Scotland led to concern that there would be a depression in turnout among 16 and 17-year-olds in the 2016 Scottish parliamentary elections. That fear was ingeniously and partially cured by an examiner at the Scottish Qualifications Authority who, as part of a higher English exam scheduled on the exact same day as the elections, included an article by Julia Hartley-Brewer with a headline stating that letting 16-year-olds vote would be a disaster. To my delight, my pals were indignantly flocking to the Dobbie Hall polling station to exercise their democratic rights before discussing how well we had done in the exam that day. I doubt that anybody is

forthcoming with an article saying that letting people register for a postal or proxy vote online would be a disaster. This is an inconsistency that we should seek to fix now.

Access to proxy and postal voting is not a theoretical concern. When the former Prime Minister called the election in the early days of the Scottish summer holidays, I and my team had to field countless questions about which postal and proxy voting applications were available, and the turnout in particular Scottish seats reflected that. The Electoral Commission report found that in Scotland, confusion, late postal ballot arrival and the timing of the election disproportionately impacted turnout. That was due to direct interaction with confusing systems—people going away on their holidays were unable to get a postal or proxy vote, or did not know how to do that—and the media commentary around it. Standardising the way we do this across the United Kingdom and across the various elections would help remarkably. This is an arbitrary difference that we should seek to resolve.

In conclusion, the Bill would allow online registration for postal and proxy voters in Scottish, Welsh and local elections, which simply would make life easier for the electorate, give folk another option and hopefully drive more people to the polls, whichever way they choose to vote in 2026, 2027 and beyond.

1.36 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for bringing forward this wonderful Bill. It is important to say that this Bill is fundamentally about making it easier to vote in Scotland and Wales. It would improve the situation for residents in those areas by allowing them to vote by post and proxy in a way that they would not necessarily be able to at the moment.

I grew up in south Wales, so this issue is close to my heart. I was consistently impressed when I was growing up by the work of the Electoral Commission, or as it would rightly be known in Wales, Y Comisiwn Etholiadol. I must declare that I had a special closeness to the Electoral Commission, because during the noughties my mother was the leader of the Wales office, so the fact that I had great respect for its work is maybe a little close to home.

In the 2000s, the commission had a great advert on television, and it stuck with me. Maybe I was paying a little more attention to adverts put out by the Electoral Commission than many of my teenage colleagues at the time, but this wonderful advert had a series of vignettes of cartoon characters, with two guys going about their daily life and talking about various issues they were coming up against. One of the guys was saying, "You should make sure you vote, man," and the other one kept saying, "I don't do politics, me." They would go into, say, a supermarket, and the guy who says he doesn't do politics says, "The price of milk's too high." The next scene is in a pub, and he says, "The price of beer is too high." The whole message of this advert was that politics is in everything. It is really important that we, as politicians, drive that message home always. We should be doing everything in our power to expand and improve access to politics. That is why the Bill is really important.

[Adam Thompson]

Those adverts—and there were many put out by the Electoral Commission at the time—were focused on making sure that people had access to voting and were going out and voting. I was not so lucky as to get the vote at 16 in Wales—I was too old for that—but when I got the opportunity to vote for the first time aged 19, I remember getting multiple phone calls from my mum shortly before saying, “You make darn sure you sign up for a postal vote in advance,” because I was at university and had to make sure I was signed up.

I am a big proponent of making sure that young people have access to voting and that we do everything we can to encourage them to vote. We should support all young people to vote more easily, and the measures in the Bill are really important in that work. We need to be removing the barriers.

Graeme Downie: Although my mum did not work for the Electoral Commission, she was a polling counter both at polling stations during the day and at the count, including for the very first Scottish Parliament election; I remember vividly picking her up from the count at about 5 o'clock in the morning, having stayed up all night to watch it. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are to improve the smooth running of elections in this country, we must support more people to participate in those vital roles, which involve very long shifts at polling stations followed by the counts, which can go on much longer? Anything we can do to support them would be much appreciated.

Adam Thompson: Of course, I completely agree with everything my hon. Friend just said. I am sure that many Members—probably all right hon. and hon. Members—agree that the polling clerks and all the attendants on election day are a vital part of our democracy, and they have our thanks for their work, year in, year out, in all elections.

As I was saying, I am a great fan of doing everything we can as a Government and as Parliament to improve access to elections and to remove barriers. Digital measures of the sort in the Bill are a really important part of that. We have heard Members on both sides of the House talk about the importance of breaking down the barriers in the way of those who are digitally illiterate and giving everyone access to a way of signing up for postal and proxy votes online. I also advocate for more education in schools.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I am in the fortunate position of being the neighbouring MP, so you may well be familiar with the school I mention, which is just down the road from your constituency. Will you commend Langley Mill academy for its great work to raise awareness among young people of British values and our voting system, and sadly for putting a photo of me on the overhead projector when I visited? They asked me lots of insightful questions, which really showed that they are learning about our democracy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I remind the hon. Member that the words “you” and “your” refer to me, and I am not the person she intervened on.

Adam Thompson: I thank my neighbour and dear friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth). I certainly agree with her and commend the school in Langley Mill. I was her predecessor as the Labour candidate in Amber Valley in 2019, and I know the fantastic work the school is doing. I am a great proponent of visiting schools. I went to two last week: Ladywood primary school in Kirk Hallam, and Saint John Houghton Catholic voluntary academy, which I know my hon. Friend attended as a pupil many years ago. I am a fan of school visits, and as a trained former teacher, I find it one of the most enjoyable parts of my job. I know that many right hon. and hon. Members are similarly strong advocates.

I was talking about the importance of better education in school, breaking down the barriers to opportunity and ensuring that all our pupils get access to the knowledge they require to engage fully in our political system. I remember the few short hours when I was a pupil at Llanishen high school in north Cardiff when the headteacher, Mr Robert Smyth, came in and taught my class about politics. He was given just four or six hours over the five years of my time in state education. It is disappointing that we have such a small amount of politics education available to pupils in state schools. I have long been a great advocate of expanding the time given to that. It is one of the things I greatly enjoy doing as a Member of Parliament—joining as many schools as possible to impart to pupils the knowledge that I have gained in this place and through my experiences.

Kirsteen Sullivan: Does my hon. Friend agree that education in schools is absolutely central to making sure that Chambers across the country start to look like the communities they represent and to achieving 50:50?

Adam Thompson: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and, of course, I completely agree with everything she says. I firmly believe that education, skills development and all the aspects we have just been discussing should be core to all of our policies. Indeed, my previous role prior to coming to this place was as an educator at the University of Nottingham, where I taught degree-level apprenticeships in electromechanical engineering. I am a great advocate of the apprenticeship system, and I am very pleased by the Government's commentary over the past few months about expanding skills provision across the board.

As I have said repeatedly throughout this speech, it is really important that we advocate for these points as much as possible. I am sure that colleagues across the House will be au fait with the comments we often receive on the doorstep. Like many colleagues, I will be out knocking doors tomorrow morning and tomorrow afternoon, and very often people say how difficult they find it to access our political system. Many areas such as mine have multiple tiers of government: councils, local government, mayors and MPs. We are talking about devolution at the moment and maybe reorganising some of those systems, and I think there is an opportunity to simplify them.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about simplifying systems. My father applied for a postal vote because he was taking advantage of the early Scottish holiday and was going

to be away on 4 July. When he tried to access a postal vote to vote for me, he found that the council could not recognise him, yet as he pointed out, it had been able to collect his council tax for some years. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that if we are going to increase the number of postal and proxy votes, we must also have better systems on the other side to short-circuit those problems?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Since the vote is private, who knows how the hon. Gentleman's father actually voted?

Adam Thompson: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and I agree. It is important that when these difficult scenarios arise, we are able to account for them and have systems in place to deal with them.

To conclude, we have had a really interesting discussion today. The points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith are very valuable and will allow a whole group of extra people to access our electoral system, which is complex. The Bill will allow us to simplify it, homogenise systems between England, Wales and Scotland, and generally improve things for voters across the country.

1.46 pm

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for bringing this valuable debate and Bill before the House today.

As has been made clear by many speakers, for as long as we have known it, there has been a weird hotchpotch of different regulations concerning different elections in the UK. We have different voting systems for different elections; we have parliamentary boundaries that take little account of the boundaries for local elections; and we have age differences for different elections in different parts of the country, with votes at 16 in some parts of the country for some elections. We have voter ID regulations. We have the single transferable vote, top-up systems and first past the post. That whole hotchpotch of different regulations needs to be simplified and standardised.

Graeme Downie: The stramash that my hon. Friend refers to around electoral systems is added to in Scotland, where initially the Scottish Parliament had a four-year term. That was extended—temporarily at first—to a five-year term to take account of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 that was enacted in this place. That has not yet been mended; it now seems to have become a five-year term, which causes additional confusion that I am not sure has been properly and adequately explained to the Scottish people. Does my hon. Friend agree that that adds a further complication to the problems he is describing?

Patrick Hurley: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend—the amount of complications and complexities in the voting system in this country needs addressing. This Bill will address just one of those complexities, but I fully agree with what he has said.

My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) mentioned that we could perhaps guess his age from the elections he had taken part in. In a similar vein, perhaps Members can guess my age when I say that the first national election I voted in was the landslide

Labour victory of 1997. At the time, I was living in the marginal constituency of Knowsley South—it was one of the safest seats in the country. I am sure it was not the vote of my 20-year-old self that tipped the balance in that election, but none the less I was very proud on that May morning to go down to the community centre around the corner from my house, with my voting card in hand, and cast my vote for the first time in a national election for my MP.

I am still very proud that at every election, I cast my vote in person, but just because I am a hopeless old romantic who wants to go down to the polling station, it does not mean that we must ensure that everybody does that. On the contrary, we need to make voting as easy and engaging as possible, so that the majority of people can engage with the process. For those people who cannot vote on the day, we need to ensure that proxy and postal voting, and absent voting more generally, is as easy as it can be.

I will talk briefly about an issue in my constituency and across my wider combined authority area. Over the last couple of years, since voter ID has become mandatory, there has been a localised concern. The law states that an older person's bus pass is an acceptable form of ID, but the common bus pass in my part of the world is the Merseytravel over-60s bus pass, which the law does not allow to be used as voter ID. My council, and neighbouring councils across the local authority and combined authority area, had to write to every single Merseytravel over-60s bus pass holder in the borough to tell them that their bus pass was not valid to vote with, contrary to what they had been led to expect and believe by the national press in its reporting on the law change.

Graeme Downie: Does my hon. Friend agree that the move to ensure that veterans' passes could be used as voter ID, which was one of the first things that this Labour Government did, was a welcome change?

Patrick Hurley: I again agree wholeheartedly. The omission of veterans' passes from the previous legislation, which meant that they could not be used, was shameful.

We have all talked about the complexities, but the cherry on top of the 57 varieties of voting system that we have all got used to over the years was the old European Parliament elections being held under the d'Hondt system. I am mindful of time, so I will not go into detail on that—I am sure that even Mr d'Hondt could not come up with a better method of filibustering than doing so.

Much to my dismay, this Bill is not intended to correct every single peculiarity of the voting system, but it is intended to correct one. The Elections Act 2022 made it easier to apply online for absent voter arrangements, but it included Scotland and Wales only when it came to UK parliamentary elections. For some reason, Wales was included when it came to police and crime commissioner elections, but Scotland was not. Unwittingly, the weird hotchpotch of systems was made worse, rather than better.

People in Scotland and Wales who thought that they had registered for a postal or proxy vote found out when it was too late that they had registered for one set of elections but not another. Unwittingly, they were being disenfranchised, due to the nonsensical bureaucratic changes that had been brought in. Even council officers,

[Patrick Hurley]

as has been made clear, did not want this change; it heaped further administrative and cost burdens on electoral officers and local authorities. Nobody wanted it to happen, yet almost by accident, the complexity was increased.

There needs to be a raft of changes. The remits of the various boundary commissions need revisiting, and the voting system needs updating to ensure stability and good governance. In July last year, we achieved stability and good governance almost by accident, despite the voting system. Voting needs to be made more accessible, and engagement with the democratic process needs to be made easier.

In conclusion, there is a huge patchwork quilt of rules that make sense to almost nobody. The Bill seeks to rectify one small aspect of the increasingly daft situation. I hope it is allowed to make progress.

1.55 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for bringing forward the Bill, and for working constructively with parliamentarians in other places. I am not sure what I can add to this full, thorough, enjoyable and important debate, but I will cover two points: the inconsistency in current arrangements, and the effect on those most likely to need a proxy vote.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Patrick Hurley) said, many of us in this place will fondly remember the first time we went to vote. For me, as for my hon. Friend, it was at the 1997 general election that I first felt the buzz of putting an x in the box and exercising my democratic right. However, for an increasing number of our fellow citizens, that is not what democracy means to them.

As we have heard, participation in democracy is falling around the UK. Turnout at local elections is consistently disappointing low, whether they are part of the cycle of regular elections or by-elections. There is much to be done to correct that trend, re-enthuse people about our democracy and rebuild the bonds of trust that have been tested over the past few years, and a vital part of our strategy must be around greater consistency and access to voting. It is bizarre to me, and, I assume, many hon. Members in the Chamber today, that a simple and quick way of registering online a request for a proxy vote is not available at every election.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith said, the difference between general election registration and devolved or local election registration is unnecessary and inconvenient. It causes huge confusion among voters and, I assume, elected Members too; we rushed to find out the rules for the previous election whenever we were presented with questions on the doorsteps.

One of the greatest strengths of our democracy is the speed and expertise with which our elections are arranged. However, real life is rarely so easy to plan. Proxy voting is an important and flexible arrangement that enables hundreds of thousands of citizens to exercise their right to vote. I add my thanks to the returning officers, electoral teams and police, who are essential to safeguarding the democratic process in our communities.

The process of registering a proxy vote ought to be consistent for voters, so that registering for a proxy vote in the July 2024 general election is no different from registering for one in the Holyrood elections in May 2026 or the Scottish local elections in May 2027. If we are keen to increase democratic participation, as I believe all hon. Members present are, we must ensure consistent and comprehensive registration processes. We value our elections, but when we fail to digitise or make registration for proxy votes more accessible, we create unnecessary differences that confuse voters and act as a barrier to participation. To put it simply, the law in Scotland for one election should match the law in Scotland for all elections.

The people who rely on proxy voting the most are young people, students and those with disabilities. The young are part of a digital generation whose university applications and rental contracts are digital, but they cannot arrange a proxy vote for a local or devolved election digitally. However, young people increasingly live further from home in temporary accommodation for study before returning to their family homes. However, young people increasingly live further from home in temporary accommodation for study before returning to their family homes. Students from my constituency who are temporarily living away and who registered online for a proxy or postal vote in the general election cannot do the same for the upcoming Scottish elections. I want to add my full support for my hon. Friend, and I thank everyone, certainly on the Government Benches and hopefully in the Opposition too, for their support in making it easier for everyone to access our democratic processes.

2 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I rise to express my full support for the Bill, which would uphold our democratic principles by ensuring that absent voting is more accessible, consistent and secure across Scotland and Wales, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) for introducing it. We debated the sunshine Bill earlier, and as we were going through all the different weather types, I was starting to think we should maybe name this one the no sunshine Bill for all types of election.

Democracy flourishes when it is inclusive, when it reaches out to every citizen and when it removes unnecessary barriers to participation. The Bill seeks to strengthen our democracy by ensuring that those unable to attend polling stations in person are still able to make their voices heard. As a former leader of a district council that oversaw local and national elections, I am acutely aware of the vital role that local government plays in serving our communities and contributing to their wellbeing. It is imperative, therefore, that we safeguard and strengthen the legitimacy of this crucial tier of governance by promoting greater accessibility and encouraging broader participation in local elections.

The cornerstone of the Bill lies in recognising that no eligible voter should be excluded from participating in our democratic process due to personal circumstances beyond their control. Digital tools are essential to that, so I look forward to hearing from the Minister about the options. Our electoral system must evolve to meet the demands of a changing world. The Bill builds on existing provisions for absent voting and brings them

in line with modern expectations of accessibility and efficiency. Although the Bill makes voting more accessible, it also ensures that our elections remain secure, and that public confidence in the democratic process is upheld. This House must always strike a balance between empowering voters and safeguarding the legitimacy of our electoral outcomes. I would welcome an update from the Minister on the anticipated costs of the change.

The Bill is also a reminder of the strength and cohesion of our Union. While respecting the devolved responsibilities of the Scottish Parliament and the Senedd, it ensures that the principles of democracy are upheld uniformly. The Bill is timely and necessary, and it reflects the values we hold dear as a nation, such as belief in the right of every citizen to participate in the democratic process, and the importance of ensuring that that process remains accessible, secure and fair. I encourage all Members to support the Bill. Together, we can demonstrate our commitment to a modern, inclusive and resilient democracy that works for all.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

2.3 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) on securing the Bill and bringing it to the House. The Bill represents an important step forward in making voting more accessible and efficient for all. The focus of the Bill is clear: to streamline and modernise the process of registering for absent voting, whether by postal vote or proxy, particularly for elections held in Scotland and Wales.

I join hon. Members in paying tribute to all electoral staff across the whole United Kingdom. We know that, as elected politicians and candidates, we put them through stress when we phone them to say, “This person hasn’t registered. Can I get them down?” or “Where’s this polling station?”. They go through a lot, and we thank them for what they do.

We welcome the Bill. The changes it would make were originally proposed under the last Conservative Government, but as hon. Members will know, the Welsh and Scottish Governments declined to provide the necessary legislative consent motions when the Elections Bill 2022 passed through the UK Parliament in 2022. That meant that all the strengthened rules on postal and proxy voting could be applied only to reserved elections. Under the current arrangements, electors must submit paper forms to apply for or to modify absent votes. The Bill seeks to align that process for devolved elections with reforms introduced in the Elections Act 2022 for reserved elections. By enabling the use of the UK digital service for online applications, it will simplify and modernise the system, ensuring greater accessibility and efficiency for voters.

I appreciate that, as a consequence of devolution, electoral law will diverge due to the policy choices of the different Governments and legislatures, but we should avoid divergence for divergence’s sake. Since some elections will remain reserved, such as those to the UK Parliament, it would make sense to facilitate the smooth administration of elections by aligning processes for electoral administrators and political parties as much as is practicable. Otherwise, it just creates more work for everyone and confuses voters, as has been outlined by Government Members.

The provisions of the Bill will allow Scottish and Welsh Ministers to implement the measures ahead of the next devolved elections in 2026. The ultimate goal is to encourage participation in the democratic process while safeguarding the integrity of our electoral system, and we must recognise the differences in turnout between general elections and elections for devolved Governments. In Wales, turnout for Senedd elections has historically lagged behind general elections, as evidenced by the turnout rates of 46.6% in 2021, compared with 56% in 2024. In Scotland, turnout for the Scottish Parliament elections is comparatively higher, but there remains room for improvement. Making voting easier and more accessible is one way to address that disparity.

It is important that online applications do not open the door to electoral fraud, as the whole point of the Elections Act 2022 was to toughen the rules and practices for electoral integrity. That is why it is essential—we will scrutinise this in Committee—that there are strict online verification checks for online absent vote applications for devolved elections, and that those are the same checks as for hard-copy applications. Fraudsters will just divert their malpractice if one venue is more lax. Electronic applications are more vulnerable to external interference, as a hostile actor can be literally anywhere in the world. If the Bill goes into Committee, I would like to see a requirement in primary legislation for the necessary checks already operational in reserved elections to be required in secondary legislation. That would help to ensure consistency across all elections, as many Members have outlined that they want.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has been consulting on legislative reform orders to implement the same provisions. Will Ministers indicate how that interacts with the proposed passage of the Bill? For example, do Ministers intend to opt for a legislative reform order if the Bill does not have sufficient parliamentary time? It is worth noting that the electoral bodies, including the Electoral Commission, support these changes. The commission highlights the need for clarity and preparation to ensure that these provisions are in place by October 2025, giving electoral officers ample time to adapt, and giving voters sufficient awareness, before the 2026 elections.

In conclusion, the Absent Voting (Elections in Scotland and Wales) Bill is a pragmatic and necessary step towards improving voter access and protecting the integrity of our electoral processes, by bringing absent voting practices in devolved elections in line with the rest of the UK. It will modernise and future-proof our democracy while empowering citizens in Scotland and Wales to participate more easily in elections.

I once again congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) on the spirit with which she has brought forward this legislation: to make voting and access to voting easier for people while ensuring that voting remains secure. I hope that her Front-Bench colleagues take that same stance and change their mind on watering down voter ID, which will have the opposite effect from the aims and aspirations of this Bill.

2.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh

[*Rushanara Ali*]

North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) on her Bill successfully reaching Second Reading. I thank election officials and express my gratitude for all the work they did at the general election and in other elections.

The Bill provides the legal framework for applications to vote by post or proxy in devolved elections in Scotland and Wales to be made online through the services already in place for UK parliamentary elections and local elections. It will also deliver changes to align application procedures for different types of elections, which will reduce the risk of confusion among electors about which arrangements they have in place for different elections, as has been said. By enabling access to those online services, the Bill will make the lives of thousands of electors easier and encourage participation in our democracy. In short, my hon. Friend's Bill addresses a difference that, if not resolved, would see electors in Scotland and Wales having less choice than those in England when it comes to electoral services. The Government wholeheartedly support the aim of removing that divergence.

I am delighted that we have had such a great turnout of Members for the debate. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank), for Erewash (Adam Thompson), for Southport (Patrick Hurley), for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan), for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes), for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes), for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) and for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for their contributions. I thank the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), for his contribution. It is extremely beneficial and helpful that there is agreement on the need to do this, and I am grateful for that cross-party support. I will not have the opportunity to respond to all the points in the debate. If I do not cover them all in the short time I have, I will be happy to follow up in writing.

We are committed to supporting returning officers in ensuring access to participation, particularly of those with disabilities and older voters, as mentioned by my hon. Friends. We continue to work closely with organisations that support disabled individuals to participate in our democratic process. On the point made about the complexity of the electoral system, we will work closely across the sector to gather feedback, analysis and ideas.

A number of hon. Members raised the importance of increasing engagement in the political process and increasing participation, including the voting age and younger voters. Various factors can impact voter turnout levels at elections, as was highlighted in the Electoral Commission's report last year in the general election. As set out in our manifesto, the Government are committed to strengthening our democracy and widening participation in our elections. We will ensure that every legitimate voter has the opportunity to vote and is encouraged to exercise their right to vote, and we are making good progress on several areas to deliver those commitments.

Work is also under way on extending the franchise for all UK elections to 16 and 17-year-olds, and legislation for that will be introduced in due course, strengthening our democracy and empowering young people to participate in it. We firmly believe in building a strong foundation

for democratic participation among young people, and we will work closely with stakeholders to ensure that it is implemented appropriately.

The Bill puts citizens' needs at its heart and supports the use of technology in delivering services. Ensuring that people's voices can be heard and encouraging participation are vital to our democracy. I know that colleagues in the Scottish and Welsh Governments share the same objectives. I am therefore delighted that they have chosen to take advantage of this innovation in their elections. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith articulated the benefits to electors of bringing Scottish and Welsh elections into the scope of the digital service, and I do not intend to repeat them. Instead, it may be helpful to provide some context by giving Members a brief overview of the history of the online absent vote applications services and outline how this Government will support the implementation of the legislation.

Before the launch of the digital service, any electors who wished to vote by post or proxy would have to request a form by post—as has been pointed out—or print out a form, complete it and return it to their local electoral registration office. That could be a cumbersome and difficult process, and some electors may have had to rely on others to help them with it. The online postal vote and proxy vote allocation services, launched on 31 October 2023, resulted from a thorough design and testing process involving 3,000 citizens across the UK. They have been used to great effect by more than 2 million citizens, both at the local elections in May 2024 and at the most recent general election.

The Bill provides the legal framework for applications for devolved elections in Scotland and Wales to be received through the UK online service, along with some changes to align application procedures, which my hon. Friend has described. Making that legal framework a reality will require further regulations to be designed and delivered by the Scottish and Welsh Governments, with whom the responsibility for devolved polls lies. The Government, having had the experience of delivering these changes for reserved elections, stand ready to provide any advice and support that may be required, and will work closely with the devolved Governments in facilitating the digital change. I assure the House that any changes required to the digital services will need to meet the same robust standards required of all gov.uk services.

Let me turn to some of the points that Members have made. We acknowledge that the Electoral Commission's findings, set out in its report published last November, identified some problems with aspects of the system for voting by post. In a minority of cases, electors were unable to return their postal ballot packs in time for the 2024 general election, which was a particular problem for overseas electors. We are carefully considering the commission's findings and recommendations, and we will respond to its report on the 2024 election in the coming weeks. However, it is important to note that the Electoral Commission also found that the majority of people who voted by post were satisfied with the method, and overall postal voter turnout remained high, at 80%. I am confident that the introduction of online absent vote applications for devolved polls would have benefits for administrators in Scotland and Wales rather than having any negative impact.

Discussions have been held with the Scottish and Welsh Governments about the costs associated with their joining the online absent vote application services. As the work involved in the extension of the service is being done at their request, it is appropriate for them to cover the costs of any further work that needs to be completed to achieve alignment. Both Governments have agreed to cover the costs of implementing the services for their devolved elections. Because much of the work involved in designing the services has already been completed, the costs associated with their adoption by Scotland and Wales are likely to be lower than the initial costs incurred before the launch in October 2023.

I hope that, given the time, I can respond in writing to the point made by the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith for her brilliant work on the Bill. I look forward to taking this work forward with her in Committee, and I hope that she is pleased with the outcome today.

2.19 pm

Tracy Gilbert: With the leave of the House, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who contributed to the debate, including the many, many interventions. In particular, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). To answer the point made by my hon. Friends the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and for Southport (Patrick Hurley), I understand that legislative consent was sought during the passage of the Elections Act 2022 by the UK Government to enable online services to be used for devolved Scottish and Welsh elections, but it was not granted by either devolved legislature at that time. Through the Bill, we can help Scottish and Welsh voters to apply online for absent votes in all elections for which they are eligible. If the Bill passes swiftly, they will be able to use those benefits in time for the May 2026 Scottish Parliament and Welsh Senedd elections.

The Bill will make it easier to participate in our democracy. I believe that the more electors who are able to exercise their democratic right, the stronger our country will be.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Fireworks Bill

Second Reading

2.21 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a pleasure to bring the Bill to the House. We all know that our constituents, whether we live in a town, city or village, are fed up with nuisance loud fireworks. This is no longer something that just happens once or twice a year; it plagues our constituents' nights almost every night, particularly in places like Luton North. I want to thank the co-sponsors of the Bill, my hon. Friends the Members for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) and for Newport East (Jessica Morden), and another big supporter of the Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed). We have had wide support for the Bill, because we know the impact this issue has on people's lives.

I have heard about this issue consistently from hundreds of constituents across Luton North over the past five years. To put it into context, it does not just affect people with pets or the elderly. I was at Parklea primary school last week and spoke to the students. Every single one of them said that they had been kept up by fireworks, so it is having a detrimental impact not just on our environment or mental health, but on education. Groups across Luton North and the country reported that last year was possibly the worst for fireworks in terms of loudness, frequency and antisocial use. In some communities, they were used almost as a weapon.

What is the problem? Under current laws, any adult is able to purchase fireworks that can make noise of up to 120 decibels. I am loud, but that is as loud as a rock concert, and any member of the public can go ahead and buy something that loud.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a wonderful start to her speech. I congratulate her on a second bite of the cherry, as this is her second time with this private Member's Bill. She talks about education and loudness. Does she agree that there is a particularly bad and detrimental impact on those suffering from neurodiverse conditions?

Sarah Owen: Absolutely. I have parents with children with special educational needs. It is particularly distressing in the middle of the night for non-verbal autistic children and young people, and calming down loved ones is really difficult. They say that the sporadic nature of the fireworks causes distress: they cannot plan in advance, and cannot prepare young and neurodiverse people for a barrage of noise.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing forward this important piece of legislation. She talks about how the uncontrolled use of fireworks is very distressing, and causes distress and injury to people. As a veterinary surgeon, I have seen at first hand the impact on animals both large and small: cowering pets, pets that go missing, and farm animal livestock or horses that bolt and cause themselves horrific injuries. Does she agree that we need more regulation and control, so that people can protect themselves and animals?

Sarah Owen: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member, who has extensive experience as a vet. Indeed, he supported the previous iterations of the Bill, for exactly the same reasons that he has outlined. The Kennel Club has reported an 81% increase in the number of dogs going missing when fireworks are used, and it changes their behaviour. Some of the fireworks lobby have said that we need to train our pets better. No animal is better trained than a guide dog, but guide dog users have told me that fireworks affect them so much that they cannot go outside when fireworks are going off.

As has been alluded to, this Bill represents a second bite of the cherry. We know that enforcement is so difficult, because the police have had their numbers cut to the bone and are limited in their powers. That is why this Bill focuses on licensing and sales alone.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): Like everyone else, I congratulate my hon. Friend on putting forward the Bill. Is she surprised to hear that this is one of the biggest issues that I come across in surgeries and emails? Over 750 people have contacted me about it since the election. She has spoken about the impact of fireworks on animals, children and people with neurodiverse conditions. I have been contacted by a number of veterans and others who are often traumatised or woken up by fireworks. On that basis, does she agree that her Bill is absolutely necessary at this stage?

Sarah Owen: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Fireworks really affect veterans, and people with PTSD and mental health issues, which is why I am proud that this Bill has been supported by Combat Stress and Help for Heroes, and by the RSPCA, the Dogs Trust, Redwings and the Kennel Club. There could not be a more diverse group of organisations and charities, and they are all saying that it is now time to limit the level of the loudest fireworks.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is absolutely clear that eventually there will be action in this area, and my hon. Friend will take great credit for that when it happens. In recent weeks, I have spoken to a police officer in my constituency who was injured by a firework last year, and I have been introduced to a man whose mother was killed when one was put through her letterbox. More recently, a senior police officer in my constituency asked the Government to take action to control the import and sale of fireworks. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is very clear that action is needed, and that the Government should ask themselves whether they want to be proactive or end up reacting to events?

Sarah Owen: My hon. Friend highlights perfectly the seriousness of this matter. When explosives such as F3 fireworks get into the wrong hands and are used for criminal ends, it has horrendous, life-changing and sometimes life-taking consequences. That is why I want to see an end to the perverse loophole that allows unlicensed sellers to sell fireworks to members of the public during certain periods of the year, such as Diwali and new year's eve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sarah Owen: I will make a little progress.

At the times when we want fireworks the most, unlicensed pop-up shops appear. They sell explosives that should be handled by licensed sellers, and that should only be sold to members of the public at the lowest and safest levels.

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with my constituent Hayley from Adel, who contacted me before the election to say that the balance has now got completely out of kilter? We have all heard about the devastating impact of fireworks on wildlife and the tragic case of Roxie at Edinburgh zoo, and about the social impact—for example, on neurodiverse people. We now have the ability to manage the use of fireworks through restrictions, or by bringing down the decibel level, in order to provide a more effective balance for our communities.

Sarah Owen: I wholeheartedly agree. There are some incredibly cool alternatives to loud fireworks, and the general public really like them. A YouGov survey recently said that drones are more popular than fireworks in the UK, and we have seen some fantastic drone displays. There are also low-noise fireworks, but the general public still do not know quite what they are buying at the moment.

I would hazard a guess that not many people would know—until they became as nerdy as me about fireworks—the difference between an F2 and an F3 firework. We need to enable, encourage and educate responsible members of the public on what they are buying and on the alternatives. There is a challenge there for the fireworks lobby, which needs to diversify. There is a hunger among the public and consumers for quieter fireworks and increased use of technology such as drones. We need to see change now, because the public are behind us—

2.30 pm

The Deputy Speaker interrupted the business (Standing Order No. 11(2)). Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 25 April.

Business without Debate

PENSION (SPECIAL RULES FOR END OF LIFE) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 January.

HUNTING TROPHIES (IMPORT PROHIBITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 13 June.

STRATEGIC LITIGATION AGAINST PUBLIC PARTICIPATION BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 July.

CHALK STREAMS (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 28 March.

SOCIAL MEDIA (ACCESS TO ACCOUNTS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

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 24 January.

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 24 January.

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 24 January.

ANIMALS IN MEDICAL RESEARCH (PROHIBITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

TREATMENT OF TERMINAL ILLNESS BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 7 March.

UNAUTHORISED ENTRY TO FOOTBALL MATCHES BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 January.

SALE OF TICKETS (SPORTING AND CULTURAL EVENTS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 July.

VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS ACT (REVIEW) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 January.

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 24 January.

TERMINAL ILLNESS (RELIEF OF PAIN) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 January.

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 January.

MARRIAGE (PROHIBITED DEGREES OF RELATIONSHIP) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 January.

LISTED INVESTMENT COMPANIES (CLASSIFICATION ETC) BILL [LORDS]

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

PETITION

Roughton Post Office

2.34 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): Local Liberal Democrat councillors and I have spoken to hundreds of people in Roughton and the surrounding villages who are furious about the prospect of losing post office services in their area. For the older population in North Norfolk, they are a vital lifeline not just for post but for banking, cash access and more. I present this petition in

[Steff Aquarone]

the hope that our collective pressure on the Post Office will secure a better future for these important services in those rural villages. The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with the Post Office to review the closure of Roughton Post Office, seek alternative arrangements to protect the existence of a Post Office in Roughton, and ensure that there is reliable and appropriate access to Post Office services within Roughton.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the residents of the village of Roughton in North Norfolk,

Declares that Post Office services in the village must be protected as they are a vital lifeline for many residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with the Post Office to review the closure of Roughton Post Office, seek alternative arrangements to protect the existence of a Post Office in Roughton, and ensure that there is reliable and appropriate access to Post Office services within Roughton.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003034]

Green Belt: Basildon and Billericay

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

2.35 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I am delighted to have secured this debate after entering the ballot many times.

The origins of the green belt go back certainly to the start of the last century, but perhaps even further, because in 1580 Elizabeth I tried to impose a block on building within three miles of the City of London, in order to prevent the spread of plague. Today, I will talk a little about the Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act 1938, the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, and a large area of land now known as the green belt.

Almost two thirds of undeveloped land in the Basildon borough is green belt, covering some 6,590 hectares. Why this debate today? Basildon council has put forward a new local plan, with a consultation that closed just a few days ago, for 27,000 homes right across the borough—the majority of which are in my constituency—covering a huge quantity of that green belt. There are 25% more homes this year on the green belt, because this Labour Government cut the need for housing in London by 17,000 properties a year and increased it in the home counties by 18,000 properties a year. All those extra properties will be heading to the green belt in constituencies such as mine across Essex and the south of England.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and fellow Essex MP on securing this important debate. His constituency, like mine, has precious green belt that is so important to the environment, biodiversity and our physical and mental health. I acknowledge the need for housing, but does he share my concerns about this Labour Government’s central top-down targets being imposed on communities against their wishes and, equally, their plans to reclassify some of the green belt as grey belt, thereby putting our precious green belt under immense pressure and danger?

Mr Holden: I certainly agree, and I was about to move on to that point. None of us on the Opposition Benches is against more housing, but often that housing does not come about because of local need in our constituencies. This is about a Government shying away from difficult conversations about densification in our cities, a mayor who has consistently failed to deliver on his own housing targets, and a failure to redevelop crucial brownfield land in the centre and on the edges of our major cities.

My hon. Friend’s point about the grey belt is particularly important at the moment, because the council is starting to redesignate large areas of my constituency. Just a few years ago, those areas were grade 1 or grade 2 agricultural land. Now, they are being designated as grey belt, despite never having had any buildings on them. I am concerned about what this insidious grey belt phrasing could mean for developments right across the country.

The Government will ask where the housing should go. London is a third less dense than Paris. It seems mad that we are building on virgin greenfield sites rather than densifying our cities, especially at a time when

constituents in Essex and across the country are having to cross-subsidise the Mayor of London for his transport. They do not get access to it, but they have to pay for it. If we had greater density in our cities, some of those transport routes would be able to fund themselves.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree not only that the Mayor of London has been given subsidies for Transport for London and has wonderful transport infrastructure links, but that he has the devolved power for housing and has not met his housing targets consistently? He has been rewarded with a reduction in housing targets, which have spilled over to the home counties.

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend is right to make that point. The Mayor of London is being rewarded for failure, just as he was with his knighthood not that long ago. My constituents, many of whom grew up in the area or moved there for the green space nearby, now feel that they face seeing their communities concreted over because of the Mayor of London's failure.

The green belt was designated by Conservative Governments in the 1930s and Labour Governments in the 1940s. One cannot talk about it today in the context of Basildon and Billericay without talking about Basildon council's disastrous local plan, which is built on the destruction of the green belt. It will result in the emergence of a contiguous conurbation all the way from Shoeburyness, through the Thames gateway corridor and my constituency, into Brentwood and then through London all the way to Uxbridge on the other side. Essentially, the area from Heathrow airport to Southend airport will become part of that contiguous conurbation.

What I have to say about the green belt rests on so many conversations I have had with county, borough, town and parish councillors, but overwhelmingly on conversations with local residents across my constituency. My argument rests on four main points. First, there is overwhelming opposition to the proposals, especially in the context of London seeing a reduction in its housing targets. Secondly, there are serious concerns about existing and future local services and infrastructure, if this housing goes on the green belt. Thirdly, there will be a need for even more physical infrastructure on whatever remains of the green belt to cope with the proposed development, leading to its further erosion in the future. Fourthly, local residents have broader concerns about why the plan is being rushed through so quickly with the destruction of so much green belt, while our local councils have a gun to their head in respect of the Government's devolution plans.

I want to be clear: residents of Basildon and Billericay are not against development per se. They are entrepreneurial, hard-working people who love their area. They are also community oriented and have stayed in Essex to raise their family or moved to Essex from London for the green space and greater sense of community. The level of building proposed is on a scale completely out of whack with what other parts of the country away from the south-east face.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am grateful to my parliamentary neighbour for giving way. One of the most worrying things about Labour-run Basildon council's new local plan is that 17,000 of the

27,000 proposed dwellings—just shy of two thirds of the total—are intended to be built in the green belt. Surely that is environmental and ecological vandalism.

Mr Holden: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. It would basically mean the merging of Wickford in his constituency with Basildon, as part of the continuous conglomeration of building that would go all the way through Greater London.

Earlier this week, the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution said in answer to my question that Basildon and Billericay residents should be proud of their council and its plans for 27,000 more properties. If every constituency in England was being asked to take what Basildon and Billericay is being asked to take, the Government would have a housing target of 12 million homes by 2040. We are bearing more than our fair share and more than is necessary. It is difficult to see how that is justified when housing targets are being cut for London.

As you can imagine, Madam Deputy Speaker, there is overwhelming local opposition to this. Central Government should be concentrating on densification of brownfield sites. There is a real fear that when the green belt is gone, the green sites left in the constituency will face immense pressure—places such as Norsey Wood in Billericay, which will be the only green space for so many local residents. The pressure on the green spaces that remain will be huge, because none of the alternatives will exist.

If this plan is accepted, even with modifications, the towns and villages of the Basildon borough will become part of an amorphous mass. Villages such as Little Burstead, Great Burstead and South Green, Ramsden Bellhouse, Crays Hill and Noak Bridge just will not exist any more. They will be footnotes in the history of Labour's plans to build, build, build.

There are serious concerns about local education provision, as we already have oversubscribed primary schools. That is particularly acute when it comes to special educational needs, with some of the services being in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois). There are already major pressures on our green belt from the housing plan, and we are not seeing the services to go alongside it. That is particularly difficult for the green belt, because the only place where those services can be built is in that green-belt space. With the plans the council has put forward, what we are seeing is just the start of the erosion of our green belt.

Healthcare is another major concern for local people. We are already seeing acute pressures on primary care services in south Essex, and yet we are expected to take potentially tens of thousands more residents, without any clear guidance from the Government on what will happen or any plans for where the additional health services we will require would be. We have seen recently in the borough a lack of support from Basildon council's leadership for Conservative councillors in Burstead and Billericay who are trying to push back on plans to close South Green surgery.

Police and fire services are another classic example of where we already face big pressures. The infrastructure required for the fire service and police service to respond within the required times is already being stretched to

[Mr Holden]

breaking point. All that extra building on the green belt in constituencies such as mine will just put more pressure on those local services.

That brings me to the need for more physical infrastructure. At the moment, Tye Common Road in my constituency is basically the last bit of green space we see before we get to the greater conurbation of London. That is not going to exist—in the next few years, it will be carpeted with huge amounts of new building. Small local roads that are already over capacity, all of which go through the green belt, will have to be expanded. Whether it is the A129, the A176 or Tye Common Road, which go between Basildon and Billericay, the massive expansion of those roads will further damage the green belt. That is before we even come to the A127 or A13, which run east-west through my constituency or just outside it, and are major arterial routes for the entire region. The green belt is already massively at stake, and I do not want to see it further at stake. I do not want to see massive new road building programmes, but they will have to happen if the Government's proposals go ahead.

Before I close, I want to mention the future-proofing of these plans. We are seeing the Government push for devolution across the country, and nowhere more so than in Essex. The local plan that has been proposed, with all this churning up of our green belt, may well not be what is wanted by the council that the Government are basically going to impose on us, with a new unitary authority and a mayor, in a couple of years.

I urge the Government to think very carefully. Once the green belt has gone, it cannot be changed back. We need to think again, especially as we face massive local government reform over the next couple of years, pushed forward by this Government. So many properties are being proposed locally for building on green belt land. That means irreversible destruction, and the merging of towns and villages across Basildon borough. It is hardly surprising that local people are outraged by the loss of their green belt. I have yet to find anyone in my area who supports the proposal. The people of Basildon and Billericay, Laindon, Crays Hill, Noak Bridge, Noak Hill, the Bursteads and Ramsden Bellhouse want the green belt to be protected to keep their communities special. They are not against development; they are just against the wholesale destruction of their communities by a Government who do not seem to understand or care about them.

2.50 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I start by congratulating the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) on securing this important debate on the green belt in his constituency. While I disagree with many of the views he has just set out, I acknowledge the strength of feeling, and in particular his views on the emerging Basildon local plan.

As the right hon. Gentleman is aware, this Government take a “brownfield first” approach to development. To that end, we made targeted changes to the national planning policy framework in December to place even stronger emphasis on the value of brownfield

redevelopment, and to clarify that proposals for development on such land should be approved unless substantial harm would be caused by them. With a view to informing future policy development, we also published a brownfield passport planning reform working paper in September, setting out a series of proposals designed to prioritise and fast-track building on previously developed urban land wherever possible. None the less, we know that there are simply not enough sites on brownfield registers across the country to deliver the volume of homes that we need each year, let alone sites that are viable and in the right location.

That is why, in our first month in office, we consulted on a new approach to the green belt to support local planning authorities that face acute housing and development pressures in meeting their needs. I reiterate that the Government attach great importance to green belts and remain committed to preserving them. Green belts have served England's towns and cities well over many decades, not least by checking the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas and preventing neighbouring towns from merging into one another.

The Government have not changed the five purposes of the green belt set out in paragraph 143 of the national planning policy framework, and do not propose to alter its general extent. Instead, our reforms provide for a more strategic approach to green belt land designation and release, allowing us to move away from the previous Government's approach to the green belt, which was to allow land within it to be released regularly, in a haphazard manner, and often for speculative development that did not meet local housing need. As a result of our changes to national planning policy, local authorities must take a sequential approach to releasing land to meet their housing need: brownfield first, followed by low-quality land in the green belt, and only then higher-performing land. To identify low-performing sites, we have incorporated into the NPPF a definition of grey belt land that reflects the fact that there are areas currently designated as green belt that contribute little to it by way of aesthetic, public access or ecological value.

To ensure that local authorities are well equipped and supported to implement our policy changes, we will provide grant funding totalling £14.8 million to support authorities with green belt reviews, and we intend to provide further guidance in the near future to support a consistent approach across the country to grey belt designation. I was interested to hear the right hon. Gentleman say that his local authority is identifying swathes of grey belt land, given that we only published our precise definition of grey belt land on 12 December. I shall be interested to hear how Basildon council is progressing its green belt view based on that definition.

Because the Government recognise the public value provided by the green belt, we have ensured that where major development involving the provision of housing is proposed on land released from it through plan preparation or review, or on green belt sites subject to a planning application, it will be subject to new “golden rules”, ensuring the delivery of high levels of affordable housing; the provision of new, or improvements to existing, green spaces that are accessible to the public; and, importantly—I noted the right hon. Gentleman's comments on the subject—the making of necessary improvements to local or national infrastructure.

Mr Francois: Mid and South Essex hospitals trust, which runs Basildon hospital, reported that in the autumn, the hospital was running at between 98% and 99% of its bed capacity. In recent weeks, because of winter pressures and flu, bed capacity has exceeded 100%. The standard NHS ratio is 2.4 new patients for each house, so 27,000 new households is just under 65,000 new patients for Basildon hospital, which is already bursting at the seams. Surely the new local plan is unsound on that score alone; Basildon hospital just cannot cope with it.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I note his concerns about hospital capacity in the area. My colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care will also have registered those comments. We are working closely with colleagues across Government to bring forward the necessary infrastructure, whether it be health or educational provision. It is for local authorities in the first instance, through the development of up-to-date local plans, to address the needs and opportunities in their area in relation to infrastructure, and—as planning policy guidance makes very clear—to bring forward infrastructure funding statements setting out what local infrastructure is needed and how it should be funded, including through the contributions made by developers.

Mr Francois: I understand the principle, but I have read the local plan. There is not one specific word in there about plans to expand Basildon. There is an associated infrastructure delivery plan, which is a living document; it is three years out of date, and there is no specific plan in there for Basildon. I understand the theory, but Basildon borough council simply has not addressed this—it has said nothing about it at all.

Matthew Pennycook: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I have heard the point he has made. He will understand that given the quasi-judicial nature of the planning system, I cannot comment on the specifics of an individual local authority's plan, but he has put his point on the record regarding health provision in the area.

When it comes to affordable housing, our new golden rules will require a 15 percentage point premium on top of existing requirements, up to a maximum of 50%. No site-specific viability assessments will be permitted until we have strengthened national planning guidance on viability, in which we will consider the case for permitting viability negotiations on previously developed land and larger strategic sites that are likely to carry greater infrastructure costs. We have also ensured that the sustainability of sites must be prioritised. No one wants to see isolated and disconnected development, which is why our policy asks authorities to pay particular attention to transport connections when considering whether grey belt is sustainably located.

I want to make it clear that while our reforms will help deliver the homes and development that this country so desperately needs, they will not come at the expense of the natural environment or rural communities. We are maintaining the existing strong protections in the national planning policy framework for the best and most versatile agricultural land—the land most important for food production—and we have preserved protections for high-quality green-belt land and land safeguarded

for environmental reasons, such as national landscapes. Alongside those protections, we are ensuring that green-belt developments deliver more accessible green space and support nature recovery.

As the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay knows, to support the Government's plan-for-change milestone of building 1.5 million new homes this Parliament, we introduced a new standard method for assessing local housing need. We recognise that as a result, some areas of the country will see their targets raised. That includes London and the south-east; the numbers we consulted on back in July were raised partly in response to concerns expressed through the consultation about the lack of responsiveness to affordability. Many areas will see their targets raised, and on 12 December, we raised London's target from the number we had consulted on. However, the acute and entrenched nature of the housing crisis in England demands that we take steps to significantly increase the supply of homes of all tenures, and all parts of the country, including Basildon and Billericay, need to play their part.

Before I conclude, I will touch on the importance of up-to-date local plans. As I have just made clear to the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, due to the Secretary of State's quasi-judicial role, I cannot comment on specifics. However, I will take the opportunity to underline that having up-to-date local plans is the best way for local communities to shape development in their area, deliver housing that meets the needs of their communities, and ensure the provision of supporting infrastructure in a sustainable manner.

Mr Holden: Will the Minister reflect on the concerns I have raised, and that have been raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) in previous debates, about the huge changes we face locally with devolution? Who will be accountable for local plans when the council that is ramming them through will not even exist in the near future? There is real concern that this is like a hit job being done on our local communities.

Matthew Pennycook: I recognise the right hon. Gentleman's point. That will depend, of course, on the state of the local plan and what point it is at—whether it is at regulation 18 or 19—and where it is moving forward, but I recognise the point about interaction of the local plan development process with the proposals set out in the English devolution White Paper. There is also a related concern, which I have spoken to the right hon. Gentleman about on a previous occasion: the Government are very clear that we want to see universal coverage of strategic planning across the country, and we will be asking sub-regions across the country to come together to produce spatial development strategies. That may address concerns in his part of the country and others by ensuring that they consider whether cross-border co-operation might ensure that housing growth happens in a planned and more sensible way, rather than every local authority attempting to meet its need within its own confines.

The right hon. Gentleman will know that this Government inherited what I consider to be a frankly appalling situation in which less than a third of local planning authorities have an up-to-date local development plan. That is not a sustainable basis for a plan-led system,

[Matthew Pennycook]

and that is why we have set out an expectation that every local planning authority must have a local plan. I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman's involvement in the affairs of Basildon council is a relatively recent development, but he will know that some of the pressures of unplanned development that the authority is experiencing will be because the current local plan was adopted in 1998, making the authority one of a very small number without a Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 plan in place. That reinforces the point that getting a local plan in place is the most effective protection against speculative development. Where plans are not up to date, or where local planning authorities are not delivering the homes that their communities need, it is right that development can come forward from outside the plan, but we want to see more plan-led development across the country.

The new council leadership has acted to address the failures of its predecessors by bringing forward a new local plan. I have registered the right hon. Gentleman's views about it. Local residents will obviously, through consultation, be able to feed in their own views about that emerging local plan, but we think it is important

that it comes forward, whatever form it finally emerges in. It is a sad reflection of the predecessors in that authority that the previous Government had to intervene to ensure a new local plan timetable was produced in December 2023. As the council continues to work on the emerging plan, we expect it to explore all options to deliver its housing targets, including maximising the use of brownfield land; considering the densification of sites, where appropriate; working with neighbouring authorities, as I said, as we move towards that emerging universal strategic plan coverage; and, where necessary, having considered fully all other reasonable options for meeting its identified development needs, reviewing its green belt.

To conclude, I thank the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay for bringing this important matter to the House. I note the concerns that he and the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford have raised, and I look forward to engaging with him further on how best we can meet housing need in full in his constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

3.2 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 17 January 2025

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND
DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK Soft Power Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Latin America and Caribbean (Baroness Chapman of Darlington) has today made the following statement:

I would like to update Parliament on the UK Government approach to soft power. The global community faces some of the greatest challenges of our lifetime: conflict across multiple continents, the climate and nature emergency, the threat of harms flowing from unregulated emerging technologies and their use by hostile states. Our rules-based international order, historically used to tackle these issues, is under attack. To meet these challenges, the UK must collaborate and take action.

Our offer to the world is unique: we are a beacon of democracy underpinned by a talented and independent judiciary. We boast internationally recognised cultural, creative and sporting sectors, vibrant in all four corners of our country and around the world. We have a world-class education system, resilient and revered financial and legal sectors, and groundbreaking science, technology and research centres. The impact of the BBC World Service and British Council is unparalleled.

The spirit of the United Kingdom is built on tolerance, fairness, diversity and inclusivity, and we ground our approach on values. The UK does not sit still; rather, we continue to look at how we can do things differently and find innovative solutions to the problems we and the world face.

While others seek to weaponise their soft power, we seek to collaborate and forge partnerships. If we are to make progress on the challenges that we face, and create a world that is safer, fairer and more prosperous for all, we must engage the sectors, institutions and networks that together contribute to our success and best project those to the world.

It is no longer viable to rely solely on hard tools. A modern, dynamic, engaged Britain unlocks the power of our strongest assets. We must use soft power to deliver hard goals.

New Soft Power Council

Today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and I are launching a new UK Soft Power Council and will convene its inaugural meeting on 15 January.

For the first time, we are bringing together some of the most influential figures across our world-leading sectors in soft power and foreign policy to steer and advise Government.

This council reflects the depth and breadth of our culture, creative, sports, education and science and technology sectors, and will tap into UK expertise on security, climate and nature and development, and our values and institutions.

This is not just an advisory group. The Soft Power Council will enable us to build stronger partnerships with external organisations at home and abroad, identify opportunities to strengthen our reach and reputation and shore up our influence for a generation.

Core to the Council’s mission is the pursuit of economic growth, ensuring a coherent, strategic, approach to soft power that brings tangible economic benefits to citizens across the UK.

Together the Soft Power Council will help the UK Government shape and drive a new UK soft power strategy that will deliver on our foreign policy priorities, bring momentum to campaigns that

deploy our soft power and broaden the reach of the major soft power and foreign policy moments in the global calendar. We look forward to inviting contributions from the full range of Parliamentarians to support this initiative.

Co-chaired by us as Secretaries of State, the members of the Soft Power Council are:

Foreign policy	
Growth	Dr Linda Yueh—University of Oxford; Royal Commonwealth Society Ewan Vinters—CEO, Hauser & Wirth (former CEO, Fortnum & Mason) Roland Rudd—Global co-chair, FGS Global; Chair, Tate
Security	Glen Sir Nick Carter—Former Chief of the Defence Staff Dr Comfort Ero—International Crisis Group
Europe	Mark Leonard—European Council on Foreign Relations Dr Parag Khanna—AlphaGeo
Climate	Richard Deverell—Kew Gardens Dr Vijaya Ramachandran—Breakthrough Institute
Development	Dr Sara Pantuliano—Overseas Development Institute
Soft power	
Culture	Dr Tristram Hunt—Victoria and Albert Museum Lord Mendoza—Historic England Fran Hegyi—Edinburgh International Festival Scott McDonald—British Council
Creative	Tom Kiehl—UK Music Sir Peter Bazalgette—Royal College of Art
Sport	Dame Katherine Grainger—UK Sport; University of Glasgow Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson—Sport Wales; UK Active; Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Debbie Hewitt—Football Association
Education	Vivienne Stern—Universities UK
Values and Institutions	Patrick Stevens—Rule of Law Director, International Justice Development Anthony Smith—Westminster Foundation for Democracy Dame Linda Dobbs—Former UK High Court Judge
Media	Tom Fussell—BBC Studios
Tourism	Peter Gowers—European Former CEO, Travelodge
Science and Technology	Professor Helen McCarthy—Queens University Belfast; Chief Science & Technology Adviser, Northern Ireland

[HCWS369]

PRIME MINISTER

National Infrastructure and
Service Transformation Authority

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): I am making this statement to bring to the House’s attention the following machinery of government change.

On 10 October 2024, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced the creation of the national infrastructure and service transformation authority. I am today announcing that NISTA will be a joint unit of HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office. This change will bring infrastructure strategy and delivery together to address systemic challenges to growth, and combine the expertise and functions of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority and the National Infrastructure Commission.

To support this, responsibility for all of the Infrastructure and Project Authority's functions and responsibilities,

including the Government's project delivery expertise and functions, and assurance reviews for the Government's largest projects, will move from the Cabinet Office to HM Treasury.

The principal accounting officer for NISTA will be the Treasury permanent secretary. The lead Minister will be the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

This change will be effective from 1 April 2025.

[HCWS368]

Petition

Friday 17 January 2025

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Pimping websites and paying for sex

The petition of residents of the constituency of Gower,

Declares that demand from the minority of men who pay for sex is driving the prostitution and sex trafficking trade, and this sexual exploitation is being facilitated by pimping websites that operate with impunity.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to outlaw pimping websites and paying for sex, and provide support, not sanctions, to victims of sexual exploitation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Tonia Antoniazzi, Official Report, 26 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 744.*]

[P003020]

Petitions in the same terms were presented by the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) [P003023]; the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) [P003024]; the hon. Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) [P003025]; the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) [P003026]; the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) [P003027]; and the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) [P003028].

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips):

The trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation is a truly horrific crime. We know this crime disproportionately affects women and girls, and the violence they face is abhorrent. The demand for commercial sexual services fuels the exploitation of women who are forced or

coerced into prostitution. The Government have set out an unprecedented mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade, and we will use all the levers available to us to deliver this.

The Government are clear that online platforms are a significant enabler of sexual exploitation and must be responsible and held accountable for content on their sites, including taking proactive steps to prevent their sites being used by criminals.

We are implementing the Online Safety Act 2023, which sets out priority offences, including sexual exploitation and human trafficking offences. Ofcom recently published its codes of practice about how online platforms should deal with illegal online content. Online platforms now have a duty to assess the risk of illegal harms on their services, with a deadline of 16 March 2025. Subject to the codes of practice completing the parliamentary process, from 17 March 2025 online platforms will need to take the safety measures set out in the codes of practice, use other effective measures to protect users from illegal content and activity or face significant penalties.

We are determined to safeguard victims and to bring the ruthless perpetrators of this crime to justice. The Government are working closely with law enforcement to tackle the drivers of trafficking for sexual exploitation, including through law enforcement operational intensifications aimed at tackling modern slavery threats, and targeting prolific perpetrators.

The protection of women and girls from exploitation is at the forefront of our approach. We want to go further to understand the options, by working with and listening to NGOs, charities and parliamentarians.

To help support people at risk of being sexually exploited, the modern slavery victim care contract provides support to adult potential and confirmed victims of modern slavery in England and Wales. This support includes a support worker to help them access support services, including medical treatment, legal aid, legal representatives, and legal advice.

The Government will continue to keep policies to tackle sexual exploitation under review.

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Friday 17 January 2025

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UK Soft Power Council.....	15WS	National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority	16WS

PETITION

Friday 17 January 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HOME DEPARTMENT	1P	OBSERVATIONS	1P
Pimping websites and paying for sex	1P		

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Friday 24 January 2025**

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PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

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