

Westminster Hall

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6 Feb 2014 : Column 165WH

Fire Sprinklers Week

2.40 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Sheridan. It is also good to see the Minister and the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), in their places for this short debate to help promote fire sprinkler week. I place on record our appreciation to the Backbench Business Committee for providing the time for it.

Fire sprinklers have a role to play in our economy, our environment and our social policy. I am secretary of the all-party group on fire safety and rescue. Our chair, the hon. Member for Southend West (Mr Amess) is here, as is our treasurer, the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). Other distinguished members of the all-party group are here too, as are others. I place on record our appreciation for the Business Sprinkler Alliance, which sponsored an event in Westminster last week to launch the latest evidence on the value of sprinklers from the Building Research Establishment and the Centre for Economic and Business Research. I give special mention to Iain Cox, the chair of the BSA, Andrew Turner, who is a great advocate for the BSA, Ben Ansell, who is the Chief Fire Officers Association's lead on sprinklers, Celestine Cheong of Ogilvy and Ronnie King, who is a founding member of the BSA and is the admin secretary of the all-party group.

I will start by debunking some of the myths on sprinklers that are perpetrated mostly by television, film and other media. Anyone watching a television drama, an advert or a movie will recognise the comedy value of all the fire sprinklers in a building going off and everyone getting drenched. That is good slapstick fun, but it is just not true. People have a misapprehension that that is what sprinklers do, when, as most of us in the Chamber know, the heads of sprinklers all work independently and will only actuate above a fire when the temperature is above 68°. In the media, people just do not get to see the value of sprinklers.

The second myth is that water damage from sprinklers is as bad as that from hoses. Sprinklers use about 5% of the water used by firefighters' hose lines. As an ex-firefighter, I have seen the water damage that firefighting operations can cause. Sprinklers totally minimise that damage. There is a famous quote from a senior Minister who, on visiting the scene of the Windsor castle fire, remarked, "Thank goodness the building was not sprinklered," indicating the level of misunderstanding about sprinklers at the highest levels of Government. In fact, as a result of that building not being sprinklered, perhaps because of its historic value, we lost £6 million-worth of national treasures. The third myth is of the potential for accidental actuation, which could cause damage, but it is calculated that the chances of accidental actuation are something like 16 million to one. The final myth is that sprinklers are expensive, but anyone who has examined the cost-benefit analysis can quickly conclude that that is simply not the case.

Government have been nudging towards sprinklers for years. Wales has introduced new legislation, Scotland has different measuring perspectives in policy, and Governments have issued clearer guidance and stronger advice, particularly in relation to schools—but all have

6 Feb 2014 : Column 166WH

stopped short of fully embracing sprinklers. Last week's evidence, which only relates to warehouses, made the case clearer and stronger. The Centre for Economic and Business Research launched a report last week that shows avoidable losses from fire running at £1 billion every five years and 1,000 jobs lost every year because of fire, most of which could be avoided. The research from the CEBR and the Building Research Establishment shows that 135,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide are released into the air annually from major fires—equivalent to the emissions from the annual domestic electricity supply for a city the size of Portsmouth.

There are economic and environmental reasons for supporting sprinklers, but there are also social reasons. Sprinklers minimise the risks to firefighters. We have seen firefighters killed in buildings, particularly big warehouses. Sprinklers protect the staff within buildings and provide business resilience and continuity against buildings shutting down because of a major fire. I know that colleagues here have experienced in their local economies the trauma and difficulty fire causes. Sprinklers minimise the transport disruption and local closures that major fires cause. The protection they offer enables larger compartments, higher occupancy and higher packing density in buildings. They can lower fire insurance premiums for warehouses by up to 50%.

It is worth comparing the regulations on sprinkler coverage in the UK with those of other countries. In the UK, business premises and warehouses of more than 20,000 square metres are required to be sprinklered. In many European Union competitor countries, such as Germany, that figure is 2,000 square metres, and in Scotland it is 14,000 square metres. Big questions have been asked about fires in schools, care homes and tower blocks, as well as the height of tower blocks. We saw the awful fire in a nursing home in Canada last week, where I understand 35 senior citizens died. Anyone involved in fire knows that the majority of people who die in fires are the old, the ill, the disabled, those with dependency problems and the poor. Those people deserve greater protection. The fascinating thing about the Canada care home fire was that part of the building was sprinklered and part was not, and the part that was sprinklered is still standing, whereas the part that was not is not. Most deaths from fire occur in ordinary homes, so it is good to see some local authorities and housing associations taking action. In my constituency, Tower Hamlets Community Housing is looking to install sprinkler systems, in one form or another, to protect vulnerable residents.

All eyes are on Government and I have a number of points to put to the Minister. I would be grateful if he responded to them, and surprised if he were unable to, because most of them have been around for some time and are predictable, so he probably has the answers in the notes in front of him.

First, we should remove sprinklers from being classified as plant and machinery for the purposes of business rates. If there is one thing that the present Government want to be famous for, it is deregulation, and as this is a deregulatory issue, it should be attractive to them. It is anomalous that companies that invest in protection for their businesses and employees are charged higher business rates than those that do not. A fair comparison would be a local authority penalising someone for putting in a burglar alarm. Removing sprinklers from that classification and equalising business rates would be a good start. I

6 Feb 2014 : Column 167WH

am sure the Minister is looking at that, because for every new regulation that he proposes, there is pressure on him to demonstrate that there is one he can repeal. This one is a freebie: he can take it and use it to argue for whatever favourite piece of legislation he wants to introduce.

We recommend that the Government review approved document B on fire safety in the building regulations and that its locus should be expanded so that the cost-benefit analysis considers the economic, societal and environmental costs of fire, alongside current life-safety considerations.

That would move the goalposts considerably and would ensure that the onus was on building occupiers and owners to invest in sprinklers.

The Department for Communities and Local Government should partner with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills with the Business Sprinkler Alliance to create an open dialogue with the business community to promote sprinklers through enhanced understanding of the benefits and acceptance of the technology. This is a matter not of regulation but culture, and such a move would create the mood music. The Association of British Insurers calculates that £639 million in fire losses was paid out in the first half of 2009 and £1.36 billion in 2008. The change would save money for the UK economy, promote business and promote best practice. If DCLG and BIS were to engage more effectively with BSA, they could create an atmosphere in which sprinklers are more likely to be understood and accepted.

We also want the Government to amend the Water Bill, which is in the House of Lords. Members of the all-party group, including me, the hon. Member for Waveney and the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Roger Williams), another of our joint chairs, recently visited the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Dan Rogerson), who is the Minister with responsibility for water, at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs after the Water Bill moved to the House of Lords. One obstacle to the wider use of sprinklers, particularly in domestic property, is that water legislation classifies the supply of water for sprinklers as non-domestic, so water companies can attach conditions that can increase the cost of connection to a prohibitive extent. The water liaison group, which is a voluntary body composed of representatives of water companies and from the sprinkler sector, reached a voluntary protocol agreement in 2004 on dealing with issues surrounding installations. The agreement was recently revised, and implicit in it is that a small change is needed to section 57 of the Water Industry Act 1991 to make water supplied for sprinklers and other firefighting equipment connected to the mains a legitimate use of water. That change can be made during the passage of the Water Bill. I am pleased to say that the Minister with responsibility for water accepted the logic of the argument and agreed to examine the matter. I hope that the Minister here, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), will reinforce the view of the all-party fire safety and rescue group that the amendment ought to be supported.

More and more evidence is emerging of the value of sprinklers. Fires that have been prevented from becoming major blazes include incidents at a Northamptonshire primary school, Bluewater shopping centre, a plastics

6 Feb 2014 : Column 168WH

factory in Lancashire, a greeting card shop in a Stockport shopping centre, a restaurant in Spitalfields and a superstore in Poole. I have 10 pages of similar examples from the BSA of businesses that had the common sense to invest in sprinkler systems and therefore ensured that their buildings survived either an arson attack, accident or failure in the electrics, and were able to carry on trading because the fire was dealt with and the fire service only had to mop up the situation and ensure that the premises were safe.

I am unsure whether the Minister has had the chance to visit Scottsdale, Arizona, but it is a trip well worth making—perhaps he and the shadow Minister could arrange one. When I first joined the House, Scottsdale was the sprinkler capital of the world. It was the first local authority to create a city ordinance that every building must have sprinklers. The last time that I checked, only one person had died in a fire in Scottsdale in over 30 years. Scottsdale is a community of more than 200,000 people and is one of Phoenix's five districts. It is a big community where people smoke, cook and use candles; they drink, and do all manner of other things—I am unsure whether Arizona is one of the states that has legalised cannabis—and fires do take place. Sprinklers have protected that community for decades. If the Minister wants to see sprinklers in action for residential

purposes—the BSA’s big push this year is on warehouses—Scottsdale provides overwhelming evidence for sprinkler use in both residential and business premises.

As I said earlier, Westminster Government, the devolved Assemblies, competitor countries in Europe and others around the world are starting to endorse, embrace and legislate for sprinklers. The evidence is getting clearer, stronger and more compelling, but we need leadership. I hope that both Front Benchers make positive responses and will engage the business community to ensure that the spread of sprinklers, which is beneficial to UK plc, gathers pace.

2.55 pm

Mr David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on requesting this debate and the Backbench Business Committee, of which I am a member, on having the good sense to approve it. I also pay tribute to all those who have organised the first fire sprinkler week. I absolutely agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman said, including the fact that nothing we are calling for today is original. We want not only 90 minutes to exchange a few words, but also a positive outcome at the end.

[Mr Graham Brady *took the Chair*]

The importance of installing fire sprinklers was made apparent just last week, on 29 January, in a small warehouse fire in Earby, Lancashire. The four-storey plastics factory was set ablaze and eight firefighters were called to the scene. Thanks to the factory’s sprinkler system, however, most of the worst damage was mitigated and the fire was stopped from spreading, even though the system was installed over 40 years ago and the sprinkler heads were 20 metres above the fire. The company was credited by a fire service spokesman for having sprinklers:

6 Feb 2014 : Column 169WH

“Because the building was fitted with sprinklers, the fire was able to be put out quicker. This allowed the firefighters to deal with it before it spread.”

That example is so typical among many similar stories up and down the country. A single fire death in a building fitted with a working sprinkler system that has been installed to the correct standard is an extremely rare occurrence and multiple deaths in such circumstances are virtually unheard of anywhere in the world. There is now such clear evidence of the benefits of sprinklers that we should seriously consider how we can encourage greater use of them in England. I want specifically to deal with care homes, schools and tower blocks, which I hope will not spoil colleagues’ speeches.

It is of course important that we ensure that all buildings are fire safe, but it is especially important that care homes are adequately equipped as they are home to some of the most vulnerable members of our society, and it is paramount that they are protected. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned a recent devastating blaze, but Sydney witnessed the loss of 11 people at a residential home in Quakers in 2011. Such events are shocking and show the importance of fire safety.

I remember as though it were yesterday an incident from when I was the Member of Parliament for Basildon in which four children tragically died in a fire at a school. As a result of the fire in Sydney, the New South Wales Government said that they would make plans for all care homes to have an automatic sprinkler system installed. In England, sprinklers are currently required only in new care homes with double bedrooms under the 2006 building regulations guidance, but double bedrooms are no longer built in care homes under social care legislation.

I am not going to go into a detailed comparison of the situations in England and under the devolved Governments in Wales and Scotland, but the Minister might reflect on the differences.

Graeme Morrice (Livingston) (Lab): I apologise for not being present at the start of the debate. I was in the main Chamber speaking in another debate, so I will need to get back for the wind-ups. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the difference between England and the rest of the UK—in particular Scotland, but also Wales and presumably Northern Ireland. Is he aware that the standards in Scotland, where I come from, are much higher than those in England? Should the UK Government not be looking at least to raise the standards in England up to the level in Scotland?

Mr Amess: I absolutely recognise that, but as a Conservative I do not especially want to fall down that particular hole. I am aware, however, of the difference of the situations in Scotland and England.

Single bedrooms are not included in the guidance, so in effect no care homes in England are required to have a sprinkler system installed. If we want to avoid disasters such as in Quebec and Sydney, sprinklers are needed in care homes.

The second of the three areas is schools; I have already touched on the tragedy in a particular local school when I was the MP for Basildon. There has been some progress with sprinklers in schools, but we need to be cautious about losing momentum and retreating from the progress already made.

6 Feb 2014 : Column 170WH

In an Adjournment debate in the House on 1 March 2007, my right hon. Friend Michael Howard, now Lord Howard of Lympne—I hope that is how it is pronounced—gave the example of a fire in his constituency in Lympne primary school. Fortunately, there were no fatalities, but the fire gutted the whole school, causing great disruption and upset. At the time, the chief fire officer said that a properly designed and installed fire sprinkler system could have stopped the fire much earlier, avoiding the ultimate destruction of the building. In response to that fire, the then Minister of State for Education, now Lord Knight of Weymouth, announced that all new schools built under the Building Schools for the Future programme would be expected to have automatic fire sprinklers installed, apart from a handful of some low-risk schools to be determined by a cost-benefit analysis.

Again, as a Conservative I do not want to fall down that particular hole, but since the programme of introducing sprinklers into new school buildings, there has been a marked reduction in school fire losses—something I am sure we all welcome and wish to continue. Recently, however, there has been a decrease in the number of new schools built with sprinkler protection, and that is not good enough. It gives the impression that protecting our children's education from fire damage is no longer a top priority. I am absolutely certain that the Government whom I support would not want to give that impression. Alternatives are being sought, because sprinklers are no longer considered to be mandatory, and developers are avoiding them to save money in the short term. That, however, is foolish in the longer term, and playing with our children's future is simply not acceptable.

I have a local example from Essex, in which county my hon. Friend the Minister was the leader of Brentwood council. I have been in communication with a fire officer who has informed me that the Essex county fire and rescue service has been consulted on 422 schools since May 2010. Of those schools, to his knowledge, only four had sprinklers fitted. That is not acceptable. He went on to inform me that when a project runs into overspend, or when other requirements are highlighted, the sprinkler installation is most often one of the first things to be cut in order to free up funds. I am sure that the Minister agrees that ensuring the fire safety of our schools is a top priority of the Government.

Finally, I turn to fire sprinklers in tower blocks. Sprinklers are required in new tower blocks of more than 30 metres; in Scotland, it is blocks of more than 18 metres. In England, 4,000 existing tower blocks are not sprinkler protected. Following the fire tragedies at Lakanal House in Southwark and Shirley Towers in Southampton, the coroners issued rule 43 letters asking the Government to encourage the installation of retrofitted sprinklers in tower blocks. Blocks with complicated designs, or problems such as those in the town centre of Southend, could well benefit from them.

As with warehouses research, there is clear proof of the financial and economic benefits of installing sprinklers in tower blocks. The BRE cost-benefit analysis of residential sprinklers commissioned by the Chief Fire Officers Association found that, for most blocks of flats, sprinklers were cost-effective. This research, however, has often not been reflected in guidance to the building regulations.

6 Feb 2014 : Column 171WH

Residential fire sprinklers are not expensive. They cost about £1 per square foot in a new home—the same amount as for carpeting a similar area—and most rooms would require only two sprinkler heads for complete protection. The vast majority of fires and resulting fatalities and injuries take place in residential properties. Even a small fire can cause a huge amount of damage to a property. Smoke alarms can give warning of a fire, but they cannot control the fire itself. That is where a residential sprinkler system comes into play.

I am not asking for more regulation, but I am asking my hon. Friend the Minister to reflect carefully on the advantages and benefits of fire sprinklers in domestic dwellings and saying that he should be seen to encourage housing providers as to those benefits. We certainly need to incentivise care home providers, education authorities, academies and those housing providers to invest in sprinklers. We all appreciate the burden of additional regulation on businesses and on those building our care facilities, schools and housing, so we are not asking for more regulation. I encourage my hon. Friend, however, to take the lead by giving a clear signal that automatic fire-sprinkler protection of our buildings will save lives, reduce burn injuries, and protect property, businesses, jobs and the environment. I encourage the Minister to commend sprinklers to all involved in the built environment.

I apologise in advance, Mr Brady, if I am absent for a time during the debate; I am hoping to make a contribution in the animal welfare debate due to take place later in the main Chamber. Meanwhile, I hope that the Government whom I support will listen to the professional voice of the fire and rescue service.

3.7 pm

Mrs Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing this important debate during fire sprinkler week.

I want to illustrate the importance of fire sprinkler systems with a sad story about a factory in my constituency. The Findus food factory in Longbenton, North Tyneside, was officially opened by the late Princess of Wales in the 1980s. By 1995 it was providing jobs for 1,500 local people. Over subsequent years, the business changed hands several times and, sadly, the number of workers reduced by two thirds. None the less, it remained an important employer in the constituency.

By 2009, the factory had become Longbenton Foods, and the owners were providing much-needed employment for 420 local people. The factory remained busy, still producing frozen meals under the Findus label—in particular, the famous Findus crispy pancakes. It was one of the few businesses

to continue to have a licence to produce them. I can see that I have brought some memories back for a number of people in the Chamber.

Work in the factory came to a sudden halt on 6 January 2009, when a huge fire broke out in the main food production area. It took six fire engines and 34 firefighters more than three hours to bring it under control. Fortunately, all the staff were safely evacuated, because of the fire alarm system, and no one was hurt in the blaze. In fact,

6 Feb 2014 : Column 172WH

Dave Brown, who was the group manager at Tyne and Wear fire service, praised the fire crews for an excellent job in tackling what he described as a difficult fire. Although there were several production halls at the factory, they were all smoke damaged and put out of production. The fire caused an estimated £20 million of damage and left almost all the workers redundant.

At the time, my predecessor in the seat, the right hon. Stephen Byers, and the then Minister for the North East, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown), worked with the council and others to minimise the social and economic consequences for the local community. Longbenton Foods secured a grant of £3.4 million from the regional development agency One North East to rebuild and reopen the business. The factory reopened in 2010, and in June that year, confident in its future, I paid tribute in my maiden speech to the efforts of all involved in saving the business. However, by December the business was in trouble. I worked with the owner to try to save Longbenton Foods, but despite valiant efforts by the administrator, the business could not be sold as a viable enterprise, and this time the job losses were final.

Although the ultimate failure of the business could not be directly attributed to the fire, it could be said that its negative influence in disrupting business at a crucial time meant that the business could never fully recover its former success. Had the fire not happened, the business would have continued to meet the demands of a healthy order book and would have provided continuous employment for all the staff.

I know the experience in North Tyneside is not unique, as has been shown today, and that businesses across the country are hit by fire all the time. At its worst, the upset can lead to loss of life; at the very least it can lead to loss of jobs and businesses, and can have an environmental impact. Only 100,000 litres of water were used to fight the Longbenton Foods fire, although often many millions of litres are used to douse a single fire, according to a study carried out by Bureau Veritas on behalf of the Business Sprinkler Alliance. That report showed that the impact of a fire in a commercial building is always felt long after the fire has been put out, as was the case with the Longbenton Foods factory.

The worst thing is that had the Longbenton Foods factory been fitted with sprinklers, the fire would have been doused or controlled before the fire brigade arrived. The factory would most likely have remained open for business, millions of pounds of public money would have been saved and, most importantly, 420 people would still be in work. No lives were lost, thank goodness, but hundreds of livelihoods were ruined. Another company now owns the factory, but massive investment is needed to get the place back into production. That is of little comfort to those who lost their jobs several years ago.

I commend the work of the BSA and would like to reiterate the following specific actions that are required from the Government. I ask for non-regulatory measures to promote the benefits of fire sprinklers to businesses and deregulatory measures so that sprinklers are no longer classified as plant and machinery for the purposes of business rates, as well as a review of approved document B on fire safety in the building regulations, so that the cost-benefit analysis considers the economic, societal and environmental costs of fire alongside the current life safety considerations.

6 Feb 2014 : Column 173WH

I hope the Minister will reply favourably to those requests for action. I do not want to see a repeat of what has happened at Longbenton Foods. A positive response would be fitting and timely in fire sprinkler week.

3.13 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing it and on his work both in raising the awareness of the needs of the fire service generally and in campaigning specifically for an increased use of sprinklers.

This debate is taking place in the first ever fire sprinkler week. The simple message important to get across is that controlling a fire when it starts is better than repairing the damage that occurs if it is allowed to spread. It is important to pay tribute to our firefighters, who do such a great job in hazardous and dangerous circumstances. We owe it to them to reduce the risks associated with the work that they do in the communities they serve. With fire authority budgets and resources coming under increasing pressure, it is important to focus on preventing and restricting fires, and making firefighters' jobs safer and easier. Fire chiefs and fire authorities up and down the country, including those in Suffolk, strongly advocate more widespread use of sprinklers. They are the people with first-hand knowledge and experience, and it is important that the Government listen carefully to their views.

Wessex Foods, on the south Lowestoft industrial estate in my constituency, was a large food factory that processed raw meat into burgers. On 14 July 2010, firefighters from Lowestoft fire station were called to a fire at the factory and arrived in just a few minutes. Unfortunately, the fire had already developed to such a degree that they were unable to enter the building safely to tackle the blaze. The building was completely destroyed by the fire, which took a total of 10 days to be extinguished fully. At its height, 14 fire engines and 80 firefighters were on site, and over the time it took to put out the fire, almost every firefighter in Suffolk attended the scene.

The impact on the local community was far-reaching. A factory that had been in operation for 30 years was closed permanently with the loss of 150 jobs, and there was a significant knock-on impact on the local economy. Other consequences included local road disruptions, evacuation of some nearby residents, environmental impacts, problems with pest control and odour due to rotting meat and the impact of using 50 million litres of water to tackle the fire.

Despite its size and use, the Wessex Foods building was not fitted with sprinklers. Had it been, the outcome would have been completely different. The fire would have started in much the same way, but a short time later the sprinkler head closest to the fire would have operated and suppressed or extinguished the flame. At the same time, the operation of the sprinkler would have set off the fire alarm and led to a call to the fire service. Firefighters would have arrived at the scene within a few minutes, and would have entered the building either to extinguish the small fire fully or to confirm that it had been extinguished by the sprinklers. They would have been back at their fire station within an

6 Feb 2014 : Column 174WH

hour. The fire at Wessex Foods is just one of many examples that reinforce the case for sprinklers to be fitted more widely.

Over the years, many myths have grown up about sprinklers, and it is important to dispel them. Myth No. 1 is that sprinklers are always going off accidentally. That is untrue. There is a one in 500,000 chance of accidental operation through damage, and the chance of accidental discharge of water due to manufacturing defects is one in 14 million. Myth No. 2 is that sprinklers operate when a smoke detector goes off—again, that is untrue. Sprinklers are not triggered by smoke; they operate as a result of high temperatures that can be produced only by a genuine fire. Myth No. 3, that all sprinkler heads operate together, is untrue. Most fires cause only one sprinkler head to operate. If more than one operates, that is due to the size of the fire and the need for more heads to operate to suppress and control it.

Myth No. 4 is that sprinkler systems use more water than firefighters. Once more, that is untrue. A fire in a building protected by a sprinkler system will be extinguished at an earlier stage due to the automatic operation of the sprinklers, which will suppress and control the fire; in some cases, the fire may even be extinguished before the firefighters arrive. A single sprinkler head uses approximately 60 litres of water per minute, whereas fires that develop and require the fire service to respond will often result in 10,000 times more water being used.

Myth No. 5, that sprinklers cause more damage than the fire, is also untrue. Not only is less water used, but the early operation of an automatic fire sprinkler system dramatically reduces fire, heat and smoke damage. Myth No. 6 is that once a sprinkler system has operated, the occupants of the home or business will need to leave for an extended period for repairs to take place. Again, that is untrue. A building protected by sprinklers will likely be returned to normal use far sooner, because the fire will be smaller and less water will be used to extinguish it; businesses are often up and running the following day.

Myth No. 7 is that sprinklers are unsightly. Again, that is untrue. Modern domestic and non-industrial sprinkler heads are fitted so that only a small disc is visible on the ceiling, and plastic pipe work is concealed in ceiling voids. Myth No. 8, that sprinklers are expensive, is untrue. A full British standard-compliant system can be supplied and installed in a new home for between 1% and 2% of the cost of the building; that is less than the cost of fitting carpets.

Myth No. 9 is that sprinklers cannot be retrofitted. That is untrue. Modern sprinkler systems can be cost-effectively retrofitted, and that has happened many times. Myth No. 10, that they are difficult and expensive to maintain, is untrue. They are relatively simple automatic systems, and have few moving parts. They require little maintenance. Finally—I am grateful to hon. Members for bearing with me—I come to myth No. 11. *[Interruption.]* There is a whole football or cricket team of myths. It is untrue that sprinkler systems are often subject to vandalism. Far more damage is caused by starting a fire or by flooding a building through leaving taps running and drains blocked.

I should add that there has never been a multiple fire death incident anywhere in the world in a building fitted with a sprinkler system designed to the appropriate

6 Feb 2014 : Column 175WH

standard for the intended purpose. The likelihood of a sprinkler going off accidentally is estimated to be about 16 million to 1, and 85% of small and medium-sized businesses that suffer a serious fire either never recover or cease trading within 18 months. The case for sprinklers is compelling.

Perhaps the myths that have grown up about fire sprinklers can be attributed to Hollywood. Sprinklers all going off at once, and dramatic fires, make good box office. “Die Hard” is the movie that gives the worst false impressions. Surprise, surprise—it grossed more than \$140 million while “Backdraft” grossed more than \$152 million. Yes, the characters played by Kurt Russell and William Baldwin in the latter film were real heroes, but we need a system that would remove the need to send such men into dangerous buildings.

The main benefit of sprinklers is that they are the most effective way to get further reductions in fire deaths. Research shows that 80% of fire deaths happen in the home, and that an automatic fire sprinkler system in the home, along with fire detection, reduces the risk of death or serious injury by more than 80%. Other benefits include protecting buildings—fire suppression by sprinklers reduces fire, heat and smoke damage; improving the safety of firefighters, through the containment, suppression and, often, extinguishing of a fire, without the need for them to go into the building; and an increased chance of keeping a business in production after a fire has started.

Sprinklers can also give flexibility to developers, architects and builders, by making it possible to comply with building regulations in a cost-effective way, and they reduce the environmental impact of fire; if there is less heat and smoke, less water will be used to extinguish a fire, and there will be less potential for contaminated water run-off to get into a water course.

Mr Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I am very sympathetic to the case that the hon. Gentleman makes, but will he reflect on why, given all the benefits of sprinklers—reducing unnecessary fires and costs, and saving lives—businesses are so reluctant to install them without being required to do so by regulation? What does that tell us about the importance of a regulatory regime to back up the common-sense case we all accept for extending their use?

Peter Aldous: The right hon. Gentleman is of course right; often people think only about the start-up costs. They do not think about the overall picture of the cost if there should be a fire. There is a need for education and for some regulatory change.

If sprinklers are fitted, a business will usually be fully functioning again within hours of a fire starting, and a sequence of undesirable events will be prevented: business closure, with the consequent loss of jobs, and the knock-on impact to the firm's supply chain and local businesses. Other businesses are often affected when there is a fire—surrounding businesses must stop work during a major fire, and businesses that supply the affected company or rely on its goods for their operation may temporarily or permanently lose custom or supply, which can put their future at risk.

6 Feb 2014 : Column 176WH

Nearly all fires in industrial or commercial buildings cause disruption to the transport system, nearby roads, footpaths and cycleways. They may also lead to residential evacuations and school closures. They also waste water. Fire and rescue services use more than 9 billion litres of water a year—the equivalent to five times the UK's bottled water usage—to put out fires in industrial and commercial buildings.

To coincide with the debate, the Business Sprinkler Alliance has commissioned two important items of research, to assess the impact of fires in warehouse buildings. I will not go through them in detail, because the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse has already done so, but the Centre for Economics and Business Research and BRE research have carried out compelling research.

The main focus of the first fire sprinkler week is on industrial buildings and warehouses, but I want to comment on care homes and homes for the elderly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Mr Amess) did. We need to keep demographic change in mind. People live longer, and older people are particularly vulnerable to the ravages of fire. They cannot get out of buildings as quickly as young people, and those who suffer from dementia face added challenges. The nation is encouraging older people to continue living in their own homes, and that is right; but we need to ensure that elderly people, and especially those who live alone, have appropriate support and protection.

We should keep in mind the devastating fire earlier in the year at the Résidence du Havre care home at L'Isle-Verte in Quebec, where at least 35 people lost their lives. In 2011, as we have heard, 11

people were murdered when a fire was started deliberately at the Quakers Hill nursing home in Sydney in New South Wales. The New South Wales Government subsequently stated that their objective is for all care homes for the elderly to be fitted with sprinklers by March 2016. I fear that often we change the law reactively, responding to such tragic events rather than being proactive and preventing them in the first place. We must take that into account and become proactive.

Last year, Suffolk county council, in what was in many respects a controversial decision, transferred the running of its care homes to a private sector operator. Part of the agreement was that the new care homes that are to be built must include fire sprinklers. The county council is to be commended for insisting on that, and I urge other councils and care operators to do likewise.

What do we want to come out of the debate, and what do we want the Minister to say and the Government to think about? As we have heard, there are three requests. First, the Government should generate a dialogue with the business community, to promote increased acceptance of wider sprinkler use. Secondly, fire sprinklers should be removed from the classification of plant and machinery fixtures for rating purposes. I understand that including them generates very little revenue, and it creates a disincentive to protect commercial building stock, the environment and society from fire.

Finally, building regulations should be reviewed, with respect to the size above which sprinklers must be fitted in warehouses. The present threshold in England is 20,000 square metres. In the Netherlands it is 1,000 square metres; in Germany it is 1,200 square metres; and in France it is 3,000 square metres. Insured business losses

6 Feb 2014 : Column 177WH

in those competing countries are far lower than they are in the UK, where they were £865 million in 2008. In Germany in the same year, the figure in relation to damage as a result of fire was less than half that, at £400 million.

Sprinklers can bring significant benefits in preventing death and personal tragedy, providing firefighters with the protection that they deserve, making the economy more resilient, and preventing unnecessary damage to the environment. We need to promote their wider use in the context of protecting and making better use of resources that are becoming scarcer and more expensive to replace. The television presenter Nick Ross, a champion of fire sprinklers, has commented that each new fire regulation is prompted by a tragedy such as the King's Cross fire.

We must move away from a reactive approach to a proactive and preventive one. Just over 200 years ago, in 1813, the first fire sprinkler system was installed in the Theatre Royal, Drury lane. We have not made sufficient progress in the last two centuries in promoting their wider use. Now is the time to redouble our efforts, to save lives, protect the vulnerable and safeguard jobs.

3.30 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): It is a pleasure, Mr Brady, to serve under your chairmanship. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing this debate.

I pay particular tribute to my friend and colleague back in Wales, the Welsh Assembly Member for Vale of Clwyd, Ann Jones, who has led the way on sprinklers. She steered through the Assembly the Domestic Fire Safety (Wales) Measure 2011, which requires all new and converted homes to be fitted with fire sprinkler systems. That is a tremendous achievement not just for fire safety, but in legislative terms. Ann is the only Assembly Member to have steered a private Member's Bill through the burdensome, legislative competence order process and to have her Bill passed by the

Assembly. Mercifully, that provision of the Government of Wales Act 2006 was removed as a result of the 2011 devolution referendum. It was a long and arduous process, and I am pleased that Ann was able to do something bold with it.

That achievement was remarkable, but it is right to focus on the forthcoming advances in fire safety policy. I was amazed at the comments of the Secretary of State for Wales about the legislation—“bizarre” is not a word I would associate with that particular achievement. Fire sprinklers are 24/7 firefighters. The tenacity shown by Ann Jones and the Welsh Government’s Housing Minister, Carl Sargeant, means that Wales has taken the bold step to require all new homes to have those 24/7 firefighters by 2016.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning Ann Jones. I had the pleasure of meeting her and she briefed me on the subject just a few weeks ago. The word to describe her is “formidable”.

Chris Ruane: Absolutely. I agree with my hon. Friend and I will relay my hon. Friend’s comment to Ann when I see her tonight.

6 Feb 2014 : Column 178WH

I want to examine the comments made by the Secretary of State for Wales. In a parliamentary question, I asked what estimate his Department had made of the cost of installing fire sprinklers. The response was:

“Wales’s largest independent house builder Redrow has estimated that Welsh specific building regulations, including the requirement for all new homes to be fitted with a sprinkler, is estimated to impose an additional £13,000 to the unit building cost in Wales. I have written to the Welsh Government urging them to give further consideration”.—[*Official Report*, 20 May 2013; Vol. 563, c. 451W.]

That is deliberate obfuscation and muddying of the water. The cost is not £13,000. The commercial director Redrow Homes in Wales said yesterday that the Home Builders Federation

“and indeed the whole industry agrees the cost of building a standard three-bedroom home in Wales will be circa £11,000 more than building the same home in England if the Welsh Government makes sprinklers compulsory... Both the HBF and independent studies have concluded that the sprinklers alone would add around £5,000”

to the unit cost. I do not know why the Secretary of State bandied around the figure of £13,000, or perhaps I do know. The true cost is nowhere near £13,000. The company said it is only £11,000, and £5,000 for the sprinklers. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) suggested that the cost would be 1% or 2%, which would be around £5,000. The matter should be looked at.

The Secretary of State for Wales was not the only person to criticise Ann Jones. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government also criticised her strongly. She responded by saying:

“Mr Pickles has repeatedly cited fire sprinklers as excessive ‘red tape’ which is holding back the construction industry in Wales. However”

the Secretary of State has previously

“backed sprinklers in his home constituency of Brentwood and Ongar, saying: ‘The facts show that here in Essex people are most likely to lose their lives in a fire in their own home or in their car than

at work and that many of the deaths that occur in residential fires could be prevented if a domestic sprinkler system was in operation.”

The Secretary of State also said:

“The cost of these units is relatively low but time after time it has been proved that domestic sprinkler systems can save lives and that is a price worth paying.”

I hope it is not unparliamentary, Mr Brady, to say that I think he speaks with forked tongue. He says one thing in his constituency and another in Westminster.

There is criticism within the Government of Ann Jones’s bold move, but others have supported her. Frances Kirkham, CBE, assistant deputy coroner, wrote to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government with her findings in the inquest into the fire at Lakanal house in July 2009. One of her six recommendations was the retrofitting of sprinklers, thought to have become cost-effective with the development of new technology.

There is cross-party support in this Chamber, and coroners have called for the fitting of sprinklers, as has the fire service—the true professionals. The Government must take their views on board. The professionals are the people who go into the houses where there are fires and rescue people. Ronnie King, former chief fire officer of Mid and West Wales fire and rescue service said:

“The first duty of a Government is surely to protect its citizens and we can only look on in envy at what the Welsh Government has achieved, after some 4 years of extensive scrutiny and intense interrogation of such a wide ranging cross section of organisations”.

6 Feb 2014 : Column 179WH

He amplifies not just the monetary cost of deaths, but the emotional cost and said:

“I myself am a former Chief Fire Officer in Wales where I served as a Chief for twenty years...and during my tenure of office I failed to prevent 150 people from dying in fires in Mid & West Wales with another 6,000 from being burned or injured in fires. Some of those have been receiving continuous surgery for their injuries for over twenty five years, with a huge cost to the Health service. During my career myself and my fellow firefighters have brought out lifeless bodies of children (sometimes as many as five or six), who needn't have died in this horrific way, had sprinklers been installed.”

I visited a family in my constituency where there were multiple deaths, including children, and sat with the family, witnessing first hand what they had gone through. We are talking about people’s lives or, dare I say, people’s deaths, as well as the financial cost, which also needs to be weighed up. Actuaries have said that the cost of a fire death of a working person is £1.65 million: in 2011-12, there were 380 fire deaths, so there is a financial cost. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse said that the cost of damage to buildings over five years was £1 billion. The financial cost alone makes it sensible to install sprinklers, and if the emotional cost is added, it is definitely sensible.

Fire sprinklers are valuable for many reasons. They stop the spread of fire, limit the amount of damage, and often contain the fire to one room, instead of allowing it to rip through a house or engulf a room. They are good for the environment because they use far less water. On average, when a fire is put out by a fire brigade, 20 times more water is used than in a sprinkler system and there is no drenching of the house. A sprinkler system works at the source of the fire and is far more targeted, so that a fire is often put out by the activation of one sprinkler.

We have heard that the current regulations requiring smoke detectors should be sufficient. Many fire detection and alarm systems in both domestic and commercial premises produce many unwanted false alarms. That is usually because their design and installation do not comply with the requirements of the Chief Fire Officers Association's policy on the reduction of false alarms. As a result, many fire brigades will not attend premises that have had many false alarms until a responsible person has confirmed that the premises are under threat from a real fire, but that cannot always be verified, and valuable time may be lost that could make the difference between premises and lives being saved or lost. By comparison, false alarms created by sprinkler systems are so rare that the CFOA has not even considered the need to implement a similar policy for the sprinkler industry.

Personally, I would introduce sprinklers tomorrow. I realise that Ministers and shadow Ministers have to be more cautious, but I ask them to keep an open mind. We have an ongoing experiment in Wales. We have to look at that and at the Welsh experience—perhaps we need a Welsh solution to a British problem.

Mr Graham Brady (in the Chair): I am aiming to call the Front Bench Members to wind up at about eight minutes past 4. They will be followed by brief comments from the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) who secured the debate. Four Members still wish to speak, so if they take about seven minutes

6 Feb 2014 : Column 180WH

each, we will get everybody in. I shall not propose a formal time limit, but if hon. Members keep to that guideline, that will assist everybody else. I call Annette Brooke.

3.40 pm

Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Thank you, Mr Brady; I will be fairly brief. I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to it. I was extremely impressed when I attended last week's event, where I learned a great deal. I should perhaps also mention that Ben Ansell, the Chief Fire Officers Association lead for fire sprinklers and a Dorset fire officer, is one of my constituents.

I had not really thought in great depth about warehouses, but to me, it was absolutely astounding that the cost to the United Kingdom economy—£1 billion over five years—and the emotional cost could all be saved, perhaps not with more regulation, but with better and more appropriate regulation. My constituent, Ben, points out that we have had a number of

“successful ‘sprinkler saves’ (where fires were controlled or extinguished by sprinklers)”,

such as at Makro—just a mile away from where I live actually—in October 2013. He says:

“Here the sprinklers did their job in the early hours of the night shift and the store was trading by 9am the same day.”

What an enormous difference those sprinklers made.

Ben is concerned because one council in the area I represent has had some local Acts repealed, including one from 1986, and he fears unintended consequences, because that Act required sprinklers in certain large buildings. That has been repealed and we now have similar-sized buildings where sprinklers are not a requirement. That seems to be another argument for looking at the issue on a national level to get some consistency.

I want to touch briefly on schools, where there have been some very bad fires in my constituency. I support the comments that have been made on care homes, but as time is limited, I shall concentrate on schools. About 13 years ago, there was a very large fire at a school in my constituency and we ended up with 40 temporary classrooms. It took a long time for replacements to be built and—would you believe it, Mr Brady?—sprinklers were not installed. There was another fire at the school in 2012. It was caused by lightning, so people could not say, “I told you so,” but even after that second fire, sprinklers were resisted for the new buildings. It is absolutely incredible.

There was a fire in another school 17 years ago. I was council chairman of education and was on hand to witness the trauma to the head teacher, the staff, and to the pupils, who lost coursework, and particularly such things as artwork, which cannot be replaced. That school was rebuilt, again without sprinklers. It has just had a massive investment and I found that council members were being presented with some of the myths that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) outlined, which is incredible. They were told that sprinklers could be set off and that having them could be more expensive. Those reasons were reported to council members to encourage them not to support

6 Feb 2014 : Column 181WH

the extra cost of sprinklers. I understand that the school was finally designated as low risk, so it does not have sprinklers.

Dorset fire service wants some consistency. It is absolutely delighted that a flagship school in my constituency has sprinklers—the school had about £50 million spent on it, and was a Building Schools for the Future project, so I am very pleased with Lord Knight’s recommendation—but this situation is not very helpful to the fire service. It is important that people listen to specialist advice from fire officers, and I make a plea to the Minister that we clearly need much more awareness-raising, because the myths we have discussed today are just being perpetuated. At the end of the day, that means an enormous cost in money and, at times, a cost in lives.

3.45 pm

Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee and congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the debate, which I want to take in a slightly different direction. I am proud to be an ambassador for the Derbyshire fire and rescue service. In that role, we proselytise about the great use and implementation of sprinklers. In pushing forward that brilliant plan and idea, I am delighted to tell everybody in today’s debate that my local council, South Derbyshire district council, led by the eminent councillor—apparently my husband—Mr Bob Wheeler, will be building new council housing because of the changes to housing funding, and because of that, it will be installing sprinklers in all the new council houses and council properties that it builds in future.

Along with that, part of my role as an ambassador for Derbyshire fire and rescue has involved encouraging the planning department at South Derbyshire district council to make it an informative in all new planning applications and planning permissions, both commercial and residential, that the council would encourage the developer to install sprinkler systems in new builds. At the moment, it is an informative, because it is not a matter of English building regulations. I am sure that the Minister will contemplate that point when he replies.

I again congratulate everybody involved in securing this important debate. Nobody wants people to die unnecessarily. We all know that in Derbyshire—if I can talk about that for a few more seconds—the number of fires has been reduced by 50% in the past six years or so. That is a fantastic story, but the vulnerable people and vulnerable areas where such problems persist can be identified. The fact that sprinkler systems would deal with that absolutely overnight is

overwhelming, and I recommend that the Minister gives us some joyous news later in his contemplations about English building regulations.

3.47 pm

Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): I apologise for being late for the start of the debate, Mr Brady. I congratulate everybody who set up sprinkler week: there has been a huge amount of debate about and emphasis on the value of sprinklers and a huge amount of knowledge has been shared in the Chamber today.

I am particularly proud of the fire service in my area. It is almost entirely staffed by retained fireman—ours is a very rural area—and all the full-time firemen are not

6 Feb 2014 : Column 182WH

in the station but doing other work. That work, which is fire prevention, is most important, and it is some of the best work that fire brigades have done. No fires is the best solution of all, but, sadly, fires start. It has been proved conclusively that sprinklers have a part to play in fighting those fires. They prevent death and injury, and they save property and keep firemen out of harm's way, because the fire is often under control or even extinguished before they get to the fire.

I shall focus my remarks on one aspect. The theme of fire sprinkler week is commercial property, and it has been shown that commercial property of more than 2,000 square metres is—in financial terms, if nothing else—better served by having a sprinkler system than by not having one. However, we have been told that one difficulty encountered by commercial property developers is that water companies have no duty to connect to a sprinkler system, which seems a bit strange. We have been told that some water companies are much happier to connect to sprinkler systems than others, and some put large financial obstacles in the way. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and I, and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), went to see the Minister to discuss whether an amendment to the Water Bill could be made in the other place to introduce a duty to connect.

Whether that will take place, I know not, but I have talked since then to Welsh Water about its approach to the problem, and I was rather sad to find out that Welsh Water is against a duty to connect. Connecting through a meter leads to a reduction in water pressure, which makes the operation of sprinklers less effective, but Welsh Water has found—this is a sad comment on human nature—that connecting without a meter leads people to steal the water from that supply. That is one reason why Welsh Water was unhappy about going down that route. It suggested that anybody who wants to build a commercial property and install sprinklers could set up quite an expensive system involving a large water store, a pump and goodness knows what. However, I still believe that the safety of people and property would be best served by a duty on water companies to connect to sprinkler systems in commercial properties. I hope that that amendment will find some favour in the future legislative process.

I am proud of the work done by Ann Jones. I think that Wales is showing the way on the issue. A report by Carl Sargeant, the Minister for housing and regeneration in Wales, says:

“From April 2014, the regulations will apply to high-risk properties such as care homes, new and converted student halls of residence, boarding houses and certain hostels and from January 2016 to all new and converted houses and flats. This phasing will allow the house building industry to gain experience and skills, and gives the sector the opportunity to innovate and reduce the costs of installing sprinklers.”

That is key. The more sprinklers go into properties, the more reduction in the cost. Now is the time to press for more regulation to ensure that people's lives are saved and sprinkler facilities are made available to more people.

3.53 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and the hon. Members for Waveney

6 Feb 2014 : Column 183WH

(Peter Aldous), for Brecon and Radnorshire (Roger Williams) and for Southend West (Mr Amess) on securing this timely debate, and I commend the promoters of this, the first fire sprinkler week. I applaud the promoters' aims of widening awareness and knowledge of sprinklers and, as the hon. Member for Waveney and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse have done so well, debunking the myths and misconceptions about sprinklers.

It is welcome that the trend in the incidence of fire fatalities has been downward and has now been stable for some time. I congratulate the current and previous Governments on that trend, as well as the fire and rescue authorities that provide vital services. It ought to go without saying, although I am pleased to say it, that it is the commitment and courage of firefighters on the front line that save lives, minimise harm, protect property and promote safety in our communities on a daily basis. As other Members have done, I pay sincere and grateful tribute to them for their work.

The facts about the incidence of fire deaths and injuries and damage to property resulting from fire are well documented and have been thoroughly referenced by hon. Members in this debate. I will touch briefly on some facts that I see as particularly relevant to fire sprinkler week. I thank the Chief Fire Officers Association and others for drawing them to my attention. In 2011-12, 380 people lost their lives in fire-related incidents in Great Britain, 287 of them in dwelling fires. It strikes me as apposite to remark that no lives were lost in the UK due to fire in homes fitted with domestic sprinklers, that fire injuries were 80% lower in sprinklered premises, and that there is a more than 90% chance that a sprinkler system that is correctly designed, installed, maintained and supplied with water will control or extinguish a fire.

How many of those 380 lives lost in 2011-12 could have been saved? How much of the trauma of bereavement and tragedy we have discussed today could have been avoided if sprinklers had been fitted? Without wanting to be mercenary when talking about people's lives, I am conscious of the economic impact of lives lost, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) highlighted exceptionally well. The cost of each fatality in a road traffic accident is estimated at £1.65 million and each serious injury at £185,000. As the hon. Member for Waveney pointed out, the cost of fire-related deaths and injuries cannot be that dissimilar.

Further, sprinklers fitted in commercial and industrial premises can save British business, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon) pointed out when she mentioned Findus Foods. I must admit that I remember those pancakes. I am not saying I ate many, but I remember them well. Sprinklers fitted in commercial and industrial premises can save British businesses and the British economy millions of pounds of losses from entirely preventable fires. Research undertaken by the Centre for Economics and Business Research states that fires cause a direct financial loss to businesses of £230 million per year. If that is combined with the job and tax losses that follow a fire, we must clearly look seriously at the business case for sprinklers.

The figures put a practical slant on any financial deliberations we make about introducing precautions such as sprinkler systems. As a relatively new holder of

6 Feb 2014 : Column 184WH

the shadow fire brief, I am still learning my way around the job, so I have been travelling the country meeting councillors, fire officers and firefighters, who have been universally keen to share their views and enthusiasms with me. I have seen more fire engines in the last couple of months than in my entire life previously. Sprinklers have been on almost every agenda prepared for me, regardless of whether I have visited a county, combined or metropolitan authority.

That there is a case for sprinklers is undeniable, given the evidence about reducing deaths and business losses from fire. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd said, there were strong objections and opposition to the regulations introduced by the Welsh Government requiring the installation of sprinklers in a wide range of dwellings. The Home Builders Federation, the Federation of Master Builders and the Residential Landlords Association have all expressed concerns about the cost of installation and the impact that it will have on development.

Clearly, we need a dialogue. My purpose today is to suggest that we take a considered and intelligent approach to that dialogue, seeking cross-party consensus and aiming to build a broad coalition of interested groups with the clear intent of reducing fire deaths and injuries while achieving sensible regulation and balancing cost and benefit.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I apologise, Mr Brady, for not being able to be present at the start of the debate. My hon. Friend is making a very constructive and helpful point. Does she agree that there will be practical difficulties—the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Roger Williams) referred to one—but with good will and through negotiation, they can be overcome, and will she join me in urging the Minister to take up that suggestion?

Lyn Brown: I am certainly hoping to be constructive in my contribution today and not to make party political points or to take an easy option. I, too, suggest that we work together to see whether we can overcome the obstacles and objections that are being placed in our way. We need to talk about whether we need to ensure that sprinklers are provided in all care homes, in children's homes, in new schools, in new and purpose-built student accommodation and, perhaps, in all new social rented accommodation.

Let us talk about the role of sprinklers in the domestic setting—whether we should expect in the future that more homes will be built with sprinklers and they will become commonplace and expected. Let us talk about whether the costs to builders and developers could hold back the building of much-needed homes. Let us learn from the experiences of other countries in introducing new requirements. The starting point for that dialogue should be risk.

We know what the risk factors are and we have figures for fire fatalities that illustrate the impact of that risk most graphically. For example, those over the age of 65 accounted for 40% of fire fatalities in 2011-12—a period when that age group accounted for 16.6% of the population. The figure of 40% for 2011-12 is up from the 2005-06 figure of 35.6%, showing perhaps the impact of an ageing population, as well as being a side effect of more people being able to live longer in their own

6 Feb 2014 : Column 185WH

homes. We know who the vulnerable groups who are more at risk of death, injury and loss from fire are: they are in homes, in the lower income bands and in more deprived areas.

We can implement our response to risk differentially, which may be one way of achieving the balance between cost and benefit and getting the best outcomes for the money spent. Requiring sprinkler systems in some categories of new build may well be part of an answer, especially where

the installation of sprinklers allows cost savings elsewhere—for example, through less costly conventional fire precautions and insurance.

I thought that it was important today to press this point, despite the fact that I could not easily find a place to put it in my speech. There are already very interesting and imaginative solutions to keep high-risk individuals safe. When I visited Lincolnshire fire and rescue service on Monday, I learnt how local partners are working together to provide vulnerable adults with appropriate fire suppression devices, such as portable misting devices. They told me about the success in Humberside, where misting devices had saved lives—more than once, a misting device had extinguished a fire for a vulnerable older person.

As a Parliament, we may not wish to make an assumption that the answer is sprinklers always and everywhere, but I cannot conceive of a holder of this brief, whether in opposition or in government, who would not advocate practices that would save lives, save businesses and protect economic capacity. In my closing remarks, I want to offer the Minister cross-party co-operation and, indeed, cross-party talks to try to get consensus on the way forward on sprinklers and to consider the Government action necessary for both domestic and business properties, because I think that lives can be saved, injuries minimised, damage to property avoided and money saved if we have the will to co-operate and the motivation to succeed.

4.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

(Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Roger Williams) on securing this general debate focusing on fire sprinkler week. I also congratulate all hon. Members who have spoken on the way in which the debate has been conducted. This has been a very thoughtful, well considered debate, with really strong contributions. I also appreciate the comments from the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). In these debates, it is often all too easy for us to get into making political points. I do not doubt that some of us will do so, but as I say this has been a thoughtful and well structured debate.

Fire safety is clearly of concern to us all. I know that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse has always taken an interest in this subject, but he has a particular interest as a former Minister with responsibility for fire safety and building regulations in the previous Administration. I am very aware that I am speaking as the fire Minister in the presence of three previous fire Ministers—they have held that position at some stage in their careers—as well as the new shadow fire Minister.

6 Feb 2014 : Column 186WH

I will declare at the beginning of my speech a personal interest in the comments from the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse. He referred to Scottsdale, Arizona, and when he was speaking he may have noticed that a wry smile came across my face. I want to put him at ease as to why that was. A Mr Lewis and a Mrs Lewis, my mother and father, have a home in and spend a lot of their time living in Scottsdale, Arizona, so I can assure the hon. Gentleman that during the past 20 years I have got to know the area very well, although I have not been there as much in the past four years. I know the structures and the situation in Scottsdale, as well as the heat that is generally experienced there.

We have a lot to celebrate in the collective success that we have all had—across agencies, the fire service, local government and central Government—in making our communities safer from fire. The figures are clear. Accidental fire deaths in the home, which accounted for three fifths of all fire fatalities, have continued to fall. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney talked about the fire

service, as have other hon. Members, including the hon. Member for West Ham. It does a phenomenal job in keeping people safe from fire across the country and, of course, in the rescue work that it undertakes. Its members put their lives at risk every day, never knowing quite what will happen in the course of their shift. We should do everything we can to ensure that they are as safe as possible in their work.

People have been talking for many years about new firefighting techniques, and it is great that we are now starting to see them really develop. The coldcut technique has been around for a while, and is now being used. Many services can learn from what is being done in areas such as Manchester and Hertfordshire, where the technique is being used to fight fires in a different, transformational way: not just to cut through building materials but to bring down the temperature quickly and deal with the fire before a firefighter has to go in. It is one of the things that can lead to the figures continuing to fall, and that can keep our firefighters safe.

Let us be clear: in 2012-13 we saw the lowest number of fire deaths ever. That is good, but we all want to see the number go down even further. The number of fire deaths is down by one third compared with 10 years ago. The latest figures, for April to September 2013, show that fire casualties are down by a further 7% compared with the same period in the previous year. They are now less than half the level of 10 years ago. The number of attendances at fires is also less than half what it was a decade ago. Building fires are down by 44%; fires in the home are down by 39%; and fires in commercial and other buildings are down by 52%. The attendance at incidents overall has fallen by 46%. That is in no small part because of the safer environments in which we are all now able to live and work. Put simply, in respect of fire and a range of other emergency incidents, we are a safer society than we were 10 years ago.
