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Fire Safety: School Buildings

3 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fire safety measures in school buildings.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this subject. I promise not to start to beat my hon. Friend the Minister up immediately, but as with so many of these debates, it is about such a simple straightforward issue that I am puzzled as to why it has not been dealt with over the last couple of decades.

At the heart of it all, the House either does or does not think that having sprinkler systems will help to save people's lives. That, to me, is the issue. I would have thought, looking at all the evidence, that the House has clearly come to the conclusion that it would be good common sense for all schools to have sprinkler systems fitted.

I have the highest regard for the Minister, but I simply do not understand this situation. Given that the Government have the power to give money for new schools to be built, surely it should not take Einstein to come up with a plan whereby people cannot tender for such a contract unless a sprinkler system will be part of the new build project. This is quite a simple matter. I have correspondence from our noble Friend Lord Nash on the issue, and it is wonderful that all sorts of consultations will take place, but I have to say to this Minister that I will not shut up until I get the straightforward answer that, in the future, contracts will be awarded only to builders who insist that sprinkler systems will be installed.

I have the great pleasure of being the chairman of the all-party fire safety rescue group; I was also the chairman in the previous Parliament. I am looking at my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) for a reason that will become obvious. When I had the privilege of becoming the Member of Parliament for Basildon, there were three particular incidents that made me admire the wonderful work that our fire service does. On two occasions, our local fire service was attending incidents in which small children died. The emotional effect that that has on our firefighters is beyond most of us to understand. One of the incidents was, sadly, in Long Riding, which I think is still in the area represented by my hon. Friend. A gentleman who ran a Chinese takeaway restaurant came in to find that his wife, who had mental health problems, had smothered their five children. That has nothing to do with fire, but it was the fire service that attended.

In the second tragic case, in what used to be Barstable school, a number of children got locked in a shed in the grounds. They must have been playing with matches and, as a result, a fire took place and they lost their lives. That was a funeral I will never forget attending at St Martin's church, as my hon. Friend is only too well aware.

Then this was the irony of all ironies. I cannot remember which election it was that I was canvassing in; it must have been the 1987 one. I was canvassing in Nethermayne, the rural part of the constituency, and I knocked on a door. A rather dishevelled gentleman came to the door. He seemed to be not entirely with it; I will put it like

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that. We went to the property next door. Unbeknown to me, he was carrying a bowl of paraffin and the next minute—we were standing talking to the neighbour—he went up in flames. That was the first funeral that I attended after that election. I went into a state of shock and I saw how our firefighters dealt with the situation. Unfortunately, in those days I used to drag along one or two of my children to canvass with me. I never did that again. I know that this is not the Minister's brief, but all of us have great regard for the work that our firefighters do and I have first-hand experience of the way they deal with the tragedy of children being killed.

I thank the Fire Sector Federation, the Chief Fire Officers' Association, Zurich Municipal insurance and the National Fire Sprinkler Network for providing me with the evidence and information on school fires that I have drawn on for my contribution to the debate.

I remind the House that yesterday was National Burn Awareness Day. When I first became a Member of Parliament, we never had these specific days. We never wore ribbons, but that changed once the AIDS movement adopted the red ribbon and now every day of the week is a national day. If I had had the opportunity at Prime Minister's questions, National Burn Awareness Day was the thing that I would have raised. Unfortunately, it got no media coverage, which is a great shame. It was for that reason that the all-party group put in for this debate.

I praise the work of the Children's Burns Trust. I know that next February there will be a National Sprinkler Awareness Day, which I hope we will be able to get more of a profile for than we seem to have done thus far. I would like to assure the Children's Burns Trust that although their day yesterday went by without great attention, many Members will continue to raise these issues, on which we feel very strongly.

I, along with many members of the group here today, am very frustrated that this issue, which is very simple—I cannot see a cost to the Government—has not been dealt with. I cannot yet blame the present Government, or can I? No, I will not; it is a little too soon. However, I just do not understand why the issue was not dealt with under the coalition Government, which obviously my party was a supporter of and led, or the previous Labour Government. I am sure that this Minister will have the answer as to why we have not taken action.

Many members of the all-party group were very surprised to hear that since 2010 there has been a decline in the number of new schools and academies being installed with automatic sprinkler systems. That is crazy. How on earth could there be a decline? But there has been. The reason why we were so surprised was that in 2007, when our noble Friend Lord Howard of Lympne was serving as an MP, he raised a similar issue. In his constituency, on 13 September 2006, Lympne primary school tragically suffered a fire. It started as a consequence of an electrical fault above the staffroom at the start of the day. The chief fire officer responsible for leading the efforts of the fire services to extinguish the fire said at the time:

“If the school had been fitted with a properly designed and installed sprinkler system the fire may have been controlled if not extinguished in its early stages”.

Instead, the school was completely destroyed—thankfully, no lives were lost—as a consequence of no such system being in place.

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Why, over all these years, have successive Governments failed to put in place even a framework or a strategy—whatever the buzzword is that the civil servants in the Department for Education use? Why have we done nothing to make sure that such a tragedy never happens again? My hon. Friend the Minister may respond that the tragedy in 2006 was an isolated incident, and some may ask why we should waste valuable public money on infrequent events. Well, how can we put a price on one life? That is the simple point I wish to make. There is evidence to suggest that this was not an isolated incident, and our children's safety and security should be ensured, irrespective of the cost.

Refurbishing or rebuilding schools following a severe fire can be very expensive. The most recent statistics I have, provided by Zurich Municipal, show that £58 million was spent on school rebuilds following fires in 2009. The last year for which the Department for Communities and Local Government has cost figures is 2004— 11 years ago, which is crazy—when there were 1,229 fires, which were estimated to have cost about £52 million. Why we do not have more up-to-date figures, I do not understand.

I am an Essex Member—we look over the River Thames at Kent—but I am going to praise Kent County Council. Following the fire at Lympe primary school, it was a welcome relief when the council confirmed that the rebuild would include the installation of a fire sprinkler system. However, why must we be reactive? We, as legislators, should attempt to pre-empt such incidents. Now that the Government, which I support, have a majority, they cannot blame things that go wrong on the Liberal party. I want them to do something positive and good with their majority. I want us to be proactive, rather than reactive.

Although there were no fatalities as a result of the fire at Lympe, and there have been no fatalities across England as a result of school fires, we cannot just sit back on our laurels and be complacent—a tragedy could happen. It is within the Government's gift to make sure we never have a tragic incident, by insisting that, when contracts are signed, and schools are built, a sprinkler system is installed.

The issue is not party political. My goodness, we have representatives here from the Scottish National party, the Conservatives and the Labour party—with only eight Members, it is probably a bit difficult for the Liberals to service all our proceedings, but I know they very much agree with the point I am making.

What is frustrating is that, since 2007, when the former Member for Folkestone and Hythe brought this issue to the attention of the House, the situation has got worse. From April 2007 to May 2010, an estimated 70% of the schools and academies built had automatic fire sprinklers installed—there was room for improvement, but we were basically on the right track. However, since May 2010, the figure has plummeted to 35%—it has been halved. That is absolutely unacceptable. Some 65% of new builds are without fire sprinkler systems. That is incredibly disappointing, given the commitment that successive Governments have made to improve the situation.

In a recent statement, the Secretary of State for Education, for whom I genuinely have the highest regard, said that, in line with departmental guidance, the relevant specification does not make the fitting of sprinklers

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mandatory, but it does suggest instances where their installation could be beneficial. Well, I say to the Government: “Let’s make it mandatory!” It is no good us complacently saying that it is not mandatory at the moment—let us do something about this. A proposal to make the fitting of sprinklers mandatory could be taken through the House immediately, and all political parties would agree with it. My right hon. Friend’s statement was some way from the cross-party commitment we had in 2007.

I referred earlier to the cost benefit of mandatory installation, which cannot be ignored—as a Conservative, I am sympathetic about the challenges the Exchequer faces. However, when it comes to fire safety, the costs are not merely financial, and we must look at the long-term implications of the mandatory installation of fire sprinklers across the country. Of course, schools are not only attended by our children, but rented out to all sorts of organisations to increase revenue.

I contacted the local authority that serves my constituency to find out how many schools there have sprinkler systems installed. It sent me an email saying that schools in Southend do not have to itemise whether they have sprinkler systems—it therefore has no information about the issue. Well, I say, “Come on, local authority!” There are not that many schools in Southend; someone could phone them up and ask the chairmen of the governing bodies whether they have a sprinkler system. To me, the local authority’s response is absolutely pathetic. If local authorities throughout the country are giving other Members similar responses, shame on them. The chief executive of my authority should say, “We can do far better than that.”

The House of Commons Library, which is fantastic—I regard it as the fountain of all truth—told me that such information is not collected centrally and that local authorities are not obliged to collect it, although I do not know why that is. Well, authorities might not be obliged to do that, but I think they should. I praise Kent County Council for collecting data after the fire at Lympne primary school. Between 2001 and 2003, there were 125 recorded fires in Kent. By 2011 to 2013, the figure had plummeted to 41—a fall of approximately 66%. There were only seven school building fires in 2013. That is seven too many, but at least there was a fall. Kent is therefore doing much better than other areas. Those figures show that, through local co-operation and a sensible policy, the number of fires can be significantly reduced.

I call on the Government to recognise the benefits of taking an approach like that of Kent County Council and the Kent and Medway Towns fire authority. I and the other members of the all-party group would also like to have a meeting with my hon. Friend the Minister to discuss the issue in more detail.

In his letter, Lord Nash told me that a consultation on the Government’s version of “Building Bulletin 100”, entitled “Design for fire safety in schools”, will begin towards the end of the year. Well, we can have all the consultations in the world, but it is just like the rubbish about obesity that has been going on this week, with Jamie Oliver turning up at the House of

Commons—it is as if obesity has just been invented. Ten years ago, when I was on the Health Committee, I had the idea of

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having an inquiry into obesity. If all our recommendations had been followed then, we would not have to have all this business about a sugar tax, a fat tax and all the rest of it now. The longer I am a Member of Parliament, the less I hear anything original. My frustration is that hon. Members make good suggestions, but nothing whatever is done about them. If Parliament is worth anything, it is up to hon. Members to hold the Executive to account, so that good ideas are acted on.

In March 2007, a commitment was made by the then Minister, the former Member for South Dorset, Jim Knight—now Lord Knight of Weymouth—that all new schools and academies that were built would be expected to have automatic sprinklers installed, except for a few low-risk schools. I do not quite know how we define low-risk schools, but that was a great commitment and of course the Government had three years to run at that time. Figures show that only 35% of new schools are fitted with sprinklers. I hope that the present Government will use the impetus of a fresh election victory to do something about that.

We have the power to ensure that fewer fires occur in schools across the country; that would mean fewer people in harm's way, fewer costs for refurbishment or rebuilding, and fewer worries for the Government. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will respond positively to the point on which I have managed to speak for 20 minutes. It is a simple one: the contracts for all new-build projects for schools should be required to include the fitting of a sprinkler system.

3.21 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) on his impassioned argument. The sprinkler campaign has a doughty champion in him.

It is ironic that I am to speak about fire today, when the top news headline in my constituency is about the Eastbourne pier fire. Many hon. Members may have seen some of the coverage—indeed, it was so dramatic and gripping that it went across the globe. Even the Prime Minister and Chancellor came down to talk to people in the town, such was the shock and trauma of seeing that beautiful and iconic building consumed in flames. It was a powerful visual example of how hungry, dangerous and destructive fire can be. On that occasion it was only the heroic efforts of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, working in conjunction with the fire service, attacking the fire from the sea, that saved much of the pier. Had there been sprinklers, the story might have been different, and we might have saved the building, which is conspicuous by its absence now, its position marked only by a boardwalk.

Last week the main headline in town was an arson attack on a primary school. Again, it is fortunate that there was no loss of life. It happened in the dead of night, and the following morning the community, children, parents and teachers woke to find that the school had been consumed, with 50% of the school buildings destroyed. The school has had a quite challenging journey and very recently came through a successful Ofsted inspection. Its entire focus has been on improving and enhancing the quality of the learning and outcomes for the

young children there. Now the head teacher's everyday life in school is taken up with meetings with insurance brokers,

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risk assessors, insurance adjusters and building contractors. The teachers, although they are hugely ingenious and massively resourceful, will be sorely pressed to do full justice to the children's learning. Some are back on the school campus; others have been shipped out to another local primary school, which has opened its doors so that learning can continue. The point I want to make is that there has been massive disruption, which was not limited to the occasion of the fire. It will continue for months to come.

I am not new to schools, having qualified as a head teacher a few years ago, but I am new to the sprinkler debate, for want of a better term. I am very aware of demands on school budgets and on county councils for everything they have to provide. I am just beginning to understand some of the wider issues to do with the installation of sprinklers and the other measures. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West will be horrified to learn that of my county's 190 schools, five have sprinkler systems. However, in the past five years there have been just three incidents—all very random and none causing destruction of property or life. It is a shame that safety seems to be driven only by casualties or fatalities, but, sadly, that seems to be the case.

I am still finding my form in the debate, but I have asked the county council for a full report on the state of play in school fire safety, and I have a question for my hon. Friend the Minister. I want to understand why sprinkler provision in schools is mandatory in Scotland and Wales, but not in England.

3.26 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today on the important issue of fire safety in schools. I thank the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) for securing the debate. As he said, yesterday was national burn awareness day and it is fitting that that should be followed by this debate.

Hon. Members may not be aware of the 2004 overhaul of fire safety laws for public buildings in Scotland. It followed the tragedy at Rosepark nursing home in Lanarkshire, where 14 elderly residents died when a fire broke out in a linen cupboard. A fatal accident inquiry found that the deaths could have been avoided, and that the lack of sprinklers could have been a contributory factor. A key finding of the inquiry was that although a fitted sprinkler system would not have extinguished the fire, it would probably have rendered conditions in all areas tenable for at least an hour. It is regrettable that such a tragic incident should ever occur, but it is impossible to say how many lives have been saved by the robust building regulation legislation that has followed. In 2010 the regulations were amended to include schools in the statutory list of buildings that must be fitted with automatic fire suppression systems. The extension of the legislation in Scotland is incredibly welcome.

One need only think of the Glasgow School of Art for another example of the sheer destructive power of fire. Large portions of the iconic buildings were gutted by a major fire in May last year. News of the fire spread fast, much like the fire itself, and in very little time

tens of thousands of people were glued to live coverage of flames engulfing the building, which had quickly become

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an inferno. It was a shocking reminder of the raw, elemental power of fire. Fortunately, and remarkably, the incident claimed no casualties, although there was extensive and irreversible damage. Unable to contain the fast-spreading flames, staff sounded an evacuation of the building. An intended fire-suppression system for the building had not yet been completed. It is clear that that would significantly have slowed the progress of that fast-spreading blaze.

In Scotland and Wales, sprinklers in schools are now standard; yet only 1,400 of the 30,000 schools in Britain are fitted with them—less than 5%. Most of the 1,400 are schools in Scotland and Wales. It is a pretty shocking disparity, but I am here today to urge action rather than to criticise. Something that is the norm in the devolved Administrations can become a target in England and a benchmark to strive for. The approach at the moment often seems to be to look at cost versus benefit, but what price can be placed on the lives and safety of children? As a mother, I know parents want peace of mind when they send their children to school in the morning. The safety of children should be paramount and we should not wait for a major accident involving loss of life before the Government will act.

The proactive approach taken in Scotland and Wales should be emulated in England. The current situation whereby 65% of new schools are not fitted with sprinklers is not acceptable to me, and I am sure that it is not acceptable to the parents who send their children to those schools every morning. If there were greater public awareness of the fact that only one in three new schools built in England possesses automatic fire suppression systems, I think that there would be an outcry from parents. The current situation is something of a safety lottery, and it falls below what any reasonable Government should strive for. Although there has not been significant loss of life in a school fire in Britain, chief fire officers have identified some near misses. We simply cannot adopt a wait-and-see attitude.

Cost cannot be a prohibitive factor either. In fact, in the long term, fitting sprinklers can save money. In the unfortunate event of a fire, sprinklers can significantly impede the progress of flames, so rebuilding is likely not to take as long as it would otherwise and the extra costs incurred for temporary measures will not be as great. Commercial insurers recognise the value of sprinkler systems in schools and provide lower insurance premiums to schools that have them. It is estimated that the cost of installing automatic sprinkler protection can be recouped in 10 to 12 years, so over the lifetime of a school building, the fitting of a fire suppression system can be cost-effective. Short-term cuts should not cloud our long-term thinking: fire suppression should be viewed as an asset to schools, because it can protect lives in addition to bringing down running costs.

I would like the Minister to take on board and respond to the points I have made. I would like to know what regulation, if any, Her Majesty's Government are currently considering for fire suppression systems in schools. I echo the sentiments that others have expressed during this debate and I ask that a Minister from the Department for Education attend a meeting of the all-party group on fire safety rescue. Finally, I would like to ask the Minister whether the Department will consider keeping records of new schools built with and without automatic fire suppression protection.

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Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): It might be convenient for Members to know that there is a possibility that several Divisions will be called in the main Chamber at 4 o'clock. I thought that our two Front Benchers, who are now going to wind up the debate, might like to bear that in mind.

3.32 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Thank you, Mrs Gillan. I am sure that we will both bear that in mind. It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

The redoubtable hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said that he would not shut up on the subject that we are debating, and that he was puzzled that the solutions to the problem, which are so simple, have not been seized by Government. He is nothing if not consistent. In February 2014, he remarked in a debate on the subject that

“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”—

a point he made again very well—

“and that is not good enough.”

He used similar language today. He continued:

“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”—

he reminded us today of his support for the Government—

“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,”

he said, with precision and aplomb,

“is foolish in the longer term, and playing with our children’s future is simply not acceptable.”—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 6 February 2014; Vol. 575, c. 170WH.]

He has done an excellent job of reminding us of all those points.

The hon. Gentleman was ably supported by the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), who spoke of the desperate energy, power and awfulness of a fire, and gave several examples from her constituency. She reminded us, with reference to the fire in her constituency, of the disruption that a fire causes to young people’s learning, and how it forces a head teacher to focus on things such as dealing with insurance agents and contractors while somehow maintaining the continuity of learning. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and

Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), who speaks on behalf of the Scottish National party, captured that well when she said that “fitting sprinklers can save money”, and that to do so in the first place can be, essentially, a stitch in time to save nine.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West pointed out that we should not have a “safety lottery”. Sadly, as the hon. Member for Southend West has pointed out, we are closer to being in that situation than we have been in the past. In 2007, cross-party agreement in favour of installing sprinklers in schools was strong, and there was a significant increase in the number of sprinkler systems installed in schools through Building Schools for the Future. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there was a 70% achievement level; that might

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not be good enough, but it is better than what has happened since 2010. That is why it is important to focus on what can be done to get the show back on the road.

Regarding the blaze at Shinewater primary school in Eastbourne, which has been mentioned, the chairman of East Sussex fire authority said:

“Sprinklers can significantly help reduce death and injury from fire, reduce risk for firefighters, protect property and heritage and reduce the effects of arson. The greatest impact of installing fire sprinklers is likely to occur in schools, residential care homes, premises housing highly vulnerable residents and certain large commercial properties.”

That is a fire professional’s view, and it concurs with the views of hon. Members who have spoken in the debate. Sadly, every week in the United Kingdom, 20 schools are damaged or destroyed by fire, often as a result of fires that are started deliberately. The number of major school fires has been rising, and that creates significant cost. All the research demonstrates that fitting sprinklers can virtually eliminate fire deaths and injuries. As someone who, at one point in my past, was involved in planning to build a new college, I know that the cost of sprinkler systems can make anyone in that position take a deep breath, so it is important to look at the longer-term benefit.

For that reason, I hope that the Minister, in responding to this effective debate, will focus on the questions that have been asked and give us some assurance that lessons will be learned. Will he review the lessons to be learned from what has happened since 2010? There seems to have been an improvement in performance between 2007 and 2010, but it did not continue after 2010. If a review is not already in place, will he look to establish one so that we can learn from those lessons? Will he ensure that proper consideration is given to installing sprinklers in new build schools? We note that that is mandatory in Scotland and Wales, and the arguments on that matter have been strongly made. Proper and full consideration, which involves the local fire authorities, needs to be given to that. Will the Minister ensure that local authorities collect information on which schools in their area have sprinkler systems, so that that intelligence can help to drive policy? On that note, and noting your earlier encouragement, Mrs Gillan, I will sit down.

3.39 pm

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon.—and redoubtable, it appears— Friend the

Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) on securing this important debate, and pay tribute to his passion for the subject and his long-standing commitment to these issues through the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue, in the Chamber and outside, more generally. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) for her passionate contribution to the debate based on some real and tragic experiences that she has encountered in her constituency. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for her powerful exposition of the case for sprinklers in schools.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West was right to start the debate by paying tribute to our firefighters and to praise the work of the Children's Burns Trust.

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He is also right to highlight the importance of the highest standards of fire safety in schools. Keeping pupils safe is the most fundamental responsibility of the education system. It is therefore vital that, where possible, we prevent fires from starting and spreading, and ensure that schools are able to evacuate pupils swiftly when necessary. Fire safety is also important to avoid the disruption and distress caused by fires, and to protect the significant investment, over many years, in the school estate—a point that my hon. Friend also made. Implementing measures to minimise the damage caused by fires to school buildings is therefore an important priority.

The context to the debate is a very welcome reduction in the number of fires in schools over the past 15 years. In 2001, there were 1,300 fires in schools. By 2014, the number had fallen by more than half to just 600. The tireless work of campaigners including my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, alongside preventive efforts from schools and fire services, has no doubt made a significant contribution to the improvement. Indeed, there have been no fatal casualties caused by fire in schools from 2000 to 2014, which is the most recent year for which we have data. Securing further reductions in the number of fires, and in their impact when they do occur, remains a priority for the Department for Education.

Newly constructed school buildings, as well as extensions and major refurbishments of existing blocks, must comply with part B (Fire safety) of the Building Regulations 2010. The Department applies the regulations to schools in more detail through “Building Bulletin 100”, which sets rigorous standards to ensure that works make sufficient provision for the health and safety of their occupants. The design must include adequate means of escape, firefighting equipment, automatic detection systems and fire signage provisions. The construction materials used must be fire-resistant. Suitable fire doors to contain the spread of any fire must be used throughout the building. A written fire safety management plan is required to be produced as part of the documents to be provided to the school before the occupation of the school building.

The Department plans to consult on a revised “Building Bulletin 100” in 2016, which will incorporate revisions to relevant regulations. In addition, all school buildings, including those already built, must comply with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, which requires all schools to be maintained to ensure adequate fire resistance and resistance to the spread of flames. There should be adequate fire precautions in place to allow the safe escape of occupants in case of fire. The order also requires them to conduct regular termly drills, so that pupils and staff can evacuate the school quickly in the case of fire. The school's fire

safety systems require regular maintenance and testing, with the activities recorded in the school fire safety logbook by the responsible person in the school.

Schools are required to implement measures to ensure that pupils or staff with sensory or mobility impairments are kept safe. "Building Bulletin 102" sets the relevant standards in those circumstances. People with visual and hearing impairments, for instance, need a choice of visual, audible, or voice announcement systems. Suitable additional visual alarms should be provided in areas where a person may be alone, such as toilets. When a

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disabled person cannot make their own way out of the building, it is the responsibility of management to ensure their safe escape, and personal emergency egress plans—PEEPs—will need to be developed in consultation with them. Escape plans should be posted throughout the building.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West made a compelling argument for the inclusion of sprinkler systems in all new buildings. He knows that these are not required under the current building regulations or the Department's building bulletin standards, which set out measures for the purposes of health and safety, not for the protection of property. The value of sprinklers is in limiting the damage to buildings caused by fires. They are less useful in protecting the occupants of buildings, because they are no substitute for well-functioning alarms, sufficient evacuation routes and effective emergency procedures. Sprinklers are activated only by intense, direct heat. The sprinkler must reach 68°C before being activated—I believe that happens by wax melting in the mechanism—by which point the temperature of other parts of the room will be significantly higher. They are therefore not an immediate fire suppression system, and they are not activated by smoke, which is the most significant cause of injury and deaths from fires. The building regulations and building bulletin therefore include provision for the use of sprinklers and other fire suppression systems where the risk justifies their use, rather than a blanket requirement that they must be included in all new schools.

The number of deliberate cases of arson in schools has fallen from 746 in 2004 to five in 2012-13 and one in 2013-14. There has been a significant drop in the numbers of fires started deliberately in schools but, as my hon. Friends the Members for Southend West and for Eastbourne would say, one is one too many.

In circumstances where there is a significantly higher risk of fire—perhaps because of local problems with arson, for example—a local authority may reach the view that it is appropriate to include sprinkler systems in a new or refurbished school building for a maintained school. In such circumstances, the Department is prepared to include sprinklers in the specification for a school built under the priority schools building programme, but would expect the local authority to meet the additional cost of installing them. If, following a risk assessment, an academy being rebuilt through the priority schools building programme were deemed to require sprinklers, the Department would meet that cost.

This approach represents a careful balancing of the risk of fire damage to school buildings with the significant cost of installing sprinklers. Including sprinklers in new school buildings would add between 2% and 6% to the cost of works. This year alone, we are spending £2 billion on new school buildings, so that would therefore represent an extra cost of between

£40 million and £120 million. If we were to go even further, adding sprinklers to a major school refurbishment project would typically add about 10% to the cost.

The Department's assessment is that the additional spending would significantly outweigh any relatively modest saving from preventing some damage to school buildings. That is especially the case as we continue to prioritise work to prevent school fires. We therefore hope that the overall number of fires declines even further in future years. I am, however, very happy to

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arrange a meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and other members of the all-party parliamentary group, either with me or with Lord Nash, the Minister with direct responsibility for this policy area, so that we can further discuss the details of the case my hon. Friend is making for installing sprinklers in all schools.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West for raising this important issue today. I hope that he is fully assured that the Government continue to prioritise work on fire prevention, even if I am not in a position to go as far as he would hope in committing the Department to install fire sprinklers in new buildings. I am confident that our other work—to promote prevention, to enforce rigorous building standards, and to require schools to have effective evacuation plans—will continue to keep pupils safe and minimise the damage and disruption caused by fire.

3.49 pm

Sir David Amess: I thank all colleagues for their contributions to this debate. I welcome the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), and I completely empathise with her about Eastbourne pier. Southend pier has had three fires. It is still standing, but the fires have set us back. I know how local residents feel, and she is right to bring the tragedy of this recent fire to the House's attention. The statistic she shared of there being only three or five sprinklers is shocking.

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I welcome the contribution of the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on behalf of the Scottish National party. Scotland was robbed in the rugby match on Sunday. She is right to draw on the excellent achievement of schools in Scotland compared with the rest of the country. She highlighted the savings that have been made. We must not be churlish about the arrival of these 56 Scottish nationalist Members; we can learn some good things from them. She has brought some excellent points to the House's attention today.

I welcome the support of the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin). I know that the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) agrees with him on the points he has shared with us. I listened carefully to the Minister, and I accept all his points on the reduction in the number of fires in our schools—I particularly accept his points about arson—but I repeat that no contract should be awarded for new build projects unless sprinklers are fitted. He says that the Department reckons there would be a 10% increase in costs, but I simply do not accept that. No doubt we will debate those and other matters in our meeting.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered fire safety measures in school buildings.

3.52 pm

Sitting adjourned.