

# Backbench Business Committee

## Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 7 June 2022

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Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Chris Green; Jerome Mayhew; Nigel Mills.

Questions 1-20

### Representations made

[I](#): Andrew Lewer and Mr Steve Baker

[II](#): Mr David Jones

[III](#): Fiona Bruce

[IV](#): Peter Aldous and Judith Cummins

[V](#): Dame Andrea Leadsom

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



**Andrew Lewer** and **Mr Steve Baker** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. This is our first meeting of this Session before the summer recess. We have five applications in front of us this afternoon, the first of which is from Mr Steve Baker, Mr Andrew Lewer and Jessica Morden, who cannot be with us. It is on investing in the future of motor neurone disease, and Tuesday 21 June is Motor Neurone Disease Awareness Day. Over to you, Andrew.

**Andrew Lewer:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, colleagues, for the opportunity to present this today. As you rightly say, Chairman, I am presenting this with my colleagues Steve Baker and Jessica Morden, who gives her apologies due to shadow Cabinet commitments. 21 June is our preferred date, and a three-hour debate is our preferred ask. We have 17 speakers, with Conservatives, Labour, SNP and Liberal Democrats all signed up, and I have strong reason to believe that there will be a significant number of more speakers.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on motor neurone disease, and we have over 130 parliamentarians as members, which makes it one of the largest in Parliament. The reason that we have so many speakers and so many members is the broad-ranging nature of the disease and the fact that it affects so many people: six people a day are diagnosed with motor neurone disease, and six people a day pass away with motor neurone disease. Any person in the United Kingdom has a one in 300 chance of developing motor neurone disease. Alas, it takes over half of sufferers from us within two years of diagnosis, which is why such a lot of work was put into changing the benefit rules recently.

The focus of the proposed debate is investing in the future of motor neurone disease. MND has been spotlighted by the rugby league star Rob Burrow, and the APPG and charities involved with motor neurone disease have highlighted not only the suffering caused by motor neurone disease and its widespread nature, but the fact that there have been significant genetic advances recently. They enable us to say not simply that we want research that might find a cure, but that there is now a very clear route towards one. We were delighted to have an announcement of £50 million from the Government towards motor neurone disease research, but it is well over six months since that announcement was made, and although we are reassured that the money will be forthcoming, it has not been forthcoming yet. It is a pressing issue for a lot of people, particularly those suffering from motor neurone disease, who, alas, do not have much time and who desperately want to see investment happen and research get under way in order to get towards the cure that the genetic advances I have mentioned enable us to do.

It is a very well supported debate and a very worthwhile cause. There is a lot of information that would benefit us by being put more squarely into the public domain through such a debate. If you are happy, Chairman, Steve would like to say a few words as well.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Mr Baker:** I am delighted to appear before the Committee, and I thank you for this opportunity to add emphasis. I am very proud to be vice-chair of the group. It is a very vibrant community and a vibrant group.

I think this debate would be timely, relevant and important, and it would be controversial too. 21 June is MND Awareness Day. As Andrew says, six people a day are diagnosed with MND, which makes the debate timely and relevant. When I meet people who have MND, who come into Parliament and make their case, I see such determination and good cheer. Given their condition and their prospects with MND, what amazing characters we meet. They come in here, and with good cheer and firmness of purpose they make their case that with the right money, effective treatments for MND could be just a few years away. They could really benefit in their lifetimes.

Of course, both we and the MND community rejoiced when the funding was announced by the Government, but here we are, months later, and the money is not out the door. That is the real point of controversy. We have sat in a meeting and watched a debate go to and fro on how the money needs to be accounted for. We are all in favour of propriety, but it cannot be acceptable that this long after the announcement, the money has not gone out the door and in a just a few years we could have effective treatments. As Andrew said, time is not on people's side. We have to force the issue with the Government and get them to come to the Commons and explain how they are going to get the money out the door. That way this important—and likely successful—research can step up a gear and succeed.

Q2 **Nigel Mills:** I have just a couple of questions. First, the debate title, "Investing in the future of MND" is a bit unclear. Do you mean the future treatment, or investing in research for a cure for MND? Is there a way of clarifying what the debate topic is?

**Andrew Lewer:** I think the reason for having that title is that MND will continue to have a future for people unless research funding is forthcoming and therefore successful. I am not, as you can imagine, particularly precious about the exact title of the debate. If the exact title of the debate was a clinching point in terms of having the debate or not, I would be more than happy to amend it in any way that seemed more suitable.

**Mr Baker:** Like Andrew, I am not precious about the title. I think if we made it, "Public investment in MND research", that would be fine. We have made it a general debate, but I feel sure we could come up with a votable motion to make it controversial.

Q3 **Nigel Mills:** I'm sure. The other point is that the Committee can offer a 90-minute debate on a Tuesday in Westminster Hall, or potentially three-hour debates on the Floor of the House or in Westminster Hall on a Thursday. We cannot give you a three-hour debate on MND Awareness Day because that is on a Tuesday. Would you rather have a debate on the day, or a longer debate on a Thursday?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Andrew Lewer:** Rather than say what I would prefer, I think the sheer volume of speakers would indicate that a debate on the Floor of the House would be a better accommodation than Westminster Hall. We have got 17 speakers stated, which I think will translate into 25 to 30—that might be a challenge for Westminster Hall.

**Mr Baker:** To add to that, very much to reinforce the point, the scale of the problem—the number of people who have the disease and the severity of the disease—in combination with the possibility of effective treatment, for me, means main Chamber time. We should be able to draw serious journalists' attention to the reality that the Government have pledged investment but not got the money out the door. That means placing the debate near the top of the Order Paper, in the main Chamber. Let's try to get real and positive attention for this issue, and crystallise in Ministers' minds the need to take effective action immediately.

**Jerome Mayhew:** I am all in favour of it, but I need to declare an interest because I am a member of the APPG—I want to put that on the record. I agree with everything that you say. I think it is an incredibly important illness; it affects one in 300 people, but we do not hear about it nearly as much as we should because people die so quickly. There is not a huge number of people at any one time suffering from it, relative to the severity of the disease—it is so lethal. As you say, if there is credible research and a pathway to a solution then that is absolutely something that we should be debating on the Floor of the House.

Q4 **Chair:** One aspect of MND that I became aware of some years ago was that local authorities were reticent to do adaptations to people's houses because the life expectancy was so short. I find that heartrending. I understand that has been ironed out in many cases, but there is still that tension there.

**Andrew Lewer:** There is, and one of the main campaigns of the MND Association and the all-party group is called Act to Adapt. As a former county council leader, I can recall the frustrations of paperwork and process for people whose time is running out. I had a constituent just recently who has had to wait several months for a wet room, and in this context several months is a quarter of a life, potentially. Equally, recently another person who came to the APPG said that the ramp that was put into their house took so long to arrive that the only time her husband used it was to be wheeled out to the hospice to pass away. That is an investment in the future of MND as well, which I am sure some people may reflect on in the debate.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. The time that we are allocated is in the gift of the Government and we don't get Tuesdays, by and large, so it more than likely would be Thursday the 23rd, if we can offer you Chamber time then. We will certainly try our best.

**Mr David Jones** made representations

Q5 **Chair:** Next up we have Mr David Jones. David, your application this



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

afternoon is on the future of low carbon off-gas grid home and business heating.

**Mr Jones:** Thank you, Mr Mearns, and thanks to the Committee for hearing this application.

This is an application for a Westminster Hall debate. Members of the Committee will be aware that the Government have plans to start phasing out boilers that use fossil fuels in all homes by 2035. It has attracted quite a lot of headlines in the press. Most homes are connected to the natural gas grid, and there is a lot of debate as to whether ultimately these homes will shift to hydrogen power or electric heat pumps, but relatively little attention has been paid to rural homes that are not connected to the gas grid, where the Government's preferred solution appears to be to use costly electric heat pumps, which even the Government concede are not suitable for all premises. The Government have proposed a rural first approach, phasing out the installation of new fossil fuel boilers in rural homes from 2026, which is almost a full decade earlier than the 2035 date for homes connected to the gas grid.

The average cost of fitting a heat pump in a rural home is approximately £12,000, so a lot of homes are going to need expensive upgrades so that a heat pump can be operated effectively. Sometimes the ancillary upgrades that are required mean that the total cost of installation is as much as £30,000. There is a £5,000 boiler upgrade grant on offer, but in the context of those figures it is relatively little. I and the other applicants represent largely rural constituencies where average income is lower than in urban areas, and we would really like to test that phase-out date of 2026, which will impact on nearly 2 million homes spread across our communities.

We are concerned that rural households will pay a higher price to transition to low carbon heating because of the short timeframe before they have to do that, and they will have less choice of how to do it compared with homes connected to the gas grid. We would like to know why rural homes are being targeted for this early intervention, and to understand what support beyond the schemes already announced the Government will be proposing to ensure that rural homes can be connected to the new heating methods sooner than the other homes across the country.

We are of course in an energy and a cost of living crisis at the moment, and we have a concern that this burden will be unsurmountable, unacceptable and unfair to rural property owners. That is essentially the nature of the request.

Q6 **Nigel Mills:** David, we normally like to see a mix of Government and Opposition MPs. Anne-Marie has got the Whip back now, so you have got 10 out of 10. Is that because there are no Opposition MPs for rural areas available or interested?

**Mr Jones:** I think in all frankness you have put your finger on it—the fact that it is rural areas that are represented by these MPs. Frankly and sadly,



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

I am sure you will agree, Mr Mearns, they tend to be Conservative MPs. I thought that that might be an objection, but that is the reason.

**Chair:** I am sure you could have dragged a couple of Liberal Democrats in!

**Chris Green:** And SNP!

Q7 **Chair:** Are the rules the same for Scotland, though? Is it a devolved matter? I am not sure.

**Mr Jones:** I do not think the grant is, no.

Q8 **Chair:** It is a problem. The Committee has a precedent to hold to; we like a mix of parties. Could you drag a couple of names from the Opposition Benches and add them to the list? It is a live application. There is a potential slot in Westminster Hall at 1.30 pm on Thursday 16 June—a week on Thursday—which might be appropriate. If you can get a couple of Opposition names in over the next couple of days, that offer may be winging its way to you.

**Mr Jones:** That is very kind, Chair. I am grateful.

**Fiona Bruce** made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** Next up, we have Fiona Bruce, a former member of this Committee. Welcome back, Fiona. The application that you have submitted is, “UK-hosted International Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief, July 2022”.

**Fiona Bruce:** Thank you, Chair. It is good to be back.

The purpose of this debate application is to draw attention to the international conference that the UK will host on 5 and 6 July. We are hiring the whole QEII Centre in Parliament Square, and more than 50 countries are invited—Government Ministers, faith leaders and representatives, and civil society activists. This will be the largest international event hosted by the UK Government in 2022.

It is a real good news story for Parliament, which is particularly why I feel we should hold the debate. But for the work of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief over the last decade or more, we would not be in this situation today, with the Government hosting this major international conference.

It is as a result of parliamentarians forming that all-party group some 10 years ago, raising questions in the House and calling debates, that former Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt instigated the Truro review, which called for an office working on the issue of persecution to be considered and increased. That is an ongoing piece of work.

We are now in a position where the UK is really providing some global leadership. We are looking at how we can bring together international Governments, parliamentarians, and faith and belief representatives, and urge increased global action on the issue to prevent violations and abuses,



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

and to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief. It is a massive global problem that is under-recognised, just as awareness of this conference needs to be increased.

Let me give the Committee just one figure relating to the persecution of Christians. We are all aware of the Open Doors conference, which takes place in January every year when Open Doors releases its annual review. The 2022 Open Doors world watch report estimates that 360 million Christians across 76 countries are highly persecuted today. That is an increase of 20 million on 2021. This is a much-needed global conference.

We should be very proud not only of the work of the all-party parliamentary group over the last 10 years, which I think, incidentally, is the largest APPG in Parliament; we have 160 colleagues—just pipping the previous APPG referred to today. I pay great tribute to the fact that the Government have now seized the matter and are investing a lot in making this conference happen.

Q10 **Chair:** You have asked for the debate prior to the first week of July, when an important event occurs, so would the last week in June be your ideal time?

**Fiona Bruce:** That would be ideal, but I will take any time, Chair. I am just suggesting that we have a 90-minute debate. Part of the reason for that is that, for recent debates, we have asked for three hours on freedom of religion or belief. I don't think we necessarily need that—we are highlighting a particular event—but I want to enable colleagues from Northern Ireland and Scotland to come and I sometimes find, when we have Thursday afternoon debates on this issue, that some of them, because of their travel times, are not included as they would wish to be. So there are two requests: I am asking for a 90-minute debate and trying to get it in during the week.

Q11 **Chair:** I am just wondering about the answering Department.

**Fiona Bruce:** It's the Foreign Office, because my role as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, in which I am helping to organise the conference, is based in the Foreign Office and it is the Foreign Office that is co-ordinating the conference.

Q12 **Chair:** I'm not sure, because we aren't absolutely certain of the rota yet, but I think that potentially there is an opportunity on a Tuesday, with the Foreign Office answering, in Westminster Hall. If that works, we'll try to sort it for then.

**Fiona Bruce:** I hesitate to say you're perfect, Mr Chairman, but that certainly would be. Thank you very much.

**Chair:** The impossible we do at once; miracles take a little longer. Thank you very much indeed, Fiona.

**Peter Aldous** and **Judith Cummins** made representations.

Q13 **Chair:** Next up are Peter Aldous and Judith Cummins, on NHS dentistry.

**Peter Aldous:** Thank you, Mr Mearns. We are most grateful to you for considering this application. You will recall that back in February you kindly granted us a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall, which was incredibly well attended. I recollected your parting words to us, which were that if there had not been any significant improvement, we should come back to you later in the year to seek a debate, with a motion, in the main Chamber. That is why we are here today.

As I say, we had a very good debate. This issue remains the No. 1 item in my postbag and, I suspect, those of a great many colleagues as well. In Suffolk, we now have DentaId, which is a charity that normally delivers in developing countries. It is now working in Suffolk, which is a source of concern. As well as being No. 1 in MPs' postbags, the issue is No. 1 in Healthwatch's postbag.

Basically, since the start of the pandemic, the backlog of appointments that have not taken place in NHS dentistry has gone up to 43 million. Three thousand dentists have left the NHS since the start of the pandemic. We are finding—all the feedback is—that oral health inequalities are widening, and there are disturbing stories of oral cancers being missed.

At the turn of the year—as a result, I sense, of the debate and pressure being brought to bear also through the Health and Care Bill as that was going through Parliament—Government did bring forward a £50 million dental treatment blitz. The concern that we're getting back is that because of the absence of dentists, it has been incredibly difficult to actually spend that money and reduce the backlog. Likewise, the Government promised some quick wins for 2022-23 but they have yet to be announced.

If you look at our application, you will see that 54 MPs have indicated a willingness to take part in the debate, and they are across all parties in England. As I said, it is an application for a debate in the main Chamber, because we would like to have a motion laid down, and you will see that the draft text of a substantive motion is before you.

Q14 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Judith, would you like to add anything?

**Judith Cummins:** Thank you very much, Mr Mearns. And congratulations on your uncontested re-election as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Chair:** The debate is granted!

**Judith Cummins:** Long may it last. Thank you for granting us the Backbench Business debate in Westminster Hall in February. It was really well attended and very lively. As Peter said, you said to come back if there had not been any movement on it. I have to say that it has actually got worse. It is a growing national scandal.

We have seen promised reforms stalled, and no timescale or timeline on what's happening. We have seen the £50 million that has been referred to—I told the Minister at the time that it needed to be targeted, and that it would not work in the form that she envisaged. It is sad in this case to



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

have been proved right. I would love to have said it has all been spent in the right places, but I don't think that it has.

The key to this is reform—we need answers on reform. As far as I am concerned, we are just seeing negotiations stalled. They were due to start in April and I do not think one meeting on reform has taken place. There are still massive issues around access. The quick wins that Peter referred to are just not happening.

We are seeing more and more complaints in our inboxes, right across the House. I think that is reflected in the huge number of names that we have. It was so easy to get those names. I've never known anything quite so easy regarding any topic for Members across all parties to sign up to.

Access is a huge issue, and we are seeing NHS dentistry at tipping point. It is clear that, if we don't take any urgent action, the damage will be hard, and maybe impossible to undo. We are seeing people pulling out their own teeth, and people travelling right across the country to get access to an NHS dentist. That is clearly not acceptable. Our rationale for a motion that is debatable and votable is that it would force the Government to explain the delay and hold them to account over this growing national scandal. We would appreciate any help you can offer.

**Q15 Jerome Mayhew:** I declare an interest: not only did I take part in the Westminster Hall debate, but I am also a signatory, to which I want to draw attention. As a result, I couldn't agree more.

There are additional issues that should be explored. One is the regional inequality of training. Speaking as a fellow East Anglian MP, the nearest place to get trained is Northampton, I believe. People quite often stay near where they train, and we need to address that. I am interested to see what the Government have to say about that.

There is also the very significant issue of recognition of international qualifications. From memory, until 2001, Australian and South African qualifications were recognised in this country, but they no longer are. That would seem to be a relatively quick win that we could address, or the Government could be asked to address.

My only query, Chair, is that, given there are already 57 signatories, the likelihood is that this is going to be an exceptionally well-populated debate, and I wonder whether the time request of three hours is enough.

**Peter Aldous:** I would love it if you could give us more than three hours. I have a feeling that might be difficult.

**Judith Cummins:** We didn't think it would be possible, to be honest.

**Q16 Chair:** It's only 54, so don't worry—it's not 57; it's only 54. The problem we have is that there is an awful lot of stuff on the stocks, and we are going to have to ration the time in the best way that we can. I am wondering in terms of time sensitivity. Are you looking at as soon as possible? Or are there any dates, anniversaries, or something you would like it to chime with?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Judith Cummins:** The main thing is that we want a votable motion in the Chamber, given its national significance.

Q17 **Chair:** From that perspective, the boxes are ticked. You have more than enough Members signing up and you have cross-party support. You have a votable motion from that perspective. It has a good prospect of proceeding.

**Judith Cummins:** Thank you very much.

**Andrea Leadsom** made representations.

Q18 **Chair:** Next up, we have Andrea Leadsom with Infant Mental Health Awareness Week 2022. Andrea, you are very welcome; it is lovely to see you. Thank you for coming along. Over to you.

**Dame Andrea Leadsom:** Thank you very much, Ian. On your previous submission, one of the biggest indicators of neglect of babies is oral decay, and you often see babies with all their milk teeth being removed, which requires several days in hospital. That is terrible for the infant and, of course, it is extremely expensive because very small children in hospital need an awful lot of expensive care. I therefore completely support those previous colleagues—but not at the expense of my debate!

Infant Mental Health Awareness Week 2022 is coming up on 13 June, so it is very time critical. This is really a last-minute request because the Backbench Business Committee very kindly gave us a debate on early years some time ago. It was very well attended—oversubscribed—with very good cross-party support, as this request has.

Infant Mental Health Awareness Week 2022 is a very important, very special week because of the impact of the covid lockdowns on very young children and their parents—specifically, the harm that has been done to those very small children, who have not been socialised and whose parents have really struggled because they have not had the support they need. We have seen increases in domestic violence and in harm done to very small children. Of course, during covid lockdowns, it was difficult for health visitors to get to see families in the way they normally would, so this year is incredibly important.

Infant mental health is often misunderstood by people—they are like, “Well, what’s that all about?”—but, as I am sure you know, the reality is that human babies’ brains are only partially formed at birth, and the experiences they have in that very early period determine their lifelong emotional and physical wellbeing. It is crucial that we take seriously the importance of supporting families so that they can support their infants to get off to the best start.

We all know the stats around two-year-olds in deprived households falling behind other two-year-olds. By the time they go to school, they are already 18 months behind their peers and, as they go up the school, they fall further and further behind in terms of speech and language development and their abilities to regulate feelings, to be a happy person,



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

to have good mental health, and then, ultimately, to be a good parent themselves. Infant mental health is where it all starts, and this is an incredibly important year.

Q19 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. I understand, obviously, that this is timed for next week. Of course, we have had a recess, so we understand that it has been difficult to get the application in in a timely way. Given that most of our time for next week is already allocated, would a Westminster Hall debate fit the bill, if that was all that was available?

**Dame Andrea Leadsom:** If that was all that was available, then yes. I think it would be a good idea to get it on the record. There was not an intention to have a votable motion, so Westminster Hall would be fine.

Q20 **Chair:** Okay, thank you very much indeed. I think there would be a slot on the Thursday afternoon next week, so if we can slot you into that, we will certainly try.

**Dame Andrea Leadsom:** That would be great. Thank you very much, Chair. Thanks, everyone.

**Chair:** Thank you. Colleagues, that brings to and end our public deliberations for this afternoon. We will now go into a private session.