



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 18 July 2023

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Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Patricia Gibson; Chris Green; Nigel Mills; Kate Osborne.

Questions 1-16

Witnesses

[I](#): Peter Aldous

[II](#): Munira Wilson

[III](#): Ian Blackford, Douglas Ross, Grahame Morris and Chris Stephens

[IV](#): Fiona Bruce



Peter Aldous made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have five applications in front of us this afternoon, the first of which is going to be led off by Mr Peter Aldous.

Peter, your application is on the future of community pharmacies. Please explain why you want a debate.

Peter Aldous: Thank you very much, Chair; it is greatly appreciated. Community pharmacies are embedded in all our communities. They are the silent partners of the health and care system, and we have probably taken them for granted for a very long time. All of a sudden, there are fewer of them on our high streets. We have had dentistry deserts; now there is a danger that we might be moving towards a situation where we have pharmacy wastelands.

Hopefully, help is at hand. The Government's plan for improving access to primary care, which was published in May, highlighted an important role for community pharmacy. The Government provided an additional £645 million of new funding. Nevertheless, there is a concern that funding for the core items of community pharmacy has decreased in real terms by 30% since 2016, so there is still very much a funding issue to grapple with and to highlight.

The purpose of the debate is not only to highlight that, but to look at the role that the Government are looking for community pharmacy to play in improving access to primary care. The roles that community pharmacies play are significant. We saw that in the pandemic with the vaccination campaign that community pharmacies undertook; I suspect we will see it this autumn, with what for a great many of us will probably be jabs in both arms, for flu and for covid. Community pharmacies have a key role to play in prevention, public health, long-term condition management and providing greater access to medicines and clinical services. In particular, I think the sector wishes to play a greater role in women's health.

The purpose of the debate would be to highlight these roles. I think we would also showcase Community Pharmacy England's four-point plan for improving the state of community pharmacy: resolving what it terms the funding squeeze; tackling the regulatory and other burdens that it believes impede community pharmacy; helping to expand its role into primary care; and developing what it calls a pharmacy-first service, which is basically a walk-in service similar to what I think a lot of people yearn for.

The debate would be an opportunity to air these issues and seek clarification on the concerns of the sector from the relevant Minister so that community pharmacy can play this very important role, which a lot of us have taken for granted. It is being asked to do more and it wants to step up to the plate, but it needs the necessary funding and regulatory framework in place to do that.

Chair: Thank you very much, Peter. Any questions, colleagues?



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Bob Blackman: I have a couple of quick points, Peter. One is that you only have six names—

Chair: Seven, including himself.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** Yes—six in addition to yours. For a 90-minute debate, we would expect to see eight, and for a three-hour debate, which you have also requested, we would expect to see 15, so you are way short on those numbers.

Peter Aldous: I have two points on that. I started putting together this bid only last Wednesday, so there has been limited time to go around and get additional names. Since then, we have had one other: Bob Seely has come forward and expressed a desire to get involved. With myself, that takes us up to the eight. I am reasonably confident that we will be able to drum up more, because I sense that this is an issue that concerns a lot of people all around the country.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** You have ticked “either”. If you get to the eight, would you accept a Thursday Westminster Hall debate if we were minded to allocate you one?

Peter Aldous: From my perspective, yes, definitely.

Chair: Thank you very much, Peter. It is very much appreciated. Any further questions, colleagues?

Nigel Mills: Can I just declare that my wife is employed by a community pharmacist?

Chair: Thank you very much. That is noted.

Munira Wilson made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Munira, and thank you for coming along. Your application is on the subject of support for kinship carers.

Munira Wilson: That is correct. Thank you for this opportunity, Chair.

Kinship care describes the grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, family and friends who step in to look after a child, often at very short notice, when their parents are unable to care for them. They step up, often overnight, because of a tragedy in the family, whether that is death, imprisonment, domestic abuse or some other trauma that the family have suffered.

My interest in this area arose through constituency casework. Someone called Kim contacted me about trying to secure some attachment therapy for her granddaughter. She told me about the huge financial burden she had had to take on. She had to re-mortgage her house to afford the legal costs associated with assuming parental responsibility for her granddaughter. Kim’s grandchild is one of more than 160,000 children in England and Wales in kinship care. That is about double the number of children in local authority care, yet unlike adoptive parents, kinship carers receive no entitlement to paid employment leave and many of them are



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not eligible for allowances either. Kinship and Family Rights Group, two charities that operate in this area and support kinship carers, have launched campaigns in recent weeks calling for the change, certainly in employment leave.

The reason I am applying for this debate now is that the Government have committed to a dedicated kinship care strategy by the end of this year, and I think MPs should have the opportunity to make the case to Ministers about what it should include before that is published. I also note that both times the House debated kinship care last year, in July and in October, the Children's Minister happened to resign just days afterwards. I hope that if I am successful in securing a debate, it will not have the same effect this time. In any case, it would be good to get current Education Ministers to respond in depth and get their comments on the record.

I point out that my application is supported by the Chair of the Education Committee and by a former Children's Minister, both of whom have been vocal campaigners alongside me on this topic. Kinship Care Week is coming up—it will be in the conference recess—and we are all keen to debate the issue ahead of that and influence the upcoming strategy if possible.

Chair: Thank you very much. Any questions, colleagues?

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** You have ticked Tuesday and Thursday. The only Tuesday available is 19 September, when Education is answering. I assume Education would be the answering Department.

Munira Wilson: Yes, it would be.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Would that be acceptable to you?

Munira Wilson: Yes, Tuesday 19th would be acceptable.

Q7 **Chair:** If that were not available, would you also be available on Thursday 14th?

Munira Wilson: Yes.

Chair: That is very kind of you. Thank you very much, Munira.

Ian Blackford, Douglas Ross, Grahame Morris and Chris Stephens made representations.

Q8 **Chair:** Next up, we have Ian Blackford, Douglas Ross, Grahame Morris and Chris Stephens. The subject of your application is football and dementia.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Chairman. I am grateful to colleagues for coming along today. We only started to put this together last Thursday, so to be honest it has been somewhat rushed. In the limited time that we have had, 24 Members across six parties have put their name to this: six Conservatives, seven from Labour, seven from the SNP, two Lib Dems, one from Plaid and one from the DUP. I suspect that if we ask additional



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Members, we will find even greater support for it; I think it is a subject that touches the hearts of many people.

Over the last few years, and the last few months in particular, there has been quite a lot of coverage of footballers who have passed away with a significant illness as a consequence of playing football. Very recently, there was the sad death of the Scottish centre-half Gordon McQueen.

The issue has been raised in the Scottish Parliament; I should compliment the Labour MSP who has very much led on this. They have published an "Injury Time" report with a number of specific asks, including that we recognise dementia in footballers as an industrial injury and ensure that those affected by it get as much support as they possibly can.

There has also been some academic analysis of the preponderance of footballers getting neurological diseases, and particularly dementia. It found that the risk of neurodegenerative diseases is three and a half times greater for former professional footballers than for the rest of the population. For Alzheimer's, it is more than four times greater, and it is even more prevalent among defenders.

I think there is an issue here that we need to look at, and if the Committee is so minded, there will be a lot of interest among colleagues. I also suspect that there will be interest in this from the football community and the wider public. I think that that merits a debate in the Chamber, where there would be an opportunity for Members across parties to express their views and thoughts on this important topic.

Douglas Ross: I declare an interest: I am a football referee with the Scottish FA. That is all declared on the register of interests. Clearly the Scottish FA and other FAs across the UK are very interested in this, and in the research that has gone before this debate application. I very quickly agreed to be one of the co-sponsors, and I think that every MP who has been approached is keen to put across their views on behalf of local clubs, local campaigners or the national FAs.

Ian referred to the report published by an MSP, Michael Marra. The introduction says that a few years ago it would have been almost unheard of to look at social media and see stories of our footballing heroes suffering from dementia. Now, it is almost a weekly or monthly occurrence. It just shows what has gone on up to now, and the progress that has been made in highlighting this as an issue.

Given the importance of the issue and the prominence that it is now getting, both in Scotland and across the UK, I think a full debate in the Chamber of the House of Commons would be well received by Members and those interested in this issue.

Grahame Morris: Just to support my colleagues, I think that one of the reasons why we would like the debate in the main Chamber, apart from the wide-ranging interest, is that we would like a votable motion; we would like to call upon the Government to do something. There is a body



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of evidence that says that consistently heading a ball can cause brain injury, dementia, motor neurone disease and a number of similar conditions. The Industrial Injuries Advisory Council, the independent committee of medical experts that the Government set up, should be looking at that to see whether those people affected would qualify for disablement benefit under the IIAC's terms, so we would like to call for that.

The issue is quite wide-ranging. I know that we are focusing here on the Football Association and football, but it is not just professional footballers; it is amateur footballers. It is not just the 90 minutes of football; it is all the training. In former times, when we were young, we used leather footballs. You can imagine the damage that they would do if you were practising heading the ball for an hour or two at a time, particularly when it was wet. The same problem affects rugby players, boxers and anyone who is at risk of persistent injury to the head, but we wanted to try to focus on football in particular because of the number of high-profile cases. We can cite a number of household names who are suffering from dementia as a consequence of their activity.

Chris Stephens: Just to add to what colleagues have said, there was a meeting held by Tony Higgins and PFA Scotland that some Members were at. One of the key things that came out of it for me was that the average wage of a footballer, back then and now, is the same as what a tradesman would earn. We are not talking about some of the telephone number wages that we read about regarding some of the elite players. The average player is getting the same as a tradesman—certainly in Scotland, and I know that it is the case in England. When we have the debate, we can explore that a bit more, as well as why access to industrial injury benefits, for example, would help a lot of people who have gone through this.

Chair: Thank you very much. I think there was a longitudinal study on professional footballers' wages. Of course, people tend to focus on what used to be the first division, which is now the premier league. A first division player at the end of the '60s was on about two and half times the average wage—not per week, but per year. That was in the first division, so when you went down through the second, third and fourth divisions, quite often—you are right, Chris—the average wage for players at those levels would be about the same as that of a skilled tradesperson in industry. They were not on a king's ransom by any stretch of the imagination, so I understand the point that is being made about the industrial injury aspect of it—the sort of attritional industrial injury that people have contracted.

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** Grahame, you particularly mentioned having a divisible motion. Obviously, that is not included in the application.

Grahame Morris: It was added last night.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** That is fine. To get a genuine debate on this subject, the issue might well be who is going to oppose such a motion. That might be



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a question, given that you are probably going to be asking for research and action to deal with the consequences, but maybe you can think about that.

The other issue would obviously be that we do not have any more Chamber time until after the recess. The earliest date would be Thursday 14 September. Could you do that date?

Hon. Members indicated assent.

Ian Blackford: I get your point, Bob, about who is going to oppose this, but often the House is at its best when there is an important topic and the House can show that we can all come together on such issues. In a sense, that might be a benefit for a subject such as this.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, everyone. That is much appreciated.

Fiona Bruce made representations.

Q11 **Chair:** Lastly, but certainly not leastly, we welcome a former member of this Committee, Fiona Bruce. Fiona, your application is on the subject of freedom of religion or belief.

Fiona Bruce: Thank you, Chair. It is good to see colleagues again. I am applying for a 90-minute debate, for two main reasons. Last year—just about a year ago—the UK hosted a two-day conference on freedom of religion or belief, and 1,000 delegates attended, including over 80 official Government delegates. That was great—two days of talking—but I said at the time that we needed to ensure that words were turned into action. One of the key reasons I want to hold this debate is to demonstrate that action actually flowed from that conference.

I will run very quickly through some of the topics I would like to talk about. Since the conference, we have been developing educational materials for very young children in four pilot schools in the country, including one in my constituency, so that they can understand how important it is not to discriminate against children or others just because of their beliefs, just as they now understand that, for example, regarding disability. We are inspiring a next generation of FORB ambassadors by holding a global virtual youth conference on 19 and 20 October—24 hours when young people from all over the world, including those suffering persecution, can speak about their experiences and hopefully inspire a whole generation to champion this issue of freedom of religion or belief, just as they have championed climate change.

I will run through the others more quickly, because there isn't time. We are championing individual prisoners of conscience and highlighting individual prisoners' cases, and I am very pleased to say that one of those has been released—a 71-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Tajikistan, who was released before the end of his term. We are building an international network of roundtables. We are networking human rights defenders on freedom of religion or belief—for example, ensuring that if they are out in countries and are risk, they know they have legal back-up. We are better engaging the media on FORB. We are working with lawyers internationally



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on legislative reform; we have UK lawyers going out to countries where laws are not strong on FORB and working to strengthen them. We are protecting religious and cultural heritage sites—in particular, we are working with Ukraine on that—and lots more.

Why is this so important? Because challenges against freedom of religion or belief are getting worse—very considerably worse. I had no idea until I was appointed as the Prime Minister’s special envoy on freedom of religion or belief two and a half years ago that there is no other Parliament in the world where there is such cross-party collaboration and championing of this issue. This Parliament is a global leader on it, and we should be very proud of that. But it has never been more important to champion freedom of religion or belief, because it has never been more at risk.

I will run through just a few of the countries where freedom of religion or belief is at greater risk. Since my appointment two and half years ago, we have seen a military coup in Myanmar, formerly Burma; we have seen the Taliban take over Afghanistan; and we have seen Eritrea and Uganda grow increasingly authoritarian. FORB restrictions are increasing in Tunisia and Algeria, and there is now a risk of them occurring in Sudan. In Nigeria, increasing numbers are killed every year, particularly by terrorist extremists, just because of their beliefs. In Nicaragua, the Catholic Church is being targeted this year, with religious organisations running schools and medical centres being expelled. They include Mother Teresa’s nuns, who have been there 30 years and were expelled with no notice.

We are all aware of what is happening in China. We might not be aware of what is happening in Tibet, with 1 million children—that is a UN figure—being removed from their homes, and from their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, to be re-educated away from their families. Of course, the war in Ukraine has erupted, with Putin weaponising Orthodox Christianity, pastors disappearing, and Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia being imprisoned as criminals because they are pacifist. I could go on, but finally, in Iran, what are the crowds who shout for women, life and freedom calling for? Along with the whole country, they are actually calling out against violations of their freedom of religion or belief.

While it is great that we have taken such action since the ministerial last July, an awful lot more needs to be done. It is great that we are doing all of this, but I want to encourage even more support—including, I have to say, from the Foreign Office.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Questions, colleagues?

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** I have two things, really, Fiona. First, you applied for a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall. We also have an application, which you have signed, from our frequent flyer, Jim Shannon, about human rights in central Africa. Have you considered merging the two applications?

Fiona Bruce: Yes, actually. If I can put it like this, I think that any country—I mentioned Nigeria and Sudan—could be mentioned in my



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debate. I do not want to be greedy and ask you for longer than 90 minutes, but I do think that my debate would give any Member an opportunity to speak about any concern on freedom of religion, including in central Africa.

Q13 **Chair:** One thing that strikes me is that if you put the two applications together under the broader subject of freedom of religion or belief, you would have 11 signatories. I would need to speak to Jim, but I am pretty sure he would be happy to secure a debate in which he could talk about the particular issues in central Africa that he is concerned about, but under the more general umbrella of a debate about freedom of religion or belief.

Fiona Bruce: I think that is right. I have 10 supporters for this debate; I do not know whether that is what you have in your records.

If you are willing to grant the debate, perhaps we could have a discussion about the title, because there is some relevance in looking at how the ministerial conference has produced some action, rather than just being a great opportunity for a lot of people around the world to talk.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** Essentially, we could offer you either 14 September or 19 September. The FCDO is answering on the 19th.

Fiona Bruce: The 14th would be marvellous. At about six o'clock on the 19th, I fly to Egypt—obviously my job involves going to different countries—so it would be very helpful if I did not have to be concerned about a debate on the 19th.

Q15 **Chair:** It would be the morning, though.

Fiona Bruce: It would be the morning, so I could manage it, yes.

Q16 **Chair:** We get a Westminster Hall slot with the answering Department on the Tuesday morning.

Fiona Bruce: That would be great.

Chair: Right, so that is a possibility. Thank you very much indeed, Fiona. It is nice to see you again at the Committee.

Fiona Bruce: Thank you very much, colleagues.

Chair: We will now go into private session. Thank you all for attending.