



Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 23 April 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 23 April 2024.

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Members present: Bob Blackman; Kevin Foster; Patricia Gibson; Nigel Mills; Wendy Morton.

In the absence of the Chair, Bob Blackman took the Chair.

Questions 1-30

Representations made

[I](#): Mr Virendra Sharma

[II](#): Miriam Cates and Caroline Ansell

[III](#): Ian Paisley

[IV](#): Marion Fellows

[V](#): Anthony Mangnall

[VI](#): Jim Shannon

[VII](#): Chris Law



Mr Virendra Sharma made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. As most people know, the Chair's daughter-in-law has been extremely ill. The good news is that she is getting better, but quite rightly he is still looking after his family at the moment, so the Committee has asked me to continue chairing for today.

We have six applications to consider. The first is from Virendra Sharma on global health agencies and vaccine-preventable deaths.

Mr Sharma: Thank you for allowing me to come this afternoon. We are applying for this debate to highlight the global public health importance of immunisation and to bring the House's attention to the work of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, as well as that of Unitaid and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, in the immunisation response.

Tomorrow, Wednesday 24 April, will mark the beginning of World Immunisation Week, a period to mobilise the international community to overcome the barriers to vaccine coverage so that we can combat vaccine-preventable diseases. It is an opportunity to consider where we currently are on the global immunisation agenda, looking at progress but also at the future challenges and opportunities.

With the new vaccines being deployed and developed, we are at an exciting moment in the fight against various global health threats. The upcoming replenishment for Gavi and the Global Fund and the funding renewal for Unitaid represent an opportunity for the Government to back this important cause.

The purpose of the debate is to focus on how we can ensure that vaccines reach under-served populations around the world who may not have access or who face barriers. It will explore the importance of improving vaccine coverage, allowing us to make gains against the world's deadliest diseases, and of the role that immunisation programmes play alongside the delivery of other tools and medicines.

The debate will look at the work of global health multilaterals and the important contribution that they make to immunisation efforts with the support of successive UK Governments and the British people. Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, is the one most directly involved in the distribution of vaccines, but other multilaterals, including the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and Unitaid, play a critical role in supporting research and in ensuring that global health programmes are effective and that we progress towards our goals of ending numerous epidemics.

Q2 **Chair:** Can I clarify that this is a bid for a Westminster Hall debate?

Mr Sharma: Yes.

Q3 **Chair:** That would be a 90-minute debate. Would you be able to accept if we offered it on Thursday 9 May?

Mr Sharma: I think that would be okay.



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Q4 **Wendy Morton:** I see that you have eight names supporting the bid. Do you think you will be able to get a few more Conservatives? We would normally expect a 50/50 mix of Government and Opposition Members. I am sure you would; I know that there is a lot of support for this area of work.

Mr Sharma: I can assure you that there would be, including you.

Q5 **Wendy Morton:** Fantastic. If I could, I would be happy to support it. It is a question that I ask everybody. If you could get a couple more Conservative names, that would be helpful.

Mr Sharma: We will make sure.

Chair: Thank you very much, Virendra. There are no other questions. The Clerks will be in touch with you about the dates.

Mr Sharma: Thank you very much.

Miriam Cates and **Caroline Ansell** made representations.

Q6 **Chair:** Miriam, your application is on the impact of smartphones and social media on children. Over to you.

Miriam Cates: Thank you, Chair and Committee. It has become increasingly evident, by any measure of children's and adolescents' wellbeing, that our young people are very much struggling. If you look at evidence on suicide rates, self-harm, mental health and educational impact, there seems to be something happening to our kids. It has become very clear from the work of Jonathan Haidt, a US psychologist who is visiting Parliament next week, that social media and smartphones have an awful lot to do with that. The number of hours our children are spending on these devices and the addictiveness of social media apps, as well as the content that they are seeing, are having very harmful effects.

Since I put in the application, there have been a few more developments. Ofcom released data this week showing that a quarter of five-year-olds and a fifth of three-year-olds now have their own smartphone. WhatsApp has reduced its age limit from 16 to 13. Just today, there was a story in the media that the Internet Watch Foundation has found children as young as three filming their own sexual abuse on smartphones and uploading it to the web.

This has become a serious problem. It is clear that smartphones and social media were not designed for children. The US surgeon general, Dr Murthy, has said that if social media were a drug it would be withdrawn from the market, as there is no evidence that it is safe.

So far, the Government have not done an awful lot in response. There was a leak to Guido last week saying that they were considering banning the sale of smartphones to under-16s, which I would welcome, but we do not know whether that is realistic or actually going to happen. The Online Safety Act, which was the Government's flagship Bill, is a long way from



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being fully rolled out. Sadly, it appears that Ofcom is busy watering it down, in conversation with tech companies.

This is an urgent issue, and not just for teenagers. There is increasing evidence of developmental delays for toddlers and pre-schoolers because of problems with looking at screens rather than talking to people; Caroline can talk a bit more about that. This seems to be an urgent topic for child safety and welfare that is just not getting enough coverage or response from Government.

Chair: Caroline, do you have anything to add?

Caroline Ansell: Thank you, Chair. When I served on the Online Safety Bill Committee, one of the issues that we continually came back to was how quickly technology advances and how slowly legislation marries up. I want to row in behind that urgency, because that is exactly what we are looking at: an exponential rise in the use of smartphones and a huge expansion in the age range.

The Education Committee is looking at the issue, because it is having a profound effect—not even just on teaching, but on that wider social dynamic in schools, to the point that headteachers tell me that the first part of their day is now often spent resolving conflicts and issues that have arisen on social media before they even get to the school gates.

It is all about urgency. It is being considered by the Education Committee, and it is going through all those important phases—we are bringing witnesses in from different sectors, so there is good triangulation—but we really need to bring every lever to bear, to understand as quickly as we can the extent of what we are dealing with. Because of the nature of any addiction, this is going to be incredibly hard to get ahead of.

Added to all that is the peer pressure that parents are feeling. The uptake is significant, and the urgency of the issue really requires us to pull every parliamentary lever we have to gather the insight and intelligence that we need to make an informed response as quickly as possible.

Q7 **Chair:** One question from me before I invite others: which would be the answering Department?

Miriam Cates: I think it would be DSIT. I think Saqib Bhatti is the Minister responsible.

Q8 **Kevin Foster:** It is an interesting application. It is not just about whether people agree with the point put forward; there is also the potential for a debate to be better if there are people involved who completely disagree. For example, some may think that the state should not decide this particular issue, because it should be families and parents who decide whether a 14 or 15-year-old has a smartphone. Have you identified any likelihood of people turning up, or wanting to support the application for the debate, who might not agree with you but would like to see the matter debated and have the chance to put forward their views?



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Miriam Cates: The title of the debate would be “The impact of smartphones and social media on children”, which is a neutral title. People can completely disagree as to whether there has been any impact at all; they are welcome to argue that we should not do anything about it. I would very much welcome a debate, and certainly the intention is not to have an hour and a half of people saying the same thing over and over again.

Having said that, it seems clear that the evidence is mounting that there is a detrimental impact, so it has become very topical. I think that the question that Parliament should be asking is what we do about it. I would hope that the debate would cover a wide range of opinions about what our response should be, as much as whether there is a need for a response.

Q9 **Chair:** Your application covers the Chamber and Westminster Hall on a Tuesday or Thursday. The earliest slot that we could probably offer you is from 9.30 am to 11 am on Tuesday 14 May. If that were offered, would you accept it?

Miriam Cates: Yes. I have left my diary behind, but I am pretty sure that that would be absolutely perfect. Thank you.

Chair: The Clerks will be in touch with you about an offer. Thank you very much for coming along.

Ian Paisley made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** The next application is in the name of Sir Robert Goodwill, but I understand that Ian Paisley is substituting for him. This bid is for a debate on the introduction of UK-made zero-emission buses in the United Kingdom.

Ian Paisley: Thank you, Mr Chairman. Sir Robert Goodwill sends his apologies; he is at an EFRA Committee meeting, so thank you for allowing me to substitute for him. Sir Robert is the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for the bus and coach industry; I am a vice-chair of the group, along with our SNP colleague John McNally.

This is an important debate, in our view. We are seeking a 90-minute Westminster Hall debate on the introduction of UK-made zero-emission buses in the UK, and we hope that we can encourage the Committee to support it.

In 2020, the Government pledged to deliver 4,000 new British-built electric or hydrogen buses within the current Parliament, launching the zero-emission bus regional areas scheme, ZEBRA. That scheme was set to deliver the policy by 2023. Department for Transport figures have confirmed that 570 of the orders currently built have been bought from overseas countries that make these buses, and not from UK-owned companies. That is worth about £115.6 million of ZEBRA money, which is a significant amount. The UK’s three largest bus manufacturers directly employ 3,500 people and further support 10,000 jobs across the supply chain.



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There remain about 35,000 non-zero-emission buses in the United Kingdom. The replacement of these can offer a major opportunity for job creation directly and indirectly across the supply chain. One of those bus companies is in my constituency, one is in Sir Robert's and another is in Mr McNally's, hence our being very enthusiastic officers of that group; I declare that interest, for your knowledge.

In December 2023, the Department for Transport received applications from 56 local authorities across the United Kingdom for the second round of ZEBRA funding. Those bids cover a combined 362 parliamentary constituencies, so the ZEBRA policy and the DFT's funding for zero-emission buses is of interest to Members from across the House.

In March, it was announced that £143 million in funding through ZEBRA 2 will support the purchase of a further 955 zero-emission buses. For the next tranche of 1,000 buses, we are hoping to make sure that the orders go to a mixture of the three companies that are based in the United Kingdom, employ United Kingdom workers and have an impact in 362 of our colleagues' constituencies. I hope we can encourage you to support this debate.

Q11 **Chair:** Thank you. I am tempted to ask questions that would lead to the debate itself, but I am not going to fall into that trap.

This application is for a Westminster Hall debate. The earliest date we would be in a position to offer you is Thursday 9 May. If we offered that, would it be acceptable?

Ian Paisley: The only reason I would push back on a Thursday is that Mr McNally is an SNP MP and has to get back to his constituency in Scotland, so earlier in the week is much better and fairer to him. The Scottish company Alexander Dennis is a significant employer, as I am sure you know.

Q12 **Chair:** I understand that, but that is the earliest we can offer. I presume that it would be Transport answering the debate, so the Tuesday is unlikely. We do not know the rota yet, but the earliest is likely to be 21 May, although I do not yet know if Transport would be answering that day.

Ian Paisley: I could live with 21 May if you offered it.

Q13 **Wendy Morton:** On the mix of supporting Members for the debate, I see that there are just two Government names. Do you think you would be able to add a couple more, to give a four-four balance? I suppose you could add Robert as a third name.

Ian Paisley: It is my intention to go to the secretariat after this and say that I want a direct call or email to the 362 parliamentarians who will be affected. As with many of these things, it can slip by us until suddenly it is brought to our attention, but we have a really good basis to lobby Members.

Q14 **Wendy Morton:** Would you expect a well-subscribed debate?



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Ian Paisley: I would like to think so.

Chair: I am advised that it is likely that you will be offered 21 May. The Clerks will be in touch with you and Robert about potential dates.

Marion Fellows made representations.

Q15 **Chair:** Next is Marion Fellows with an application for Global Intergenerational Week 2024. Marion, over to you—it is good to see you when you are not talking about the Post Office.

Marion Fellows: Well, yes. This application is probably not as well prepared as my applications on the Post Office, because I have been otherwise engaged. There has been a lot going on.

As it says in the reasons given for the debate, it is important that we have intergenerational working. I do not think anyone could disagree. Global Intergenerational Week starts on 24 April, but that date is not particularly important; it just focused me on applying for this debate.

We are all aware of the work that is done in places like Holland and other areas of Europe and the world. It is an important issue, because intergenerational awareness promotes good mental health. We always think of old people as being lonely and suffering most from social isolation, but it is also true of younger people. Anything that brings the generations together is welcome. There has been a lot on social media. I remember a debate on the subject years ago in the Chamber that was all about us old people sitting on our mortgage-free homes and younger people struggling. It is even worse now, so anything that can promote good relationships between generations has to be welcomed.

With a little more time, I can get some more cross-party Members. This application was done at a bit of a gallop. I apologise for that; as you know, it is not my normal practice to come unprepared to these events.

I think it would be a good debate to have. It would be a way to introduce Members across the Chamber to the good work that goes on elsewhere, and perhaps to encourage and prompt the Government to invest a little more time and effort in this important practice.

As a matter of interest, I picked up information about the subject at the Scottish Older People's Assembly, which has engaged someone who is trying to promote this. That is where I met them, so I felt it was almost my duty to bring this forward.

Q16 **Chair:** Thank you very much for that presentation. The earliest we could slot you in would be Thursday 9 May in Westminster Hall. Would you accept that?

Marion Fellows: I see absolutely no reason why not.

Q17 **Wendy Morton:** Marion, you have pre-empted me: I was going to seek confirmation that you will get a balance of support.

Marion Fellows: Yes, I will spend some time on that.



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Chair: There are no other questions from colleagues. Thank you, Marion.

Marion Fellows: Thank you very much.

Anthony Mangnall made representations.

Q18 **Chair:** Next, we have Anthony Mangnall with an application on the contribution of independent lifeboats to UK search and rescue.

Anthony Mangnall: Yes. Very quickly and simply, this is an annual debate that I have always applied for. A 90-minute debate on a Tuesday would be preferred. It would celebrate, recognise and commemorate the work of the National Independent Lifeboat Association, an organisation I founded that represents the 54 independent lifeboat stations across the United Kingdom.

Q19 **Chair:** When will the anniversary be?

Anthony Mangnall: To be honest, we don't really mark the anniversary; we have just made the debate a yearly thing to be able to celebrate its work and to mark it. We will probably tie in the association's AGM in Westminster, to invite parliamentarians to come and meet its members.

Q20 **Chair:** Presumably the answering Department is Transport.

Anthony Mangnall: It could be Transport. Technically, it could also be the Home Office, because it is responsible for UK search and rescue. We will take either.

Q21 **Kevin Foster:** It is good to see this application back. We recently had a debate about the RNLI. I accept that this application is about the independent lifeboats; a lot of people don't realise that there are still those groups. What would you be looking to achieve from the debate? What would you be looking to get out of the Government or the Opposition?

Anthony Mangnall: The RNLI debate that we had, which I think I also requested, was in celebration of the 200th anniversary. NILA is individually funded: each independent lifeboat station has to raise its own resources. The debate is about raising awareness in that way, about enhancing co-operation with the RNLI, and about ensuring that NILA's role in UK search and rescue under the Home Office is fully funded and working and operating.

In terms of achievable outcomes, I hope that we would be able to see how we can improve training opportunities and the buying of equipment, and generally get more Members of Parliament aware of and engaged with a subject that crosses all parts and corners of the United Kingdom.

Q22 **Chair:** We have done a quick calculation, and we think the first free Tuesday on which Transport is answering will be Tuesday 11 June.

Anthony Mangnall: I will take whatever I can get, Mr Chairman.

Chair: That is subject to the rota, which we have not yet seen. The Clerks



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will contact you once the rota is clear.

Anthony Mangnall: I am very grateful to you and the Committee.



Jim Shannon made representations.

Q23 **Chair:** Last but by no means least is our inevitable season ticket holder, Jim Shannon, with a request for a debate on asthma treatment and management in the UK. I have to declare an interest as someone who suffers.

Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman, it is always a pleasure to come to this Committee. Thank you for giving me the chance to request the debate. I chair the APPG for respiratory health, so this is a big issue for us. We have done a number of inquiries over the last couple of years and are very aware of where some of the fall-downs are with asthma management in the UK.

Asthma deaths in the UK are still unacceptably high. Unfortunately, they have not fallen very much. I have a son who has asthma and has a salbutamol spray. It is a totally preventable illness, as you know, Mr Chairman. The landmark report "Why asthma still kills" was published way back in 2014, so we have had 10 years to improve.

To be fair, we have had some discussions with the relevant Health Ministers and a lot of work has been done. Questions have been asked back home in Northern Ireland and in Scotland and Wales. The report back then provided a thorough overview of the problems facing asthma care in the UK and provided a series of recommendations to minimise the number of deaths caused by asthma each year. Ten years on from those recommendations, we should have seen a big improvement. I say this very respectfully, Mr Chairman—you know that I do not set out to attack anyone—but it is quite clear that we need to see improvement that is actually working.

I know that the debate cannot coincide with World Asthma Day on 2 May. The debate will consider ways in which the Government, NHSE, clinicians, patients and their families can improve asthma outcomes in the UK. That is the request.

I am ever mindful of the time I came here and Wendy asked me to make sure that I had MPs from all parties. I have four Conservative MPs, three Labour, three SNP, two DUP, one SDLP and a Lib Dem.

Q24 **Chair:** You clearly have cross-party representation. Your application is for Westminster Hall for a Tuesday or Thursday. The first date we could offer would be Thursday 16 May, and you could take the first slot. I know that you probably prefer Tuesdays, but that is the first available date we could give you. If not, we are probably looking at the end of June.

Jim Shannon: I am conscious that I should have put in for this debate a long time ago so that it would coincide with World Asthma Day. You know that I am not staying here on Thursdays; that is a decision made by the staff back home, so we can focus on some other things. I would be happy to go for the end of June.

Q25 **Chair:** Thank you. When is World Asthma Day?



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Jim Shannon: World Asthma Day is 2 May, which is too short notice. It is not achievable—nowhere near it.

Q26 **Wendy Morton:** Jim, you have pre-empted my question. You have a great mix of parties down to support your debate—brilliant. I can only count three Conservatives on my list.

Jim Shannon: The fourth is Miriam Cates.

Wendy Morton: Marvellous.

Jim Shannon: She nabbed me, and I nabbed her.

Wendy Morton: As you are a season ticket holder, I am expecting great things.

Q27 **Chair:** Thank you, Jim. The Clerks will be in touch when the rota is clear. I take it that the answering Department will be Health and Social Care—is that right?

Jim Shannon: I suppose it would be. Yes, it would be, of course.

Chair: I cannot think who else it would be. We will look at when in the rota Health will be answering. Thank you very much for your attendance. That concludes the new bids, but we have an update from Chris Law.

Chris Law made representations.

Q28 **Chair:** Chris, I understand that you have been able to update your application with seven Government names.

Chris Law: Five. I think last week we said three or four, but then I got an email from the Clerk saying that I needed six. I have five, which is somewhere in the middle. Of those five, one is Mark Garnier, the last Chair of the Committees on Arms Export Controls. Have you got all the names there?

Q29 **Chair:** Fine. As far as I am concerned, that answers our request. The Committee will consider your request in private. If the Committee is minded to offer you Thursday 16 May—

Chris Law: I would love it to be then, but unfortunately I am away with a Select Committee during the week of Thursday 16 May.

Q30 **Chair:** I ask because that is the first available date. If you cannot do it, we understand and will slot you in when you can. You will go on the waiting list.

Chris Law: I know it might not be flexible, but I could definitely do the following week. That particular week, I am away with the Select Committee.

Chair: That is fine—we understand. That concludes the public business of the day.