

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 26 October 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 26 October 2021.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-29

Witnesses

[I](#): Ms Harriet Harman.

[II](#): Mr Nicholas Brown and Robert Halfon.

[III](#): Sheryll Murray.

[IV](#): Debbie Abrahams.

Written evidence from witnesses:

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Ms Harriet Harman made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee, everyone. We have five applications on the Order Paper but only four are being presented to us in person, beginning with Harriet Harman on enabling visa and permit-free working for musicians in the European Union.

Ms Harman: I thank the Committee for considering this application, which I am making on behalf of myself and David Warburton MP, who gives his apologies. This is about visa and work permit obstacles to the UK music sector touring in the EU, which sounds like quite an esoteric issue but is a very important one. The UK music sector was worth £5.9 billion at the latest counting, of which £2.9 billion was in export revenue, and the EU is the biggest single export market for UK musicians. Forty-four per cent. of UK musicians earn up to half their income in the EU, so it is a big sector, closely connected with the EU, and this is very important for our music sector.

The problem, since we left the EU, is the expense and bureaucracy of trying to get to tour in the EU. That has been masked by covid but it is now becoming clear what the problems are. If musicians are touring, they have to have 27 different visa applications, apply to different work permit regimes, and have carnets to certify that their instrument is not for sale and a music instrument certificate to certify that it is not made of endangered wood or endangered ivory. The expense and bureaucracy mean that a lot of touring simply cannot go ahead.

We have all become experts on cabotage in the haulage industry, but that is affecting this sector as well, because the maximum of three stops on any short tour does not work for music touring. We have a very highly skilled sector of transport and handlers of instruments and technical equipment, which, actually, is used globally, but they cannot then go to Europe because the business model just does not work.

This affects all areas of the country. It affects the sector in Scotland and in Wales and all regions in England and Northern Ireland. You can see from the spread of support from MPs who would like to debate this issue that it is from all over the UK, including, of course, my constituency of Camberwell and Peckham.

The Prime Minister said to the Liaison Committee on 24 March, and then again on 7 July, that this was something that the Government knew was a problem and that they were going to sort it. Lord Frost appeared before the DCMS Committee and said that it was a matter for the DCMS, and then the DCMS said in August that the problem was solved, but, in fact, it turns out that it is actually not solved. We want to enable MPs to have a say on this issue, to underline its importance and to press the Government to solve the problem. That is why we applied for a debate.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much, Harriet. Are there any questions,



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colleagues? On your application, you have ticked that you would accept a Westminster Hall debate.

Ms Harman: Yes.

Q3 **Chair:** If you were offered a slot on Thursday 18 November, would you be able to accept it?

Ms Harman: Yes.

Chair: Thank you very much. I am looking forward to the tour T-shirts that tell you the places that people intend to go to subject to visas, permits and licences.

Ms Harman: Now you have said that, you are going to get one.

Chair: That's great, Harriet. Much appreciated—lovely to see you.

Mr Nicholas Brown and **Robert Halfon** made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Next up we have Nick Brown accompanied by Robert Halfon. Your application this afternoon is on the provision of school-based counselling services in the United Kingdom.

Mr Brown: It is a pleasure to be here and to be joined by Rob. This is an all-party bid; we have four political parties on our request, and I am certain I could get more. As you probably know, the present legal position is that there is provision for counselling in schools in the devolved authorities—Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales—but there is no statutory provision for England. The issue is of course important, but the current circumstances have raised its profile. I have had representations from my constituency, and I know that other MPs who are supporting the bid have had representations from theirs.

The situation is made more complicated by the fact that the Department for Education does not routinely correct school workforce data that would allow us to identify how many schools directly employ their own counsellors. Some do, and others link up with an external provider. Some rely on referrals or have an informal arrangement with the voluntary sector, and some just do not make any provision and often rely, effectively, on the voluntary intervention of diligent teachers, who are much put upon in this area because they are trying to do the best for their youngsters. They are there to help.

The purpose of the debate would be to discuss these issues and try to explore whether it is possible to make school-based counselling more consistent. As I understand it, the problems affect something like—it is difficult to be certain—one in six children. We are all familiar with the sorts of issues: depression, anxiety, conduct disorder and behavioural problems. These can only have worsened with the coronavirus pandemic, the uncertainty around lockdowns, the disruption to daily schedules and anxiety among children overlaying, rather than solving, bigger questions



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as they come into adulthood. They worry about what they are going to do next in their lives and what the world, and the future, holds for them.

Chair, I know you represent a constituency that is not dissimilar to mine—we are neighbours—and you will have seen, as I have seen, the disproportionate effect that these issues have on the most vulnerable, including youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with disabilities, for whom anxiety is just an additional worry. We know that school-based counselling works and that it is valued by the school pupils and teaching staff who have some sort of provision under way.

We, as a House, have not debated this for a while—certainly not since the onset of the pandemic. Individual Members have touched on it and on the wider issues through parliamentary questions—Paul Blomfield had one in 2020, and Abena Opong-Asare had one in 2019. I also see that Layla Moran, who is supporting today's bid on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, raised mental health and wellbeing issues in schools in a Westminster Hall debate in 2018. I have researched this aspect diligently, and that is it, so I think we are overdue for a review and discussion.

This is not intended to be a party political issue—I am not seeking to table a motion that could be amended, and I am certainly not seeking to divide the House. The question would be that this House has discussed the issue, and I hope you feel able to consider the application favourably.

Robert Halfon: Nick has summed most of it up. What I would say is that we know that mental ill health among children was a severe problem before the coronavirus; and in my own view—I have visited schools all over the country—mental ill health, given what has happened during the pandemic, has become an epidemic among young people. Eating disorders alone have gone up by 400% among young people, and there is a wealth of other statistics that show that young people are being affected hugely by mental health issues.

The catch-up programme tends to focus on the academic. I think this is as important an issue as the catch-up, academic side of it. We are going to have to grapple with this issue, and I think having counsellors in schools is incredibly important. That is something that I have campaigned for. In my view, every school should have a properly trained and qualified mental health practitioner. I hope that this debate begins to set a way forward. That is why I am pleased and honoured to be supporting Nick in this application.

Q5 **Chair:** Thank you, Rob. Let me say, for those watching, that Rob and I work together on the Education Select Committee. This issue comes up in many different inquiries. It comes up because of the impact of the pandemic, but also the deteriorating levels of sound mental health among young people. Staff in schools is an issue as well. A counselling service there might well be of benefit.

Is there any time sensitivity from your perspective, Nick or Rob? Is there any particular urgency, or any sort of anniversary or anything else of that



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nature?

Mr Brown: No, but I am keen to get a slot on the Floor of the House on a Thursday. I accept that the subject matter and the way we are suggesting we handle it would render it suitable for the second of the two debates, but I think there would be quite a lot of demand for it, so we would not want to be squeezed out.

Q6 **Nigel Mills:** We normally want 15 names, split evenly between Government and Opposition. I think that, out of 15, you have three Government MPs. Could you obtain half a dozen more, just to meet our normal rule?

Mr Brown: I am sure we could. The way the rule is set out, as I understand it, is that it just says 15 from a mixture of parties, which I think we have complied with.

Q7 **Chair:** It has become custom and practice, Nick, that we look for four or five from either of the two major parties for a Chamber debate.

Mr Brown: If you want me to go and get some more, I am—

Chair: The point is that it's an application that is in; it is live and it can be added to.

Mr Brown: Aha!

Chair: That's the way we operate.

Mr Brown: Let's see what we can do.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** One problem, obviously, is that Chamber time is limited. It's your application, but clearly it would join a queue to get into the Chamber. The other issue is that, as it's effectively an Adjournment debate, it could go into Westminster Hall and—before you say anything else—you get absolutely guaranteed time in Westminster Hall. For example, last week in the Chamber, they were squeezed down to about—

Chair: Three and three-quarter hours.

Bob Blackman: Yes, so it was less than two hours each for the two debates. This is obviously a problem on a Thursday in the Chamber because of statements and UQs. There is an option that would get you an earlier debate, rather than being in the queue, but it's your application.

Mr Brown: I would prefer the set piece on the Floor of the House. I understand what you are saying about the risks of getting squeezed if it's the second one or having to wait longer because more people want the Floor of the House, but this is an important issue. People are very committed to the debate. I am not denigrating Westminster Hall debates at all—I have cheerfully taken part in them in my time—but I would rather hold out for the Floor of the House.

Q9 **Chair:** From a technical perspective, would it be the DFE or the Department of Health and Social Care answering this debate?



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Mr Brown: It would be for the Government to choose, wouldn't it? I think that's the way it works.

Q10 **Chair:** That is a very sound answer, former Minister. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Brown: My comrade and ally is saying that if we could influence it, we would hope it was the DFE.

Q11 **Chair:** There was a proposal by the DFE to have mental health professionals placed in secondary schools, but I think it was going to be only about a quarter of secondary schools, and we are some way off that actually being done. For the three quarters of schools that do not have them, that is obviously problematic, and we know that CAMHS services are a patchwork quilt around the country, with a bit of a postcode lottery in terms of how good they are. I am not really sure they are good, anyway; I think CAMHS services around the country are somewhere between just about passable and dreadful. From my perspective—I declare an interest as a member of the Education Committee—it is something that is of great importance.

Mr Brown: Do you want me to go and get some more Tory MPs?

Q12 **Chair:** The thing is, Nick, you have 15 Members, because you have Paul Blomfield on the second page. I think 15 is probably about right. In order to tick all the boxes, it would be really useful if you could get one more Conservative—just to keep our ducks in a row—but I am sure Robert can help you with that.

Mr Brown: In the whole of Parliament, can I find another Conservative MP? There is a challenge.

Q13 **Chair:** Sometimes, if you have a look over your left shoulder, you might see somebody who might help out.

Mr Brown: It has certainly happened in the past. Thank you.

Sheryll Murray made representations.

Q14 **Chair:** The next application this afternoon is from Sheryll Murray. Sheryll is submitting an application on pet travel.

Mrs Murray: I am indeed, Mr Mearns, and it is a pleasure to be here. I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on cats, and it was expressed by a number of MPs from different parties, including Mrs Gibson, that we would like a Westminster Hall debate, purely and simply to ensure that what the Government are introducing for dogs is extended to cats. We see some terrible actions at the moment, with people importing cats into the country. Exotic cats are declawed and brought in in terrible conditions, and our ask is quite a simple one: we would like a Westminster Hall debate of one and a half hours as soon as possible. I notice that DEFRA is responding to Westminster Hall debates next Tuesday and Wednesday—the 2nd and 3rd. If we could be accommodated, we would be very grateful.



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Q15 **Bob Blackman:** We only have the Tuesday.

Mrs Murray: Next Tuesday, then. Obviously, if that slot is filled, we would be very happy to take the next slot.

Q16 **Chair:** I am afraid to say that our 2 November slot is already filled—it has been filled for a couple of weeks—and I am afraid that our 9 November slot is already filled as well.

Mrs Murray: So it would probably be on the 16th.

Q17 **Chair:** It would be as soon as possible after the mini recess.

Mrs Murray: Yes, okay.

Q18 **Chair:** The application is to get a response from the Government about the welfare of cats being imported into the country. What would be the answering Department?

Mrs Murray: DEFRA.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

Q19 **Bob Blackman:** Would you accept a 90-minute debate on a Thursday?

Mrs Murray: Yes, we would.

Q20 **Chair:** Patricia cannot support you, because if she goes to that side of the table, we become inquorate.

Mrs Murray: I fully understand that, but I think you can see by the smile on Mrs Gibson's face that she would be very happy to support it, if she were able to do so. As I say, we have cross-party support. Unfortunately, the other co-chair of the APPG, Mr Gwynne, was not able to attend today, but I know he is very supportive of this.

Chair: Thank you very much. As far as I am concerned, your application is the cat's whiskers.

Mrs Murray: Thank you.

Debbie Abrahams made representations.

Q21 **Chair:** Last but certainly not least this afternoon, our next application is from Debbie Abrahams on dementia research in the United Kingdom.

Debbie Abrahams: I thank the Committee for considering my application; I think it is self-explanatory. The APPG that I co-chair with Baroness Greengross undertook an inquiry during the summer on dementia research. We looked particularly at the impact of covid on dementia research and the implications that it has for a field of research where we were, pre-pandemic, second in the world. Internationally, we had an immense standing, but partly because of the way that dementia research is funded—for example, the Alzheimer's Society provides a huge contribution through its fundraising to Alzheimer's research and to the UK



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Dementia Research Institute—of course, that funding dried up during the pandemic.

There are implications for the research community to consider, which we looked at as part of the inquiry. We also looked at the progress in different aspects of research, including prevention research looking at biomarkers right through to research that has been undertaken on care for people living with dementia and their carers. This debate is really to present the findings from the inquiry that we did on this issue and hopefully to gain support from the Government for the actions that we have identified.

Chair: Thank you.

Q22 **Bob Blackman:** You have asked for a three-hour debate, but you are slightly light on the number of speakers.

Debbie Abrahams: I think we have 15.

Q23 **Chair:** There are 12 on the application we have in front of us.

Debbie Abrahams: If you look on the second page, hopefully that should have been updated. Certainly at the end of last week, we had 15.

Q24 **Chair:** Who do you have after Jeff Smith at No. 12?

Debbie Abrahams: Marsha De Cordova, Paula Barker and Jim Shannon.

Q25 **Patricia Gibson:** Could I also say that Alzheimer's Research UK has emailed the letter that it has sent out to this effect—about funding for research—to all MPs? It provides a list of the MPs who have signed that letter—I know that because of I am one of them and I have put it on social media—so if you are looking for extra names, anybody on that list would sign this application.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you very much; I will do that.

Chair: Since you have provided us with three additional names to make it to 15—

Q26 **Nigel Mills:** It is still a bit light.

Debbie Abrahams: I am happy to add to that, Nigel.

Chair: If you wouldn't mind—the more the merrier. Of course, you have the "get out of jail free" card, because you have added Jim Shannon.

Patricia Gibson: I believe that over 100 MPs have signed the letter, so there is an embarrassment of riches out there.

Q27 **Bob Blackman:** Would you accept a Westminster Hall slot? Otherwise, you are going to join a queue.

Debbie Abrahams: I appreciate that; hopefully, it would not be two and half years before we got to it. You very kindly granted us a debate last year when we had done another inquiry specifically looking at the disproportionate impact of covid on people living with dementia, and we



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were put in the Westminster Hall category then. It is the biggest killer in the UK and the biggest source of dread that people express around an illness. I think it deserves a platform in the Chamber.

Q28 **Bob Blackman:** Is there any date or any action going on that you could hang the debate around?

Debbie Abrahams: Not currently. We had World Alzheimer's Month in September, so we just missed out on that. The next is Dementia Awareness Week in May, but we did want to have something before the end of the year, if at all possible.

Q29 **Chair:** Obviously, we are in a situation where we are almost fully allocated up to the end of November, but I am sure that you would not turn something down in December, if we could get it.

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. As I say, by the end of the year would be brilliant. If the Committee could grant us that, that would be fabulous.

Chair: Part of the problem, as you know, Debbie, is that it is literally in the gift of the Government what time they allocate to us. I already put in a request at business questions last Thursday asking for time on the 18th and the 25th on time-sensitive applications. That would then quite possibly take us into December. We will deliberate and, if this gets the green light, it will be added to the list and we will hopefully get you in before the end of the year.

Debbie Abrahams: Fantastic.