

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 21 November 2017

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Chris Davies; Patricia Gibson; Jess Phillips; Alex Sobel.

Questions 1-39

Witnesses

[\[I\]](#): Stephen Lloyd, Peter Aldous, Sammy Wilson and Laura Pidcock.

[\[II\]](#): Sir Peter Bottomley and Jim Fitzpatrick.

[\[III\]](#): Tom Brake, Sir Peter Bottomley, Jo Swinson and Stephen Kinnock.

[\[IV\]](#): Stephen Kinnock and Sarah Champion made representations.

[\[V\]](#): Mike Penning, Yasmin Qureshi, Louise Ellman and Seema Malhotra.

[\[VI\]](#): Jess Phillips.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Stephen Lloyd, Peter Aldous, Sammy Wilson and Laura Pidcock made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have six applications in total in front of us this afternoon. If we are all sitting comfortably, we can begin. First is Mr Stephen Lloyd with the effect of universal credit on the private rented sector.

Stephen Lloyd: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I thank the Committee. It is good to be here. We are all hearing a lot about universal credit at the minute, so why are we here? One element of it that has not been highlighted to the extent we believe it should is its impact on the private rented sector. About 1.5 million homes across the country in the private rented sector are in receipt of LHA—housing benefit for the private rented sector. Some of those are already on universal credit, and all will eventually be on UC.

The car crash that is coming towards us is already happening in some parts of the country. As we can understand, housing associations and councils are often much more patient about not being paid for a couple of months because of some of the payment delays surrounding universal credit. The problem with the private rental sector is that the business model can't sustain that. If I am a private landlord who owns, for instance, three houses, I may not get paid for three months because of the delays and what have you. The private rental sector is beginning to constrict and pull out even more from the LHA housing benefit sector.

The reason why we want a debate on this subject is that this is a million and a half homes. I ask you all, as experienced MPs with busy constituency offices, what will happen if 30%—I think it could be higher—of landlords of those million and a half homes say, "We can't sustain this business model. We are not getting paid. We are going to pull out of the private rental sector entirely," or, "We are going to pull out of having universal credit tenants entirely in our private rented accommodation"? Where are those 400,000 people going to go? It is a massive issue.

Because there are so many challenges surrounding universal credit, it has gone under the wire a wee bit, which is why we want to bring it front and centre through a Backbench Business debate.

With me today are my colleagues Peter Aldous and Laura—

Laura Pidcock: Pidcock.

Stephen Lloyd:—Prendergast.

Laura Pidcock: Pidcock.

Stephen Lloyd: My hearing! Pidcock, sorry.

Laura Pidcock: It's all right; it's fine.

Chair: I know who Laura is—don't worry.

Stephen Lloyd: Laura is standing in for a colleague, Ruth George, who is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on universal credit. Ruth has a really important thing today: her daughter is graduating from Sheffield University, and that should take priority.

Another colleague who has co-sponsored the application with me is Sammy Wilson. That means I have a cross-party group of MPs sponsoring it, because this is not a political issue; it is very much a cross-party issue. In addition, we have numerous MPs who we know will be very interested in speaking in the debate. We are asking for a general debate in the Chamber for three hours. Do any of my colleagues want to add anything?

Peter Aldous: An underlying premise of universal credit that has been there right from the start is that tenants should receive their housing benefit directly, from which they pay their landlords rent. The idea is that that replicates the working environment and helps to encourage financial prudence and the like. Right from the beginning, landlords in East Anglia raised concern about how it will work in practice. From my perspective—Lowestoft in my constituency has had the full roll-out of universal credit since May 2016—it is one of the major issues that has arisen.

I know well a retired schoolteacher who relies heavily on her to-let properties for her income. She has incurred losses of £6,000 or £7,000, and she cannot afford to do that. There is a concern among private landlords. There have been these large arrears building up, and certain landlords are saying, "We're not going to accept universal credit claimants as tenants in future". That will put an enormous burden on the social and council house renting sector, which, frankly, will not be able to take the strain.

There are clear signs that this is leading to an increase in homelessness. There have been debates on universal credit, including a number in the last few weeks and months that have tended to concentrate on the delay before you receive a first payment. This issue has, to a degree, gone under the radar. Certainly from my perspective, it needs to be properly aired and highlighted in Parliament.

Chair: Questions. Alex?

Q2 **Alex Sobel:** I have two—I might be stealing Chris's. You do not seem to be suggesting any sort of fix for the issue, which you have outlined very well. You just want a general debate. You are not suggesting a substantive motion to fix the problem.

Stephen Lloyd: No.

Q3 **Alex Sobel:** No? And you have only 13 names and you want three hours. Do you have more names than that?



Stephen Lloyd: I know from the indications that I have had from across all parties that many more people will want to speak on this. MPs are finding out from people in their constituencies, now that it is a national roll-out, exactly what the impact is in the private sector, so I am very confident that we will have no problem filling the numbers.

Q4 **Chair:** Sorry, I neglected to bring Laura in. Do you want to add anything?

Laura Pidcock: It's fine. My name has been mispronounced, too. I agree with everything that both Members have mentioned so far. I think that the issue has been crowded out, quite rightly, I suppose, by the generality of the other debates on universal credit, because so many issues have needed to be heard, but the knock-on impact is of huge national significance. If those people are made homeless, what will happen to local authorities trying to house them? We have seen pre-emptive eviction notices, and a point made often in the Chamber is, "That's illegal". Whether or not it is illegal, it is a consequence of the roll-out. This issue could have huge, catastrophic effects on many of our constituencies, and it deserves that isolated time, so that the issues and the solutions can be heard and considered from both sides of the House.

Stephen Lloyd: That's a really strong point, Laura. Folk are getting section 21s. It is much easier to evict someone from a private rental on a section 21 than from social housing. I have no idea where those 400,000 people are going to go.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** I draw attention to my entry in the register of interests. Could I clarify what you want to see happen as a result of the debate? Noting what Alex had to say, clearly you can have a general debate, and we could allocate you, for example, Westminster Hall, as opposed to the Chamber, but if you are after something specific—Ministers taking action—it would be better if you had a motion that was framed with your debate.

Stephen Lloyd: Okay.

Peter Aldous: I haven't got the details to hand, but there is a proposal to address this problem, put together jointly by the Residential Landlords Association and Crisis, that certainly I would home in on in a debate.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** I know what you mean, but the point is that if that is the intention, it should be spelled out in a divisible motion, because otherwise there is no resolution of the House supporting the proposal.

Laura Pidcock: There are already solutions that can take place at a local level but that are not happening on a wider scale. A person can have a relationship with the jobcentre in which they say, "We want the housing benefit payment to be made direct", but that is so bespoke, and we need it heard that it needs to be a national thing.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** At this point, we do not want to go into the aspects of the debate. We are here to facilitate how that debate takes place and



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what happens. During your debate, you can bring out those particular issues. I am just concerned about having a debate where something happens at the end of it.

Chair: To cut to the chase, Stephen, we can agree today, in our deliberations after this Committee sitting, that this is a good subject for debate and is worthy of consideration, but if you, as a triumvirate, wish to add a votable motion afterwards, that would be entirely in order and would help us to move things forward.

Stephen Lloyd: Then we will happily do that. I might just add something that Sammy would say if he were here, rather than in the Chamber: in Northern Ireland, the default is that it goes to the landlords, if that is agreed by both. They have already been running that for two years in Northern Ireland. Obviously, that is an important point; we would like to say to the Government that it is already happening.

Chair: I am afraid to say that my previous local government experience hammers on the back of my head. There was a time when a previous Government tried to make the payment of housing benefit for rent directly to tenants, and that experiment was withdrawn after a number of years because it quite clearly did not work, but there we go.

Q8 **Chris Davies:** Most of my questions are answered, but I see that in the 13 names that you have, one particular party dominates. You have said that you could get more names. If you want to push for a Chamber debate, would you be able to supply us with more names before we fully considered that?

Stephen Lloyd: How long have you got?

Q9 **Chair:** Could you add names as soon as possible? We do not have any Chamber time to allocate until at least 14 December, so could you have additional names and a votable motion back with us before next Tuesday?

Stephen Lloyd: And shall we give them to you as the Chairman?

Chair: No, to the Clerk, please.

Stephen Lloyd: We are happy to do that.

Sammy Wilson: Sorry I am late.

Stephen Lloyd: I was just mentioning the cross-party support for the debate, but I was also explaining how in Northern Ireland they already have this as default for the landlord and the tenant, by mutual agreement. That is something that we would talk about.

Sammy Wilson: That applies not just to social landlords, but private landlords. The computer system that operates that applies to the whole United Kingdom; it is not unique to Northern Ireland. I think there may have been some administrative costs that had to be paid by the Northern



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Ireland Executive to have that facility included. Some aspects of the changes that have been asked for to universal credit—for example, changing the six weeks to four weeks—cause technical difficulties; this one does not. That is one of the reasons why I felt that it was an issue that the Government could at least look seriously at. This is not just a theoretical debate, but a debate where if a political decision was made, the request could actually be implemented.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Sir Peter Bottomley and Jim Fitzpatrick made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** Next up, we have Sir Peter Bottomley. The subject is leasehold and commonhold reform, and leasehold abuses.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Chairman, you very kindly gave us a debate after our submission in December. We have a growing number of members of the all-party group—more than 115, I think it is now—and 35 have put their name to this request for a debate. We are suggesting that it should be a three-hour debate. We could probably have asked for six, but I think that in time the Government will have to come back to respond on their consultation.

The question is leasehold and commonhold reform and dealing with abuse. I quote briefly the all-party group's response to the Government's consultation: "Leaseholders have been abused, are being abused and will continue to be abused unless there are steps to prevent and penalise unfair treatment." The additional issue follows from Grenfell Tower. There are many leaseholders in blocks like Grenfell that have had cladding removed who are being asked to pay exorbitant amounts of money for fire security, and probably for work afterwards. The Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, the charity that provides the secretariat to our all-party group, has helped many people to keep their homes and has avoided about 1,000 people being put on to the transfer list for social housing.

This is an urgent issue—not so urgent that the Speaker has granted an emergency debate, but it justifies us trying to have the debate as soon as we reasonably can, preferably by the end of the year. Although we heard what was said about a votable motion, I believe this is appropriate for a "take note" motion because the Government are in consultation and will need to respond.

Q11 **Chair:** Jim?

Jim Fitzpatrick: To reinforce what Peter said, you very kindly gave us a debate in the Chamber last December. It was the last debate of the year in the Chamber. We had 20 Members then. I think the figure here says that we are now up to 127. The Government have moved, partly because of lobbying from colleagues of all parties and from different parts of the country—not Scotland, of course, because of the different tenure there. This affects north and south, young and old. It affects people who have used Help to Buy, people who are buying million pound-plus new

development properties, and people who exercise right to buy on former council properties for some tens of thousands of pounds.

The Government have their housing White Paper. They have called for evidence and launched a consultation that has closed. There is real movement on this. As Peter said, over 30 colleagues have indicated that they want to speak—without pushing—in the all-party group. More may very well come forward. We think there is a very good case for allowing the further airing of these issues, to allow colleagues to bring forward evidence from their constituencies in order to help the Government get to their conclusions and move the issue on. We will be very grateful for time in the Chamber from the Backbench Business Committee to allow us to do that.

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

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** Is there a date for the end of the Government consultation?

Sir Peter Bottomley: The Government are analysing the consultation. The consultation has closed. The Government's responses are coming in part, but there will be a whole series of them. In addition, I put on the record that we are dissatisfied with the running of LEASE, the Government-funded Leasehold Advisory Service. The debate is also a way of challenging the Government on that and asking them what they will do about that during the time that they are coming to conclusions on their consultation.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** I am getting to the point of whether there is a time sensitivity to the debate.

Sir Peter Bottomley: No. If it is in the second half of December, that is fine. If it is in early January, that is fine. It is not that time-critical. The subject is critical, but the timing is not.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The consultation is on relatively narrow issues. We have been trying to get the Government to widen that out to the whole scope of issues concerning the abuses of leaseholders and the lack of rights to protect them.

Q14 **Chair:** We have come across an issue where people are leaseholders of properties where the freehold is owned by charitable trusts. Unfortunately, the advice that the charitable trusts get from their legal advisers is not to sell the leasehold—not to surrender it. Quite often, the charitable trusts do not need the money, but their advice is that they cannot surrender them or let them be sold.

Sir Peter Bottomley: That is the kind of issue that we can bring up in the debate. As in last year's debate, if you look at the progress made because of that debate and following it, that is one of the issues where the Government and the charitable sector might come together and say, "This is unjustifiable in nearly all circumstances". If you have an almshouse,



that is different, because people have a licence not a lease, but if you are a leaseholder, you ought to have pretty well the same rights whoever your freeholder is.

Jim Fitzpatrick: We have had some success in one of those charitable cases—in fact, I think it was from the north-east. Using parliamentary procedures and the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, which is a charity campaigning in this area that acts as secretariat to the all-party group, we highlighted that a charity was making life untenable for the leaseholders in a property. They could not sell, because the length of lease remaining was too short to allow anybody to secure a mortgage. We got that charitable trust to look at extending the life of the lease, which made the property saleable, allowed the family to move and allowed someone else to move into the property. These are the minutiae of problems that colleagues could bring out in their contributions to the debate.

Sir Peter Bottomley: There is one more thing to say, Chair, very briefly. There is a case on appeal from the upper property tribunal on the money that needs to be paid for an extension of a diminishing leasehold, where the Wellcome Trust has taken over the Henry Smith properties and has managed to persuade the upper property tribunal that the cost to most people of extending their lease will go up by between 20% and 30%. That is one of the issues where we believe that the Government should join the case, and our debate would be a way of getting that to work. That could potentially help millions of leaseholders.

Q15 **Chris Davies:** May I confirm that you are happy to have the debate in January, as long as it is in the Chamber?

Sir Peter Bottomley: The Chamber matters more, because of the prominence, than whether it is the second half of December or January.

Chair: Thank you.

Tom Brake, Sir Peter Bottomley, Jo Swinson and Stephen Kinnock made representations.

Q16 **Chair:** Moving swiftly on, the next application, from Mr Tom Brake, is on Russian interference in UK politics and society.

Tom Brake: Thank you very much, Mr Mearns, and I thank the Committee for giving me time to make this bid. I do not intend to rehearse the reasons why it would be good to have a debate on Russian interference in UK politics and society; clearly, it is a matter that has been widely covered and that many Members from all parties have expressed some strong views about in recent weeks. Now would be the appropriate time to hold such a debate. I thank colleagues from all parties for joining me on the panel. You will have received a list of names of Members who support the debate. You will notice that it is completely cross-party: we have Plaid, Liberal Democrats, Labour, Conservatives, DUP, and indeed Lady Hermon. We have covered all bases in terms of it being cross-party. Since I submitted the list, a further eight Members—it was going to be seven, but

Stephen Kinnock has joined me on the panel—have expressed an interest in taking part in the debate. That takes us above 30 Members.

We are seeking a three-hour debate on the subject of Russian interference in UK politics and society, which would enable us to look at not only what is being covered at present in relation to possible Russian activity on Twitter and Facebook during the referendum campaign, but the effect that RT and Sputnik have on our political dialogue in this country, so it would cover a range of issues and Russian interference. The three-hour debate that we are bidding for would be a general debate as opposed to a debate with a votable motion. Our preference, of course, would be for it to be in the Chamber, simply because that would enable more Members to take part; certainly, some of the very well attended debates in Westminster Hall can get a little congested if people have sharp elbows.

In terms of timing for the debate, clearly it is a live issue now and the sooner it is possible to make three hours available for it, if your Committee is amenable to that idea, the better. Would Peter, Jo or Stephen like to add something? Stephen has some personal experience that he might bring to bear on the subject.

Stephen Kinnock: I lived and worked in Russia for three years, as the director of the British Council out there. All the issues that Tom outlined are extremely important. We are heading into the Russian presidential elections next year; there are ongoing investigations in the United States; and the Electoral Commission here has announced the opening of an investigation and there are potential connections there with Russia. As Tom said, the issue is very topical and has a lot of public interest, so I think that it would be right for it to be debated.

Jo Swinson: I would certainly echo what has been said, and say that the Government are recognising more that it is an issue, so the ability to explore that issue with Government Ministers and get some further assurances than we are able to in the confines of something like an oral questions session would be particularly helpful. I mean, the Prime Minister's remarks last week made it very clear that the Government recognise that this is a significant issue, so it is right that the House of Commons should be able to explore it fully.

Sir Peter Bottomley: People taking an interest in our elections or referendum is one issue—doing it openly should be notable, and noticed—but doing it in ways that are unfortunate, hidden or illegal should be out in the open as well. So, whichever way it is, I think it is a very good topic to discuss in this Parliament.

Q17 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Which Department would you see answering such a debate?

Sir Peter Bottomley: It could be the Prime Minister, after her words last week.

Tom Brake: My assumption would be the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, because of the Twitter and Facebook aspects of it. I

guess there is a security services aspect to this, but we would not expect to get much in terms of clarity from that perspective.

Chair: The Foreign Office, or Home Office, or—

Sir Peter Bottomley: Chairman, isn't it their problem rather than ours?

Q18 **Chair:** I am just asking you to speculate on which Government Department would be most appropriate to answer such a debate, but—

Jo Swinson: It may well be the Department that is leading on this within Government. It might be DCMS, it might be the Foreign Office, or it might even be sitting in the Cabinet Office. However, if the Government were to come back and say, "Actually, this is where we are co-ordinating it from"—

Tom Brake: We would be guided by the Government. As Jo was saying, which Department is actually in the lead on this issue? Indeed, it may be the Prime Minister, as Peter Bottomley said, in which case we would welcome her.

Q19 **Chair:** Any further questions or comments, please? We have not yet got time allocated. We know that we are likely to get 7 December, which is already pre-allocated for a fisheries debate and a debate on another subject. We have been told on the radar about 14 December and 21 December, but they are to be confirmed. So, if allocated time, say, on 21 December, would you be able to fill it?

Tom Brake: I would certainly be able to do that and would consider it to be part of my Christmas celebrations.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Stephen Kinnock and **Sarah Champion** made representations.

Q20 **Chair:** The next application is from Mr Stephen Kinnock, and it is on the steel sector deal.

Stephen Kinnock: Thank you very much, Chair. I should just start by saying that we would be happy if this were to be a Westminster Hall debate, and 90 minutes is also suitable; we reflected on that after we had submitted this application.

The reason that we feel this is a very important debate is that colleagues will recall the deep crisis that the steel industry was in around about 18 months ago, and there was a huge amount of activity and focus. That, of course, has decreased, because Tata Steel decided not to go ahead with the sale of the business.

However, there are some extremely important policy initiatives that need to be made within the context of the Government's industrial strategy, and the steel companies have come together and put forward an offer as



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one of these sector deals. There are a number of sector deals, going across the entire industrial strategy.

They need to know from Government whether or not that will go forward. They submitted their proposal in September; they have not yet heard back. I understand that meetings with Ministers are ongoing, but those of us in the all-party group on steel and metal-related industries feel that it is very important that we bring this issue to the fore, give people an opportunity to make sure that the importance of the steel sector is still on the radar, so to speak, and get some clarity. Either we would welcome the fact that a decision has been made in a positive sense, or, if it has not been made, we would underline the importance of a decision in the context of the industrial strategy.

Hopefully, also, we can take the debate forward with Government, so that we can get a little bit of clarity and transparency, because constituents in all of the steel constituencies and their families are very keen to know what is happening with this sector deal, which could potentially play such an important role in the future sustainability of the industry.

Q21 **Chair:** Sarah?

Sarah Champion: Thank you. First, it is fun being this side of the table, so thank you for that opportunity.

We know and are very grateful that you have given us opportunities to have these debates before, but unfortunately while we have had the debates we are not getting the certainty that we are looking for from the Government. Yes, we are very fortunate that the companies that own our steel have made a longer-term commitment to us, but underpinning that is the security that we need from the Government, particularly in the light of Brexit. Things like the tariffs that we are paying make us uncompetitive internationally. There is much that the Government can do, and we have had quite a change of Ministers over the last 18 months or so. As Stephen says, we are hoping we are going to get some movement in the next week, so we want either to be able to celebrate that or to carry on underlining the key issues that will enable us to have certainty in our constituencies.

While I appreciate that this impacts directly on a few MPs, in terms of our how we view our industries in this country, it is a very big issue that then starts rolling out and impacting on, for example, glass or potteries. To get those principles on the table would be extremely reassuring for a lot of people in the country.

Chair: Thank you. Any questions or comments?

Q22 **Chris Davies:** Stephen, I see you have only got seven names down so far. Is there a likelihood of many more coming forward?

Stephen Kinnock: I am confident we will get more. It is very good to see that we have two Conservative colleagues there, Simon Clarke and



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Andrew Percy. I think a number of colleagues in the all-party parliamentary group have come back and said that dates are a bit compressed, and some were reluctant to commit without knowing what the date might be. I am confident that we can get more than that. We are also hoping that we will get one or two SNP colleagues, who of course have steelworks in their constituencies as well. I am a little bit mystified as to why we haven't had a response from some colleagues. It may just be snarled up in the inbox. We will keep on chasing that, but I am confident that we can build on that number, and we can certainly fill a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall.

- Q23 **Chair:** Off the top of my head, I think there are a number of colleagues who have steel interests in their constituencies but are unfortunately either Ministers or Opposition spokespeople.

Stephen Kinnock: That is also an issue, yes.

- Q24 **Chris Davies:** You are feeling safe and prefer a 90-minute debate now.

Stephen Kinnock: Yes. We waited until yesterday to look at the numbers and who we could get in. Given the number that we have right now, it is a sensible move for us to say Westminster Hall. We really just want to get the issue back on the agenda and have a Government Minister come and answer a few questions.

- Q25 **Bob Blackman:** Are there are decisions or timeframes at the moment that make the application time-sensitive?

Stephen Kinnock: Yes. The sector deal involves a number of things. Some are policy instruments, so for example, reforming the energy market to support energy-intensive industries. That is an ongoing thing we have been pressurising the Government to do. That has been running for a very long time. There is also a financial dimension to this, which is matched funding, whereby industry says it will invest. There is actually an offer of £30 million a year over five years to invest in innovation and in building R and D capacity, but it will only come on stream if the Government agree to match it. That is the basis of the sector deal—there are a number of sector deals on the table now within the industrial strategy, and this is one of them. What the steel companies are saying is that they are making decisions now about how they allocate their investment for the next financial year, so if they don't have clarity by Christmas on whether the Government are on board, they will probably pull the plug on their side of the investment.

- Q26 **Chair:** I am just throwing this out there, and it doesn't mean anything, but it is just to get clarity. There is a 90-minute slot on Tuesday 19 where one of the answering Departments is BEIS. If you were offered that, would that be acceptable?

Sarah Champion: That would be extremely helpful.

Stephen Kinnock: Yes, that works.

Chair: Thank you.

Mike Penning, Yasmin Qureshi, Louise Ellman and Seema Malhotra made representations.

Q27 **Chair:** I'm going to change the advertised running order, because the next application would be from Jess Phillips, and Jess has to be here anyway, so I will now ask Mike Penning to come forward, please. This is an application on hormone pregnancy tests.

Sir Mike Penning: Thank you, Mr Chairman and the Committee, for listening to us. You have seen our submission. Yasmin can't speak because she is on the Front Bench, which is an anomaly, but it is from Hannah and myself. We have 57 colleagues who would like to speak in the debate and over 120 people in the all-party parliamentary group.

The reason this is so urgent is that, following the support from the Committee before, there was a debate and the Government gave way and said they would have an inquiry. In that inquiry, they said quite specifically that there were five points: that the Government should set up an expert working panel inquiry; that there should be a full-disclosure review of all evidence; that the inquiry will be conducted fairly and independently; that the inquiry would have the trust and confidence of the victims; and that the inquiry should seek "possible association". Interestingly enough, all-party parliamentary group colleagues and the victims and families would feel that at least four of those five have not been fulfilled in the report that was released last week.

We were lucky enough for Mr Speaker to grant us an urgent question last week, and I was amazed how many colleagues came to the Chamber at such short notice. They were very unsatisfied, not only with what the Minister was saying—I felt for the Minister; he had not had an awful lot of time to appraise the report—but because the report missed most of the big issues that the families have been campaigning for.

To give a little bit of texture, these drugs were given to women who thought they might be pregnant. In some cases, they were given by prescription, but in many cases they weren't; the drawer was just opened and the drug was given to the ladies, which they then took in good faith because their GP had issued it to them. That is not a secret; it is information that is out there. Given the effects that has had on the families and the deformities that these people have had to live with for so many years, the similarities with thalidomide and contaminated blood are so obvious for everybody to see.

The report doesn't address what it was supposed to. It specifically was not supposed to look at "causal association"—whether there was a causal link—because that is very difficult to prove. It was supposed to look at "possible association", but it did not do that. In the media, the chairman of the committee was asked many times why he didn't look at what he was supposed to. There was also no look at regulatory failure. If an NHS doctor



gave these drugs to the lady who wanted to know whether she was pregnant, surely a system should have been in place to prevent that.

The reason this is so urgent is because these families have been waiting for so long. Their faith in this report was actually there. The chairman of the campaign had to sign a document—a gagging order—to be part of this. The families were treated appallingly, which the Minister addressed in his response. However, the Government seem to have closed their eyes to what the report should have looked at and just accepted the report, literally within minutes of it being published.

We have a votable motion, which I know the Committee likes to have. I think speaking time in the debate will have to be contained, because even if we get the three hours we are asking for, I think there will be so many Members there; there are over 1,000 victims, and in logical terms at least one is in every constituency that we represent. I cannot think of a better, more timely debate to be had following the report last week and any other report that could be done. That is why we are asking the Committee to give us that support: so we can hold the Government to account and find out the truth—eventually by public inquiry, I hope, but I am probably speaking for myself there.

Q28 **Chair:** Louise?

Mrs Ellman: To add to that, it is extremely important that there be a further debate with a votable motion on this. It is about establishing the truth about what happened, looking at the failure of regulatory authorities and possibly also hiding information that was in fact available many years before.

It matters very much that this be held now, because the inquiry report that was published last week is presented as the last work on this subject. It is not the last word, because it raises many queries and its findings are not compatible with its terms of reference. That is why it would be so timely to have a debate as soon as is practicable, and to have a votable motion. This is a major issue and it will not go away.

Sir Mike Penning: We would like to have our cake and eat it, so we would not like a debate on the 21st, which is the last day the House is sitting. We just will not get the support that colleagues want to give us if we go on that date. I think that is the best way forward.

Q29 **Chair:** Seema?

Seema Malhotra: I want to make one brief point in addition—I think the key points have been made. What has really struck me is the hit on confidence of victims and their families as a result of the report and the Government's response. I think it is really important for us to do all we can to make sure those voices continue to be heard, and to do so as soon as possible.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We will now move on to our next

application.

Sir Mike Penning: No questions?

Q30 **Bob Blackman:** You said you did not want the 21st, but if you were offered the 14th, would that be acceptable?

Sir Mike Penning: We want it as soon as possible.

Bob Blackman: I understand that.

Sir Mike Penning: The only reason we do not want the 21st is that, as colleagues know, it is the day of the Adjournment debate.

Yasmin Qureshi: The 14th is fine.

Sir Mike Penning: The 14th would be fantastic. It would be brilliant.

Q31 **Chair:** We have seen other applications, and we have a waiting list. If you were not able to get the 14th, would you prefer to wait until January?

Sir Mike Penning: Yes.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much. That is the only thing I wanted to clarify.

Jess Phillips made representations.

Q32 **Chair:** We now have Jess Phillips presenting. For the watching public and for other Members, Jess will present to us but will not take part in the consideration of her own application.

Jess is speaking to us this afternoon on an application regarding funding for domestic violence refuges.

Jess Phillips: Thank you to the Committee—you are a wise Committee for taking this application. The application, as is laid out quite clearly, is about funding specifically for domestic violence refuges. There have been lots of debates, not least led by hon. Members on this Committee, around homelessness, the issues of housing and how the Department for Work and Pensions and different welfare reforms have been grappling with housing. Refuge accommodation and other supported accommodation have been part of that big conversation for quite a long time.

Last week, the Government revealed what their plans were specifically for refuge and other short-term supported accommodation, as they would term it: accommodation for care leavers and some accommodation for people with learning difficulties—basically hostel accommodation, for want of a better word. The plan put forward by the Government has set quite a lot of concern among the sector, and certainly the members of the all-party parliamentary group on domestic violence, of which I am chair, have real concerns about how it is going to meet the needs.



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The proposal is essentially to stop using the model of housing benefit and to create a ring-fenced budget that goes down to local authorities. At the moment, 60% of all women and children who attempt to get into a refuge are turned away, and every single day in this country, 90 women and 93 children, I think it is, cannot find a bed in a refuge. There are real concerns that without statutory pressure on local authorities, even with ring-fenced budgets, we will still end up with an enormous postcode lottery in this field.

We are just not sure, given all the lobbying, all the conversations and all the consultations that led up to this, that this is the solution that those working in the field think was the best. We feel it needs to be debated.

As you can see—you know, I have some insight into the questions you ask—there is a divisible motion, and among the lead Members there are people from across the parties. All the Members have said that they are interested in speaking. There is a broad range from all the different political parties—save, I think, the DUP. Although we have put in a divisible motion, I am happy, because of time constraints, to have Westminster Hall as well. I am not going to die in a war for the Chamber.

Q33 **Chair:** Can I ask you, Jess, when George Howarth crossed the floor and became a Conservative?

Jess Phillips: I don't know; obviously it was when whoever it was put that down. We live in testing times, Chair.

Chris Davies: Watch this space.

Q34 **Bob Blackman:** Can I ask a question about your draft motion? I think you said in your introduction that 60% of total referrals were declined. Is that because there were not beds?

Jess Phillips: Yes, there is not space. Largely that will be the reason for people being turned away—lack of provision.

Q35 **Bob Blackman:** Is the provision—in other words, the number of refuges—going down?

Jess Phillips: Yes.

Q36 **Bob Blackman:** That doesn't appear to be mentioned in your motion.

Jess Phillips: That is because it is semantics, depending on who you ask. The Government would tell you that the number of bed spaces has gone up. I would say the number of refuge spaces has gone down. Those two things are not the same. We are talking about specialist provision and specialist services. That is not just accounting for domestic abuse, where specialist services are needed, but across the piece in mental health services, offender management and supported accommodation. There has been a reduction in specialist domestic violence refuges. In the past year, I think 15 refuges have shut down.

Q37 **Chair:** Am I right in thinking there is also a technical problem because of



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local housing allowance and online universal credit applications, because of the lack of a permanent address?

Jess Phillips: All those things are definitely true. There is a problem with local housing allowance rates. What the Government is proposing removes some of the concerns that were on record, certainly by myself, about local housing allowance rates not being suitable when considering specialist accommodation. This is basically their solution. I think their solution is on the way to being right, but is not there yet. The Government is currently in consultation until 23 January, so I suppose we want to have this debate to get the feeling of the House on these proposals.

There are a number of issues around universal credit that are very specific to victims of violence entering into refuge. For example, there are issues around the benefit cap. Lots of women will keep their tenancy and their council property while they are in safe accommodation, which means they very quickly leap over the thresholds allowed in universal credit. There is a problem with that. Those things are all true. There are lots and lots of ways in which the welfare system interacts with supported accommodation that need ironing out, as some of the other people who presented said.

Q38 **Chris Davies:** Jess, you said that the consultation finishes at the end of January. Would you be happy to have the debate in early January?

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. The sooner, the better. The sector is very nervous, as am I, that the Government feel, "We've answered your prayers." We're not sure whether those prayers have been answered. I don't want to leave it so long that they are preparing for the consultation end date, and to launch—it is usually almost immediately after a consultation—exactly what they think. The sooner, the better, but if it had to be early January, that would be okay.

Q39 **Chris Davies:** You have 25 Members named at the moment. Are you likely to get that increased?

Jess Phillips: I'm certain I could, but I think 25 Members for three hours is plenty—I talk a lot.

Chris Davies: I hadn't noticed.

Chair: Anyone else?

Bob Blackman: No.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That concludes our public session.