

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 23 January 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 23 January 2018.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-12

Witnesses

[I:](#) Ruth Smeeth.

[II:](#) Mr Laurence Robertson.

[III:](#) Mr John Baron.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Ruth Smeeth made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to this meeting of the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications in front of us this afternoon. The first is from Ruth Smeeth on the subject of community bank closures. Ruth, over to you.

Ruth Smeeth: Thank you, Chairman, and I thank the Committee for agreeing to let me come and present this. Over the past three years, 1,500 bank branches have closed across communities. The House has discussed this several times, and you have facilitated that, but debates have been very specific—about Lloyds, NatWest or the Co-op. We have not discussed the wider consequences of 1,500 branches going. What that really means is that across the country, many towns are down to their last bank, and probably the last bank closure. I have had three sets of closures announced in the last two months, and I am going to lose the last bank in the mother town of the Potteries.

When I emailed colleagues about this, within 24 hours, 43 colleagues asked to co-sponsor the debate, and another 20, from all parties, who are PPSs or Front Benchers said that they would want to contribute to such a debate. Members from all parts of the House very much want to discuss this, and I hope that you will be able to make time for this.

Chair: Thank you very much. Any questions?

Patricia Gibson: I am very supportive. I have 13 towns in my constituency, seven of which are now without a bank, so hear, hear.

Alex Sobel: I have nine closed banks in my constituency, so I am very supportive.

Chair: I am not down to the last bank branch in Gateshead yet—there are three or four in the town centre—but the ones in the smaller communities around and about have taken an absolute hammering, so I am very sympathetic as well, Ruth. Thank you.

Mr Laurence Robertson made representations.

Q2 **Chair:** We move swiftly on to Mr Robertson. The subject of your application, Laurence, is housing, planning and the green belt. Over to you.

Mr Robertson: Thank you for allowing me to make this application, Mr Chairman. Given that the Government have made housing one of their priorities—we hear a lot about the broken housing market and the housing crisis—there is a need for a debate to put this in perspective. I do not think that the crisis or problem is in every area across the country; it is more acute in certain areas than others. Also, we are taking our eye off the type of housing needed. There are lots of three, four and five-bedroom houses being built, when perhaps what we need is two-bedroom houses, but planning guidance policy does not seem to allow for the right direction

to be given.

There is also a problem with lending policy. Falling housing ownership is not necessarily because there are not enough houses; it might be to do with lending policy, for example. Against this supposed housing crisis, we also have the Government announcing a review on land banking. There is some contradiction there; why are developers getting land and not building on it? Perhaps in some areas there is not the demand that the Government assume there is.

Inspectors across the country are applying certain policies. Certainly in my area, the council has been forced to plan to build 10,000 houses on green-belt—not green field—land, which goes against the Government's planning guidance. That guidance is a little confused, which is why I want to discuss planning, housing and green belt in one debate. The term "exceptional circumstances" is somewhat confused, because Governments have also said that green belt outweighs unmet need in importance, or is likely to. There is big confusion there. There is no methodology for calculating five-year land supplies; the Government have acknowledged that, but have not changed the rules yet.

I am concerned about the powers of inspectors, because while they seem to apply planning guidance policy correctly sometimes, on far too many occasions they do not. That is an example of the working of the inspectorate compromising democracy. Local councils are democratic; this place is democratic; but planning inspectors certainly are not. The whole thing needs looking at and discussing, and that is why I would like to hold a debate on the subject.

Nobody has accompanied me today, but that is entirely my fault for not telling them. I have the support of 33 colleagues from different parties for this debate. Thank you very much, Mr Chairman.

Q3 Chair: Thank you. I take it that CLG would be the answering Department.

Mr Robertson: Yes.

Q4 Chair: And that there is no time sensitivity to this.

Mr Robertson: It is not an urgent problem as such. The sooner the better, but everybody probably says that, don't they?

Q5 Chair: But you are not commemorating any particular event—the royal institute of planners isn't having a lovely outing.

Mr Robertson: Not to my knowledge, Mr Chairman.

Q6 Bob Blackman: I am very sympathetic; at business questions, I have once or twice called for a similar debate. What do you want to happen as a result of the debate? You are covering a wide range of areas.

Mr Robertson: Yes, that is why I have asked for a three-hour debate. It



got expanded a bit; colleagues said, “Can we put this bit in, and that bit?”, so it has ended up covering three areas. The housing crisis is patchy; it is in different places. It is probably most pronounced in the south-east, but in some areas perhaps there is not a problem, so I would like the Government to address the question of how we build affordable houses. There are two building sites in the village that I live in, building three, four and five-bedroom houses. There is absolutely no need for them; there is a need for two-bedroom homes. I want the Government to take that on board, look at whether the planning inspector is too powerful and whether there is a better way of doing these things, and to clarify “exceptional circumstances”.

We need to say to the Government—whichever party they are from; obviously, I am a Conservative, and there is a Conservative Government—that these issues are confused. I do not know about colleagues around the table, but I get complaints about planning in one form or another pretty well every day, so this needs discussing.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** It seems that the route might be to have a Westminster Hall debate to start with, see what the answers are—we have a new ministerial team—and then to come back with a motion for the Chamber.

Mr Robertson: Whatever you recommend. Okay.

Q8 **Chair:** Thank you very much. The accountability of planning inspectors is a big, fractious question. Who are they answerable to? Technically, directly to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, I would guess, but it is a question of how that accountability works in practice.

Mr Robertson: Absolutely.

Q9 **Chair:** I am honestly not being pedantic, but I think that we are talking about not one green belt specifically, but green belts in general.

Mr Robertson: Absolutely, yes.

Chair: Thank you very much, Laurence; it is good of you to come.

Mr John Baron made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** Last but certainly not least, we have an application from Mr John Baron on the cancer strategy, halfway through. John, over to you.

Mr Baron: I thank the Committee for considering this application for a half-day debate. It may not look it, but as chairman of the all-party group on cancer, I am representing the chairs of the other cancer-specific all-party groups, as I hope that you will see from the names on the supporting list. A point for the Clerks, so that there is no doubt: since signing up to the debate, Maggie Throup, although remaining supportive, has been promoted to PPS, and so properly has to withdraw her name from the list. I hope that the Committee will forgive me if we do that.

Briefly, as you know, the all-party parliamentary group on cancer has a proud track record of speaking its mind, regardless of which Government are in power. We produced a detailed report in December on being halfway through the cancer strategy for 2015 to 2020. We took 100 pieces of evidence and conducted two oral evidence sessions—cross-party, as you would expect. We had before us the Cancer Minister and Cally Palmer, who is the head of cancer for NHS England, and a few others—including, importantly, those on the frontline trying to implement the strategy. It was important to hear from them.

The report was quite critical of the cancer strategy. We have real concerns that we will not meet the 96 recommendations and objectives set out in the cancer strategy 2015. We have highlighted our chief concerns. We are not the sort to wander away just because we are being told, “It’s all in hand.” We have a real concern about this.

We have an annual debate on the Floor of the Chamber for half a day. It is usually an opportunity to not just raise the pressing issues of the day, such as these, but allow all to ask the Cancer Minister various questions. The all-party group represents something like 100 cancer charities, who look to us to raise issues of cancer in the House of Commons. We would be looking for a half-day debate on the Floor of the House. If history is anything to go by, it will be very well subscribed; we usually run out of time. In this case, it will be even better subscribed, because we are—how can I put it gently?—asking searching questions of the Government.

Chair: Thank you very much. Any questions?

Q11 Bob Blackman: Two issues. The first is the time sensitivity. You released the report in December, as you say. Presumably, there has been no reaction yet from the Government to it. Do you want the debate sooner rather than later? Is there a particular week or ideal time?

Mr Baron: Not a particular week. I know that everybody will say this, but the sooner the better, because of a couple of the key findings. First, the workforce planning is a year behind schedule, and without proper workforce planning, you cannot implement a cancer strategy. Secondly—I raised this point at PMQs just before Christmas, on 6 December, for the record—I have pressed the Prime Minister on the fact that there is £200 million sitting in NHS England that is not being released to frontline services because it does not believe that process targets are being met. It is a chicken and egg situation: if we do not get that funding, we won’t be able to get the 96 recommendations implemented, but NHS England seems to be saying, “Hold on a minute: we are not going to release it, because this is our only leverage.”

The short answer to your question is that there is no specific week, but the sooner the better, because a lot of clinical commissioning groups and cancer frontline services are looking to us to press the case to Government.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** The other question is what you want to happen as a direct result of the debate. If you want something specific, why have you not got a substantive motion for debate?

Mr Baron: Because we have always tried—no matter what side we are on—to approach this in as consensual a manner as possible. We are not trying to go to war with any Government. We want co-operation; that is certainly what the cancer charities that we represent want, and I understand that. Having said that, I think that this debate will have a little more edge, because we have highlighted two or three issues that the Government seem to be digging in on a little bit. I hope, not unreasonably, that logic will prevail, but the debate will be a key part of trying to persuade the Government to think again.

Chair: Anyone else? No? In that case, thank you very much, John; it is good to see you again. That concludes this formal sitting of the Backbench Business Committee. We will now go into private session.