

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 4 December 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 4 December 2018.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Colin Clark; Nigel Mills; and Jess Phillips.

Questions 1-16

Witnesses

[I](#): Ian Murray.

II: Peter Aldous

III: Toby Perkins

IV: Wera Hobhouse, Clive Betts, Kerry McCarthy and Matt Western.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Ian Murray made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have in front of us this afternoon four applications by Back-Bench Members of Parliament. I should say at the outset that we are still not aware of any time allocated in the main Chamber to hear these debates. Just for the record, next Thursday it will have been eight weeks since we had any time in the Chamber. We are always hopeful—we do have a meeting planned with the Leader of the House to discuss this issue—but as of this minute we do not actually have any time in the Chamber to allocate. There may well be the possibility of time in Westminster Hall. I just ask applicants to bear that in mind.

First up this afternoon is an application from Mr Ian Murray on early diagnosis and the cancer workforce in the NHS long-term plan. Over to you, Ian.

Ian Murray: Thank you, Chair. I know you like brevity, so I will be very quick. I am presenting this on behalf of colleagues who, unsurprisingly given the events happening across the parliamentary estate today, are not able to join me. The application essentially seeks to tie in with the publication of the NHS long-term plan, which we should be seeing in the next few weeks.

We seek a debate not necessarily on early diagnosis but on the workforce requirements in the national health service to deliver that plan. We know that by 2035 one person will be diagnosed with cancer every single second. It is a huge issue. The Prime Minister, in her conference speech back in October, said quite clearly that the Government want to set a target of three quarters of all cancers to be diagnosed at an early stage by 2028. We think that is an incredibly ambitious plan but the correct thing to do. We seek a debate about what the workforce requirements are with regard to trying to meet that target, because it is very good in theory but the practice of these diagnoses is often much more complicated than it appears at face value.

We are looking for a 90-minute debate in—you will be pleased to hear this—Westminster Hall, not the main Chamber, to take some of the pressure off the growing list of debates you have. It is important now purely because the NHS long-term plan is just about to be released, so we are looking for some time in December or January to try to coincide with that and raise some of these important issues. Of course, the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matthew Hancock, has said that one of his top three priorities is to address the workforce issues. I do not want to swear in the Committee, so I will not use the B-word, but the B-word will make those workforce issues even more difficult in terms of immigration in post-Brexit Britain. This is an opportune time to address some of these issues.

Q2 Bob Blackman: I am very sympathetic to your cause, and thank you for applying for a Westminster Hall debate. The Department of Health and Social Care will answer debates on Tuesday 8 January. That is quite early



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on in the new year. If you were offered the 9.30 am to 11 am debate on that date, would you be able to accept it?

Ian Murray: I think we would be able to accept that, yes.

Chair: Any other questions? Short and sweet—brevity. Fantastic. Thank you very much indeed.

Peter Aldous made representations.

Q3 **Chair:** We now have an application from Mr Peter Aldous on social mobility in county areas. This is an application for a 90-minute general debate in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday or a Thursday. Over to you, Peter.

Peter Aldous: Thank you, Chair. Last month the county APPG, which I chair, in liaison with the County Councils Network and Localis, published the "Social Mobility in Counties" report. Basically, it identified a problem with social mobility in county areas and in coastal areas in particular. Young people there do not move on and they are not taking up the opportunities that young people in city and metropolitan areas probably are. This report highlighted the issue and came up with 11 recommendations as to how we might address that. They were fairly wide ranging recommendations: broadband; additional early years educational funding; devolution was very much there; and, universities playing a greater role in the communities in which they are located.

From our perspective, with the local government funding settlement expected shortly and with the first funding review of education about to take place, as well as a comprehensive spending review, we were keen to make sure that the report does not gather dust on the sideboard and to highlight these issues, to ensure that this issue, which I think is a major problem to our country, is actually addressed. With that in mind, we were looking ideally for a 90-minute debate in the new year in Westminster Hall. I am conscious that I am here on my own today, but we have had reasonable cross-party support from other members of the APPG and I would be looking to confirm that for you, with not only just the APPG members but all those MPs who represent county areas.

Chair: I should just point out, for the record, comprehensive spending reviews are a concept of the previous Government.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Thank you for the presentation, Peter. There are two issues. One is that not only do you appear alone before the Committee, but your application appears alone without any other sponsors or speakers. You mentioned a cross-party group of individuals. It would be helpful if you could supply that list.

Peter Aldous: I recognise that, certainly. I have one colleague who was due to be here with me today who has not joined me, I suspect because of what else is happening in this place today.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** We understand that. Notwithstanding the comments you have made, the second issue is about which Government Department

would answer this debate.

Peter Aldous: I think we would be looking at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The recommendations in the report cover a number of areas. I talked about broadband, so that is the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and there is the Department for Education as well. I think predominantly we would be looking to go to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Which could go on Tuesday 15 January, provided you had a list of speakers that were commensurate with our requirements?

Peter Aldous: I would be happy to do that.

Chair: Any other questions? Thank you very much indeed. Next is Mr Toby Perkins. It is an application on fibromyalgia.

Toby Perkins made representations.

Toby Perkins: Thank you, Chair. I start by apologising to the Committee for failing to attend last week. I was crestfallen that my other engagement overran and I misjudged it. My apologies to the Committee for that.

The debate follows a petition on fibromyalgia, which I presented in Parliament. It was a physical petition signed by 1,379 people. It mirrored an online petition on the change.org website that was signed by 104,551 people, contending that fibromyalgia is a disability. The petition called for greater research into the causes and treatment of fibromyalgia, and for greater awareness of fibromyalgia among the medical profession, Government Departments and employers.

Fibromyalgia is a condition that is hugely misdiagnosed and under reported. It is debilitating, it is draining and it reduces people who have worked hard for years to fatigued and listless lives of pain and discomfort. It features chronic pain, muscle stiffness and excessive fatigue. There is no known cure for it, and as many as 1.5 million to 2 million people in the UK may well be victims of it, including dozens of people in every single Member's constituency.

The petition was started by Adrienne and Leann Lakin from Chesterfield, and at least 12 hon. Members have already indicated an interest in speaking in the debate. With the Committee's permission we would like to have a Westminster Hall debate so that it can be given greater awareness and profile.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** I assume that Health and Social Care would answer the debate.

Toby Perkins: I believe it would be either Health or the Department for Work and Pensions. It could be either of those really.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** So potentially, if it is Work and Pensions, it could be Tuesday 15 January. Would that be acceptable?



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Toby Perkins: Yes, very much so.

Q9 **Chair:** There is also potentially some time on the last day before the Christmas recess, also in Westminster Hall. Would that be acceptable to you?

Toby Perkins: I would prefer 15 January, if that is possible, in terms of the opportunity to build the profile. Obviously it is up to the Committee, but we might prefer the January one.

Chair: Okay. There may be competing tensions for the same date from different debate applications—that is the problem. We will have to try to slot everyone in where we can.

Wera Hobhouse, Clive Betts, Kerry McCarthy and Matt Western made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** Lastly, we have an application for a debate on the use of permitted development and the nationally significant infrastructure project regime for shale gas exploration and production. I have a funny feeling that most people would regard that as fracking.

Mr Betts: Fracking—that's about right. It is called other things as well, but fracking will do for the time being.

Q11 **Chair:** This is an application for a general debate, but in the Chamber, for three hours.

Wera Hobhouse: Thank you very much for hearing us. Again, because of other business in this place we do not actually have a Conservative Member here, but we do have cross-Bench support. I think the fact that the previous Westminster Hall applications were led by two Conservative MPs also shows that this is very much an issue that exercises all of us. There are live applications that could be used in 150 constituencies, so it affects a lot of constituencies and local people.

I apologise for the very long name of the debate, but it shows that it is several issues wrapped up in each other. For me it is about giving local people a voice. Local people are being threatened with not having a voice, on two sides. Permitted development would enable exploration and drilling to happen without local planning committees making a decision. Also, if drilling was happening in earnest it would fall under nationally significant infrastructure projects. On both sides, local communities are basically threatened with a decision being taken out of their hands. It is very much about local democracy.

Apart from the fact that this is about fracking, it is about fossil fuel exploration, at a time when we have the IPCC report, the international committee on the Paris agreement, and Katowice currently going on. We need to do something to combat climate change. It is an issue that basically covers a lot of things that exercise our minds as MPs, which is why we believe that it is a very important debate. We had two Westminster Hall debates where MPs could not have their say, and it



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needs to be further explored. We are therefore applying for a main Chamber debate.

Mr Betts: Very briefly, I think the number of people who attended those debates show the strength of feeling across the House. The Government have been consulting. It is right that they listen to elected Members on this issue. We are in a situation where, even without a formal vote, the weight of parliamentary opinion may change Ministers' approach. This will be an opportunity for that to happen.

Kerry McCarthy: I attended both Westminster Hall debates. It was impossible to speak because they were so busy—there were more on the Government side. It was packed. There were two different Departments, but the responses were not great and we need the opportunity to press it further.

Matt Western: I echo those points. I attended one of the debates and was able to make an intervention. A great number of people wanted to speak. At the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee we have heard about this process. At a time such as this, when local democracy is threatened, it is a major debate we should have about ensuring local people are heard.

Q12 **Chair:** Having had two Westminster Hall debates, and given the fact that you are looking for Chamber time, which is very rare hens' teeth, we would still give precedence to debates that have a votable motion for Chamber time. Have you thought about trying to put together a votable motion on this issue, which applicants can subscribe to?

Mr Betts: Very easily, Chair. We could simply say that we do not want the Government to go ahead with either of the changes they propose. It could be as simple as that.

Wera Hobhouse: The consultation has only just finished, so it is quite urgent.

Q13 **Chair:** Similarly, although we already have a long list of unheard debates, should time become available on Thursday 20 December, which is the day that the House rises for the recess, would you be willing to take some Chamber time on that day if it was available?

Wera Hobhouse: Well, why not?

Chair: That is just for the record. I do not have a crystal ball. In fact, I do not even have a functioning snow globe.

Wera Hobhouse: I know that I will definitely be here and will speak.

Mr Betts: Speaking of crystal balls, we understand that Mr Ashley sells them in his shops these days.

Chair: Far be it from me to tell tales out of school but someone from the Government Benches asked me last week what it would take to get people on my side of the House to back the Government's agreement motion. I



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said, "If in some way, shape or form you get rid of Mike Ashley from Newcastle United, I might be tempted."

Jess Phillips: It is £4 million for me.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** Allegedly, he will sell the club next week.

We have to make a decision on the allocation of time. If you insist on Chamber time, it is likely that you will have to wait until after the February recess, because there are many ahead of you in the queue of debates already in place, which can take place only in the Chamber. We could fill every allocation—were we to get them—until the February recess. I notice that you have put down by 20 December or no later than 31 January. That makes it time sensitive. You would get a guarantee of Westminster Hall on 20 December. I know you cannot put your motion there, but at least you would have the debate in Westminster Hall for a guaranteed three hours if you choose to take it.

Wera Hobhouse: Not Westminster Hall.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** In that case, the likelihood is that you will not get a debate in the Chamber until after the February recess. I do not think you should go away with any illusions; we have a list of I don't know how many—

Chair: Twelve.

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** There are 12 debates ahead of you in the queue for Chamber time. Some of those have come back with what they will do in terms of 20 December and other dates. They have been waiting longer, so they get first priority. I do not want you to go away with any illusions about the opportunity. However any of us feels about the subject, we must look at the order in which people have applied.

Chair: I should just clarify that I asked about 20 December just for the record, in the unlikely event that all those 12 allocations should refuse.

Wera Hobhouse: Are we talking about the main Chamber or Westminster Hall?

Chair: I am talking about the main Chamber.

Wera Hobhouse: That is what we are after, because we have had two Westminster Hall debates.

Bob Blackman: We understand that, but just so you are aware of the position.

Chair: Notwithstanding the potential fortunes of Newcastle United, Christmas or my crystal ball, thank you very much indeed. That concludes the public deliberations of the Backbench Business Committee. We will now begin the private session.