

Backbench Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 11 December 2018

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Colin Clark; Patricia Gibson; Jess Phillips; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-11

Representations made

I: Jim Shannon, Dr Lisa Cameron and Liz Saville Roberts

II: Lisa Nandy

Jim Shannon and **Dr Lisa Cameron** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have two applications in front of us this afternoon, the first being Jim Shannon on support for children with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions and their families. Over to you, Jim.

Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman and fellow Members, this is a debate that a number of us are very interested in, across parties, as you can see on the paperwork that you have in front of you: Caroline Johnson, the Conservative, Catherine McKinnell from Labour and David Linden from the Scots Nats. I also have some 19 names of other Members—Conservatives and Labour—who want to speak on the matter.

The issue touches the hearts of every one of us—very much so. The application comes off the back of Together for Short Lives, which provided the briefing before you. We are very concerned about children's palliative care. Some cases come through our constituency offices and others we know about from other constituencies through their Members of Parliament.

I feel that it is important that we support and empower families caring for seriously ill children, and that we build a strong and sustainable children's palliative care sector. We also want to support those professionals and children's palliative care services who deliver the lifeline care.

This is the sort of debate that tugs at the heartstrings, Mr Chairman, when we know the issues and can relate them to our own constituency. Every one of us wants to see how we take that forward. I suspect that some people present might even be members of the APPG, and so will understand clearly what we are trying to achieve. It is also about putting the focus on the Government's end-of-life care choice commitment for children.

I will not go through all the issues, but you know what these are: leadership and accountability; clarity for poor commissioning by CCGs; funding—funding is so important, so we have to focus on that—workforce issues, which we need to address as well, because even if you have all the funding in place, you might not have a workforce that is skilled and able to respond; and the last one, integration. Often the big issue is how we do health, education and care—all those things come together to make it successful. Those are the five points that we want to achieve.

Mr Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for giving me the chance to come forward to request the debate.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much, Jim. Is there any particular time sensitivity—any commemorative or memorial day, or anything like that?

Jim Shannon: Some time in the new year. I listen to you every Thursday, as you know, and I understand your time constraints, so any time in the



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new year. To be fair, the other leading Members would also like it in the new year—one and a half hours in Westminster Hall, if that's available.

Q3 **Chair:** So you would like 90 minutes—

Jim Shannon: Yes, 90 minutes in Westminster Hall.

Q4 **Chair:** We are not aware of any time, anywhere, apart from a slot that we have on Thursday 20 December. With that exception, we are not yet aware of any time available to us, either in the main Chamber or in Westminster Hall, because we have already pre-allocated for the first couple of weeks in January. We have a backlog of debates because, as you know, Jim, we have not been awarded any time in the main Chamber for ages now.

Jim Shannon: You said that last Thursday. I understand that.

Chair: Thank you very much for that. Bob, do you have any questions?

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** I congratulate you on getting people to sign the form, as opposed just to putting names, which demonstrates that people will turn up and speak—*[Interruption.]*

Jim Shannon: And here we have my left-hand lady.

Bob Blackman: Indeed. Given that you have changed this to be a Tuesday application and, as the Chair mentions, we have allocated the first two Tuesdays in January when we come back, would you consider a Thursday? We have a potential allocation on 10 January, which is a Thursday. If you wanted that, we would possibly consider you for it. It would be the Thursday afternoon, and you could potentially have three hours.

Jim Shannon: I have to be fair to the others who signed it as well. They specifically said they did not want to do a Thursday. Sorry, that is unfair. They were unable to do a Thursday; let's be honest. I am very conscious of that. Although my name is on the list, there are a number of other ones there and they said no.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Just so we are clear, the answering Department would be Health and Social Care, would it?

Jim Shannon: Yes, it would be.

Q7 **Chair:** Lisa, is there anything you want to add? I know Jim has laid out the reasons for the application.

Dr Cameron: No; I just think it is such an important issue that it deserves to have parliamentary time. I have had a constituency case recently that has been extremely poignant, and that has touched thousands of people right across my constituency. I fully support what Jim is doing and I know he has cross-party support. The will of the House is to reach out to the most vulnerable, and this debate will go some way towards doing that.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Anyone else? In that case, I thank



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you for your application. We will add you to the list of waiting debates, Jim, and then we will see what time we can allocate you, if and when we are given any time by the Government.

Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman, I thank you and your Committee for your indulgence, and for your courtesy and good manners every time I come forward. I wish you, in anticipation, a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

Chair: That is very kind of you, Jim.

Jess Phillips: That won't change our opinions about which order they come in.

Chair: Your season ticket is safe, don't worry.

Lisa Nandy made representations.

Q8 **Chair:** We now move on to the hon. Member for Wigan, Lisa Nandy. The application is on the recent Post Office announcement of the franchising of further Crown post offices and its impact on high streets and local communities. Over to you.

Lisa Nandy: Let me start, as I often do, with an apology. I should have declared an interest on the form. The register shows that my constituency party is sponsored by the CWU.

Jess Phillips: I should declare the same interest before we continue.

Lisa Nandy: I will amend the form accordingly. I also have a couple of extra names to add to the form: Alison McGovern MP and Jo Stevens MP, both from the Labour party, who got back to me after I had submitted the form. The other interest I have is that my own Crown post office is one of those affected, and I will tell you a little about that and then hand over for questions.

In October, it was announced that 74 Crown post offices were to be closed, with an estimated 700 jobs put at risk. It is the latest in a wave of closures over recent years and if these latest announced planned closures go ahead, 60% of the total Crown network will have been closed or franchised in the past few years. Typically, when Crown post offices are closed they reach some kind of agreement with a local retailer to install a counter that continues to provide a service in that area. That has been proposed in many of these cases, particularly in relation to WH Smith in many areas, including mine in Wigan.

These plans have aroused considerable local opposition in many of those areas. In Bury, where the local MP James Frith has been campaigning, and in Oldham, where a petition by Jim McMahon, Debbie Abrahams and Angela Rayner has attracted 1,700 signatures in eight weeks. Concerns that have been raised include loss of jobs, loss of accessibility because many of the customers of Crown post offices are older and require better



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access requirements than are being offered, and loss of services. Concerns have also been raised about the viability of the proposals, given that a number of WH Smith branches themselves are potentially earmarked for closure as well. At the recent all-party parliamentary group for post offices, which was very well attended, these concerns were raised with the Post Office but no satisfactory answers were forthcoming.

You will know that in towns across the country, high streets are under considerable pressure. One of the many concerns about the closure of Crown post offices is that they are often flagship post offices that act as a destination to the town centre for many people who then stay and use other shops and facilities. My own Crown post office in Wigan has stood on that site for 134 years and is one of the critical anchors of that high street, which is struggling along with many others.

There is a real concern among many MPs who have signed this form, and also the Members who have signed an early-day motion on the subject, that this could set in train a spiral of store closures and derelict buildings on our local high streets. In addition, MPs have raised concerns that many of the banks that have closed in town centres over recent years have moved their services into post offices, and we do not believe that the loss of those facilities has been adequately considered or would be adequately met by one counter in a WH Smiths down the road.

The EDM tabled on this topic by Jo Stevens MP has attracted 38 signatures so far, the APPG on post offices was very well attended, the issue dominated the recent business questions in the main Chamber and it has been the subject of many written parliamentary questions in recent weeks as well. However, there has been very little opportunity for the House to consider the impact of these closures. There was one 30-minute Westminster Hall debate about a post office closure in North Yorkshire recently, and there was an Adjournment debate specifically on the subject of rural post offices, although many of the earmarked closures are not in rural areas.

Previous closures have seen very little scrutiny, and we still do not have firm dates from the Post Office on when the consultation process will begin. The consultation process typically lasts six weeks, and we have had an indication that the intention is to begin some of that consultation in January, although we do not yet know how it will be conducted. Given that the Post Office is owned in its entirety by the Government, we are very keen to make sure that the House has sufficient time to scrutinise the impact of what might be a fairly major set of decisions.

Chair: Thank you very much. Does anyone have any questions?

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** Lisa, in terms of the application, you will not have heard—because you have not been here for a while—that we have had no time in the Chamber for eight weeks. It will now be nine and probably 10 with the way business is going. We have a queue of debates for the Chamber, which are obviously on motions that are divisible. As your application is for a general debate, you would be looking, even with a



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following wind, at getting a debate in the Chamber at the end of February.

Equally, you have ticked the boxes for 90 minutes and three hours in Westminster Hall, and also the Thursday and Tuesday boxes. The last day for posting is 20 December, and we could offer you 20 December for a Westminster Hall debate. Would that be suitable?

Lisa Nandy: I am going to say no, only because one thing you will have noticed on the form is that I have not yet gathered all the signatures of the MPs who signed the early-day motion. Some are Front Benchers, so they cannot sign, although they would be interested in participating in a debate. However, for obvious reasons, people's energies and attention are currently diverted elsewhere, and it has been quite hard to catch people over the last couple of weeks.

Like everybody else, my concern is that, given the centrality of this issue to people's constituencies, MPs be given the chance to be there if they are directly affected. I think I could do a lot of damage to a lot of MPs from different political parties were I to agree to a debate at relatively short notice with everything else that is going on.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** The other alternative is potentially 10 January, which is in the first week back. Given that you were talking about consultations and so on, would that be more suitable?

Lisa Nandy: Yes.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** If you get those extra speakers, would you want a three-hour debate, rather than a 90-minute debate?

Lisa Nandy: It would be preferable, but the absolutely crucial thing from our point of view is that there is an opportunity to scrutinise and to draw attention to what is happening. I appreciate that the Committee is under a lot of pressure with the time you have been allocated, so time is the key thing. Three hours would be very helpful, but I obviously understand the constraints around the Chamber. Westminster Hall would be more than acceptable.

Chair: Okay. Anyone else? In that case, thank you very much, Lisa, and I wish you a happy Christmas as well. That concludes our public deliberations. We will now go into private session.

Lisa Nandy: Thank you.