

Backbench Committee

Oral evidence: Backbench Business Committee 05 02 19, HC 0

Tuesday 5 Feb 2019

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Patricia Gibson; David Linden; Nigel Mills; Jess Phillips; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-56

Witnesses

I: Dame Cheryl Gillan and Jim Shannon

II: Tonia Antoniazzi

III: Jim Shannon

IIII: Jim Shannon

IIIII: Mrs Anne Main, Tim Loughton, Lucy Powell and Will Quince

IIIIII: Alex Norris

IIIIIII: David Linden and Mary Glendon

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



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Dame Cheryl Gillan and **Jim Shannon** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have seven applications in front of us this afternoon, so we would welcome people being concise in their application statements. First up, we have Cheryl Gillan, aided and abetted by our season ticket holder Jim Shannon, on the progress of services for people with autism and their families, and what more needs to be **done**. Cheryl, over to you.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Mr Mearns, thank you very much. I think I have a supporting cast behind me as well. May I first of all thank you and the Committee for hearing this application for a debate? You will not be unfamiliar with the fact that I have the privilege of chairing the all-party parliamentary group on autism, and have done for some time. It is a group that is well supported, across parties throughout this House. Awareness of autism has been gaining ground over the past few years, in no small part thanks to the work of many Members across all the parties, who have put a lot into it.

World Autism Awareness Day is coming up. This is an annual request that I try to put before the Committee. It is an internationally recognised day taking place on 2 April every year. It is a day on which we encourage the public to take part in World Autism Awareness Week, which is a full seven days where people across the UK take part in a whole range of activities to highlight autism, and many Members will have activities going on in their own constituencies.

I think this year it is particularly important, and I was hoping that we could apply for a debate to take place before World Autism Awareness Week, to give it maximum publicity, on either 21 or 28 March for your consideration. It is also the 10th anniversary this year of the Autism Act, which is still the only disability-specific piece of legislation that we have in the UK. I was privileged to bring it in as a private Member's Bill, but again with good cross-party help. It was taken through the other place by a Labour Member of the House of Lords, so there is good cross-party support for improving the situation for people with autism.

The sort of thing that we would want to highlight is the lack of public understanding of autism, because although more than 99.5% of people in the UK have heard of autism, only about 16% of autistic people and their families think that the public actually understand autism in any meaningful way. We are trying to bridge that gap, which I think is really important.

There are still lengthy waits for diagnosis, which I think every Member of Parliament will be familiar with. We are looking sometimes at two or three years, and we know that early diagnosis opens the door to the sort of assistance that people and families need. There is, of course, an autism employment gap, which really needs highlighting, because although disabled people are being taken off the unemployment register, people with autism are disproportionately being taken off it less than other people with disabilities.

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We have done some work on the all-party parliamentary group that shows that, sadly, the education system in England is not necessarily performing at an optimum level for children with autism. I think we need to push at that, although I was very glad that last year we achieved an autism module in initial teacher training, which I think means that the next generation of teachers coming through will have much more awareness of autism.

Lastly, because I know you want me to be brief, Mr Mearns, I think it is fair to say that we have all been alarmed by the recent news articles, which I think have been very powerful and very distressing, about the appalling situation faced by autistic people who have been stuck in inappropriate assessment and treatment units.

There have been investigations by leading newspapers, whether it has been *The Mail on Sunday* or *The Times*, or Sky News and others, and they have revealed what I consider to be distressing stories of absolutely unnecessary use of seclusion, restraint and over-medication. There was recently a piece in *The Mail on Sunday* that shed light on the tragic case of an autistic teenager who took her own life after she was locked up in a care unit meant for psychiatric patients.

I think this needs airing. We cannot give it enough airtime, if you like, because in a civilised society we should be providing much better services, and much better help and assistance to these individuals and their families. In December 2018, the National Autistic Society published a report called "Beyond Transforming Care", and that highlighted the increase in the number of autistic people who are inpatients in mental health hospitals, when it should have decreased.

My application is supported by many colleagues. The names I have at the moment are Joan Ryan, Stephen Twigg, Huw Merriman, Sir Bernard Jenkin, Ronnie Cowan, Neil Gray, Carol Monaghan, Paul Williams, Thangam Debbonaire, and others have indicated to me orally that they are interested in participating. I am very grateful to my colleagues who have indicated their support here today. I do hope, Mr Mearns, that we will be looked on favourably for this debate.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Jim, have you anything to add?

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Could I just add that we are asking for a three-hour debate on the Floor of the House?

Jim Shannon: This first came to my attention back in my previous job as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998, when we had Autism NI, which was set up through the Assembly. I'm very aware of the issues back home in my constituency. There are issues of health and education. It is about assessment and proper education for those with autism, so that they can adjust better. It is about the pressures on families. It is very often about filling in DLA and PIP forms for children and adults.

Dame Cheryl: Cheryl is right that we need to raise awareness. The stories in the press in the past few weeks have lifted that level of awareness. It is also

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time that we discussed those things in the Chamber in the light of new evidence, which is shocking, to say the least. It has had a great effect on many people, so I fully support Dame Cheryl.

- Q3 **Chair:** Thank you. Any questions? The only thing I was wondering about was the title of the debate. Could we sub-edit that so it is a bit shorter to go on to the Order Paper, if and when we can gain the time to put on the debate?

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Mr Mearns, I would be delighted if you edited it as you see fit, even if it is called "World Autism Awareness Week" or something like that.

- Q4 **Patricia Gibson:** The only thing I was going to say was that we have been very backed up for Chamber time. I presume you want it on the Floor of the House, rather than Westminster Hall, because that gives it more gravitas and weight, even though it does not have a divisible motion.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The topic is of interest to every Member of Parliament. We estimate that every MP has about 1,000 individuals in their constituency who may be on the autistic spectrum and require help. It is a subject better suited to the Floor of the House. I have to say, Mr Mearns, that if I could be granted it only in Westminster Hall, I would take it in Westminster Hall, but I think it is a subject of great significance and, therefore, would lend itself better to the Floor of the House. That is just my opinion; it is up to the Committee to decide.

- Q5 **Chair:** We try to flag up with the Leader of the House what we consider to be time-sensitive applications, such as a commemoration day or anniversary. We will do that very thing with this application, Dame Cheryl.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I am most grateful.

Tonia Antoniazzi made representations.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Thank you, Chair and Committee, for hearing my request for a Back-Bench debate to celebrate St David's Day. There is a lot of cross-party support from Welsh MPs who are keen to secure another debate. Last year, we were hit by the weather and we had a delayed debate. I think there is a history, prior to the establishment of the Backbench Business Committee, of an annual debate. I feel it is important that we continue to celebrate the culture and heritage of Wales.

More importantly, as Wales is devolved, we need to discuss the many issues that are close to our hearts. We want an open floor to discuss those issues, because we want to show how well we work with the Welsh Assembly and we want to be able to discuss the needs of Wales. Currently there are a number of very big issues around rail. Wales has 12% of the rail infrastructure, yet 2% of the investment, and we want a fairer share. We need to raise issues around communication between the Government and the Welsh Assembly.

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It is an important day for Welsh MPs to discuss a wide range of issues pertinent to our constituents and to Wales as part of the United Kingdom, particularly in light of Brexit. I will not keep you any longer, because I know that time is of the essence, but I will just mention some of the people who have given me their names. Albert Owen is a main signatory. Other signatories include Anna McMorrin, Carolyn Harris and Jo Stevens from Labour; Liz Saville Roberts and Ben Lake from Plaid Cymru; Chris Davies, David T. C. Davies and Glyn Davies from the Conservatives; and Alistair Carmichael from the Lib Dems. The debate is of interest to all Members of Parliament, who would have the opportunity to take part. Would you like a date?

Q6 **Chair:** A date? I was assuming 28 February.

Tonia Antoniazzi: That would be perfect.

Chair: Given that St David's day is the day after.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Absolutely.

Q7 **Chair:** Can I just double check with you, has Wales annexed Orkney and Shetland?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I think that devolved issues matter to us all and it is a good opportunity for us to discuss it across parties.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

Q8 **Jess Phillips:** I was also going to ask if you wanted a specific date. You have selected a three-hour debate and a 90-minute debate. I am looking at the list of speakers. Apparently to be a Conservative and be Welsh, your surname has to be Davies.

Tonia Antoniazzi: They like diversity in the Conservative party.

Jess Phillips: Are they from the same family? You are going to need more than 90 minutes.

Tonia Antoniazzi: We are going to need three hours. I would request a three-hour debate.

Chair: I am glad that you agreed with 28 February, because I did flag that up with the Leader of the House at business questions last Thursday.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I obviously was not paying too much attention. I do apologise.

Chair: Thank you very much for your application.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Thank you.

Jim Shannon made representations

Chair: The season ticket is being well used this afternoon. Next up is Jim Shannon with the cost of unhealthy housing to the national health service. Jim, over to you.

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Jim Shannon: Mr Chairman, Committee members, this is something that I want to bring for a debate in the House. I am the chair of the APPG for healthy homes and buildings. We have just done a full inquiry and delivered a white paper. There are many recommendations in that white paper. You have it in front of you. Healthy homes contribute to better educational attainment, higher workplace productivity, reduced emissions, lower energy bills and a lower carbon footprint.

The cost of unhealthy housing to the NHS also came up in the inquiry, and that is also very important. The title of the APPG contains the word "healthy", so that is the reason we are asking for this debate. Poor housing in the United Kingdom has contributed greatly to health issues. We have tried to raise awareness of that with the Minister, Kit Malthouse, and with the Government directly.

Those who have signed up to participate in the debate come from all parties. We are seeking a 90-minute debate. The effects of poor housing in the UK are estimated to cost the NHS some £2.5 billion per annum. Therefore, as believers in early diagnosis in order to save money later, we feel that this debate has not been aired before, as far as I am aware. We feel it is important enough to warrant a response from the Minister. It will also give him a chance to respond to the white paper, which we have sent to him, and the recommendations in the last few pages.

Q9 **Chair:** Who would you be looking for as the answering Department? Would you be looking for Communities and Local Government or for Health?

Jim Shannon: I think it probably has to be CLG for this one. Although it has to do with health, the responsibility for housing falls within CLG. It will be something that we ask in the debate—how the Minister will take forward, in conjunction with the Health Department, the real responsibility for housing and the design of housing.

You will probably be of the same vintage as me, Mr Mearns. When we were younger, we didn't have full-blown heating in the house and the windows were probably draughty, but we survived very well. Society today is different. A house almost has to be totally draught-proof. The heating in the house has to be running at probably 30°, which has the sweat running off your brow. But the fact is that we need to be sensible in how we do houses. We have so many new houses being built, but the problem seems to be that the new houses being built are not done to a standard that addresses the issue of health as well. I think that the debate is an opportunity to impress on the Minister not just the health issues, but the issue of how houses are designed, how they are built for the future, and how to address the issues in the white paper.

Q10 **Patricia Gibson:** Jim, you have a lot of names for 90 minutes. I don't know whether that is an issue for you—whether you are expecting them all to speak. The other thing that I want to say to you is this. Given what you have said about the white paper and the issues that you have outlined as needing to be addressed—this is just me being curious—I am

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surprised that you are not asking for a substantive motion, a divisible motion, to call on the Government to do something.

Jim Shannon: Those are very wise words, Tricia, but I think we are probably at the stage where we want the Minister to have a chance to look over the issue and respond. That doesn't mean that I will not come back again—that would be a surprise, wouldn't it?—and perhaps ask for something that is divisible, but I am a person who likes to bring people along with me and therefore I suggest that I would probably ask the Minister to consider what his thoughts are, then act accordingly.

Nigel Mills: Jim, you know this process probably better than we do, but the easiest time we have to offer you is a 90-minute Westminster Hall slot on a Tuesday. Ironically, 5 March does have Health and Social Care and MHCLG answering, so whichever one of those—

Chair: That date has been changed since this went to print, Nigel.

Q11 **Nigel Mills:** Has it? I shouldn't have been given the one with that date. But Jim, would you take 90 minutes on a Tuesday rather than —

Jim Shannon: I certainly would take a Tuesday—absolutely, yes. If that is available—this is not time-limited; I can fit it in anytime—obviously, I would be very pleased with that.

Q12 **Chair:** The change in the date means that MHCLG will be answering on Tuesday 19 February, which would have been the recess week but isn't, as it were.

Jim Shannon: I am happy to take it whenever it's on; thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much, Jim.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q13 **Chair:** The next applicant this afternoon is Mr Jim Shannon. Jim, on this occasion you are asking for a debate on banning the consumption of dog meat in the United Kingdom. And dog meat doesn't mean dog food; it means food made from dogs.

Jim Shannon: It means dogs as meat. The reason why I have brought this application forward is that the World Dog Alliance came to the House and did a number of presentations and receptions. I was not aware, to be truthful, that although it is illegal to sell dogs for consumption, for meat, in the UK, it is not illegal to eat dogs for meat in the UK. So we have a query. This was brought to my attention, as it was brought to the attention of other MPs. Quite a few MPs have signed the early-day motion that we put down some time ago.

I have had dogs all my life. My dogs are pets. The dogs probably eat better than I eat—that's the truth. That is not disrespectful to my wife, by the way; I just say that very quickly.

Jess Phillips: You're not going to eat her, either.

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Jim Shannon: Dogs are well treated in our home; we have always had a dog.

I think it is obscene, gross and immoral that someone could, technically speaking, cook a dog and eat it themselves and they would not be doing anything illegal, but if it were to be sold in a shop—I am not being facetious; I have been quite honest about the issue, because I feel strongly about it, as do many other hon. Members who have put their name to the application. They recognise the loophole in the law.

I am aware that the eating of dogs happens in other countries, such as China and Vietnam. In the far east, it seems to be normal and some 30 million dogs have been slaughtered. A number of concerned charities are working on that, of which the World Dog Alliance is one, and they are pushing for the UK to show some moral leadership.

In December 2018, the USA passed a ban on the practice through provisions in their farm Bill. When we have a country the size of the USA that recognises the issue and takes the steps legally to prevent it happening, I think it is time that we in the United Kingdom look at the same thing.

Let us be honest: it is a simple thing to ask for. We should not have to have a debate on the matter—it should be simple—but we want to remind our Government here in the United Kingdom that it could be included in upcoming provisions on animal welfare.

The background information is that many hon. Members have supported the campaign, such as Royston Smith, Sir David Amess, Dr Lisa Cameron, Dr David Drew and many others. The only way we ever address real issues and bring them to the attention of the Government is through Back-Bench debates, which bring the Minister to the House to respond. It would remind the Minister of the importance of the issue for this nation of dog lovers—not dog eaters.

Q14 **Patricia Gibson:** You said that it is illegal to sell dogs to be eaten, but it is not illegal to actually eat them. Is there evidence—I genuinely do not know the answer to this question—that that is an issue in the UK and that dogs are being eaten?

Jim Shannon: I am not sure if I could honestly say that there is, but we want to do what the USA has done. They have closed the loophole to prevent it happening.

We are a multicultural society. People have different outlooks on life and different ways of looking at things. I am conscious that we have many people in our society who do not have the same—I am being careful what I say—moral code as we have and therefore may do things differently.

What we would do is close the loophole. The World Dog Alliance and many other charities are of the same opinion. Many MPs have added their name to this. There are long-standing MPs who also recognise the issues. We

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want to make sure that it does not happen. If we close the loophole, we will make sure it never happens again—like the USA.

Q15 **Chair:** Would the answering Department be Defra?

Jim Shannon: Defra, yes.

Q16 **Nigel Mills:** Jim, this is your third application today. Where would you place this in the order of priority for finding time, if we were struggling to allocate time for all these debates? Is this your least important compared with autism and healthy housing?

Jim Shannon: They are all important. Whatever order the Committee decides to put them in, I will be happy. If that's the way it is, that's the way it is. I am more than happy; thank you.

Q17 **Jess Phillips:** As somebody who lives in an incredibly diverse area, I have never come across anybody eating dogs. Maybe we also have to have consideration for some of the creatures that we eat that people around the world consider to be sacred, and not necessarily call it a moral judgment. Indian people would tell us that we were immoral for eating cows, for example. I do not think it is to do with morality, is all I would say.

Jim Shannon: We will agree to differ.

Chair: Thank you very much, Jim.

Mrs Anne Main, Tim Loughton, Lucy Powell and Will Quince made representations.

Q18 **Chair:** Moving swiftly on, the next application is from a galaxy of stars on school funding. *[Interruption.]*

Mrs Main: Apologies for my phone going off: it was my husband tracking me down. As you can see, you almost have the full quota of lead Members. Rushanara Ali has sent her apologies; she would have liked to be here, but she is busy.

I want to say only a few words, because I know the interest in this debate is huge. Since putting in the numbers, we have had Matt Western, Kemi Badenoch, James Frith, Caroline Lucas, Fiona Bruce, Bambos Charalambous and Priti Patel adding to those. That means we now have support from Conservative, Labour, DUP, Green and Liberal Democrat Members of Parliament. There has been a Westminster Hall debate, which I took part in. There is no doubt—we can argue all this again once the debate comes along—that more money has gone into education. However, for many of us from both sides of the House, there is a real concern about what the education authorities are being asked to provide for that money and whether what we have going forward is sustainable.

The pressure on Members of Parliament has been huge from the fair funding group; from parents, who are writing to us in droves letting us know that they are being asked by their schools to provide more and more; from parents of special educational needs children, who are saying

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that they do not feel they are getting the additional help and support they need; and from parents of sixth form students, who are saying that they have been appalled. This is crossing all levels, including nursery school funding. I am sure some Members might take the opportunity to dive into university funding, but principally, I am looking at the school funding formula.

My ask is that we would get the next spending review and that we could put in a special plea to say that schools have done all they can with the resources they have got. I would like to leave it to my colleagues here to put their points, because I really believe this needs to be on the Floor of the House. I really believe there is a cross-party willingness to say that if there is money to be had—on top of the generous allowances to be made—we have got to recognise that the voices are so uniform in this and that this is not something that has been made up. It is not a party political point-scoring exercise. On that point, I will hand over to Lucy and then I think everyone else would like to have a few words.

Lucy Powell: Chair, you and I both sit on the Education Select Committee, so you will appreciate this is a massive issue.

Q19 **Chair:** Never crossed my mind!

Lucy Powell: I know you sit on these things independently, but this is a huge issue with many different constituency and area issues, as well as the national issue. I was delighted that Anne and others asked me to co-sponsor this debate as I think it is important we make it a cross-party rather than a party political point. It would lend itself extremely well to a good bit of Chamber time.

We can see, just from the debate today, how oversubscribed these kinds of debates are. We had the maintained nursery schools debate last week. Thank you very much to the Committee for granting that to us. That is a very small sub-set of this application, but even so, we had 13 substantive speeches last Thursday with many other interventions and many other colleagues taking part.

That gives an indication, probably covering 5% of this, of just how many people would speak. It is really important, if possible, that we get this debate in good time, ahead of all the jostling around the comprehensive spending review—or is it just called "spending review" now? As you know from the Select Committee, we are trying to make sure on a cross-party basis that education funding is prioritised in that review.

Will Quince: I declare an interest: my wife is a teacher. I probably have to declare that one.

We know this issue affects every single constituency across the country. It would be a widely supported debate, and, as Lucy rightly points out, we do somewhat sing with one voice on this particular issue. We know that there is more money going into schools, but we also know that the pressures on schools are more than they have ever been. We are all getting letters home in the post, via our children, about the pressures schools face and,

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collectively, we want to make the case to the Government for increased funding in education because ultimately, we all want the same thing. We want equality of opportunity, and that starts with education.

This would be a very popular debate. Given the significance and importance of the issue, it needs to be in the main Chamber.

Tim Loughton: I echo all that. I am slightly loath to put my name to this, given that my debates always get delayed and delayed. I eventually got it on children's social care.

This is a question not only of the funding issue; it's the funding formula, on which things have happened but still not sufficiently for many people. It is also not just a question of teacher numbers and class sizes, but all the additional services that schools have increasingly been called on to offer in the absence of other local authority services—mental health, counselling and safeguarding—which they are also increasingly under pressure to try to maintain.

Then there is the special educational needs side to it, so I have no doubt that there will be a time limit on contributions to such a debate, such will be the interest in it. We just need to keep up the pressure ahead of the spending review to get this recognised.

Mrs Main: May I also add something that has been in the papers recently? I have a number of parents in St Albans who home school and I know that is quite popular. What concerns me is that I have a number of parents who home school because they cannot get the educational support that they need in their school, so they feel that they have been failed by the school system. It is not an act of choice.

The despair that some parents are feeling at not being offered that level of support, whether the child has behavioural or educational needs, is something that dovetails into this question. If we are going to look at home schooling, which I understand is part of a Government review at the moment, we cannot take it in isolation without looking at why some schools are failing—not intentionally, perhaps, but because they cannot deliver on the needs of all the children in their care.

Q20 **Jess Phillips:** I do not doubt that you would fill the Chamber and that you would have time limits, but you have only asked for three hours. I know time is limited and you have had your fingers burned with the many delayed debates, but do you think that there would be room to have a six-hour debate on this? I think almost most Members of Parliament would want to come and speak.

Mrs Main: We are all being asked to help support the Prime Minister, and there seems to be money around; I do not know whether there is or not, but now is the time.

Q21 **Jess Phillips:** My son's school is going to have to start shutting at 12.30 on a Friday because of cuts, so maybe at least she might offer to pay for that childcare for me. She has offered me no such thing to date.

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Mrs Main: The point I am making is that the goodwill of the House is required at the moment, and if this is something that brings us all together, what better thing to expend some largesse on?

Lucy Powell: I think if there was a six-hour debate going, we would fill it.

Mrs Main: May I plead for it to not be in recess week? I think an awful lot of colleagues who are on here—

Q22 **Jess Phillips:** With children.

Mrs Main: Yes. They may find that their time is constrained.

Q23 **Patricia Gibson:** I was just going to make the same point. Even with a six-hour debate, with all the shenanigans that happen on a Thursday with urgent questions and statements and all sorts, even if you got a six-hour debate you would be on a very strict time limit.

Tim Loughton: Let's make it two days!

Patricia Gibson: I would ask for six hours if I were you.

Q24 **Chair:** We need to bear in mind that, with everyone else today putting in applications—it is delightful to have seven applications before us—prior to Christmas we had an eight-week hiatus when we did not have any time in the Chamber at all. Since then, we have managed to get a day a week, but we are not guaranteed any. The time that we get is at the discretion of the Government themselves, so we do have to bear that in mind.

We are still asking for applications for estimates day debates, and if there are supplementary estimates published by the Department for Education, this might fit neatly into that particular bracket. The thing is, though, we understand that the estimates themselves for the different Departments have not yet been published, although they should have been. If there are supplementary estimates published by the Department for Education, we could quickly convert this into an estimates day debate, but we are not completely sure when that would be.

Lucy Powell: Did we not get an education one of those last time?

Q25 **Jess Phillips:** We did, yes.

Lucy Powell: Okay. That is fine; it is up to your discretion, Chair. That is marvellous.

Q26 **Chair:** That is true, Lucy, but it seems to me that this would really fit into that bracket, in order to get a day.

Mrs Main: The timing of this debate is important, because we do not wish to miss that funding review, but also because I had the privilege of being part of the last debate of last year, on the Rohingya. Despite the huge interest, there were only about 10 Members in the Chamber. That is why I asked for it not to be in the recess. It was an excellent debate, but I just think this has to be centre stage. It is probably the biggest thing for parents, if we were to have any form of election in the next couple of

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years. There are letters home to every school saying they are not getting enough into their education. We need to take notice.

Chair: I should actually declare an interest myself: I am not only a member of the Education Committee, which I sit on with Lucy, but I am still the Chair of Governors of a two form entry primary school in the middle of Gateshead, so I have an interest from that perspective. Thank you all very much.

Alex Norris made representations

Chair: Next up is Alex Norris, whose application this afternoon is on the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Macpherson report on the Stephen Lawrence inquiry.

Q27 **Alex Norris:** Like many people, I grew up with the Stephen Lawrence case. I was nine years old when Stephen Lawrence was murdered, and it feels like something I have followed through the course of my life.

I was just saying to Mary Glendon that it seems unthinkable that the murder happened 26 years ago. We are now coming up to the 20th anniversary of the Macpherson report, which was published on 24 February 1999. Unlike those who made representations before me, my request is for a debate in that recess week commencing 18 February.

The case is important historically as it was of extraordinary national and international interest. The Macpherson report is remembered for talking about the Met police and its institutional racism, but it actually made a significant and long list of recommendations, for which there is no way of holding subsequent Governments to account as to whether they have been met. The debate would be a mechanism to talk to the Home Office about whether things have changed 20 years later. We could celebrate the progress made in certain areas and look at what might come next. It is important for that reason.

It also has important echoes down the years to today. One issue often talked about at length in this place is knife crime. The case has significant parallels to that. There is also stop and search. I think it is important that we publicly discuss stop and search. I say this pointing a finger at myself as much as anybody else, but sometimes our conversation about stop and search is a bit dishonest. When we face a room of people angry about disproportionality in stop and search, we say yes, it is wrong that a black male is four and half times more likely than his white counterpart to be stopped. However, when someone has been stabbed and dies in our constituency, we are keen for there to be lots of stops and searches, and we ask the police how we can get knives off our streets. To have a proper, adult conversation on that in the Chamber would be good for us and for those who watch.

The case also has parallels for policing confidence and police recruitment—lots of us talk about having a police force that reflects our community. Again, this might be something that happened 26 years ago—the report was published 20 years ago—but I think it is very relevant to today.

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Why now? The date makes it an obvious time. I have asked the Home Office, as has the Home Affairs Committee, what plans it has to mark or commemorate the anniversary of the report. They do not have plans. They intend to focus on Stephen Lawrence Day, which is 22 April. However, we have engaged with campaigners and the family, and they want that to be themed around education and young people, which is their priority. I do not think that holding the debate off until then would be suitable, because I do not think that the family want to spend that day talking about the Macpherson report, so the recess week would be a better time to hold it.

As you may have seen, I had Yvette Cooper and Vernon Coaker with me—they had to disappear but both are keen supporters—and a good, broad coverage of hon. Members have indicated interest, including Clive Betts, Ben Bradley, Tom Brake, Janet Daby, Stephen Doughty, Rosie Duffield, Clive Efford, the Member for the area where Stephen was murdered and a campaigner for the inquiry to be set up in the first place, Preet Kaur Gill, Harriet Harman, David Lammy, Douglas Ross, Jim Shannon and Tom Tugendhat. I think that is a good, broad range. I also did not list Sir Peter Bottomley, who was Stephen's Member of Parliament. He indicated his support but does not think he is likely to be present on that day.

As there is broad interest, I think it would be a very good debate. It is important because of its context and because of what a poignant moment it was in the history of British policing, and its relevance today is still strong. It would be of value for us to spend our time on it.

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

Q28 **Bob Blackman:** One quick question. I think 24 February is a Sunday. We do not yet know whether there will be opportunities during the so-called recess week, but there will obviously be the week after. Would you take a debate during the so-called recess week, if it is offered? In particular, because you have asked potentially for a 90-minute debate, could you take an end-of-day debate, if that comes up as an opportunity?

Alex Norris: I ticked for 90 minutes as well because I think this should happen in some form. I would not let good be the enemy of great, or whatever the expression is.

Q29 **Chair:** Not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Alex Norris: I am not modelling perfection myself.

Q30 **Chair:** I am not one for often quoting Michael Gove. That is a phrase he does use.

Alex Norris: Oh, is that one of his? I might delete that one from my mind.

I think the longer would be better because there would be a lot of interest, but I would rather it happened than not at all. As for "recess week", if there was a sense that colleagues were not after them, I would be very happy to have one of those.

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Q31 **Bob Blackman:** The alternative is potentially taking the Westminster Hall debate on 28 February, where you would get a three-hour debate if you wanted.

Alex Norris: I am happy to leave this in the hands of more experienced colleagues in this room, but I don't think the optics of Westminster Hall would work for this debate. Normally, I would bite your hand off for Westminster Hall for more time and would think that a good trade. But, given the significance and the seriousness of the issue, I think people would wonder why it was not in the Chamber.

David Linden and Mary Glindon made representations.

David Linden: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee. Two weeks ago Santander landed a major blow on our constituencies, with plans to close 140 branches up and down the UK. If implemented, the planned closures could put at risk up to 1,200 jobs and will leave many Santander customers without a branch in their community.

It does, of course, follow a pattern of many banks closing branches in our communities, with them suggesting that customers prefer to do banking online or by telephone. We know that that is not always the case, particularly for constituents who are elderly or from vulnerable communities.

In the case of my own local branch at Parkhead Forge, there is a very high footfall. I think there is a fairly clear correlation between the branches that Santander want to close and areas of high multiple deprivation. Last week when I met with Santander bosses, they were suggesting that they are putting all their stock into post offices. I think all of us in this room will know that the post office network has been incredibly fragile. I see that in my own constituency where one post office has been closed since 2017 because no one is willing to take it over.

In bringing this application before the Committee, we are seeking a Backbench Business debate to bring into sharp focus how illogical and ill-thought out these planned closures are. It will have an incredibly detrimental impact on our communities.

As it stands, 127 Members of Parliament will lose Santander branches in their constituencies; 102 of those are Back Benchers. Kirstene Hair's constituency of Angus is losing two branches. You will see from the application that there is very strong cross-party support for the debate and we would be grateful if the Committee approved it.

We are keen to have at least three hours, given the number of people affected. I don't think we are particularly precious about whether it is the Chamber or Westminster Hall. The important thing is to ensure that the issue is aired in the House of Commons in some way, and we can get people from Santander along to listen to the pleas to save our Santander. Mary will have other things to say as well.

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Mary Glendon: The issue for me—and the Chair knows the area where I live—is that I have three town centres and this will reduce one of my town centres to two banks. We have made the point about older people, and there are other people who do not like to use online banking for security reasons.

(The North Shields Chamber of Trade and Commerce pointed out to me the message that they feel is being sent out: big national companies are saying, "We have had enough from your town. We don't need you any more. Your customers can go into Newcastle city centre or five miles away in Sir Alan Campbell's constituency." (That takes the footfall away from our town centres apart from anything else. Businesses rely on these banks to bank their money daily. There are endless things that these closures affect.

There is something else—we have to send out a message to Santander. It is all very well to tell the Minister that they are very sorry and it is a difficult decision, but the decision has been made without taking the customers fully into account. They have virtually been told—that is not consultation. As parliamentarians, we need to call them to account as soon as possible.

Q32 **Mr Wragg:** I have sympathy for the application. The number of branches that have closed in my constituency is considerably higher with different banks. However, I can almost tell you verbatim what the Minister's reply will be, because there have been a number of such debates. What is your specific ask? Do you have a motion in mind that you would like the House to consider or are you looking for a Westminster Hall debate?

David Linden: We have put in for a general debate, "That this House has considered", not a divisible motion. You are right that Ministers have been quite reticent. I certainly asked a question about this at Treasury questions last week and the Minister put very much the same emphasis on it as Santander while saying that it is an issue for the post offices. I think there is a wider issue with post offices. You might find colleagues going into that debate as well.

It is not the case that Ministers can wash their hands of this. If the UK Government are serious about standing up and protecting the high street and local communities, we want to hear a ringing endorsement of the campaign to save Santander branches from the Minister at the Dispatch Box. That is what I look forward to from that debate.

Patricia Gibson: I am also sympathetic to the application. The reason my name is not on that application is there is nothing left to close in my constituency. Banks are becoming emboldened about these mass closures because they have sat back and watched banks that we own being allowed to do this to us. If we do not own them, we will have even less influence and less control.

Regardless of what the Minister might or might not say—and we do not know, because he has not said it yet—even if we know he is going to rubbish the whole thing, our job is to be a voice for our constituents, as

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you say, David, to air their concerns and grievances and their sense of injustice.

The underlying point is that the push has to be for Government to somehow nail down some social responsibility to our towns, villages and cities. This is about financial inclusion. The debate is well worth having, even if we know what the response will be.

Q33 **Nigel Mills:** What timing do you want for this debate? I know you said that the closures commence in March. Are you looking for a debate before those start?

David Linden: I am fairly relaxed about the timing. For example, my own branch is not due to close until June, I think. I know for some colleagues it is November. As long as we know there is a date. I don't know what date Mary's closure is.

Mary Glendon: It is May for mine.

David Linden: I think it has to take place in the next week or two, put it that way. I am very conscious having sat through the Jim Shannon show that there are a lot of applications. As long as we have a date, we can work towards that. The important thing is that Members of Parliament put down a marker to Santander that we will not sit back and let them abuse our communities in the way that they plan to do. We are fairly flexible on dates.

Q34 **Bob Blackman:** I am sympathetic towards this debate as well. I have written to the chief executive saying that all the customers who transferred from HSBC, when it closed down in my constituency, to Santander, will no doubt switch to Barclays. That is okay, because there is a branch right next door. But if Barclays close, where do customers go?

Would you accept a debate during the so-called recess week, if a date is available? We do not know yet, but we may have to fill the time.

David Linden: We would not have any problem with that. Mary is right, it would give us something to do. It seems from what we are hearing that the "recess week" is largely going to be SI Committees, and also the House is going to be sitting.

Q35 **Chair:** Which answering Department would it be based in?

David Linden: I imagine that it would be the Treasury—because it is banking.

Mr Wragg: It is John Glen.

David Linden: John Glen was the Minister who responded to my question.

Q36 **Bob Blackman:** We should have a six-hour debate, because we just served on a DL with John Glen, who gave rather a long speech.

David Linden: I should also declare an interest, given that I am a Santander account holder. It is important that I place that on the record

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as well.

Q37 **Bob Blackman:** Say you will switch your account.

David Linden: I very much plan to do that. I was an RBS account holder and moved because they abandoned the community.

Q38 **Chair:** So you don't want your account nationalised?

David Linden: I'll tell them I'll get it nationalised.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time.

Before we conclude, I have one thing to mention. I have been written to by the Holocaust Educational Trust to thank us for holding the Holocaust Memorial Day debate on 24 January. I thought I would make that public.

Bob Blackman: May I put it on the record that we had a very successful debate on Equitable Life last Thursday, with no less than 35 contributors—either through speeches or interventions—as well as, obviously, the Front Bench speakers. That went extremely well.

Q39 **Chair:** Thank you for the update, Bob. That concludes our public deliberations.

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LocalTime="GMT" />

Comment [WK]: <TimeTag
ServerDate="05 February 2019"
ServerTime="15:21:12"
ServerTimeZone="15:21:12"
LocalTime="GMT" />