

Backbench Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 16 July 2019

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Nigel Mills; Alex Sobel; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-12

Representations made

[I](#): Steve McCabe

[II](#): John Howell

[III](#): Fiona Bruce, Rosie Duffield and Wera Hobhouse

Steve McCabe made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have three applications in front of us, the first of which is from Steve McCabe for a debate on the EU settlement scheme and looked-after children and care leavers. Steve, over to you.

Steve McCabe: Thanks, Chair. I should explain that I would have been accompanied by the hon. Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). As this meeting was rearranged from last week, Tim is at the Home Affairs Committee and Stuart is doing something else. This is by way of an apology, to say that I am not a Stevie-nae-mates.

The purpose of this application is relatively straightforward. As you say, it is about applying for a debate on looked-after children and care leavers in the EU settlement scheme. As Members probably know, the settlement scheme will be the largest registration programme that this country has ever seen. We are quite concerned that there is a risk that hundreds of thousands of children and young people might find themselves undocumented and therefore without legal status after the deadline. We think that risk is substantially higher with EEA looked-after children and care leavers.

It is difficult to give precise figures, but the Home Office estimates that there are currently about 5,000 EEA looked-after children, not including care leavers, who would need to be regularised through the scheme. It is an estimate, because neither central Government nor local authorities routinely collect nationality data on children in their care; I find that slightly surprising. Likewise, there is no centrally collected and publicly available data on European national care leavers, although the Government estimate that there are about 4,000 care leavers—young people up to about the age of 25—in the system.

There has been a Government pilot to try to work out how the EU settlement scheme would work. One of the things we have learned is that people involved in the pilot phase found there was quite a lot of difficulty, and sometimes insurmountable barriers and problems, when it came to youngsters associated with our care system. The Government issue guidance for local authorities to try to assist them, but local authorities argue that the guidance is not always that clear. Many local authorities have quite limited legal services departments these days, and very few have immigration specialists. The guidance says that they have to make applications on behalf of children, provided they have parental responsibility for them.

Primarily, we are talking about children who are in care under a section 31 care order. In reality, a child is “looked after” if they have been in the care of the local authority for more than 24 hours. It is a very arbitrary distinction. A 16-year-old might well be accommodated under section 20 for exactly the same kind of problems, difficulties and vulnerabilities that



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lead a 15-year-old to be placed in care under a section 31 order. In my very dim and distant past, I was once a social worker, and I have encountered exactly how that sort of thing may occur.

Some of the difficulties that we think children are going to face are the problems of producing documentation around nationality. That will be crucial to the scheme. The authorities that have tested this—Kent, Lincolnshire, Haringey, Waltham Forest and Sheffield—have all highlighted that there have been problems in obtaining identity documents.

When a child arrives in care because there has been a problem with their parents, there will not necessarily be any incentive on the part of the parents to help to provide the necessary documentation or to make things easier. The danger is that if we cannot do something to address this now, we face the prospect of very large numbers of young people becoming undocumented. This could be a Windrush-plus scandal in the years ahead.

We do not seek this debate for the purposes of confronting the Government. We realise the Government are trying to address a particular issue. We think the problem of children in the care system, looked-after children and care leavers is perhaps an element of that issue that has not been sufficiently considered. If it is possible to have a proper debate and alert Ministers to the risk that may have escaped them so far, it may be possible to intervene at a stage where we can head off a Windrush-type situation rather than have to react to it subsequently.

We are looking for something like a 90-minute debate, although we think we could sustain a three-hour debate. We have about a dozen backers who are clearly cross-party. We hope to make a bid for either the short September period when Parliament sits, or early after the recess.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** You have made your case for the debate. I have a few points about your application. First, you have ticked 90 minutes or three hours. As a Committee, we would expect, as a standard rule, 15 speakers for a three-hour debate to make sure we use the time effectively. At the moment, on your list, you have 10 speakers. That falls short of the three hours.

Equally, you have ticked the Chamber, and it is a general debate. We obviously have extreme pressure on the Chamber. Without a motion that is potentially divisible, our emphasis would be to put a general debate into Westminster Hall. There is the possibility of a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall on the day we come back in September, assuming it would be the Home Office that answered. Is that right?

Steve McCabe: The expectation is that it would be the Home Office.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** If we offered you Tuesday 3 September in Westminster Hall for 90 minutes, would that be acceptable?

Steve McCabe: My inclination is that I would accept that. Obviously, I said 90 minutes or three hours, because I do not think there would be any trouble getting more speakers. As more people become aware of what might be at stake here, this may gather quite a lot of momentum. The



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rationale for asking for the main Chamber is because this is a debate that is raised directly in response to a very big issue around the Brexit settlement, which is going to have ramifications. The point is to emphasise its significance rather than to make a—

- Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Perhaps the way we would approach this is to allocate the 90-minute slot. If you do not get the answers you would like from the Government, you could come back with a further application with a divisible motion asking the Government to do something.

Steve McCabe: I hear that, and I would be more than happy to accept that.

- Q5 **Chair:** This is not time sensitive, in terms of an anniversary or anything like that, is it?

Steve McCabe: No. The Government have piloted the scheme and it is their expectation that this is the model that will be used to deal with EU nationals resident here as Brexit progresses. We all have our views about that timescale.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We will let you know as soon as we possibly can, Steve.

John Howell made representations.

- Q6 **Chair:** John, your application this afternoon is on a national memorial to the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit.

John Howell: The Photographic Reconnaissance Unit is an overlooked and forgotten aspect of the RAF and the second world war, but it is by no means a footnote to the second world war. The nub of what I am going to say is that there needs to be a debate; I will come on to talk about the number of speakers who have indicated they would like to participate.

The unit was founded in 1939, so there is no immediate anniversary to hang this on, but it was absolutely influential in the course of the second world war. It flew from bases right across the UK, from Cornwall through Oxfordshire and my own constituency, up to Wick in Scotland, so it took in a huge amount of the UK. It was responsible for finding the Bismarck and the Tirpitz, it enabled the identification of radar installations and it helped to find the V2 sites in western Europe, so it was very influential in doing that.

Unfortunately, because the planes were light and had to fly long distances, the casualty rates were very high. Something like one third of the men who flew on those missions were killed and, because many of them were flying alone, they disappeared on their own and there was nobody to mark their graves, so they lie uncommemorated at the moment. A memorial to them is, I think, a fitting way of commemorating their activity and the enormous contribution that they made to the second world war and our victory in that.



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The number of Members who have indicated that they would like to speak in this is now just over 40. It is impossible to say how many of them will turn up and speak, but they are the 40 who we have approached and who have expressed great interest in this. It is genuinely cross-party; members of the Conservative party, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats, the DUP and the SNP have indicated that they support this move for a debate on the national memorial and on the substance of the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit.

Q7 Chair: You say it is not particularly an anniversary, but it is 80 years since it was established in 1939, isn't it?

John Howell: Yes. It is an odd number, isn't it? But it is not a distinct anniversary at the moment.

Q8 Chair: It does seem appropriate, because it is 80 years since the beginning of the second world war; why not 80 years? It would seem appropriate. But it is not time-sensitive in terms of when you would want to try to get this debate aired, is it, John? We literally have no time between now and the summer recess.

John Howell: I appreciate that. Some time after the summer recess would be a good time for this—perhaps in the two weeks in September.

Q9 Bob Blackman: That was going to be my point. Given that you have asked for either Westminster Hall or the Chamber, we have two potential slots at the moment in Westminster Hall, on the 5th or the 12th. Would you have a preference for either of those?

John Howell: I am happy to go with whatever is best for you.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much indeed.

Fiona Bruce, Rosie Duffield and Wera Hobhouse made representations.

Chair: The subject of this application is the impact of diagnosis and treatment of parental mental illness on children's outcomes.

Fiona Bruce: Thank you, Chair. We are seeking a 90-minute debate. Approximately 26 MPs are supporting this application. It is an opportunity to debate the low identification of maternal mental illness.

The National Childbirth Trust has ascertained that nearly half of new mothers' mental health problems do not get picked up by health professionals. As a result, not only is the mother suffering, but there is an impact on children's own emotional development and wellbeing. In later childhood, research has shown that the risk of depression for 16-year-olds is almost five times greater if the mother has experienced post-natal depression. Early identification can help to break these signs, as well as an inhibition of the child's emotional, social and physical development.

One reason we are keen to have this debate in the autumn is that the general medical services contract, which sets out the responsibilities of



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GPs, is reviewed in the autumn. The six-week maternal check performed by the GP, which is prescribed by NICE guidelines, sets out the GP's responsibility to do a baby check, which is mandatory. There is no such equivalent mandatory requirement for doctors to look at the mother's mental health; we feel this is something that has been missed and needs to be looked at. If we can have an opportunity in this House in the autumn to highlight the role and importance of GP post-natal checks, it might be something that could be included when the contract renegotiation comes up.

Rosie Duffield: I agree with everything that Fiona has said. This time last year I did a debate on perinatal health for mothers and the physical checks, but this follows on nicely. We often neglect potential post-natal depression. I am in touch a lot with the NCT and groups like that, and they say that it is a postcode lottery. You might get the right kind of GP picking it up, but you might not.

Interestingly, in this debate we have people who are still serving in the health service. Dr Paul Williams and Dr Rosena Allin-Khan are interested in the debate, as are other people who are serving as nurses. They are seeing it on the frontline, so it is not just anecdotal or just from NGOs, although that is obviously important.

You can see that it is a cross-party debate, and those are my favourite debates to take part in. We have a real consensus and we think we could get a proper result from putting this debate up in Westminster Hall. As Fiona said, the time sensitivity is about the GP contracts.

Wera Hobhouse: I came across this issue as a member of the all-party parliamentary group for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences. There is a powerful relationship between the mother's mental health and how, if she is not well, that will then affect the development of the child and become an adverse childhood experience that children carry throughout their lives and into adulthood.

Adverse childhood experiences mean that there is much more likelihood of low achievement and bad relationships, and ultimately ending up in criminal gangs and in prison. There are very strong links. A particular statistic from the LSE research in 2014 says that the cost of perinatal mental illness is currently £8.1 billion for every annual cohort of births, and 72% of those costs relate to the impact on the child. There is a very strong relationship between the mother's mental health and the child's mental health, and the costs that that carries into the future.

From my own experiences—we had four children—I must say that you get your baby check-up, and at the very end, as you are already out of the door, the doctor will ask you, "Are you okay?" at which point you will probably want to say, "No, I'm not." To have a dedicated check-up for the mother is very important.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** This is almost the reverse of the question that we normally have. You have 26 or 27 speakers and you have asked for 90



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minutes. After you allow for Front-Bench speakers and whoever leads off, you will probably end up with a minute and a half each, being realistic. It is your application, not ours, and sticking to 90 minutes is fine, but it will mean that there will be a lot of very unsatisfied people who either will not get the chance to speak or who will get to speak for next to no time.

Fiona Bruce: That did go through my mind, Mr Blackman. I have to say that my personal experience recently has been that, while a number of people put their names down, they do not always turn up to such debates. I think we can pretty well guarantee a well-stocked 90-minute debate, and we are not seeking to hog the requests for three hours.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** Presumably, if you go for a Tuesday debate, it would be Health and Social Care answering, would it?

Rosie Duffield: We think so, yes.

Fiona Bruce: Hopefully.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That is entirely in order, and it concludes our deliberations this afternoon.