



Petitions Committee

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Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser
Chief Executive
UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

15 June 2021

Dear Professor Dame Ottoline,

As part of its work on brain tumour and childhood cancer research in the UK, the House of Commons Petitions Committee recently held an evidence session with campaigners, research funders, researchers, and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State and relevant officials from the Department of Health and Social Care.¹

As you may be aware, in 2018 the Government announced its intention to spend £40 million over five years on brain tumour research, via the NIHR. The purpose of the Committee's evidence session was to assess progress in the UK brain tumour research environment since this date, including the impact of this funding commitment.

During the session, numerous witnesses argued that basic research funding for brain tumours should be increased, and that a lack of understanding of the basic science of brain tumours was hampering efforts to allocate clinical and translational research funding via the NIHR. Witnesses identified UKRI and the Medical Research Council as key organisations which could allocate funding for this purpose.

For example, Professor Chris Jones of the Institute of Cancer Research argued:²

There is still a real gap in funding for the basic, biological research that then forms the platform on which we build translational efforts in getting things into trial. I am not aware of huge amounts of research spend in this area, via the MRC, for example [...] I think much more [Government funding] needs to be filtered through UKRI, MRC and the basic science end of things.

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Lord Bethell, also indicated that he believed that early-stage brain tumour research and basic science "needs more resources and more support".³ We are therefore contacting you to invite you to respond to the comments of Lord Bethell, Professor Jones and our other witnesses, and to offer your perspective on this issue.

In particular, we would be especially grateful for any information you can provide on the following specific points:

¹ A transcript of this session is available to read at:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/event/4542/formal-meeting-oral-evidence-session/>

Question numbers cited below refer to the question number given in the transcript of the session.

² Q18, Q22

³ Q32

- During the session, Mike Batley suggested you plan to hold “a sandpit event that will bring together neuroscientists with oncologists”, as well as already “funding quite a few PhDs and doing a fair amount of capacity-building in this space”.⁴ Can you provide further details of the initiatives Mr Batley was referring to?
- Beyond these actions, what other funding or support are UKRI and the MRC providing for basic research relevant to brain tumours, or to help develop the research environment for brain tumour research?
- NIHR previously issued a highlight notice⁵ to encourage applications for brain tumour research via its funding programmes, and to raise awareness within the research community that NIHR was actively seeking to fund research applications in this area. Have you discussed with Government the possibility of issuing a similar targeted call on brain tumour research for UKRI funding programmes, or would you consider issuing such a notice?
- Written evidence provided to us by NIHR notes that officials from NIHR have “recently begun engaging with UKRI colleagues”, and have had “some positive discussions”⁶ – can you provide more details of these conversations and how they may impact your future work to support brain tumour research in the UK?

We would be grateful to receive your response to the points raised in this letter by no later than Thursday 8th July, to allow the Committee to consider your reply before the summer Parliamentary recess.

Please be aware we would envisage publishing your answers alongside written evidence we have taken from NIHR and other organisations in the course of our most recent work on this topic.⁷

Yours sincerely,



Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair of the Petitions Committee

⁴ Q32

⁵ <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/a-call-by-nihr-for-research-on-brain-tumours/11656>

⁶ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/26089/default/>

⁷ The written evidence we have taken so far in our work can be found at:
<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1151/brain-tumour-and-childhood-cancer-research/publications/written-evidence/>