



Thangam Debonnaire

Member of Parliament for Bristol West

December 2018

MEMBERS' REPORT—December 2018

Happy New Year!

It's been a busy December; with Brexit chaos continuing in Parliament I've been spending as much time as possible speaking to constituents about their concerns and listening to their wishes so that I can continue to represent them well in Westminster.

On a brighter note, I really enjoyed canvassing in Ashley Ward, and sharing some Christmas cheer with carol singers, postal workers and commemorating 100 years since women's votes by unveiling a blue plaque. Remembering our victories of the past gives me hope for the future in these turbulent times!

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FIGHTING TORY BREXIT CHAOS

Autumn's Brexit chaos continued into December, as [Theresa May cancelled the parliamentary vote on her Brexit deal](#) at the last minute because she knew it was bound to fail. This will now go ahead, she says, on 15th January but I am concerned she has used this delay tactic to strengthen the threat of leaving the EU with no deal for our future relationship. All forms of Brexit harm our economy, our rights and our peaceful relationships with our neighbours, but leaving with no deal is the most catastrophic.

As a Whip, I am responsible for coordinating Labour work on various committees for new laws arising



because of Brexit: fisheries, agriculture, environment and

healthcare. We've had some victories on various aspects of these Bills, but whilst these would have tangible benefits, they do not outweigh the damage of Brexit, particularly a no-deal Brexit.

I continue the challenge the government in the House of Commons on this:

- In the House of Commons on 3 December, I challenged the [Attorney General Geoffrey Cox](#) on his disregard for MPs' request to publish the full legal advice on the Brexit withdrawal agreement.
- On 10 December, I asked [the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union Stephen Barclay](#) and [the Leader of the House Andrea Leadsom](#) when they were planning to reschedule the vote on the EU withdrawal agreement—the delay is unacceptable.
- On 11 December, I called out [the under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union Robin Walker](#) for the government's unfair tactics delaying the vote on the EU Withdrawal Agreement.

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IN PARLIAMENT

BEHIND THE SCENES—THANGAM'S VIEW

The mood in Parliament is febrile – most MPs are opposed to the Prime Minister's Brexit deal and my work as a Whip includes mobilising MPs to vote against it. I also signed the letter from a large cross-party group of MPs to the Prime Minister calling on her to stop threatening to leave the EU with no deal at all, as this would be the most catastrophic Brexit. I continue to represent the views of those of us who want to remain in the EU, as the government is ignoring these views in favour of Brexiteers.

I am working with MPs from all parties and with businesses, trade unions, other organisations and individuals to inform my challenge to the government. This includes my work on Brexit-related Bill Committees.

The Tories are undermining their newly-published NHS Long Term Plan with a failure to tackle underfunding, staffing crises and cuts to public health. Furthermore, a catastrophic Brexit which would hurt every aspect of the NHS. Fighting Brexit and the impact of this awful Tory government remain my top priorities – we badly need a Labour government.



HOLDING THE GOVERNMENT TO ACCOUNT ON ITS TREATMENT OF REFUGEES

I am continuing to hold the government to account in the development of their new Immigration Bill, demanding that the Bill be an opportunity to improve the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in this country.

My job as Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees has been to [call the government out for its delay on the Immigration Bill](#), and to lobby them to use the Bill to improve housing and work opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees. The asylum system itself must also be improved, as we know for many it is an awful experience.

After all this campaigning, [I told the Home Secretary I was heartbroken](#) to hear nothing in his statement about refugees. In the White Paper itself, the section on refugees is woefully short and is little more than a commitment to the inadequate status quo. Apart from a mention of English lessons and a vague commitment to improve the system, there is little that gives me hope.

However, there is still time to change this during the drafting process; I will prioritise this during spring.

CHALLENGING THE GOVERNMENT ON SCHOOL FUNDING

On 17 December I confronted [Secretary of State for Education Damian Hinds with the concerns that I'd heard directly from head teachers](#) in primary and secondary schools across Bristol West: cuts to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities funding in schools is seriously disadvantaging those children that need help the most.

I was particularly concerned to hear that the consequences of these cuts made by the Tory government is a noticeable increase in the anxiety levels of pupils and staff alike. It is always upsetting to hear about the rise in mental health problems being caused directly by the government's actions.

The Education Secretary's response was another non-answer. This is nothing new—ministers have repeatedly denied [the seriousness of school funding cuts](#) when answering my previous questions.

This won't stop me from continuing to raise this, reminding Theresa May that 'austerity is over', in her own words!

OTHER WORK IN PARLIAMENT

- [I challenged Prisons Minister Rory Stewart on reducing homelessness in prison leavers](#). One study of single homeless people found that 41% of them had spent some time in prison. The links between prison and homelessness are complex, but we should do more to help ex-offenders get back on their feet after completing their sentences.
- At this time of year, many of us are aware of the dangers faced by homeless people. I proposed that the recent figures on [homeless deaths should be treated as a public health emergency](#).
- I also asked about our approach to refugees coming from the horrific conflict in Yemen.

IN BRISTOL

BREXIT Q&A IN BRISTOL WEST

During December, I made it a priority to speak about Brexit with as many members, constituents and charities as possible, and I have particularly aimed to speak to businesses about their valid concerns in the looming threat of a no-deal scenario.

I held a Q&A session for businesses in Easton, Ashley and Lawrence Hill to ensure that I'd heard their specific concerns and to brief them on how to best prepare to protect their staff.

I also visited the University of Bristol Students' Union to talk to some very proactive student movements about their views on Brexit and how it might affect their future.

I have been receiving an unprecedented level of correspondence about Brexit, including many hundreds of letters, emails and petitions. In the current uncertainty, I want to keep you as up to date as possible. Please contact my office if you would like to speak over the next few weeks.



OTHER EVENTS IN AND AROUND BRISTOL

- In December, I paid a visit to Aid Box Community, a fantastic charity who collect and distribute vital donations to asylum seekers in Bristol. I personally dropped off some knitted donations I'd made, raised the profile of their 'Refutree' Christmas tree sale, and promoted the good treatment of refugees in the UK. You can find out more about how to donate items to Bristol asylum seekers [here](#).
- I unveiled a blue plaque commemorating the brave women who founded Bristol's first universal suffrage organisation in 1868.
- I also visited the hard-working teams in the Royal Mail post sorting office in the run-up to Christmas.

MEDIA ROUND UP

- As the Tories tried to whip up anti-immigrant panic about refugees crossing the English Channel, I [argued for fairer treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in The Guardian](#).

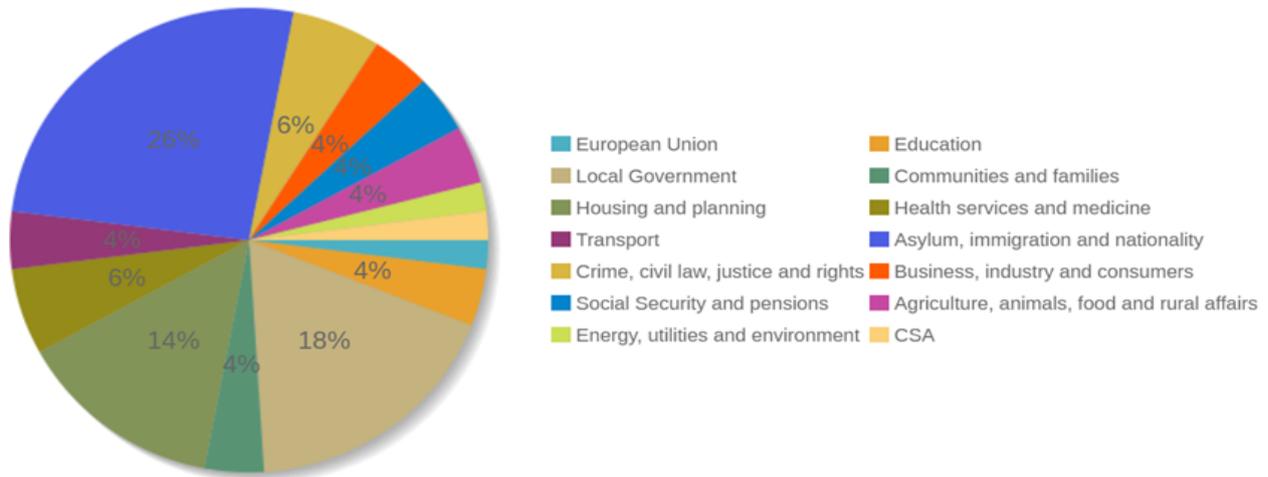


- I spoke about knife crime in Bristol, which was covered in [The Mirror](#) and [The Sun](#).
- My work on domestic violence perpetrators was reported in the [Law Gazette](#).
- I was quoted in a [Bristol Post](#) piece about the dispute over Cotham School's playing fields.
- On the blog, I wrote about the [Immigration Bill](#), why Cotham School should be able to [protect its students](#) and the [ever-present Brexit](#).

- My speech unveiling a new blue plaque for Clifton's Women's Suffrage Society was covered by [BBC News](#), [Bristol 24/7](#) and [Bristol Post](#).
- My visit to Aid Box Community was covered by [Bristol Post](#), BBC Radio Bristol and ITV West.

CASEWORK REVIEW

NOVEMBER 2018



OVERVIEW

Last month was busier than usual for December with 50 new cases. A quarter of the new caseload was immigration enquiries. Eighteen percent were related to local government and 14% related to housing. An increasing amount of our caseload is dealing with Bristol City Council.

We did not hold a constituency surgery in December but we have surgeries scheduled in January and February. Looking ahead, we are planning to hold a weekday surgery once a month as well as our regular monthly Saturday surgery in order to meet increasing demand for appointments. Following the success of a specific surgery event for carers in November, we are looking at arranging more case specific surgeries – for example Universal Credit, housing and so on.

CASEWORK SUCCESSES

We've had many successes, including:

- Assisting a constituent by expediting his application for further leave to remain allowing him to return to work.
- Successfully advocating for a vulnerable constituent who was not receiving the correct amount of Employment Support Allowance.
- Supporting several successful visit visa, spousal visa, asylum and leave to remain applications.
- Advocating for a constituent who was vulnerable and facing eviction to ensure that she received the correct Housing Benefit, therefore securing her current housing.
- Advocating for constituents and successfully persuading the council to place them in a higher priority housing band. This will give them a much better chance of securing a more suitable home.

STAY IN TOUCH!

Finally, I wanted to remind you that I am here to serve you, my members and my constituents. I'm always pleased to hear from Bristol West members, so please do get in touch with me via email, or interact with my [Twitter](#) and [Facebook page](#). I love it when members retweet, share my Facebook posts and interact with my blogs or refer people on to me: it keeps me accountable, and helps spread awareness of what I'm doing to your friends and family!