



Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 14 June 2022

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Members present: Bob Blackman (Chair); Patricia Gibson; Chris Green; Jerome Mayhew; Nigel Mills; Kate Osborne.

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Rachael Maskell made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. I should say, for those of you who were expecting to see Ian Mearns in the Chair, that unfortunately he is indisposed today—we wish him well for a speedy recovery—and he has asked me to chair the meeting on his behalf.

We are going to run through the list of applications in order of presentation, so first up is Rachael Maskell with an application on the independent review of children's social care.

Rachael Maskell: Thank you ever so much. I am really grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for considering this application for a debate on the independent review of children's social care. I am sure that everyone agrees on the importance of this issue. Rarely do we devote time to really scrutinising what is happening across children's services, but when we hear the names of Leiland-James, 13 months old; Star, 16 months old; Arthur, six years old; and Sebastian, 15 years old—who have been on our minds in the last few weeks—we understand the importance of discussing how we achieve a safe, stable and loving home for all children.

Children are often denied the life that they should have the right to live, because of a failed system that is overstretched, understaffed and under-resourced, so the four chairs of the all-party parliamentary groups that address issues facing children who experience care have come together to put forward this application for a debate. Josh MacAlister was commissioned by Government to chair an independent review of children's social care, and that is a very significant piece of work—one could say a once-in-a-generation, or once-in-a-decade at least, piece of work—to understand what is happening across children's services, but also how to transform them for the future. Currently, 80,000 children are in our care system. If there isn't change, it will be 100,000 in just a decade. But with intervention, that number will fall by 30,000, and we trust that that trend would then continue.

There is also an impact financially: £10 billion is spent on keeping children safe in care. That will escalate to £15 billion if intervention is not made. This report talks about how that intervention will be transformative.

In the debate, we want particularly to focus on the reforms that Josh MacAlister puts forward—first, looking at how family help can replace the current system of intervention, particularly looking at a multidisciplinary approach with professions coming together for early interventions around the whole family and keeping children safe within the community. We want to look at mental health, education and social care coming together to meet the needs of a child at the right time in the right place.

However, when a family reach crisis, we need to ensure there is sufficiency in the system to address that. We are 9,000 foster placements short. This review seeks to recruit to that. There is a need for a greater



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recognition of kinship care arrangements, and the unique challenges and opportunities that they bring.

We also need to look at adoption, and how it can move forward faster and better, while recognising the needs and commitments of children in placement. We need to look at the holistic needs of the children, the trauma and challenges they have experienced, and the love and security that they demand—rightly so.

The report also focuses on the structure and the system, which is really important—how the market has failed the placements that are currently available, and how social workers themselves need the best opportunities they can get through their training and their careers. Transforming that into a five-year early career framework will bring sustainability and ensure that people with the most experience are making the most difficult decisions. Professionals need to be drawn from the community around a family as well, in order to provide that family with the best support possible.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for adoption and permanence, and we welcomed the report. We recognise that the Government are going to respond by the end of the year. With cross-party support, we would really welcome a debate on this report and on the wider issues impacting on children in social care. There are many challenges coming over the horizon, including the financial situation in local authorities and their ability to provide sufficiency. That is why this report is timely.

The clock is ticking. Children are struggling. They need a safe, stable and loving placement. They need a family in which they can grow up.

The four chairs of the all-party parliamentary groups would welcome the debate, and we are supported by Back Benchers from across the House. With the Government planning to respond to the report by the end of the year, we would welcome the opportunity to debate the issue in the autumn at the latest, bearing in mind the challenges there, to ensure that we move the whole environment forward for the sake of our children and the future generation.

Q2 Chair: Thank you, Rachael. Two things immediately arise. As you will appreciate, Chamber time is very limited indeed. This is a general debate. I wondered whether you had considered having a divisible motion of some description. I don't know the detailed recommendations, but one that springs to mind straightaway is "This House calls on the Government to adopt the recommendations." That might be an appropriate one that you might want to consider. That would then mean we would have to hold the debate in the Chamber. The other alternative is to have a Westminster Hall debate rather earlier than the autumn. Those are the two choices before you, but it is your application.

Rachael Maskell: Thank you very much for the advice. We could certainly look at having a motion to support the debate. I think it warrants



the importance of a debate in the Chamber. There is certainly much interest, not just from Back Benchers but also from people on the Front Bench who would want to participate in the debate, should it be held. We could certainly look at having a motion for the debate in a timely way, according to how business sits.

Q3 Chris Green: I have a brief question. You touched on a great many different issues. There are existing concerns within the system. Are certain aspects of this significantly affected by covid? Has there been disruption to services, or is it an ongoing thing that hasn't really been affected by covid very much? Would that be relevant in this debate?

Rachael Maskell: There is no doubt that covid has had an impact on children in the social care framework, and we know that access to children in their home environment was difficult to assess through parts of covid, but social services had to adapt the way that they worked. Children were not able to socialise in the way that they normally would, and there was a rise in domestic violence and other challenges in the home environment. That has clearly had an impact on family life, but also on the safety and security of children. Covid is a factor, but not the only factor. Certainly, the report looks at and projects to what is going to happen over the next decade, and to see such a rise in the number of children who will require being brought into social care without a change of direction—an additional 20,000 children over the next decade—really does show that, post covid, there are many challenges that need to be addressed.

Q4 Kate Osborne: Rachael, I welcome this application. This is an area in which I have done some work, and Josh came to the Education Committee to talk about his report. Is there a consideration, if you are going to put a motion forward, around a fostering strategy? The Government have an adoption strategy, and I wanted to mention that. Also, do you have any idea of when the Government might bring this forward? By the end of the year?

Rachael Maskell: Thank you ever so much for your question. With regard to fostering, you are absolutely right that we need a strategy on all forms of care—fostering, but also kinship care, which is often misunderstood, but has particular characteristics around it that present unique challenges. Therefore, we need to look at all forms of care provision and we would certainly want to explore that area. I can talk to the other chairs of all-party parliamentary groups about formulating a motion for debate covering those areas.

On the timing of the debate, the Government have said that they will bring forward a response by the end of the year. Clearly, that is a significant piece of work that was undertaken from 2019, coming through that period. Therefore, Government are not rushing their response, and having a debate, possibly in the autumn, would be timely when they had gone through their considerations and the thinking about the response that they are putting forward after that. I would raise with the Committee the fact that I am going to be on a significant Bill Committee until the end of September, so perhaps the two could level up—that's the Bill—and we



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could find some space maybe straight after the recess if that were at all possible.

Chair: Thank you, Rachael. We will consider your request after we have heard all the others, and the Clerks will be in contact with you about those dates.

Rachael Maskell: Thank you very much.

Angela Crawley and **Kirsten Oswald** made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** Next up are Angela Crawley and Kirsten Oswald on 50 years of Pride in the UK.

Angela Crawley: Thank you to the Committee for considering this application. It is 50 years of Pride in the UK this year, which marks 50 years since the London Pride celebration of 1972, which was held on 1 July. Traditionally, Pride is celebrated during the month between 1 and 30 June. It is a month-long celebration of the establishment of the LGBT+ rights movement.

As we mark that event, it is important that we reflect on how far we have come as a society and the huge strides of legislative progress that have been achieved for the LGBT community, as well as that which is yet to be achieved, as we witness the daily attacks on members of the transgender community and conversion therapy still being commonplace.

Pride is not only a celebration and a recognition of the trailblazers who came before us, but a protest. We have made huge strides in recent decades, with civil partnership, equal marriage, and more and more LGBT+ couples choosing to build their own families, as routes to parenthood expand and new role models continue to grow within our community to promote the diversity of family within the LGBT community, but I believe that it has never been more important to celebrate the diversity and progress that we have achieved thus far, and to recognise the way that we still have to go. I believe that a debate in the main Chamber would allow Members from across the House to champion their constituents—the families across their constituency—and to recognise this annual event, especially this year, which is the 50th anniversary.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire for supporting this application and to other Members from across the House; we have secured support from all main political parties. My hon. Friend may have something to add.

Kirsten Oswald: I would emphasise what my hon. Friend has just said about the support for this debate from Members from across the House. That is particularly important given the subject that we are seeking a debate on today.



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If we look at the debates on topics that relate to LGBT issues, whether in the main Chamber or in Westminster Hall, we can see the degree of support that there is from Members across the House, who want to participate in that kind of debate. Now that we are here in the 50th anniversary year, I think that such a debate is something that Members would welcome and that the general public would think was appropriate for us to do—perhaps expect us to do.

Q6 Chair: Thank you. In your application, you mention that Pride Month is 1 to 30 June, so I assume that ideally you want the debate within June.

Angela Crawley: Absolutely. We suggested in the application that if the debate could be on 30 June, that would be the most preferable and appropriate date, but obviously we would be happy to accept the—

Chair: If you can lean on the Leader of the House to allocate this Committee 30 June, we might be in a position to allocate time on that day. We just do not know the timing of the Chamber until literally a couple of weeks beforehand. Any questions from colleagues?

Q7 Chris Green: I have a minor question. You talked about protest. Actually, this topic—this area—is a really important political question as well. Pride is often very strongly connected with politics and change in politics. Do you think that that—the political interest and sensitivity across the British media and globally regarding this issue—is another reason why we need this debate?

Angela Crawley: I can only speak personally about how powerful it is as an LGBT individual to witness debates in this House on this issue. It is incredibly powerful for any young person or family across the UK to feel that they are represented and heard. Every single Member in this House has a responsibility to champion the diversity of our communities, and the LGBT community is very much a part of that—so, yes, I think it is implicit that the politics runs through this, and still to this day Pride is both a protest and a celebration.

Q8 Chair: The final issue is that, as I said, we do not know whether we will get the main Chamber, or when we will get it. In the event that we do not get the main Chamber, we know that we will get Westminster Hall. Would you accept a debate in Westminster Hall if we are not allocated the main Chamber?

Angela Crawley: Absolutely. We would welcome any opportunity to debate this subject. I think that it was allocated three hours last year, so we hope that would be possible again this year, but I understand the limitations that the Committee has outlined.

Chair: All right. Thank you very much.

Sally-Ann Hart made representations.

Q9 Chair: We move on to Sally-Ann Hart on the future of coastal



communities.

Sally-Ann Hart: I am grateful to the Committee for giving me the opportunity to ask for a debate on coastal communities. Coastal communities are integral to the UK's environmental, social and economic wellbeing. The covid-19 pandemic profoundly impacted our coastal communities, exposing and exacerbating social and economic structural changes that need an urgent and co-ordinated response for a sustainable recovery.

Coastal communities are also the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with erosion and flooding posing an ever-greater threat to both the built and natural environments. These communities have major challenges to overcome, but they also have so much potential to unleash if they are given the opportunity to do so.

We have long been a proud maritime nation, historically relying on our coastal communities to help deliver national prosperity, but today too many of them face shared challenges and disproportionately high levels of deprivation. Coastal communities have enormous potential, which can be unleashed with ambitious vision, partnership working, and the right investment from both the public and private sectors. If given the necessary social, economic and environmental support and investment, our coastal communities can be an even greater national resource, rather than a problem that requires a solution.

Finding new ways to deliver more for less has never been as important as it is now, and coastal communities need a focus on—and investment in—transport, education and skills, housing, health and green tech in order to take full advantage of the green revolution. Coastal communities have also unleashed nature-based potential, both on land and in our oceans, for renewable energy industries and in the fight against climate change, which can also drive social and economic benefits. Our coasts and seas contain some of the UK's most varied ecosystems, and if those are restored, maintained and protected, they can help boost our coastal economies by providing jobs, food, transportation, leisure and health benefits, as well as protection against flooding.

No one size fits all, although coastal communities share a commonality of factors, as outlined in the chief medical officer's annual report on health disparities in coastal communities last year. I welcome the recommendations of his annual report. Its recommendation of a national strategy for coastal communities to address health and wellbeing is key, but such a strategy must look beyond health alone. Tackling the underlying drivers of poor health, such as weak educational attainment, poor housing and underdeveloped transport infrastructure, as well as focusing proportionate NHS and care resources to appropriately provide for health and social care needs, will prevent ill health in the long term, benefiting not just our coastal communities, but the whole UK.

High levels of deprivation, driven in part by major and long-standing challenges with local economies and employment, are important reasons



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for poor health outcomes in these communities, and tackling deprivation is key. While the levelling-up White Paper articulates how policy interventions will improve opportunity and boost livelihoods across the country, it does not specifically target coastal communities. In order for the Government's spending, taxation, investment and regeneration policies to bring about meaningful change in these communities, they must be at the heart of the Government's levelling-up plans.

Coastal communities, along with their inland neighbours, have their own distinctive and unique role to play in our regional and sub-regional economy, as well as nationally. We must ensure that all places create and share in prosperity in order for everyone to have the opportunity to enjoy a higher quality of life. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on coastal communities, I feel that they deserve a full and proper debate in Parliament.

Q10 **Chair:** Thank you, Sally-Ann. Two points about your application: first, it is a general application, and therefore time in the Chamber is very challenging. If I could say so, it is also a niche subject in that sense. I know we have a big coastline, but—

Sally-Ann Hart: Our entire United Kingdom is coastline. It affects—

Chair: Then the challenge comes—which should be an easy one for you to resolve—that the number of speakers you have is dominated by Conservative MPs.

Sally-Ann Hart: That is true, yes.

Chair: We would look for a balance of, certainly, three or four extra Opposition speakers, if it is possible to get that.

Sally-Ann Hart: I will try, but people do not always answer their emails or calls to arms to help.

Q11 **Chair:** Indeed, but for us to allocate the debate, we would need to be sure that there was a reasonable debate between the two sides of the Chamber. The other thing is that I would have thought that this would lend itself quite well to a Westminster Hall debate on a Tuesday morning. Which Department would be answering?

Sally-Ann Hart: The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Q12 **Chair:** That probably leads us to 14 July, at a rough guess. It would be either a Thursday in Westminster Hall or a Tuesday morning. I think the Tuesday morning is probably 12 July, and the Thursday is the 14th. Those two possibilities would be open to you, but with the proviso that you furnish the Clerks with—

Sally-Ann Hart: More signatures.

Chair: From the Opposition parties.

Sally-Ann Hart: How many more?



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Chair: I would say four.

Q13 **Chris Green:** A minor point: as people exit the Division Lobby, that is quite a good place to grab people as they go out. If you want to go to the Opposition Division Lobby and have a list of who might—

Chair: Just don't go in the Opposition Lobby.

Kate Osborne: You can do that too.

Sally-Ann Hart: If anyone would like to give me their name, I am quite happy to take it now.

Q14 **Kate Osborne:** I was just going to suggest that you might want to approach some of the north-east Labour MPs, who may be willing to help you, because they have been involved.

Sally-Ann Hart: I think we probably did.

Kate Osborne: I will see what I can do.

Sally-Ann Hart: Thank you, Kate.

Q15 **Chair:** Your application will go on the list, but it will be pending further names.

Sally-Ann Hart: So get that done as soon as possible.

Chair: You don't have to come back to us; you just supply them to the Clerks.

Miriam Cates and **Jackie Doyle-Price** made representations.

Q16 **Chair:** We now come to Miriam Cates and Jackie Doyle-Price—Rosie is not here—on relationship and sex education materials in schools.

Miriam Cates: I thank the Committee for seeing us. Three years ago, the new relationships and sex education guidance was produced by the DFE. In the guidance, it says that it will be reviewed every three years, so that is coming up, and we feel that this is a good time to debate the RSE curriculum as it stands. The Secretary of State wrote to the Children's Commissioner last week asking her to look into sex education in schools, because, in his words, it is of mixed quality. We also have the Schools Bill coming through, which has already started in the Lords. It is being increasingly reported in the press that some of the materials being used in schools are quite shocking; that some of them are not age-appropriate and some of them are quite explicit; and that various different groups that set themselves up as sex education providers are being allowed to come into schools and teach children. It is a topical and urgent issue, because of the RSE review and the potential for MPs to debate it before the Schools Bill comes to the Commons.

The issues are severalfold. First, some of the materials being used are factually inaccurate. I used to be a biology teacher, so I have done my fair share of sex education from a scientific point of view. Some of these



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providers, for example the Sex Education Forum, which has a website and its materials are used in schools, divides children into menstruators and non-menstruators. Now, if you are a girl and your periods don't start, and your conclusion is, "Oh, well, I am just a non-menstruator," why would you then go to the doctor? Why would you be worried that your periods had not started? That is a factual inaccuracy, and I could go on and on about the various different things being taught that are dangerous. It is dangerous to give people incorrect information about sex. Anal sex is being normalised without talking about the health consequences of that for children. There are factual issues about what is being taught.

A lot of the materials are age-inappropriate. Of course it is important to have open discussions about sex, consent and relationships, but is it appropriate to speak about some of these things with pre-pubescent children? I do not know whether any of you have come across a dice game where children are asked to cut out and produce a dice that has different body parts, and then throw the dice and describe a sex act that could take place between those body parts. Is that appropriate for children? Would parents be happy about it if they knew that was being taught as part of the RSE curriculum? It is really important to talk about consent, but we also have to be clear that children cannot consent to sex under the law. If we are teaching young children that it is all about consent, are we being clear enough that that does not include them?

On the use of external resources, as a former teacher I know it is important to have access to good-quality resources. You cannot create everything yourself, and you should not have to, but it seems very clear that a lot of schools are just picking stuff off the internet without looking into who has written the materials, what the group's vested interests might be and whether schools should be using it or not. It is very clear from the guidance that schools should be looking into that. I understand the time pressures that may mean that they are not, but, again, that needs to be looked at. There are serious safeguarding concerns about normalising talking about extreme sexual activity with children, breaking down their barriers, and encouraging them to talk about sex with adults they might not know. Does that then make them more susceptible to grooming? Will they then look at things on the internet that they should not be seeing?

Finally, on transparency, it seems clear that some schools are refusing to show parents the materials that are used in sex education. The reasons for that vary. Sometimes they talk about the copyright of the scheme of work. Should schools have to be open about the materials that are used for children and also the groups that come into schools? We think there is a case for an urgent debate on the materials that are used, whether they are appropriate for children and whether the RSE curriculum has delivered what we in Parliament hoped it would.

Chair: Thank you. Jackie, do you have anything to add?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Yes. When this was debated in Parliament, although there was some controversy about the extent to which we applied it in the



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curriculum, the overriding philosophy was one of empowering girls and breaking down the ignorance that was being perpetrated by the kinds of content that children increasingly find themselves exposed to by the internet. We are all aware now that children are exposed to pornographic content that is far more extreme than anything we would have grown up with, and that is contributing to an atmosphere in schools that young people are growing up in that is leading them to feel confused about the whole issue.

We collectively need to set the tone of what we are trying to achieve through relationships and sex education. This is about educating children so that they can be confident about this stuff, confident about admitting when they are not mature enough to handle it, and really getting to the issue of empowerment. It sits alongside the fact that we now have, again, a political consensus around the need to tackle violence against women and girls. Frankly, the first place that girls encounter violence is in school, so that is the first place we need to tackle it.

Q17 Chair: I have a couple of questions. You mentioned the fact that it is an urgent request, and you have said you would accept a debate—in the Chamber or Westminster Hall, I think—on a Tuesday but not on a Thursday.

Miriam Cates: Just because I am pretty much always in the constituency on Thursdays, but if that was the only option I could make arrangements.

Chair: The reason I mention this is that we have a vacancy on 23 June, next Thursday, in Westminster Hall. That is the earliest date you are going to get a debate.

Miriam Cates: Due to train strikes, I cannot come next week, unfortunately.

Chair: All right. That's fine. I just put that out there to try to facilitate having a debate, but that's fair enough.

Q18 Jerome Mayhew: You have made a compelling case. I get the hot topic side of it, but I want to ask two things. First, do you have a date when the Government are looking to review? Is it next week or the week after, or is it in six months' time or by the end of the year? That is the first thing in terms of whether it needs to be now.

Secondly, the evidence that you rely on seems to be very strong. I would like a little more information on the volume of evidence. Is this—to traduce the *Daily Mail*—a *Daily Mail* sensation with a couple of extreme examples, or, from your research, is there more background evidence that should be of greater concern to us as parliamentarians?

Miriam Cates: First of all, the guidance came in in February 2019, but the curriculum was not properly introduced until the following September. I could find out whether there is an exact date for when the review will start or finish, but it is a topic of conversation in the DFE now, as far as I understand it. They are approaching the review of the first three years.



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Q19 **Jerome Mayhew:** So the thinking work is being done now, even if they are not writing it.

Miriam Cates: Yes—quite. On your other question, there is a huge body of evidence that I am collecting, that many groups are collecting, and that many teachers are collecting. I am emailed about it every day. It is in all types of school across the country.

Jackie Doyle-Price: This is really the nub of it. With our having decided we were going to encourage RSE in schools at given ages, a wealth of groups basically filled the void by generating material, and some of it is adequate and some of it isn't. The Department for Education has not—well, why would it? We don't supervise everything that goes on in every classroom, but I think there does need to be some consideration of what sort of material is appropriate and what isn't, because without Government and without us setting out that steer, the content is just proliferating.

I might add that, with the tampon tax money that was being used to fund things that were relevant to women and girls, the Government gave an indication that RSE materials would be an area that qualified for that funding, and, again, that led to a plethora of bids from organisations. To be honest, I have a real objection to the fact that tampon tax money is funding this stuff. But I think we just need to have a debate that sets some standards about what is and isn't appropriate.

Q20 **Chris Green:** One area that seems to be coming up in what you are saying is that institutions are taking their own lead, and the way many people would view it is that it is actually for politics and for Government to say, "This is the representation of the views of the people. We ought to be taking a lead and saying, 'This is right; this is appropriate.'" Prisons, hospitals and schools are going beyond—whatever materials are out there or guidance is out there, they have taken this and, in some areas, it is advancing way beyond what is generally considered appropriate. I think it goes into the earlier application about 50 years of Pride in the UK. Actually, this is a huge ongoing debate, and it ought to be seen in a significant way in the political context that the representatives of people lead on this and actually give a bit more of a steer and direction to the institutions of state on what is and is not appropriate.

Miriam Cates: I think, from the schools' point of view and as Jackie said, there is a vacuum. RSE is mostly taught through the vehicle of PSHE. PSHE is not a specialist subject; many schools do not have specialist PSHE teachers. The poor, unlucky form tutor who happens to be on duty that day has a look the night before and thinks, "Oh my gosh, how do I teach about x? I'll go on YouTube." I think part of it is just that because it hasn't been given the status of an important subject, like science or maths, it has not been given the credibility for teachers to train in it and for schools to resource it. I think part of it is just that there isn't sufficient status around the subject for it to be taught by specialist teachers.



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Of course there are dangers of becoming political in this, but I think that is why Jackie is right. We need to take an age-appropriateness attitude to this and look at the child development evidence. There is plenty of child development evidence out there about when children are able to process certain bits of information and when they become sexual, when they become aware of their sexuality. I think, at the moment, it is a free-for-all—"Okay, we'll teach about this to any age we can think of"—rather than people thinking, "What is the evidence about how children's brains and bodies develop?" As parliamentarians, it is not our job to say that, but we can say to the Government, "You must get child development experts involved in this and not just rely on unregulated sex education providers."

Chair: Does anyone else have a question? No. Thank you very much. We will consider your application, and the Clerks will be in contact with you.

Theresa Villiers made representations.

Q21 **Chair:** Last but by no means least is Theresa Villiers on levelling up and planning. This is Bob Seely's application, but Bob is ill, so Theresa has kindly stepped in to lead on the application.

Theresa Villiers: Yes, I should start with an apology for not being Bob Seely. I am slightly less well prepared than I would normally be for an occasion like this, but I will do my best, having stepped in at an hour's notice. I am really grateful that the Committee is giving serious consideration to the application that Bob and 48 other colleagues have made.

As the Committee is no doubt aware, the planning aspects of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill are very significant. They would involve major changes to the planning system. This is one of the first planning Bills we have had for some years and it is likely to be the last one we have for a few years, and it contains some quite controversial provisions that would see development management policies centralised, which would involve a major rewrite of the planning system.

However, a lot of Back-Bench concerns focus on what is not in the Bill. There is a real enthusiasm to ventilate that in the main Chamber or in Westminster Hall, try to shape the Government's approach on it, and potentially amend and strengthen the Bill. It is increasingly clear that the planning system is placing immense pressure on many of our constituencies and increasing the pressure for ever more intensive development. Local planning committees and councils are being advised by their offices that they must accept a particular planning application because, if they do not, they might be overturned at appeal, or on the basis of not meeting their housing targets.

There seems to be a steady erosion of the freedom of democratically elected and accountable local councillors to make decisions about planning, because of the fear that the Planning Inspectorate will interfere and overturn the application. That could have significant consequences for



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our environment and our communities well into the future. We all know that in the 1960s and 70s there were some disastrous mistakes made by architects and designers. We are in danger of making similar mistakes. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill is the opportunity to try to correct the serious problems with the current system. What we build in this country has a major impact on our environment. Our ability to deliver on commitments on conservation and nature, as well as net zero, are also tied up with the Bill. There is a strong case for amendments that would put us in a stronger position to meet those vitally important environmental commitments.

I appreciate that there is also a strong focus in the Bill on town centres and high streets. I think that every single Member of the House appreciates and understands the problems that our high streets have been facing. An opportunity for Back Benchers to have the debate and talk about the solutions that they think are needed to make our high streets thrive would be well subscribed. I acknowledge that this is a concern strongly felt on the Conservative side, but I know that MPs from all sides seek to guard their constituents against overdevelopment, and I am sure that we would attract speakers from all sides. Indeed, the application is backed on a cross-party basis.

This is quite an urgent matter because we have an indication from the Housing Minister and the Secretary of State that they are willing to listen to what Back Benchers want from the Bill. While we had an excellent debate on Second Reading, there are many colleagues who would have liked to have spoken for longer. Parliament has an opportunity to have real input, not just by scrutinising the practicalities of the legislation, but to make it better by addressing some of the concerns I have expressed. It is a crucial time to debate the issue, and I hope that the Committee will consider giving Back-Bench colleagues the opportunity to make their voice heard about what we build in this country, how we build it, where we build it and the circumstances in which we build it. I would be delighted to answer any questions.

Chair: Thank you. I have three quick points before I turn to Nigel. First, when I was approached, I said to Bob Seely that I do not sponsor requests for debates. My name appears as one person who would speak in the debate. I specifically said that I was not going to do that because it bars me from considering this application. That needs to be corrected. I appreciate that you have stepped in at the last minute, Theresa, so you are not responsible.

Secondly, to say this is heavily dominated by the Government side is to put it mildly. There really are not sufficient speakers from the Opposition to justify this being a Backbench Business debate. That would need to be corrected for this to be taken forward.

Thirdly, there is an issue with the draft motion. That would need to be substantially redrafted to make it a proper debate for the Committee to consider. Obviously, you will need to take that back to Bob because he is the lead Member applying.



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Q22 Nigel Mills: To me, it seems slightly strange to ask for Back-Bench time to discuss a Bill that is still going through the Commons. Would you not be better tabling amendments in Committee and speaking to them there, when there is some chance of convincing the Committee to change the Bill, or doing the same on Report or demanding more than one day for Report? Would not those be more effective ways to proceed than, effectively, a general debate on a different day with no way to change the Bill and you have that mechanism elsewhere?

Theresa Villiers: We would certainly want to see amendments debated in Committee, but especially on Report, so this is an addition rather than a substitute for those parliamentary procedures. We certainly felt, and many colleagues felt, that the issue was so important that we needed more time for Back Benchers to express their views. Obviously, Second Reading was a few hours long, but that did not give everyone a chance.

Q23 Nigel Mills: There was no objection to the programme motion setting out less than a day for Report. Would it not have been better for a few dozen MPs to demand a second day so as to have proper time? There is plenty of precedent for spending more than one day on Second Reading. It seems slightly odd to use Back-Bench time to consider a Government Bill. That is what Government time is for.

Theresa Villiers: I will certainly be pressing the Government to allow as much time as possible on Report. I would have liked them to extend the time available on Second Reading, but I still think this is sufficiently important and I hope it will be considered by the Committee.

Q24 Patricia Gibson: I can understand why you would want a debate on this, although I accept that the title of the debate is unsuitable, if that is the right word. The kind of wide-ranging debate on a huge Bill that you are talking about is always going to mean you are squeezed for time, even if you take the route that Nigel has suggested. I think a debate on this would be perfectly in order, but I still think that even if the debate was a six-hour debate, you would probably find that you were pressed for time because the debate is so wide ranging and there are so many aspects to consider. If you changed the title of the debate to something like, "Planning Issues in the UK", people could refer to the levelling-up Bill as much or as little as they wanted. I think this is a worthy application.

Theresa Villiers: Thank you.

Chair: Anyone else? No? Okay. Thank you, Theresa. We will now go into private session to consider these applications and our waiting list.