

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 17 January 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 17 January 2023.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Kevin Foster; Wendy Morton; Nigel Mills; Kate Osborne.

Questions 1-17

Representations

[\[I\]](#): Peter Aldous

[\[II\]](#): Martyn Day

[\[III\]](#): Selaine Saxby

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Peter Aldous made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon. We have five applications in front of us. The first of which is by Mr Peter Aldous. Welcome Peter, it is nice to see you again. Your application is “Levelling up the east of England: the region’s progress towards the Government’s 12 levelling up missions”. Over to you.

Peter Aldous: As you said, that is the long title for the proposed debate. It refers to a report that was published early last month by the all-party parliamentary group for the east of England, which I co-chair with Daniel Zeichner, and the East of England Local Government association. We applied for a debate last year and you very kindly gave us a debate at around this time on the east of England generally. It was a very well attended debate. In many respects this is a follow up. We are mindful that, perhaps, in the east of England we are not as successful as you in the north-east are at getting our message across in this place. Perhaps, at times, we have hidden our light under a bushel.

Chair: It is the accent, Peter. That is what it is.

Peter Aldous: I will not start talking like The Singing Postman. It follows on from the debate last year and will look at the report that we have carried out. While the east of England is an economic success story, and one of only three regions that is a net contributor to the Treasury, we do have deep pockets of deprivation. These are in coastal communities, such as the one that I represent, in some of our rural areas, where that deprivation is hidden, and in our large towns such as Norwich, Ipswich and Cambridge—there are serious challenges there as well.

We focused on the 12 missions of levelling up, which are set out in the levelling-up White Paper. I will not go through them in detail. I sense a good start has been made with levelling up, but while there is high confidence in achieving three of those 12 missions and medium confidence in achieving four of them, there is low confidence in achieving five of the missions. We wish to burrow down into that in this debate, highlight those concerns and put forward some proposals as to how we could address them and turn that low confidence into high confidence.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. I take it that it would be the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities that would be answering the debate?

Peter Aldous: Correct.

Q3 **Chair:** On time sensitivity, how soon would you like to have this debate?

Peter Aldous: I do not think there is any particular time sensitivity. The report has been published, and we would obviously like to get in as soon as possible. But it is not urgent.

Q4 **Bob Blackman:** You said you would accept Westminster Hall?

Peter Aldous: Yes, we would.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** Would you prefer a Tuesday or a Thursday if the Committee is minded to allocate it?

Peter Aldous: I think we would prefer a Tuesday.

Q6 **Chair:** We have to get the right answering Department in attendance on a Tuesday, so we will look at that. Thank you very much indeed, Peter. I am afraid that The Singing Postman had too much of a connection to the tobacco industry for my liking. Does anybody remember that? "Hev Yew Gotta Loight, Boy?"

Peter Aldous: "A Miss from Diss", was another example.

Chair: I am sure the spirit of Molly Windley carries on to this day.

Martyn Day made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Next, we have Mr Martyn Day. Your application is on high income child benefit charge. I understand that we do not have any names of applicants to go along with your application.

Martyn Day: I have not added any names yet. I have been off on a period of illness, so I got my staff to put the application in while I was working remotely. I will admit that it is a bit of a niche issue, but I am sure I can find some individuals, because it is an interesting area.

Q8 **Chair:** The point is that once you have made your pitch it is a live application that can be added to. We will then put it on the list.

Martyn Day: I have been advised to try yourselves through the Procedure Committee, as I have been dissatisfied with the answers that I have received from the Treasury relating to the whole area.

I have quite reasonably pressed for action through written PQs and letters to Ministers, and I will summarise the response that I got. The Government's answer is basically that they have conducted an assessment of the changes in inflation and the cost of living to the HICBC, and they will not change their intended approach. That seems to be their settled will; therefore, I do not think that there is any point in me trying further written approaches. It would be good to physically get a Minister there to answer and press further.

It is a very interesting area. I have had a number of constituents who have raised concerns about what they perceive as its unfairness and the ineffectiveness of HMRC in administering it. For example, one constituent was contacted by HMRC aggressively trying to recoup much more than it is entitled to for the tax years 2016-2020 after they stopped claiming child benefit in 2018. There are clear examples here that would be quite interesting.



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Stopping a claim to child benefit means—and this is a very interesting area—that stay-at-home parents with a high-income partner who choose not to claim child benefit because of the bureaucracy involved lose out on vital national insurance contributions, which ultimately impacts their entitlement to retirement pension. That is another area that is maybe not seen.

I will summarise the rest of my points very quickly. Basically, the rate has not been uprated in nine years, which is a significant period of time. It no longer aligns with income tax thresholds, which it once did. There is a perception that perhaps this area should be based on household income, not the highest income, because obviously there can be two household income earners that earn significantly more than a household with one high-income earner. That is basically the area that I think could make quite an interesting debate.

Q9 **Chair:** I take it that you would be looking for the Treasury to answer it.

Martyn Day: It needs to be the Treasury, yes.

Q10 **Chair:** And you would accept Westminster Hall.

Martyn Day: I would be very happy with Westminster Hall and any time period.

Chair: From my perspective, Martyn, we now need you to flesh this out by getting some people who would be willing to take part in the debate.

Q11 **Kevin Foster:** Do you envisage getting names and support for holding the debate from Back Benchers on the Government side as well?

Martyn Day: I would need to approach a few people; I do not know what reaction they would have. This is an area that crosses the party-political—I do not see it as a politically biased area. It is an interesting area, and we will all have constituents who fall into these categories. I do not know who they will be—I do not even know who they will be on my own side, if I am brutally honest—but I would think that there would be people from all wings.

Kevin Foster: From my perspective, we expect to see that the applications are genuinely cross-party when they come here, with support from both sides of the Chamber. That is just a bit of guidance.

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** What do you seek to achieve by having the debate? Unfortunately, because of the almost blank application that we have in front of us, it is not completely clear to me—although you have spoken about some of the unfairness that there is—what you seek to achieve.

Martyn Day: Obviously, who knows what the Ministers might say, but getting them under a bit more scrutiny might be better than the written answers that I have had. Ultimately, I would quite like to see them look at it a bit more seriously, because it has been some time since it was

updated. There are issues of fairness there in a range of areas that could improve people's lives.

Q13 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. Much appreciated, Martyn; thanks a lot.

Selaine Saxby made representations.

Q14 **Chair:** Your application is on decarbonising rural transport. Over to you.

Selaine Saxby: Thank you very much. I have made this application particularly in the light of Chris Skidmore's recent report that highlights how transport is a really key sector if we are ever to get to net zero by 2050.

When it comes to rural transport and rural behaviour, there might not be as many of us in rural Britain but we travel an awful lot further in our cars than people in any other part of the country. That has now been proven by countless reports on the matter. When I ran the debate on levelling up rural Britain, it was fascinating to have in the Chamber other rural colleagues from across the UK identifying exactly the same issues.

There are several facets to the issues around rural transport. There is the roll-out of electric vehicle charging points. Coming from my patch in rural Britain, I could not possibly get here in an electric car without a stop and I am worried that I would never get off Exmoor if I had an electric car—I would be permanently stranded. The roll-out is so slow. I still have parish councils that do not believe that electric vehicles are safe so they will not authorise a charging point in the village. This is what we are up against.

You then overlay that with the availability of public transport, particularly buses in a rural setting. We have seen repeatedly from Westminster that people take an urban policy and pop it in the country and hope it is going to work, but you cannot get a bus down most of my roads and, frankly, most of the villages do not have enough people in them. We have not really sought to find solutions that work in a rural environment. When you get people together, there is an opportunity to share some of the learnings. When I had a quiet word with the Prime Minister in the smoking room, he told me, "I've got a great rural bus project in my patch." Some of these things are actually already in situ but, because of the nature of being rural and spread out, we do not often get to talk about them and share those ideas. We really need to put some momentum behind decarbonising rural transport. We have everything from massive tractors firing on diesel through horse boxes to just taking so much in our general daily lives.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group for cycling and walking, and one of the things we have found repeatedly is that active travel decisions have not taken in rurality as a factor. For example, the council in Devon put in six bids for the last round of active travel funding. The second ranked of those bids was for the Tarka trail in my patch, which is a rural leisure trail that should, if it was full, join north and south Devon with one off-road



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trail. Five of the six bids were given to Devon County Council; the only one that was not was mine. All the other money went to Exeter. This is what we see in the decision-making process: time and again rurality is not factored in. Funnily enough, there will never be as many people on my cycle path as in the centre of Exeter—that is just a fact—so until we start to take into account in some of the decisions the fact that we do not have the same density of population, rural Britain will fall further and further behind in terms of decarbonisation. If we want to hit 2050, we all literally need to get on the same bus.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Any questions, colleagues?

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** This would seem to be a Westminster Hall-type debate.

Selaine Saxby: I would be happy to go to Westminster Hall.

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** Would you prefer a Tuesday or a Thursday?

Selaine Saxby: Tuesday, because all the rural folk have a long journey home—and no public transport to get on.

Q17 **Chair:** Who would be the answering Department?

Bob Blackman: Is it Transport or Levelling Up?

Selaine Saxby: It is probably Transport. It is a combination of the two. There is obviously a challenge with anything that crosses a departmental line.

Chair: Much appreciated, Selaine—thank you very much indeed.

We also have a paper application from Vicky Ford about the United Nations international day of education, signed by nine Members. That would also be appropriate for Westminster Hall. Do colleagues formally accept that application?

Members *indicated assent.*

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We are short of an applicant, who is not here at the moment, so I suggest that we adjourn and go back into private session.