

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Monday 27 February 2023

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Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Kevin Foster; Patricia Gibson; Chris Green; Wendy Morton.

Questions 1 - 3

Representations made

: Robin Walker

Robin Walker made representations.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to a special sitting of the Backbench Business Committee in which we are deliberating on applications for debates on departmental estimates. The first application before us this afternoon is from Mr Robin Walker, who was the Chair of the Education Committee.

Robin Walker: Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to pitch for this. I have submitted a form, although I apologise to the Committee if it was not entirely complete; that would be because I was suffering from flu last week and was not on the estate to collect all the signatures that I wanted to. Since our initial form was submitted, a number of further signatories have come on board to support this debate, including the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, as well as Stella Creasy from the Labour party and Carol Monaghan from the SNP—I just wanted to make sure that the Committee was aware of the degree of cross-party support for this application.

As your Chair is all too aware, the Education Committee is currently conducting an inquiry into the early years and childcare, and we are taking evidence from the sector. More than 1,700 pieces of written evidence have been submitted to us as part of that inquiry, which shows the salience of this issue and how much interest and concern it is causing. We have heard evidence around some of the reductions in the number of registered nurseries and childminders that we are currently seeing, and the fact that, certainly, the industry believes that the so-called free hours are not fully funded and that that is a concern. We have also heard evidence about the affordability of childcare being a major concern for parents.

Of course, in the Department's estimates, the Department for Education achieved an overall increase in its budget at the last spending review, with more than £2.2 billion for each of the next two years going into schools; however, it is important to recognise that that money is all for mainstream or specialist education in the school sector. None of it is earmarked for childcare and the early years, so the case for a debate just ahead of the Budget on estimates day to look at spending on the early years would be very strong in terms of timeliness.

We have also seen from recent Westminster Hall debates that there is a lot of appetite among Back Benchers from all parties for engaging in issues relating to childcare and the early years. We have seen a range of good debates on these issues there recently, and also in the Chamber, when the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill was debated. The fact that, again, Members from across the House got engaged on childcare as an infrastructure issue reflects the fact that there is demand for more debate in the main Chamber.

What I would ask the Committee for is, ideally, either a 90-minute or a three-hour estimates day debate for the Department for Education to



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focus on the issue of childcare and the early years. I am very happy to answer any questions that your Committee has.

Chair: Thank you very much, Robin. Obviously I am a member of the Education Committee as well, and I have been engaged in all the inquiries that Robin has been talking about; and yes, we have had some very interesting evidence recently—that is just just me declaring my interest in this issue.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** Can I ask when your report is likely to surface?

Robin Walker: I would love it to be sooner, but it won't be until we have completed the full inquiry, which is going to take a number of sessions. Therefore, it won't be until about May at the earliest now, so it won't be in time for the Budget, which is another reason why an estimates day debate ahead of the Budget would be very helpful.

Q3 **Wendy Morton:** You have clearly got a lot of support for this; can I just seek some clarity as to how much time you would be looking for? Would it be 90 minutes, or would you be looking for three hours or even six hours?

Robin Walker: I think either a 90-minute or a three-hour debate would be useful and ample. I don't think we would need six hours of your valuable time. Three hours would be my mild preference, but at the end of the day, if we got 90 minutes, I'm sure we'd be satisfied with that.

Chair: Anyone else, please? In that case, Robin, thank you very much for coming along and presenting, and thank you for the application. We will now go into private, because all the other applications have asked that they be heard as paper applications.