



Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 28 November 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 28 November 2023.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1-45

Witnesses

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Chair: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the first meeting of the Backbench Business Committee in this parliamentary Session. We have a bumper bundle of applications this afternoon, so we will press on, but I first thank Members across the House for not putting up anybody else to stand against me as Chair, so I was re-elected unopposed. I am very grateful for that and to the members of the Committee for rejoining. The membership of the Committee is very similar, if not almost congruent, with our predecessor Committee in the previous Session. I thank them for their perseverance and for putting up with me.

Damian Green made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** First up this afternoon, we have Mr Damian Green. The application that you are presenting this afternoon is for a debate on preparation for new and upcoming dementia treatments. Damian, over to you.

Damian Green: Congratulations on your triumphant re-election, Chair, and on this perfectly formed Committee, which is as perfectly formed as it used to be. When in doubt, crawl.

Thank you for hearing my application. As we all know, dementia is a hugely important issue. About 1 million people in the country are living with dementia. The reason for having this well-supported debate—18 MPs from five different parties support it—is that new treatments are becoming available. It is almost the first sign of hope we have had. One has already been approved in the US, and we are expecting the first decision from UK regulators in the new year. At that point, clearly there will be massive public interest, but if such treatments do gain approval, it is estimated that because of the various obvious constraints, only about 2% of UK patients will be able to gain access to them.

I therefore want to have a debate on how we prepare for those new and upcoming treatments, because they could be genuinely, seriously life-changing. At the moment, we are still in the foothills of a discussion about how the NHS and NICE will cope. This is therefore important and timely.

Q2 **Chair:** Is there any time sensitivity, Damian?

Damian Green: As I say, the first decision will be taken in the new year. There is no day, as it were, but any time between now and Christmas would be ideal.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** I have one quick question, Damian. You have asked for a 90-minute debate. Given the number of speakers you have, that would mean that, after allowing for Front Benchers and you presumably leading the debate, everyone will get two minutes. Usually, for a debate like this, with this number of speakers, we would be expecting an application for three hours—but it is your application.

Damian Green: I put in for 90 minutes partly out of a degree of cynicism about the potential drop-out between the number of people who sign and



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who will actually turn up—born of experience, I should say. I have discussed it, and we think that 90 minutes will probably be enough.

- Q4 **Bob Blackman:** The second issue is that it is a general debate, so if we could not allocate time in the main Chamber, would you accept time in Westminster Hall?

Damian Green: Yes. Obviously, I would prefer it in the main Chamber, but yes.

Chair: No one else has any questions, Damian, so thank you for your application.

Sally-Ann Hart made representations.

- Q5 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Sally-Ann. Your application is for a debate on the provision of auditory verbal therapy across the United Kingdom. Over to you.

Sally-Ann Hart: I attended an event in Parliament for auditory verbal therapy. My campaign manager has really benefited from auditory verbal therapy. This issue needs to be discussed and debated more widely, because there are about 50,000 deaf children in the UK, more than 7,000 of whom are under the age of five. They face the prospect of lower academic achievement, lower employment and a higher risk of poor mental health, bullying and social exclusion. But it does not have to be that way, because if deaf children and their families have access to auditory verbal therapy and if it is delivered early and in an effective manner, it can really help children and expand their opportunities. It is important for children with these special educational needs because they need to reach their full potential. It is important to them, to their families and to society as a whole.

The argument is that early support should be available to all deaf children, whether their parents choose to communicate with spoken language, sign language or both. Auditory verbal therapy is an early intervention. It is delivered through a family-centred coaching program, which equips parents and care givers with tools to support the development of their child's listening and speaking. It is evidence based.

Around 80% of children who attend an auditory verbal programme for at least two years achieve the same level of spoken language as their hearing peers. That rises to 97% of children without additional needs, and most of those children attend mainstream schools and are attaining educational outcomes on a par with hearing children.

We need more auditory verbal therapists in the UK. There must be discussion on that. The debate will allow MPs to speak on the national or local policy measures that can be taken to maximise access to auditory verbal therapy to improve outcomes for deaf children. It will allow MPs to speak of the benefits of the therapy, including to family wellbeing and to the economy in the long term, and the opportunities that it can provide to deaf children living in the UK.



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Q6 **Bob Blackman:** You have applied for a general debate in either the Chamber or Westminster Hall on a Tuesday. If we were not able to accommodate that, would you accept a Thursday in Westminster Hall?

Sally-Ann Hart: Yes.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** What Department would you like to answer? If we allocate a Tuesday, it has to be the answering Department that is on the rota.

Sally-Ann Hart: Either Education or Health.

Bob Blackman: They answer on different weeks.

Sally-Ann Hart: I would definitely say Health.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** Would a slot on the morning of Tuesday 12 December be acceptable?

Sally-Ann Hart: Yes.

Chair: Thank you. That is much appreciated.

Nickie Aiken, Sally-Ann Hart and Kirsten Oswald made representations.

Chair: I do apologise; this is looking a bit like a production line, but we have an awful lot of applications to get through this afternoon. As context, it may be useful for Members to know that we have adopted the inherited list from the predecessor Committee. It contained 11 unheard debates and we have 13 applications this afternoon, so we are quite busy.

Nickie Aiken: Thank you, Chairman, and congratulations on your successful election. I do not have to explain to the Committee the situation in the middle east and the repercussions for the United Kingdom.

In London alone, we have seen a rise of over 1,300% in cases of antisemitism. Let me paint a picture. During Prorogation a couple of weeks ago, Mike Freer asked me to welcome some children from a Jewish primary school in his constituency to Parliament because he could not make it. I met them in Westminster Hall, and they were nine and 10-year-old boys. I said to them, "Why are you wearing baseball caps?", and they said, "To hide our kippahs." That really shocked me—that there are children, British children, in this country, hiding their identities. And then I thought, we talk about all the negatives and we talk a lot about antisemitism, which is absolutely right, but I really do think it is time that we celebrated the British Jewish community, which has made such a massive contribution to this country for hundreds of years.

Obviously, I represent the Cities of London and Westminster, and in the City of London I am proud that we have the oldest synagogue in the United Kingdom—and possibly in Europe. So, we have huge history across London and across the United Kingdom. I am very grateful that Kirsten is here, who has a big Jewish community in her East Renfrewshire constituency, and Sally-Ann Hart from Hastings and Rye is also sitting beside me.



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I was quite overwhelmed by the number of people who agreed to sign my application within a couple of hours. That is not everybody who wanted to sign—quite a few people contacted me after the deadline. So, there is huge interest in this subject and a huge wish to celebrate the Jewish community in this country. Also, it is time that we had some form of national recognition with a British Jewish history month. The debate would call for that and it would be interesting to hear how the Government respond.

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously it is a good application, with a huge number of potential speakers. The only point is, of course, the potential time-sensitivity of this debate. Do you have a particular need to hold this debate quickly? In fact, is there a suggestion of when the Jewish month would be?

Nickie Aiken: I have had tentative conversations. Obviously, the Holocaust memorial month is January, and with this parliamentary term coming to an end in a couple of weeks' time it may be that you could find time in January to coincide with that. But for the month itself I think that we would want to look at a different month, because January is all about the Holocaust. I do think we need to have a positive debate, and the British Jewish history month would be a positive.

We are in your hands. I would like the debate to be in the Chamber, if possible, because it is such an important subject.

Q10 **Patricia Gibson:** I just want to say that I think it is a very good application, and it is the sort of application that I would have signed, had I not been a member of this Committee. I think we need to do the kinds of things that your debate is seeking to do, and I think we need to do them, probably, more urgently than ever. This is not why I wanted to speak to you, but I would commend my early-day motion on this very issue to you, because I think it is very important. I have spoken to Kirsten about this before; I think it is very important.

Kirsten Oswald: I am really grateful that Nickie has brought this application. I think it is really important. It is important for communities like mine in East Renfrewshire. A very significant proportion of Scotland's Jewish community live in my local area. We have the only Jewish school in Scotland in East Renfrewshire. It adds immeasurably to our community, as does the diversity of the people who live there. I think to celebrate that, and to focus on the contribution of the Jewish community in particular, we should be the people who are leading that. That is part of our job in this place, and communities like mine are immeasurably better because we have the Jewish community as part of our broader community.

Given where things are now—the challenges that Nickie set out—I think that these things trouble us all. Nobody should feel anything other than supremely confident to walk around and be visibly and proudly Jewish, and people are not feeling that way; so part of our job here is to bring this kind of debate to the Floor, so that we can very clearly indicate our solidarity with our Jewish communities and make it very clear what we



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think about the scourge of antisemitism. I would be really grateful if the Committee were to support Nickie's application, and I hope that they would do so sooner rather than later. Hanukkah is coming up.

Nickie Aiken: That is a very good point.

Kirsten Oswald: Just as a hint.

Nickie Aiken: Yes. We are in your hands, Mr Chairman. Obviously, I would like it as soon as possible, but I understand what you said earlier about the number of debates that you have got ahead.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** Could I suggest that it would be very helpful, given the objective of the debate you have requested, to have a substantive motion to go with this?

Nickie Aiken: Yes, absolutely.

Q12 **Bob Blackman:** That does mean, of course, that we'd have to hold it in the Chamber, and you might want to cut and paste an early-day motion.

Kirsten Oswald: A very good EDM, even if I say it myself.

Nickie Aiken: I will have a wee look, I promise.

Q13 **Kevin Foster:** I think Mr Blackman has probably covered the main point for me. Given the way you have phrased the debate and the fact that you have a specific ask rather than just, "This House has considered the British Jewish community's contribution to the UK," are you thinking of having, "This House has considered and agrees," or would you like to see an annual British Jewish history month created? That might be something to think about.

Nickie Aiken: Yes, absolutely. I think that is really good advice from the Committee and I certainly want to do that.

Chair: Thank you. I should declare a minor interest, in that I have a very large Haredi Jewish community in my constituency. There are seven or eight schools and colleges, a rabbinical college and a Talmudical college all situated in the community in which I live in Bensham, in my Gateshead constituency. With the influx of students, the Jewish community in Gateshead swells from about 4,500 to 7,000 on an annual basis, so I definitely have a constituency interest in the whole subject. Thank you very much for bringing it to us.

Nickie Aiken: Thank you.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q14 **Chair:** Jim, good afternoon and welcome. Make yourself comfortable. Your application is on the 75th anniversary of the genocide convention.

Jim Shannon: Chair, first of all, I congratulate you on your re-election. We are all very pleased to see you back with all your Committee members alongside you as well. It is only to be deserved.



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The title of this debate is the 75th anniversary of the genocide convention. I have added another two names to the application form, which makes the numbers up to lucky 13. The 75th anniversary of the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide is on 9 December. Alongside the universal declaration of human rights, it creates a vision of a world where genocide and other mass atrocities are prevented and punished, which is critical. In the last 75 years there have been successes and failures of the convention, but today we still see atrocity crimes in Ukraine, China and Ethiopia, just to name a few.

The UK has no formal mechanism to determine genocide, instead relying on the determination of a court or tribunal. Despite this, UK courts have a very limited mandate to engage on the issue as per section 51 of the ICCA 2001. Indeed, UK courts have never prosecuted the crime, and currently there is no other law that would enable declaratory regulations. That, in addition to the lack of an atrocity prevention strategy, places the UK at a disadvantage when trying to fulfil its duty to predict, prevent and punish atrocity crimes, as actions are often delayed until an international judicial system marks the recognition.

The debate will have three aims. The first is to mark the 75th anniversary of the convention, the second is to highlight the successes of international action in preventing atrocities, and the third is to explore ways in which the UK can better predict and prevent these atrocities, which is critical.

You will see that I have asked for a 90-minute slot. I have asked for either Westminster Hall or the Chamber, whatever it may be. I think you'll agree that those who have applied to participate in the debate are those who champion human rights issues in the Chamber. They are quite specific people. That's no disrespect to any others, by the way, but all of them are champions—if I can use that word; it is used often in the Chamber, but I will use it again—who speak up every time there's a human rights issue in the Chamber.

Chair: Thank you very much, Jim. Questions please, colleagues.

Q15 **Kevin Foster:** It's always good to see you, Jim. And as you rightly say, those who have applied are quite regularly interested in this area. On our stocks, there is already a potential 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall or the Chamber for the 70th anniversary of the UN declaration of human rights, which is likely to have some strong cross-interests with this debate. I wonder whether, for example, combining the two and having a three-hour job in the Chamber might be a better idea than having two very similar 90-minute debates. I very much appreciate your passion in this area, and clearly this debate could fulfil 90 minutes on its own, but I wonder what your thoughts are on that, Jim.

Jim Shannon: That is an excellent suggestion. I am not against the idea. The two debates probably complement each other; I do not think they would be completely divorced from their core objectives. If it was a three-hour debate in the Chamber, I am not sure how that would work, but if it was this side of Christmas, we would probably grab that. The big hitters



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on this list are probably on the other one—I was one of the people who signed it as well, so I am very keen, but I am guided by the Committee.

Q16 Bob Blackman: You have asked for a 90-minute debate in either Chamber. If we were minded to give you one of the dates that you have outlined—possibly 7 December, which I think would be the earliest date—would you be able to do that in Westminster Hall?

Jim Shannon: Yes. Forgive me, Kevin, but that is probably closer to the date.

Kevin Foster: I am thinking more about how the debate works, and then dates come second.

Q17 Chair: I am loth to suggest to you any dates or times at the moment, because we do not know what the Committee will be allocated by the Government between now and the Christmas recess. We might get Thursday next week or the Thursday the week after. We might get the Monday or the Tuesday in the final week. We do not know, so we need to do some consulting with the Leader of the House's office about that.

Jim Shannon: I am quite happy, as always, to leave it in the hands of you and your Committee, because you have always been fair, and I respect that.

Chair: Well, Jim, I wish I could say that your glowing praise will secure an automatic result, but I do know one thing: you have definitely retained your season ticket to the Committee. Thank you very much indeed.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Committee.

Grahame Morris and **James Grundy** made representations.

Q18 Chair: Grahame and James, welcome. The subject matter for your application is justice for miners and mining communities.

Grahame Morris: I would just like to reiterate the congratulations of other pitchers this afternoon and wish you every success in the Champions League this evening.

Chair: That's coming from a Sunderland supporter, but there we go.

Grahame Morris: I am pitching on behalf of rather a large group. I must mention that James has stepped in at the last minute—I am grateful for him doing that—because Aaron Bell, who was the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on coalfield communities, has been promoted; he is now a member of the Government, so unfortunately he was unable to come and present.

We have quite a good cross-section of Members of various political parties. We have a number of Conservatives who represent coalfield communities right across the country, Members of the SNP, quite a number of Labour Members and an Independent from Wales. I do not think we will have any



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problems in filling the time, if the Committee is minded to grant us three hours. We would like to be in the main Chamber; we think we would be more likely to get an airing.

I will briefly mention some of the issues that we would like to cover. Coalfield communities like the one I represent are still trying to overcome some long-standing structural problems and the challenges of deindustrialisation. We all represent areas with high levels of deprivation, and there are a range of issues that are really important to miners, former miners and those living in former coalfield communities.

The all-party group that I referred to, which just had its meeting a little while ago, produced an excellent report, "Next Steps in Levelling Up the Former Coalfields", with 12 recommendations, each of which would form the basis of a contribution in the debate. It covers areas such as the role of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, issues around poor provision of transport infrastructure and a very interesting point about the potential of geothermal energy—a new all-party group has been established. In fact, our APPG visited Gateshead, Chairman, to see the new district heating scheme there.

An issue highlighted in the report that I also want to raise on behalf of former miners is the surplus from the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme and how that should be redistributed.

There are also issues about whether the lottery funding distributors are giving the former mining communities a fair share. I do not know whether you can see this document, but it shows mining communities, apart from those in Northern Ireland. There are areas in Scotland: in Ayrshire, Lothian and Fife. There are areas in northern England, in the north-west, in Lancashire, Staffordshire, Derbyshire, Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, obviously South Wales, and there is the former Kent coalfield. If you put them all together in one region, it would be the biggest region in the country and, sadly, it would also be the most deprived region and one of the poorest regions in the country as well.

There is a lot of ammunition to go at and there are a lot of issues that we want to raise, not least holding the Government to account in respect of the levelling-up commitments. And enough people have indicated that they have an interest in this subject to ensure that it will be quite a lively and well-attended debate, if the Committee is minded to grant us the time for it.

James Grundy: Thank you very much. Obviously, I endorse everything that my colleague, the hon. Member for Easington, has said.

It is telling that you have two Members before you today from pretty much opposite ends of Parliament, although we represent constituencies that have very similar issues, as has been explained. There are issues with transport infrastructure, as many colleagues have heard me say before in the main Chamber. There are issues with poverty, and of course the big issue is regeneration and levelling up.



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I will just give you an example of the range of Departments that we deal with: the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero; and the Department for Education. Obviously, we also deal with a number of statutory bodies and other bodies related to regeneration, such as the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation, or CISWO, Arts Council England, National Lottery Community Fund and National Lottery Heritage Fund. That is by no means an exhaustive list.

I realise that we are asking for a substantial debate, lasting for three hours. However, I think that both in terms of the breadth of topics that we can talk about and the number of Members who wish to contribute to such a debate, we will fill that time easily. And I believe that because of the way that seats were distributed at the last election, whereby there are now a large number of Conservatives who did not traditionally represent coalfield seats, it will be an issue that is important to colleagues from across the House.

Although we may differ on some of the solutions, we share many of the interests in resolving the same set of problems that we all face in ensuring that in years to come our communities benefit from levelling up and transition from being poor, ex-mining communities to wealthy commuter communities, as we have seen in parts of former mining areas in, say, Cheshire, which basically went through this process about 30 years before our communities did.

With that, I strongly commend the recommendation for this debate.

Q19 Kevin Foster: First, I think that the case put for the debate has been excellent and the subject is exactly what Backbench Business debates are here for; they are here for things that are of interest across parties but that may not necessarily get Government time, or, for that matter, Opposition day time. The case was powerfully put, pointing out the reasons why these communities need to have their voice heard.

It is a request for a general debate. Is there a list of specific asks that might be a substantive motion, or is it the intention to have a more general debate, allowing people to put their own views, if I can put it that way?

Grahame Morris: We have considered that—putting a votable motion. However, if we have a general debate, it will give Members the opportunity to raise any issues that they feel are pertinent to coalfield communities.

I mentioned the National Justice for Mineworkers campaign in justice questions; I raised issues regarding the pardons Bill. It would be perfectly legitimate to raise that, although I would anticipate that the Minister responding would be from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

We generally felt that we should keep the debate as open as possible, because I think Members want to raise other issues, such as geothermal



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energy. It's not all bad news; there is some potential there in coalfield areas. So, I thought that if we didn't divide the House, that would give an opportunity to discuss more issues.

Also, if you were going to ask, I don't think this debate is time-sensitive. Are we one of the outstanding cases from the last Committee? We have been working on this since our AGM.

Chair: No.

Grahame Morris: Kevin, you know I have been lobbying people to support this. If you would give it consideration, I think it would be worth while.

Kevin Foster: It is a very well-supported application. That is very helpful. Thank you, Grahame; it is appreciated.

Chair: In that case, gentlemen, thank you very much indeed.

Selaine Saxby made representations.

Q20 **Chair:** Selaine, welcome. Your application this afternoon is on justice for road traffic collision victims.

Selaine Saxby: Yes, and I am with Fabian Hamilton, who co-chairs the all-party parliamentary group for walking and cycling with me. We have recently concluded a report on road justice. We heard some very harrowing evidence from victims of shocking accidents, as well as from the police. People are not served justice in this area. Many of us, as constituency MPs, have shocking cases in our own constituencies. When you aggregate this up across the country, it is a very sizeable issue, and the justice associated with these cases does not seem to be appropriate in far too many instances.

In the report, there are recommendations for the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Justice to increase sentences for many of these crimes, which would act as a deterrent. At the moment, because you do not get punished for many of these crimes, there is not a deterrent and we see a huge amount of reoffending, so the debate would be about highlighting the issues and looking for change in terms of enabling people to undertake active travel safely and without fear for their lives. We know that one of the biggest barriers to people changing their behaviour and walking or cycling is the fear of what will happen if they are involved in an accident. When you hear about the poor justice they receive if there is an awful accident, you can see why. It is about how we increase the deterrent to reduce some of these shocking cases.

Fabian Hamilton: Selaine has put forward an excellent case. The report was very thorough and very detailed—almost on the level of a Select Committee report. This country has seen a huge increase in the number of cyclists, but as Selaine said, many are put off cycling or continuing to cycle by the dangers on the roads and by the infrastructure, although it is improving, and also by the fact that cyclists who are injured or killed are



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not served by the justice system in the way that other victims of road transport accidents or incidents are treated.

I will conclude with the case of my constituent Jeremy Richardson. Every MP will have a case like this. He was a well-loved headteacher of a primary school in Bradford and cycled from Roundhay, in my Leeds North East constituency, most days of the week, especially in the summer. On a June morning, at 6.30 am, he was cycling 15 miles from Roundhay to Bradford West. He was almost there when, at the junction between Barkerend Road and Byron Street, a taxi driver drove into him and killed him. That was in June 2022. Here we are in November 2023, and the police still have not finished their investigation. The family have not been served well. The community are still mourning for this wonderful headteacher. Nothing has been done. This is why we feel that this debate needs to come to the Floor of the House.

- Q21 **Wendy Morton:** My apologies for being a bit late this afternoon. This is a really timely application, because we have just had the World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims and I believe that the RoadPeace organisation are supporting this piece of work. I think I am right in saying that this will have a much broader appeal amongst colleagues. It is not just about cyclists and walkers; it will be about victims of road traffic accidents in much more general terms.

Fabian Hamilton: And we cover walking as well, of course.

- Q22 **Bob Blackman:** What would you like to see happen as a result of the debate?

Selaine Saxby: There were specific asks in the report. One of my predecessors in this role was Alex Chalk, so there is enthusiasm for change within the senior ranks. This is a replication of a report that was published when he was chair of the APPG, so there is recognition through the ranks that change is overdue in this area. We will be pushing for change, but we have not really heard that. Certainly in my time in the House there has not been an opportunity for people to come together. I was deeply shocked when I listened to the evidence and heard from the police about their challenges in dealing with this issue with what they currently have. Many of the recommendations were reported to Justice, but Justice sent them all over to Transport. We are fighting that battle elsewhere. It is one of those areas that naturally sits in Transport, but there are probably changes that need to come through in Justice.

- Q23 **Bob Blackman:** You put down for a general debate, but a divisible motion would be a way of initiating some action from the Government. A general debate would air the issues but wouldn't necessarily encourage the Government to do anything. It's your application, but—

Fabian Hamilton: Bob, I think that is a very good point. Clearly, we don't want to minimise the chances of gaining this debate. We think it is really important that these issues are aired, and we have a lot of detail—as Selaine said, some of the evidence is really harrowing—but we want answers and we need action. Infrastructure is obviously very important



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because that makes it safer to cycle, but so is the judicial system, which treats cyclists and pedestrians as second-class citizens.

Q24 **Chair:** If you had a votable motion that asked the Government to adopt the recommendations of the report that you referred to, that might be a way to tackle it. If you wanted to put all the recommendations from the report into a votable motion, that would be quite long, but if you just ask the Government to adopt the recommendations of the report, that would be something that they could formally respond to.

Fabian Hamilton: That is very helpful, Ian. Thank you.

Chair: In that case, thank you very much indeed. It is very much appreciated.

Judith Cummins *made representations.*

Chair: Next up, we have an application from Judith Cummins and Caroline Nokes. Judith, you are on your own, I take it.

Judith Cummins: Thank you very much, Chair, for inviting me here, and congratulations on your re-election. This is a joint application for a debate; it is a very straightforward application in one sense. The Government had a statutory duty to publish a report by 28 April 2023. It is already seven months late, and they have failed to publish it. Since then, the Government promised to publish the report this autumn, but so far it has not been forthcoming.

This debate would be topical, both because of the report and its timings, and because the Government have claimed that their delays are due to a change in view with regard to whether a specific offence for spiking is necessary. That is obviously important because we have had mixed messages from the Home Office and Home Secretaries on this, and we want to clarify the situation and explore further when the report will be published.

At the moment, the problem is that spiking can fall under seven different offences: three if it is by drink and four if it is by needle or drink. It is often under-reported or reported incorrectly, and it is near impossible for anybody to make any sense of the widescale spread of spiking. The police chiefs would welcome a specific offence of spiking so that they can get a true picture. The data at the moment is inconsistent, inaccurate and inconclusive.

There has been broad interest in previous debates; they have been well supported. A ten-minute rule Bill was introduced in June 2023 by Richard Graham. This application currently stands at 33 Members of Parliament, drawn from five political parties, including a former Home Secretary and two Chairs of Select Committees. If the Committee is minded to grant us the time to explore and push this important issue, we would be very grateful.

Q25 **Bob Blackman:** My understanding is that Richard Graham is suggesting



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that the Bill that is currently in the Chamber should be amended to contain this specific offence and clear up the issue of the seven potential offences. I do not know whether you have contributed to that. Obviously, Richard is on your list of potential speakers. It strikes me that time could well be of the essence in this if this is to be the parliamentary route to get this sorted out. Have you discussed that with Richard?

Judith Cummins: I have not discussed that with Richard. I am aware of that letter, but I was told that it was of a confidential nature and I believe that it has only been circulated to Conservative MPs and myself. I have signed the letter, but it is a big if as well.

Q26 **Kevin Foster:** My point was very similar to Mr Blackman's, in that there is clearly an opportunity for a debate on this subject when the Report stage of the Bill comes up. It will be interesting in this regard to see whether the Bill gives scope for an amendment on Report. My understanding is that it does and that might clearly give quite a powerful opportunity to create a new offence in this area.

Judith Cummins: I would say to the Committee that, as I said, this is already seven months overdue and it is a very important issue. My interest in spiking came from one of my constituents, who was spiked and subsequently allegedly raped at the age of 16. It is obviously an issue that is close to my and to my constituent's heart and it needs addressing. The fact that we have seven different offences—

Q27 **Kevin Foster:** To finish the point on how to address it, to be clear, if there were an amendment, some of us would be likely to vote for that.

Judith Cummins: Thank you. It is a big if and when.

Q28 **Chair:** I take it that, from your perspective, it is a question of the sooner, the better for this. It is an ongoing issue; it is live.

Judith Cummins: Obviously, it is an ongoing issue. It is very live and it is very topical. So yes, the sooner, the better; very much so, Chair.

Q29 **Bob Blackman:** One final thing. You have had a very well-attended Westminster Hall debate already. If we were not able to give you Chamber time, would you take another Westminster Hall debate?

Judith Cummins: I think we would take it wherever.

Q30 **Chair:** Super. That is very good to know. Thank you.

Liam Byrne made representations.

Q31 **Chair:** Liam, your application is on the potential merger between Vodafone and Three. Welcome.

Liam Byrne: Thank you, Chair, and congratulations to you. I will say by way of introduction that three further colleagues have added their names, admittedly in the last 24 hours. They are David Davis, Chris Loder and Sir Peter Bottomley.



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The subject of this debate is one of the biggest mergers of the year: a £15 billion merger between Vodafone and Three. This takes the mobile market through a critical threshold. Once the number of mobile operators goes from four to three, all kinds of strange effects begin to happen in the market. We can see that from evidence around the world, but the upshot of that is that investment tends to go down and prices tend to go up. This is quite a critical moment in the mobile phone market.

The reason for bringing the application to you at this stage is threefold. First, there is now some fairly new evidence from Australia about competitive dynamics, which the House has not had a chance to consider.

Secondly, this merger is a test case around the investment screening regime for this country. Some of you will have seen former heads of MI6 begin to warn about data traps and, in particular, the risk of foreign actors acquiring access to UK data. Vodafone is obviously one of the biggest "houses" of data in this country and there are security concerns because the board of Three is located in Hong Kong, with some pretty close relationships to the Chinese Communist party. Although Three is a company that is operating in the market at the moment, whether they should have access to 49% of Vodafone is a very different question. There are a number of security concerns that colleagues would like to have the opportunity to have out on the Floor of the Chamber.

The third reason for bringing this to you now, Chair, is that the Business and Trade Committee had oral hearings with a range of witnesses. We are looking for an opportunity to ventilate that evidence on the Floor of the House for those who are interested in this particular merger. That is the argument in a nutshell.

Q32 **Chair:** I reciprocate the congratulations, Liam, on your election as Chairman of the Business and Trade Committee. I understand that the application was signed by a number of members of that Committee.

Liam Byrne: That's right, yes.

Q33 **Kevin Foster:** As I have said, I can see the argument for a debate. Given some of the comments being made, I wonder whether this should be a resolution, such as "This House expresses concern at the proposal" or whether it is just "This House has considered the proposal", given that, at the moment, you have listed a general debate. What is the intention with this?

Liam Byrne: We wanted to make it as permissive as possible, because we are conscious that the chief concern for many colleagues is the impact on jobs. For others, the chief impact is on investment. You will probably know that Oliver Dowden has put out a call for evidence about how the investment screening process in our country works, which has a deadline of late January/early February. We will obviously be limited in the Chamber in how much we can talk about some of the security concerns, but I know there will be colleagues who want to make those concerns heard.



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We just wanted to try to cast it as widely as possible. Frankly, some will want to support the merger and say, “This is creative destruction in the marketplace. It could be good for investment and for creating a national champion.” But there are lots of others who will not take that view.

Q34 **Kevin Foster:** A good application is one where people argue both sides. We are not here just for everyone to agree with the position being put forward—just to be clear.

Liam Byrne: I think people may want to argue both sides, perfectly reasonably, which is why we cast the motion as “This House has considered”.

Q35 **Chair:** Because this is a debate about a proposed merger, what is the time element, from your perspective?

Liam Byrne: It is potentially sooner rather than later, just because I think the Secretary of State has to take a decision about whether to call it in. The Secretary of State can call it in on investment screening grounds. I suppose, as a Committee, we wanted to try to make sure that the House has had a chance to put any of its concerns on the table so that, when the Secretary of State—whether the Secretary of State for Business and Trade or Mr Dowden—is taking those decisions, they have the benefit of the House’s advice on the decision.

Chair: Thank you very much. It was very good of you to come.

Liam Byrne: Thank you.

Dame Margaret Hodge made representations.

Q36 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Margaret. Your application is on the implementation of public registers of beneficial ownership in the United Kingdom’s overseas territories and Crown dependencies.

Dame Margaret Hodge: Congratulations on your re-election, Chair, and thank you for taking me a little late. I had another meeting to go to.

The first thing to draw to your attention is that this debate is supported across the parties. It is genuinely a cross-party issue. A lot of people here, and people who were in Parliament before 2019, have played an important role in progressing the legislation that we want to debate. Ironically, the Minister who may reply to this is the individual with whom I worked to get the legislative change—Andrew Mitchell—when he was a Back Bencher.

Secondly, it is really urgent. If we had not had recess, I would have been before you sooner. Under the legislation, the overseas territories and Crown dependencies should be introducing public registers of beneficial ownership by the end of this calendar year.

This goes back a long way. To give you the history, it was David Cameron who, when he was Prime Minister, put Britain ahead of the league in introducing a public register of beneficial ownership here in the UK, before anybody else did. We were world leaders on transparency, and



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transparency really matters because if you know who owns a company, you can follow the money. It is as simple as that.

We had all those leaks—Panama, the Pandora papers, the Paradise papers. More recently, although it has not had a lot of publicity, there has been the Cyprus confidential papers. I don't know whether that has hit your radar, but it is another batch of leaks that demonstrates again the importance of the issue that we are debating. That was covered by the BBC and by *The Guardian*, but I think that, with all the Gaza-Israel issue, it has not made the headlines in the way that one might have wanted.

David Cameron, in 2014, wrote to the overseas territories and said that he had taken this step here in the UK, and he thought that it was important that they too should have a public register of beneficial ownership, because a lot of the tax havens, particularly the BVI and others, are used extensively by Russia in particular. This latest batch of leaks demonstrates Abramovich's links to Putin in the clearest way we have seen to date, all done through companies. The money comes out of Russia, into Cyprus, into the BVI and then buys art here—or buys Chelsea football club—and things like that. It is the clearest demonstration that we have seen of the role of the BVI, really, in that chain that gets money out of Russia and a lot of it out of the illegal market, into the legal margin and then into the UK.

Cameron did it first in 2014; he urged them, but it did not work. Andrew Mitchell and I partnered on this when Theresa May was Prime Minister, and we just built a fantastic level of support among Back Benchers for the measure. The Government were forced to give in to us in 2018 and we got it in legislation that the overseas territories would introduce public registers. Then, there was the hurricane in the BVI around that time, and therefore everybody recognised that they needed a bit of time to try and respond to the hurricane and the economy, and that brought in some delay. Then the Government itself, I have to say, did cause further delays. In the meantime, Andrew Mitchell and I went on what I called our "royal tour" of the Crown dependencies and persuaded them, without legislation, that they too should introduce public registers of beneficial ownership anyway. They were given time, the Government delayed, and the final date was supposed to be 23 December—and they are supposed to have those registers now.

Sadly, there has been a ruling in the European Court, in a case that was taken in Luxembourg by British lawyers. The company that took the case to the European Court argued that revealing beneficial ownership contravened privacy rights. And they won that case. Now, actually, we are not covered by the European Court of Justice any longer, but it is a very, very bad ruling, and the Crown dependencies and overseas territories are relying on that to then say that they do not have to implement UK legislation.

It is the will of Parliament. Those of you who were here in 2018 will remember that it was overwhelmingly carried by Parliament. They are now



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delaying, and we want to urge them to do what they ought to do under our legislation. It is both highly supported and very urgent.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Margaret. Questions, please?

Q37 **Bob Blackman:** First, a comment: I do not know whether you know, Margaret, but PACAC are doing a review of the Crown dependencies and overseas territories at the moment, and they are going on a series of visits to various different ones. Therefore, it might well be worth your while having a conversation with William Wragg, the Chairman of that Committee, just to get it on the agenda for when they are doing their work.

Secondly, obviously you have got a large number of speakers, and you have ticked both 90 minutes and three hours to cover your bases. We would normally be allocating this a three-hour debate, if we can. Obviously, you are saying that it is not only urgent but important, but are there any time constraints from your perspective as to when you would want this debate to be held?

Dame Margaret Hodge: As soon as possible. It really is as soon as possible—definitely before Christmas. That would be completely brilliant if we could do that, given the commitment that those registers should be implemented by the end of the year.

Chair: Dame Margaret, thank you very much indeed.

Dame Margaret Hodge: Thank you, and thank you for taking me last.

Chair: Well, not quite!

Bob Blackman made representations.

Q38 **Chair:** We now call Mr Bob Blackman. Good afternoon, Bob, please make yourself comfortable. You have an application in front of us this afternoon calling for a free and democratic Iran.

Bob Blackman: Indeed. May I join all the rest of the applicants in congratulating you, Mr Chairman, on being re-elected. I am sure that we will all look forward to similar elections next year.

Before attending this Committee, I was co-chairing an event on the current position on Iran and expressing horror that one of our colleagues in Spain— former vice-president of the European Union—was shot in the face by Iranian terrorists, with the principal aim of killing him, because the only enemies that he has in world are from Iran. That just demonstrates the serious nature of the role that the IRGC plays, not just in the middle east, but across the whole of Europe.

We, of course, had a debate in the main Chamber in which contributions were made by all political parties, all in support of a motion calling for the proscription of the IRGC in its entirety. This motion—it may actually be needed to be updated yet again—will effectively update that position. We know that the IRGC is behind Hamas and Hezbollah and, while we have



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proscribed both Hamas and Hezbollah in this country, the head of the snake—the IRGC—is still not proscribed. The Government refuse to contemplate that. They have carried out sanctions, which is to be applauded, but they have not actually carried out what is required, which is to proscribe the IRGC in its entirety. That would make it illegal to be a member of the IRGC and it would then be a particular offence.

We are asking for a debate in the Chamber. Obviously, we want it to be as long as we can get. I think that there actually been an error on the application; it should be three hours, not six hours. My apologies for that. As you can tell, we have a whole range of particular individuals, and I am very confident that most, if not all of them will want to come along and put their two pennyworth in, because they will be contributing to various debates that we have had over the years.

Q39 Wendy Morton: This is just the usual question that I ask to applicants. Noting that it is a three-hour debate, we would be looking for a minimum of half of the names to be Conservative. I can see that there are four on there so far. Have you any thoughts on bolstering that a bit?

Bob Blackman: We can obviously add to them. The reality is, of course, that we are covering the range of political parties across the piece. Knowing some of these speakers, there will be no problem whatsoever in them lengthening their speeches.

Wendy Morton: I appreciate that, but the fact is that we would normally ask for half of them to be from the Government. Thank you.

Q40 Kevin Foster: Mr Blackman has already covered the point about it being six hours rather than three hours on the application; I think that six hours would be fairly rare.

I appreciate the urgency of the motion—the Member touched on the issues around the IRGC and the links to Hamas and Hezbollah—particularly given the current situation. Is there any time sensitivity on this debate, apart from obviously wanting to have it as soon as possible?

Bob Blackman: As soon as possible. We have recorded things here in relation to the attacks on Ashraf 3. If you don't know, Ashraf 3 is basically made up of refugees from Iran who were originally in Camp Liberty, where they were protected by the American forces. The Albanian Government then very kindly allowed them to set up a town just outside Tirana. That has recently been the site of an attack by the Albanian secret services and police, in which one of the leaders of the township was, I am afraid, killed. Once again, that is the extent to which the IRGC and the regime in Tehran will go to hit the people that are campaigning for a free and democratic Iran.

Chair: Thank you. Any further questions? Thank you very much. Next up, we have Mr Bob Blackman.

Bob Blackman made representations.

Q41 Chair: Welcome, Bob. Your application this afternoon is on achieving a



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smoke-free future.

Bob Blackman: Thank you, Ian. The reality of this particular application is that it came as a welcome surprise to me, as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, when the Prime Minister literally cut and pasted one of my speeches for his party conference speech on combating smoking. Indeed, the announcements from the Government on moving towards a smoke-free 2030 are extremely welcome.

What has happened since, of course, is that a new Government have been elected in New Zealand. The current position is that the idea of raising the smoking age came from New Zealand. The Government passed the laws to make that happen, but it was not actually implemented, because it takes a period of time to implement. The new Government are apparently rowing back on that particular commitment, for reasons best known to themselves. Here, Sajid Javid, when he was Secretary of State for Health, got the Dr Khan review, which was released in June last year. That made a number of specific recommendations, one of which was raising the age of sale.

At the moment, the position is that we will not hit the smoke-free 2030 target in England if we do not implement all the measures proposed by Dr Khan. Raising the age of sale was only one of those items. Particularly in the light of the reshuffle and new Ministers, and equally given that the Government have committed to doing one of the measures, we want to literally test out the Ministers and make sure that they are still going to progress in the way that we wish them to.

In the application, we have laid out all the reasons for it. I would say that the sooner we can get this on the stocks, the better, because we need to test out the Government on their long-term commitment to this.

Q42 **Kevin Foster:** I am just going through the form. Is it definitely for a general rather than a substantive debate?

Bob Blackman: Yes.

Q43 **Kevin Foster:** Obviously, at some point we will have a substantive debate around the Government's legislation. The application is both for 90 minutes and for three hours, presumably in the Chamber. Just to clarify, are you happy to accept Westminster Hall?

Bob Blackman: Yes, if necessary. Time is of the essence on this particular issue. Obviously, that would mean a 90-minute debate, not a three-hour debate.

Q44 **Wendy Morton:** I am sure Bob knows the question that I am going to ask. I am just looking at support from colleagues. I note that there are three Conservatives on the application. Do you think you can add some more to that?

Bob Blackman: Including myself, as well.



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Wendy Morton: I beg your pardon—yes.

Q45 **Patricia Gibson:** Chair, I would hate for Mr Blackman to be suggesting that cutting and pasting other people's work has not only taken place in the Labour party but now penetrated the Conservative party at the highest levels.

Bob Blackman: Indeed, I was very pleased. I mentioned to the Prime Minister that plagiarism is a something to like when it involves copying my words almost entirely. I said, "Which speechwriter wrote this? They should be congratulated for having such words of wisdom."

Patricia Gibson: Cutting and pasting seems to be in fashion at the moment.

Chair: I am glad that it has been noted that it is not the sole preserve of one particular party. Thank you very much, Mr Blackman.

Bob Blackman: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much. That concludes our deliberations.