

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 5 March 2024

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Watch the meeting

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

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Representations made

[I](#): Robin Walker.

[II](#). Dr Caroline Johnson.

[III](#). Dame Diana Johnson.

[IV](#). Paul Blomfield.

Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. We have four applications before us this afternoon, in two different categories. The first set of applications are for debates on estimates day. We have two applications in front of us. The first is from Mr Robin Walker. Welcome, Robin: please take a seat and make yourself comfortable.

Robin Walker made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** The subject of your application is “Spending of the Department for Education on SEND provision”.

Mr Walker: It is; thank you, Chair. We all know, probably from our constituency postbags, that SEND provision is an issue of great concern to constituents. We have already seen some very good Backbench Business debates on the issue; specifically, there was an f40 motion that David Davis put before the House a few weeks back, which I think was one of the most highly subscribed Backbench Business debates. The nature of the challenge in this space is, as we all know, very multifaceted, but part of it is around the funding system and the way in which that works. The Department for Education will always argue that it has been doing lots on this front, and it has quite credibly set out that high-needs funding has doubled since 2015 and increased by 60% during the lifetime of this Parliament. The challenge is that that is not matching the growth in education, health and care plans.

There is both a revenue and capital challenge in this space. I remember that at the last spending review the Government committed £2.6 billion to capital spending to increase SEND provision. Pretty much every—but not quite all—upper-tier local authority in the country has a high-needs deficit, and they all want to bring more provision in-county or into their local authority area. However, the amount of capital available to do that is limited, and likely to be more limited thanks to the fact that the Department reached an agreement with the Treasury to prioritise RAAC when it comes to capital spending over the coming years. On both the revenue side and the capital side, there are arguments to be made around the funding for SEND provision.



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Primary schools report increased levels of need, which are likely to feed through to secondary schools throughout the system. There are arguments around early intervention. One interesting thing that came out of the supplementary estimates, which the Education Committee discussed today, is that there was a £250 million transfer from the capital budget to the revenue budget of the DfE. One of the things we might delve into during any debate on the estimates would be whether any of that came out of the very important capital funding for SEND provision.

There is a good case for an estimates day debate. We know that there is strong cross-party interest in this area. I cannot remember whether it was 19 or 22 signatures at the end of the day, but we had signatures from all parties and different parts of the United Kingdom on the application for the debate, even though obviously the DfE estimates primarily relate to England.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. There is one thing that strikes me as interesting—of course, I was at the Education Committee this morning. Despite the extra, additional expenditure on RAAC, having an underspend of £250 million on capital within the financial year seems rather strange from my perspective, particularly when you have all the additional demand for specialist provision across local authorities and the whole of the country. That could be investigated, and I am sure you will want to ask Ministers about that on the day of the debate.

Mr Walker: That is absolutely right. There is also a question there around the capacity of local authorities to plan and measure for these things, which needs to be asked and delved into as part of this as well. Part of the concern that we all have is around how provision is met and planned for in each area. I have certainly heard local authorities saying, “We don’t necessarily have the capacity to bid for this money.” That in itself is a concern, and it may be leading to some of those underspends. If the Government are going to meet their aspirations under the “right place, right support, right time” Command Paper, they will clearly need to be able to address that.

Chair: Another aspect of that—certainly in my local authority, which is no different from many in this respect—is that the demand for special educational needs places is still very high and there are a lot of unmet needs. That is an interesting thing to check in on. Any further comments or questions, colleagues? If not, then thank you, Robin.

Dr Caroline Johnson made representations.

Q3 Chair: We are going to need to mix and match because of who is here. We were due to have Dame Diana Johnson with an application on Home Office spending on asylum and migration, but we will instead move on to the application by Dr Caroline Johnson for an ordinary Backbench Business Committee debate on large-scale solar farms. Over to you, Caroline, and welcome. Thank you for coming this afternoon.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Thank you, Chair. I would like to request a debate on large-scale solar farms. These are an important issue with huge, wide-



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ranging consequences for our environment and our countryside. Rural communities have been plagued with applications for really enormous solar farms. Solar farms are disproportionately affecting the most fertile parts of the UK. One of the counties particularly affected is Lincolnshire, which produces 12% of the UK's food, including 30% of its vegetables, despite comprising less than 3% of its land. There are currently 12 NSIP solar farm applications in Lincolnshire, covering 9,000 hectares, or twenty-two-and-a-bit thousand acres. To put that into food figures, 81,000 tonnes of wheat, 57 million loaves of bread or 1.5 billion Weetabix could be produced from that amount of land.

Chair: Most people can only eat two, you know.

Dr Caroline Johnson: I know. I had my Weetabix this morning—well, I didn't actually have a Weetabix this morning. More than half the land nationally proposed for solar plants is in Lincolnshire, Leicestershire and Rutland, which are the most food-rich parts of the UK now. The Prime Minister said that he was not going to allow great swathes of our British countryside to be covered in solar farms, and he has updated the national planning framework, but it does not seem to be working at this stage. Within my constituency, the Heckington Fen application is on 49% best and most versatile land, while Beacon Fen is 30% and Springwell is 32%. But this is not just a problem for Lincolnshire, and it is not just a problem for my constituency. For example, Botley West in Oxford is another NSIP solar application on 38% best and most versatile land; the Drax application in East Yorkshire is 94% best and most versatile land; Mallard Pass in Rutland is more than half, and Old Malton in Thirsk and Malton, in Yorkshire, is 60%. One of the problems is that that is probably an underestimate, because solar prospectors are allowed to test the land themselves, so that they can tell us the percentage of the land that is best and most versatile, and it is obviously in their interests to minimise that. That is an issue I think we need to debate.

It is fundamentally a country-wide problem. There is an issue over how we use our land. What is our land use strategy? Do we want to grow food? Do we want to have solar panels? Do we want to grow houses? Do we want to rewild it? All those matters for debate are very important. Given what has been happening with the war in Ukraine and the impact it has had on food pricing and grain availability, it is really important that we keep a high level of food security in our country. There are actually alternatives. There are 600,000 acres of south-facing warehouse and industrial building land in the UK that could be used instead. I think we need to debate whether and how we make sure that that is an attractive thing for industrial business owners, such that the land can be kept free for its proper purpose of growing food.

The other thing is that it destroys the character of the countryside. I sent a survey out to my constituents and received over 2,000 responses. There is a high level of public interest—that is more than a 20% response rate from my constituents, who do not like solar farms. More than 90% of the people who returned the survey said that they did not like these large-



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scale solar farms. When they were asked whether they were concerned about the use of productive farmland, 68% said that they were extremely concerned, giving a 10 out of 10 on the scale, while 55% said they were extremely concerned about the visual impact. Some solar farm prospectors will tell you that they are going to put the panels behind hedges, where they cannot be seen, but in reality they are very tall. In fact, in some cases they are three times the height of our current Energy Secretary. Were she to take a lovely stroll through the countryside, and even if Daniel Kawczynski were with her, neither would be able to see over the tops of those solar panels. They are really impacting—

Q4 Chair: Aren't hedges that large counterproductive when you are trying to collect the rays of the sun?

Dr Caroline Johnson: Potentially, yes; that is also the case.

For places like Lincolnshire, where we have a lot of cliff villages, people there would be able to see for miles around the impact of these solar panels.

The panels also have an impact on wildlife. Many MPs and their constituents are concerned about wildlife, including how deer progress across the countryside and what happens if birds think the panels are water and dive into them, hurting themselves, or what if the panels are very hot?

There are many, many reasons why these panels are somewhat of a menace. Of course we want green energy and we need to debate what the alternatives are and how they could be better used. A small modular reactor only takes two playing fields and can generate much more energy than whole swathes of farmland used for solar panels.

I think there are lots of different topics and different nuances to this debate and I very much hope that you will be able to grant us some time, please.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much indeed. Questions from colleagues, please.

Q5 Wendy Morton: Thank you for that presentation. I think you really set out the way that this issue can potentially cover various Government Departments.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Yes.

Wendy Morton: Which Government Department are you seeing as being the most likely that you would want to respond to your debate? Would it be the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, given the planning angle, or would it be the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, or—? What are your thoughts?

Dr Caroline Johnson: I think this is one of the key issues with the challenge. We have an energy Department set up to find green sources of energy; we have DEFRA, which is set up to try and find the best ways of growing food and looking after our countryside; and then we have a



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planning Department that is stuck in the middle of the two. And because there isn't one obvious Department covering the whole issue, I think that is one of the reasons why the Prime Minister's stated aim of not having these great swathes of land covered in the countryside is failing to be adequately delivered.

I think we have to ask the Government who they think is the best person to put up, but I suspect it would end up being someone from DLUHC.

- Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously, one of the reasons why Wendy asked that question is that, because you have ticked Tuesday, we will need to know which Department is answering, so that we can allocate the debate to the right date, because it has to be when the answering Department is actually due to answer.

Dr Caroline Johnson: I see. Okay. Well, I think it could be answered probably most effectively by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero or DLUHC.

- Q7 **Bob Blackman:** Yes—that doesn't help us that much.

- Q8 **Chair:** Because they are on a different part of the rota. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Caroline Johnson: Ah, I see. Okay. Well, I'll give Cabinet responsibility.

- Q9 **Bob Blackman:** The other issue is obviously that you have a large number of people who potentially want to speak in this debate.

Dr Caroline Johnson : Yes.

Bob Blackman: I just gently say that if everyone did turn up and speak in a 90-minute debate, by the time you have outlined the issue and allowed time for the Front Benchers to sum up, those people will get about two minutes each, if that.

Given the level of interest, I wonder whether this is something that you might consider; it is obviously up to you. We have allocated, for example, a Westminster Hall debate for the whole afternoon, which gives you an almost guaranteed three hours for a debate. Time in the main Chamber is unfortunately beyond us, because of the Budget, estimates days and so on. So, that is something that you might want to consider.

Dr Caroline Johnson : That would be really helpful. I wrote it out and asked whether anyone was interested in supporting the application, and I got 26 names extremely quickly. I am sure that if I had put some effort into it, I could have got more, but in practice we only needed eight, so to have 26 so quickly shows there is a huge amount of interest in it. And as soon as somebody else gets an application in their constituency, their level of interest increases rapidly, too.

- Q10 **Nigel Mills:** I think I have two applications in my constituency. Without wanting to contradict Mr Blackman, are you tempted by a motion calling on the Government to do something? This issue has been debated numerous times? Would a motion in the main Chamber calling for a



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planning change to tighten the rules even further not be more helpful in achieving what you want to achieve than just having a 90-minute general debate?

Dr Caroline Johnson : I think there are different strategies that the Government could use to resolve this issue. One of the things they could do is to make it so that the quality of the land, whether it was best and most fertile or not, had to be independently verified, rather than being tested and having the homework marked by the person who wants the planning.

The Government could make it much more explicit that they don't want the best and most fertile land to be used. At the moment, it says "unless there is nothing else locally available", and in Lincolnshire there is nothing else locally available, because it is all great land, pretty much.

To say that in any case, even if there was not anything available locally, only a small percentage—say 20%—could ever be considered the best and most versatile land for any given application is another option they could use to tighten up the framework. There is more than one answer. There are also different inducements that they could use in the way they look at things such as standing charge versus consumption charges on electricity for industrial units and how they can incentivise people to put up the industrial units. I think there is more than just one simple answer that we can put forward and say, "Will you do this—yes or no?"

Chair: Caroline, thank you very much. We have received the application. It looks entirely in order, so we will try and find you an appropriate slot.

Dame Diana Johnson made representations.

Q11 **Chair:** We will go back to estimates applications now. Next up is Dame Diana Johnson. Diana, welcome.

Dame Diana Johnson: Apologies for being late. I am really sorry.

Q12 **Chair:** No worries—we are very flexible; we just go with the flow. Don't worry. Your application for an estimates day debate is on the spending of the Home Office on asylum and migration. Diana, over to you.

Dame Diana Johnson: Thank you very much for hearing this application. The application is backed by all members of the Home Affairs Committee. We are particularly concerned to look at the issue of asylum and migration and the lack of transparency related to that expenditure. One example is the Home Office's decision, which was supported by the Treasury, to omit a significant proportion of expected asylum expenditure from the Home Office's main estimates. That makes it very difficult for Parliament and the Home Affairs Committee to scrutinise what is being spent. The omission has also resulted, on 1 February this year, in the Home Secretary having to request an emergency drawdown of £2.6 billion from the reserves because the Department ran out of money before the supplementary

estimates were approved. Clearly, something is not working correctly with the budget for it to be overshooting so dramatically.

We are also concerned about the spiralling cost of asylum accommodation because of the use of hotels. In the first 12 months of asylum seekers' accommodation, that is funded through, at the moment, the overseas development assistance budget. From 2021-2022 and then from 2022-2023, Home Office use of ODA budgets increased by 165% from £981 million to £2.6 billion. That forced the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to cease all non-essential programs, as spending was being redirected domestically. The implications of that have been criticised by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact and by the International Development Committee.

Another thing I want to highlight is the problems we have been having around getting transparency on the migration and economic partnership with Rwanda. We have repeatedly asked the Department for financial details of that scheme, and we have really struggled to get even the top lines of the cost of that partnership. It is particularly important because the permanent secretary of the Home Office requested a ministerial direction from the then Home Secretary, Priti Patel, because he was not satisfied that he could, as the accounting officer, sign that policy off as value for money.

We were told that we had to wait and retrospectively find out the cost of the policy when they were published in the annual reports and accounts at the end of the financial year. It was only recently, because of an accidental leak in Rwanda, that the Home Office was forced to disclose what money had been spent and was due to be spent this April. Along with the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, we had to enlist the help of the National Audit Office to see what it could find out about the spending. It produced a report about that at the end of last week.

The view of the Home Affairs Committee is that we would like to have an opportunity to debate and to look at the budget of the Home Office and its spend on asylum and migration. We think it is good for accountability purposes, and it is good for the Home Affairs Committee to be able to get its hands on information about what is being spent. I hope that provides sufficient detail of why we are concerned enough to request an estimates day debate.

Q13 Chair: Any questions? No. It was a pretty straightforward application. In that case, Diana, thank you very much indeed. Nice to see you.

Paul Blomfield made representations.

Q14 Chair: We now move swiftly back to standard, but certainly not ordinary, Backbench Business Committee debate applications. Paul Blomfield, you are very welcome. It is good to see you. Your application is on the impact of the increase to the minimum income thresholds for partners and spousal visas.



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Paul Blomfield: You have summed it up. It is a relatively straightforward application. Colleagues will know that the Government initially announced a fairly significant increase in the threshold to £38,700, then adjusted the position to phase that in over a two-year period. That caused a lot of my constituents some anxiety because they had life plans based on assumptions about living together with their spouses in the UK. Some were already living here; some had plans for partners to join them. They are probably not the sort of constituents many might have had in mind when this change in the threshold was introduced. In my constituency, the concerns came primarily from early-career academics and NHS staff. I had one tech start-up say, "Fair enough. If this is what is going to happen, it means our life is going to change. We're going to set the business up in Canada." They were feeling voiceless and wanted their circumstances to be heard.

Clearly, I was not alone in hearing such voices. I am pleased to have been joined by colleagues from across parties in making this application today—Robin Walker is here too. Mark Logan, a Conservative colleague for Bolton North East, had wanted to add his name. He discovered that he could not as a PPS, but I thought I would just sneak that in to show the breadth of support. It would be an opportunity to provide a voice for people whose life plans have been seriously affected by the Government's announcement, and to share with the Minister thoughts on how these things might be done differently.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** Just to clarify, would the Home Office be the answering Department?

Paul Blomfield: It would be the Home Office answering. Sorry not to have been clear on that, Bob.

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** It would be for a Tuesday, which would potentially fit with 26 March. Are you available for that slot?

Paul Blomfield: The last sitting Tuesday is clearly not going to be an attractive option for many people who may not be here for other reasons.

Bob Blackman: It would be at 9.30 am.

Paul Blomfield: I guess we can anticipate where the Whips might be on that Monday and Tuesday.

Bob Blackman: It will be Rwanda coming back from the Lords.

Paul Blomfield: Ideally, a Tuesday that was not that Tuesday would ensure that we would have an opportunity to provide as many different voices from as many different parts of the country as possible.

Q17 **Chair:** It is a 90-minute debate on a Tuesday morning, because that is the right answering Department on that particular day. It might be another month until that answering Department would be in Westminster Hall again, given the Easter recess. It is an opportunity. I suppose the crucial question is, if offered that slot, would you accept it?

Bob Blackman: Go on!



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Paul Blomfield: It doesn't matter to me, but I would rather not on the basis that I want to provide as many colleagues as possible the opportunity to participate in the debate.

Q18 **Wendy Morton:** You anticipated my question, Paul. I was going to pick up on the point that we would normally expect at least half of the eight names to be from the Government. We are now at three with Robin Walker. You mentioned Mark Logan, who is a PPS. Are you fairly confident that it would be attractive to both sides?

Paul Blomfield: I think so. I think there will probably be a range of views on what alternative measures might be put in place or indeed how this might be dealt with over a period that is going to be beyond the next election. I think there are people on both sides in significant numbers who want the opportunity to provide a voice for constituents who have written to them.

Chair: If there are no further questions, I thank Paul very much indeed. We will now go into a private session.