

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 5 November 2024

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Members present: Bob Blackman (Chair); Jack Abbott; Mary Glendon; Alison Hume; Wendy Morton; Will Stone; Chris Vince.

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Jim Shannon made representations.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the first meeting of the Backbench Business Committee for the new Parliament. I welcome the new members of the Committee, our Clerks and the applicants who have put forward requests for debates.

It would not be the Backbench Business Committee without an application from our season ticket holder, Jim Shannon—and not only that, but to start, he has produced three applications for our delectation. Jim, I assume you are starting with the respiratory health one.

Jim Shannon: First, Chair, I wish you and the newly elected Backbench Business Committee members all the best for the future. I suspect, if God spares me over the next few years, that you will see lots of me.

This application is for a debate that, had the election not been called on that Thursday, I was due to have then, but because of the wash-up and so on, it did not go ahead. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for respiratory health and we have eight members. I would add the names of Rachael Maskell and Ruth Jones to the application.

Why is this important? One in five people in the United Kingdom have issues with respiratory health, which is the third-biggest cause of death in England after cancer and cardiovascular disease. Lung cancer, pneumonia and COPD are the biggest causes of death. Hospital admissions for lung disease have risen over the past seven years. I am giving these facts simply because it illustrates why the debate is important. There are lots of things that have happened in the last period of time that have exacerbated the problem.

The economic burden of asthma and COPD on the NHS is estimated at £3 billion. Along with all lung conditions, they cost the NHS in the UK some £11 billion each year.

An important point is that the incidence and mortality rates for respiratory disease are higher among disadvantaged groups. In the APPG, we recognise that in the reports that we have done and the inquiries we have carried out. There are certain categories of people in the United Kingdom that have higher incidence levels. For instance, that includes those who smoke, and those who live with higher levels of air pollution, in poor housing or with exposure to occupational hazards.

Without further ado, and conscious of all the other Members that are sitting behind me, I request this debate.

Chair: Questions, colleagues.

Q2 Will Stone: You have two extra people signed up for the debate, so you are now at the minimum number you require. It looks a little bit light on official Opposition Members. I am not too knowledgeable about all the Members—are either of the two you just put forward from the Conservative party?



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Jim Shannon: They are both from the Labour party. It is about ascertaining who the Members on the Conservative side and what their interests are. The Chair has said he wants those named to participate in the debates, so I am conscious of having to ascertain names. We are trying to add a Conservative to that at the moment, and we want to make sure that the Conservative has an interest in the subject matter. It will come, but we wanted to bring the debate forward at this moment.

Q3 **Wendy Morton:** My understanding, looking at the form, is that this has to be split between Government and non-Government parties. Presumably it does not matter whether it is official Opposition or not, although arguably we would want as many as possible.

Chair: It is four and four at the moment.

Wendy Morton: But it does not specify that it must be official Opposition. You have ticked Tuesday and Thursday, Jim. Do you have a preference?

Jim Shannon: You know me—I am happy to do whatever you feel is right. On that question that you brought up, four are Labour Members, and the other four are on the other side of the House.

Wendy Morton: Thank you.

Chair: So the application is for Westminster Hall—yes? Thank you.

Jim Shannon and **Ruth Jones** made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Jim, you have two other applications.

Jim Shannon: Pakistan is one of them—humanitarian and freedom of religion violations in Pakistan. I have Ruth with me here.

As all Members probably already know, I chair the all-party parliamentary group for freedom of religion or belief. Ruth is the vice-chair, and we work very well together in what we are trying to achieve.

If Members are there on Thursday in business questions, they will understand that I usually use those questions to bring up things that are happening across the world, wherever that may be, in relation to freedom of religious belief. In particular, I have mentioned Pakistan a large number of times.

I have been to Pakistan twice, in 2018 and 2022. I would love to be able to tell you that things were better in 2022, but unfortunately, they were not. That is why we are asking for the debate.

I will quickly go through the reasons. Reports of religious violations are deeply concerning and merit a parliamentary debate on this issue. Reports indicate a significant deterioration of religious freedom. As you know, the APPG speaks up for those of Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs and those with no beliefs, because that is what I believe, honestly, in my heart, that we should be doing. Ruth and I are together on that point.

Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, Sikhs, Baha'is and other religious minorities experience widespread persecution, with little governmental intervention.

We have done a number of reports over the years on Pakistan. The one we did just before the election was on the brick kilns in Pakistan, where those of a Christian faith, in particular, are persecuted and discriminated against. Contracts are manipulated to keep them there longer—depressingly so. We find more and more cases where women and girls are being abused. I do not need to tell you what that means; you can work it out.

Forced conversions have also been an issue, as has being coerced into marriage and the violation of human dignity and basic human rights. A failure to address the violations directly contravenes article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights. Because of that and the inaction by the Pakistan Government—and it is frustrating that in the conversations we have had, they have not been forthcoming to try to address these issues—we are looking at a state where persecution levels have risen, where discrimination is at a level never before seen, and the impact upon women, girls, Christians and many ethnic minorities is such that a debate in this House would allow MPs to address the humanitarian concerns, discuss the UK's foreign policy response, and explore diplomatic avenues to press the Pakistan Government to uphold its international human rights obligations and protect its religious minority communities. I hope I have not spoken too fast, Mr Chairman.

Q5 **Chair:** Ruth, do you have anything to add?

Ruth Jones: Yes. Thank you, Chair; it is a privilege to sit here with my hon. Friend. The debate's objectives are to raise the awareness across the whole House and to highlight the systemic persecution that is faced by religious minorities at the moment in Pakistan; to review the UK aid and the diplomatic stance; and to promote accountability to ensure that the UK Government can encourage the Pakistani authorities to uphold their international commitments to religious freedom.

Obviously, the discussion points would focus on addressing forced conversions and abductions of women and girls and looking to monitor the accountability mechanisms. How is the UK monitoring and ensuring that our friends in the Pakistani Government are being held to account over these issues? Also, there is the ability to express support for grassroots and civil society groups in Pakistan. To that end, this is a request for the Backbench Business Committee to allocate time in the Chamber.

Q6 **Chair:** There is one thing I want to clarify. The application mentions Chamber and Westminster Hall. Given that you have what would be a divisible motion, that could be taken only in the Chamber. Is this an application for the Chamber only?

Ruth Jones: *indicated assent.*

Jim Shannon: My apologies. Westminster Hall is probably the norm, but we feel that this debate warrants time in the Chamber. It will be the first



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in I do not know how many years, even going back to the last term of Government, where we have a debate on religious persecution and religious belief. Also, if you do not mind my saying, significant numbers have taken an interest in this. This time they are from all the parties—Conservative, Labour, Lib Dem, Scottish National party, independent and of course ourselves in the DUP. So I do think that we warrant that this time.

Chair: Questions or concerns, colleagues? No? Thank you.

Jim Shannon made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Jim, your last application is the NICVA funding from the UK shared prosperity fund.

Jim Shannon: Was that for a half an hour or was it—

Chair: It was for 90 minutes.

Jim Shannon: Okay. I am sorry—I had another one but I asked for that to be withdrawn, and it has been. That is the one we talked about in the Lobby. That one for NICVA is very specifically about Northern Ireland. We had the chance of an urgent question in the Chamber and every one of the political parties in Northern Ireland put forward their case. We do feel that there is a necessity to have this debated in the House, because the outstanding issues have not been addressed yet. With that in mind, Mr Chairman, because this is a Northern Ireland issue, you will see on the application that probably most if not all the Members are from Northern Ireland. It is a wonderful thing to be able to bring forward a debate where all political parties can put their hands up and say, “Yeah, we want that.”

Q8 **Chair:** Well, obviously, we will put it on the stocks. The issue might be for you to apply for an Adjournment debate—given that you participate in every Adjournment debate in the House. That might be a way of getting it on the Floor of the House.

Jim Shannon: Did I ask for a 30-minute debate?

Q9 **Chair:** You have asked for a 90-minute debate.

Jim Shannon: Okay. If Members were able to assent to a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall and that were possible, I would be happy. But I realise that this is my first time here in this new Session, and I do not want to be too pushy.

Q10 **Chair:** All right. Thank you, Jim. I say to all applicants that we have not yet been allocated any time by the Leader of the House, so we are waiting patiently for that to happen. For all applications, it will be a case of hearing them today and waiting to hear when we actually get some time to allocate for debates.

Jim Shannon: I thank you, Chair, and all the Committee members.

Sarah Dyke made representations.



Q11 Chair: Sarah, your application is on improving public transport in the south-west of England.

Sarah Dyke: That is right. Thank you, Chair, for allowing me to bring this application forward. I will give you a bit of background on the subject. I recently had a 30-minute Westminster Hall debate on bus services in rural areas that was very well attended. I took five or six interventions—indeed, the Minister took six interventions—which I think shows the depth of interest in the matter. After the debate, the Chair recommended that I bring this topic forward for a more in-depth discussion.

The new Government have made it clear that infrastructure investment is desperately needed, and the recent Budget has made this clear, so this seems a really opportune time for a discussion of how that will work. The Government recently laid a statutory instrument giving local authorities more powers to franchise their own services alongside the forthcoming buses Bill, but local authorities—until recently, I was a Somerset councillor—desperately need more information around how that will happen. Somerset was struggling in the same way as many other rural councils, so I know the financial struggles that local authorities face, alongside other councils across the country. It is really pertinent that we get the information out to our local authorities on how they will be expected to deliver yet more services with an ever-shrinking budget.

In addition, I have campaigned on rural transport for many years. I have been involved in the annual cycle of trying to save buses in Somerset and have been able to have some success in that. Obviously, I am very keen to ensure that we encourage more people to use buses and public transport in rural areas, but we need to ensure that we have a consistent, regular service to encourage people to do that and move away from a reliance on their cars.

In the last Parliament, I presented the Public Transport (Rural Areas) Bill, which would have implemented a minimum service level for public transport to link rural areas with employment, education and leisure. I also presented a petition with more than 650 signatures, calling for a new train station in Somerton and Langport, which is the longest stretch of rail without a train station between London and Cornwall. Unfortunately, that was cancelled due to the cancellation of the restoring your railway fund, which was really disappointing. Since then, however, I have been working with GWR and hopefully with South Western Railway to look at a more integrated service between buses and train stations, so that we can start to develop the transition and more people will be aware that buses will talk to the train timetables, so in a longer-term view, we can help people to feel more confident about using public transport in its widest sense.

In addition, I am the new chair of the all-party parliamentary group on rural services, and public transport is one of our top five priorities during this Parliament.

Q12 Chair: Lovely—thank you very much. There is potentially quite a long list of Members who are going to attend and speak. The one thing I will say



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is that, if all 19 of you turn up and speak in a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall, together with Front Benchers, you will be quite stretched in allowing people enough time—but it is your application.

Wendy Morton: On the flipside of that, I note that your other option is a Chamber debate. Similarly, if it was a Chamber debate on a Thursday afternoon, do you think you will get enough Members there, given that the title is “South West of England”? I fully understand why you are doing it, but it may restrict the number of colleagues on a Thursday afternoon. That might be something to bear in mind in terms of the debate’s title and positioning.

Sarah Dyke: Yes, I appreciate that. Obviously, it would be preferable to have a Chamber debate on a Tuesday. Given the amount of interest in the debate, it is such an important issue for all of us in the south-west, and I think there were more issues on the trains—

Wendy Morton: RYR goes way beyond the south-west!

Sarah Dyke: I would be hopeful, but obviously I appreciate that there would always be a question mark around a Thursday debate.

Chair: Thank you. We will obviously contact you in due course when we know what the position is with timing and so on.

Sarah Dyke: Thank you, Chair; I appreciate that very much.

Chair: The next applicant is not able to be with us—the application comes from Sarah Owen on “Tackling Islamophobia”—so she has asked us to delay the application for a week, and we will do that. The next application is therefore from Lloyd Hatton on “Silenced Stories—The impact of SLAPPs on free speech”.

Lloyd Hatton made representations.

Lloyd Hatton: Thank you. I will give a little bit of background as this can sometimes feel like a technical and somewhat dry subject area—although I assure you that it is not. The debate is on SLAPPs, or strategic lawsuits against public participation, and the colloquial term used by journalists is “lawfare”. This is essentially where very powerful, often deep-pocketed individuals—such as businessmen, kleptocrats, oligarchs or even warlords—use this legal tactic and the legal system to bung up any journalism done in the public interest.

Stories critical of these individuals never reach the light of day. They threaten the journalists, often with bankruptcy, simply through the courts. It is a very effective way of making sure that criticism does not ever make it out there, and we have seen countless cases where British journalists have found themselves unable to publish work that has looked at Russian oligarchs and warlords because of this tactic.

Currently, we only really have legislation to combat this “lawfare” tactic if the story pertains to economic crime. If it is anything else, we do not have



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any substantial legislation that can tackle this tactic. It is a really important piece of work where both Parliament and Government could act to improve things through legislation. There is certainly a gap there worth discussing.

As you can see from the application, it has broad cross-party support. We have a number of senior Labour and Conservative MPs backing it, including some here today—thank you, Sir Iain. Also, when the issue of SLAPPs was debated as part of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, we saw that there was support for further discussion and a positive step forward in the House of Lords as well. This has seen support from both Houses. The all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, which is one of the most active APPGs in Parliament, has been pushing on this for some time. Again, there is clear support from the Back Benches there.

Finally, there is clearly a public interest matter here. These are stories that are suppressed or kept away from our constituents by these powerful and deep-pocketed individuals. Therefore, it is an excellent use of Back-Bench time in the Commons to talk about these stories, which are in the public interest. This is a way that we can circumvent these individuals and start to play them at their own game, quite frankly, and look at what legislation we can use to fix this problem. We also know that, as this would be a debate in the Commons, we would be protected by parliamentary privilege, and I cannot begin to describe how important that is for some of these journalists who have been working on these stories, often for years. We can use parliamentary privilege to bring some of their work to the public, and I think we should not miss that opportunity.

- Q13 **Chair:** This is obviously a heavily subscribed application, as you say, with interest from several senior colleagues, so I suspect it is a debate that very much needs to happen. If there are no questions from colleagues, we will be in contact shortly, when we know what time we have been allocated.

The next application is from Alistair Carmichael on the UK fishing industry.

Mr Alistair Carmichael made representations.

Mr Carmichael: You have the application in front of you, but I will make a couple of other points. I will discuss the likely subject matter and then give a bit more context to explain the reasons why I would like, quite unusually, to make a pitch for Chamber time.

In addition to the material you have on the subject of the debate, there is a great deal happening around fishing at the moment. There are labour shortages, especially in the processing sector but also in the catching sector, which are causing real difficulty, especially for the smaller inshore boats. The bigger boats that can go outside the 12-mile limit to fish are able to use transit visas to bring crew in, but that is not open to those who are effectively fishing in inshore waters. Then there is the whole question of spatial squeeze. We see agricultural interests coming into the space and



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offshore wind developments. The fishing industry is being slowly salami-sliced out of a lot of the traditional grounds.

Back in the day, we used to have a fishing debate every year in Government time in the main Chamber. That was organised to coincide with the European Union Agriculture and Fisheries Council in December, which would set the total allowable catches and quotas for the year to come. That, of course, is now a matter of historical interest, but we still have year-end negotiations involving the UK, EU and Norway, so we have managed to reinvent for ourselves what we got rid of after our removal from the European Union.

I co-chair the APPG on fisheries with Melanie Onn; we have just reconstituted it. Frankly, I have been surprised and delighted at the level of engagement from new MPs coming in from fishing communities. You will see that we have 23 MPs on the list. The breakdown is two Conservative, five Labour, 11 Liberal Democrat—we will come back to that—one Reform, one DUP and one SNP. It is a little bit Lib Dem heavy, as you might expect. But actually, those who have expressed an interest are, for the most part, MPs who have some considerable fishing interest in their own community.

I am keen to seize the moment of this renewed interest that we see through the work of the APPG. To the fishing industry itself, which is now looking towards the review of the trade and co-operation agreement with the European Union in 2026, this would be a really good signal for Parliament to send: here are the concerns of the industry back, front and centre.

You will remember, Chair, that for a period of time there was no shortage of people who were interested in speaking about the fishing industry, however well informed they may have been or otherwise, at the time of the Brexit debates. As soon as we were out of the European Union, a lot of those people just disappeared. That in itself has done some damage to the standing of politics and Parliament in the industry. I see this as a moment for a potential reset. For that reason, if there is time available in the Chamber, I think the debate would be good to put through.

Q14 Chair: Can I ask whether you would want the debate before those annual discussions?

Mr Carmichael: That would be the ideal. However, over the years—this goes back to the point about when it was in Government time—we have had the debate before and after. It is all topical. It is good to be able to inform the Government's thinking as they go into these negotiations, but it never hurts to tell them why they got it wrong either.

Q15 Wendy Morton: You have a really good range of colleagues signed up to this, but for the Chamber we would normally be looking for a few more from the Government Benches. I could count only three.

Mr Carmichael: I've got five.



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Chair: Sorry, I think you provided—

Mr Carmichael: Sorry, I beg your pardon. I can tell you who I have got. From the Labour party, we have Melanie Onn, obviously, Alison Hume, Jayne Kirkham from Cornwall, and Lloyd Hatton, who has just left.

Wendy Morton: Perfect. My sheets were printed off, so perhaps there is a new version.

Mr Carmichael: No—

Chair: Would you supply extra names?

Mr Carmichael: Believe it or not, MPs are sometimes slow to respond to these mass emails.

Wendy Morton: Thank you. That is fine.

- Q16 **Jack Abbott:** To be honest, I was going to raise the same point as Wendy. Even with 23 names, we have only five from the Labour Benches, so we would still be over a dozen short if we are looking for an even split of Government and non-Government. Obviously, there are plenty of new Labour MPs, as you mentioned, who are now representing these communities, so I would be confident that that threshold will be met.

Mr Carmichael: We would take that on as an action point.

- Q17 **Chris Vince:** We have had a few applications today that have been very specific. Without making a pun about widening the net—sorry, Chair—it feels that this is more of a general debate on fishing. Is that how you see it?

Mr Carmichael: That is deliberate on my part. To go back to my point about the APPG, we talk about the fishing industry, but in fact it is a series of different industries. The interests of the bigger whitefish boats and the very big pelagic boats that I have in my constituency will be very different from those of the under-10 metre sector, which you will have in quite a lot of the seats represented here. Melanie Onn from Grimsby represents a lot of fish processors, and shellfishing interests will be represented by quite a number of Members too.

We have a geographic spread, which is important. We have a couple of colleagues from Scotland; incredibly, we have Jim Shannon from Northern Ireland; we have Jayne Kirkham from Cornwall; we have Steve Darling and Caroline Voaden, who between them cover Brixham, which is probably the most significant port in the south-west. Off the top of my head, I can't tell you if we have anybody from East Anglia, but that would be the other area. I still don't know everybody's names.

Chair: Okay. Any others?

- Q18 **Chris Vince:** To follow up on that, my concern is that this is a very general debate. As you said in your opening speech, there are a lot of issues facing the fishing industry. You asked for half a day, which is



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obviously up to three hours. Are you confident that that is enough time to really get into the depth of this discussion? That wasn't a fishing joke—sorry. Again, without making a pun, might we only touch the surface?

Chair: Don't invite him to apply for a full day's debate.

Mr Carmichael: Incidentally, when it comes to fishing puns, I could write the book. Don't get me wrong, if there is more time available, we would take it. We all have to take our responsibility, in terms of sharing time in this place and making sure everybody's voice is heard. I could debate fish all day, every day. You will be delighted to hear that we don't.

If, come the day, there were two half-hour debates and I am sitting there with 25 or 30 people around me, and there are five people ready to discuss something not quite as exciting, the way business management works in the Chamber is that we can adjust that. I will certainly take more time if it is available, but I am not going to be greedy.

Chair: Okay, thank you very much. We will be in touch shortly.

Blair McDougall and **Sir Iain Duncan Smith** made representations.

Q19 **Chair:** The final application we will hear today is from Blair McDougall on Taiwan's international status. Iain, you are supporting the application.

Blair McDougall: The motion in the application is a fairly straightforward restatement of long-standing existing policy towards Taiwan—and deliberately so, to provide an opportunity for a wide-ranging debate about Taiwan and the current situation and relationship between Taiwan and the PRC.

The timing of the application is important because of the rising tensions in that area—the constant testing of both the seas and the airspace around Taiwan—and because there is a new Government exploring a new China policy. The debate would give people the opportunity to discuss that.

The other reason why the application is well timed is that Sir Iain recently had an urgent question and Ministers have recently brought statements to the House on the topic. The House has been incredibly oversubscribed, with Members often trying to shoehorn in all sorts of issues around China, and particularly Taiwan. There is a strong appetite for discussing these issues.

The last thing I would say about the importance of this debate is that we are in a period of rising tension with Taiwan, but not necessarily a moment of crisis as yet. The lesson from Ukraine is perhaps that clarity of policy is not necessarily best formed in the middle of a crisis, but far in advance, and in fact that forming clear policy far in advance is the best way to avoid tension becoming a full-blown crisis. Having time in the House for a proper discussion on this and proper testing of the policy would be in the interest of the country and our contribution to international security.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: This debate is well overdue because the original UN resolution, which is often and deliberately misrepresented by the



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Chinese Government as to the settlement of China's claim of Taiwan's status as a part of China, has never been brought forward or resolved at the UN. It seems that far too many countries pay service to that misinterpretation of the resolution, which is critical, too, because Taiwan has not been designated by the UN at any stage to be a part of China. That is critical element in understanding why this is a very big issue.

As Blair says, this application comes at a time when we can see China's hand across the globe, through Ukraine and North Korea into Iran, Syria and now the Gulf, using proxies such as Iran and so on. This is a very important moment for us to establish Government policy, and, if they do not have a policy, to try to persuade them that policy is due in this area, because otherwise this could backfire dramatically.

Two points are worth mentioning in support of Blair's bid. First, for those who say that Taiwan is not of great interest to us, 72% of everything made in the world today is made within that area of the South China sea, including Taiwan. That includes the most important microchips, those of advanced American quality, which are made in Taiwan.

Secondly, the reality is that any suspension of the ability to trade with Taiwan at the moment would probably lead to a hit on global economies of anything between five and six times what happened with Ukraine—some say 10 times what happened with Ukraine. So it is not a far and distant country; it is in fact our next-door neighbour when it comes to business.

Q20 Will Stone: Thank you for bringing this debate forward. Just for some clarity, because my papers might be slightly out of date—the last application did not have as many—how many people do you have on the debate? My papers say that only eight people have signed up to it. If you are looking for a debate in the Chamber, you would need a few more to ensure that you could fill that time.

Blair McDougall: There are eight at the moment. It was not terribly hard work to get that eight, I have to say. There is a large network of people with Parliament who are interested.

Q21 Will Stone: So you feel confident that you could deliver on that?

Blair McDougall: Yes. And I think that the number of people bobbing in the Chamber whenever there is any sort of question on China is evidence of that.

Chair: Jack, did you have a question?

Jack Abbott: Mine was relatively similar to Will's—it was just about confidence in filling the time.

Q22 Alison Hume: Just for clarification, could you tell me what ADIZ is, please?

Blair McDougall: It is the air defence of Taiwan. It is the internationally recognised zone—it is the equivalent of territorial waters, but in the air.



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Chair: Thank you for the application. Taking what colleagues have said, if you can get some extra names of people who will definitely speak in such a debate, and communicate those to the Clerks, we will add those to the application and you will hear from us in due course, when we have some time available in the Chamber.

The final application was from Sharon Hodgson, but she is not able to be here, so she has asked for us to hear that later on this year. That brings the formal proceedings to a halt. We will now go into a private session to discuss the applications and decide what should be allocated time, where we have time available to allocate.