

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 3 December 2024

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

Questions 1-15

Representations made

[I](#): Jayne Kirkham; Perran Moon

[II](#): Max Wilkinson

[III](#): Mrs Sharon Hodgson

[IV](#): Dr Simon Opher

Jayne Kirkham and **Perran Moon** made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee. This afternoon we will be considering, we hope, four applications for debates. A warm welcome to our applicants.

The first application is from Jayne Kirkham, on floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea. Jayne?

Jayne Kirkham: Thank you for seeing me today. The potential for floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea is absolutely vast. It is so important for the south of Wales, all around the south-west and down to Cornwall, where I am from. The issue is that the potential has been unrealised for a long time. I am part of the APPG for the Celtic sea and floating offshore wind, and there are a couple of things to do with ports, the ports fund and contracts for difference that we really think would help to get this off the ground.

I have a lot of support for the debate. There are a number of people from around the region who would love to come and discuss it. We have also met with industry and the local authorities, and we have a lot of supportive stakeholders as well.

We really think that a debate of this nature could help to propel the start of this industry, which would really benefit Cornwall and the surrounding region. We are very keen to make those arguments to the Minister—the Minister is very supportive and aware, but there are a number of things that we would like to highlight that they could do to help. That is why we want to have the debate.

Chair: Your application is for a Westminster Hall debate on a Thursday.

Jayne Kirkham: Yes.

Chair: Perran, is there anything you want to add?

Perran Moon: As the MP for Camborne and Redruth, the neighbouring constituency, I just want to add my weight to what my colleague has just said. Unlocking the potential of the Celtic sea is critical to creating good-quality jobs in an area of very high deprivation, as well as being a key driver towards the UK's objective of achieving net zero by 2030.

Q2 **Chair:** We have an opportunity next Thursday, 12 December, in Westminster Hall. If you were offered it, would you be able to take it, especially given the timeframe?

Jayne Kirkham indicated assent.

Chair: Are there any other questions from colleagues? Is everyone happy?

Thank you very much for your application. The Clerks will be in touch with you about the offer and whether you are able to take the slot we have available for allocation next Thursday.

Max Wilkinson made representations.



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Q3 **Chair:** Max, your application is for a debate on Old Oak Common and the impact on rail services to the west and Wales. Please present your application.

Max Wilkinson: Thank you, Chair and members of the Committee. I very much appreciate the chance to make the case for a debate. In the last Parliament, Luke Pollard, who is now a Defence Minister, did some excellent work trying to bring people together on this issue, having discovered the problems that might be caused by Old Oak Common for people in the west and Wales. He is now stepping aside, having taken a ministerial role. His suggestion at a recent briefing for Members was that Members for affected constituencies—there are a huge number in the west, south-west and Wales—ought to try to take the issue forward.

There is a shared issue across party lines. You will have noted that support has come from Labour Members, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, and there is a good geographical spread in the ask, including a Member from Wales.

I do not know whether there are any Members from west country or Welsh constituencies in the room, but the issue that will be caused by Old Oak Common is that because HS2 will be arriving in London at Old Oak Common first, before hopefully moving on to further stops, a new station will be built on the Great Western main line just outside what I suppose you would call the west of London.

In the short term, while the construction work is happening, it will add about seven minutes to journey times, but there will also be widespread cancellations for large periods of the year. There will be a lot of times during the year, for the next six years, where there will be no services running on Sundays between London and the west and Wales, which will cause huge disruption. In the longer term, it means probably another seven to 10 minutes added to every journey to the west country and Wales. That is, however, potentially offset if the Department for Transport can put in some work to ensure that Old Oak Common becomes an opportunity rather than a potential loss. My hope is that by bringing Members with an interest into the room together for a debate, we can put the case to Ministers that something needs to be done in the initial thinking from DFT.

The key point is that members of the rail industry, who gave the briefing organised by the Defence Minister, were very clear that there is an opportunity, but it is all unfunded, the studies have not even been started yet and it is very much at the conceptual phase. To get to the stage at which we know how much it will cost and what we are asking for, and we know that it will be an opportunity rather than something that causes more problems, we have to have those discussions.

I think the right format is for that to happen in a debate in Parliament, in which the Member of Parliament for each constituency that will be affected has the opportunity to say, "Here's what we need to happen; this will be the impact on my constituency for the next few years; and, in the long



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term, here is the potential opportunity.” Given that this is going to affect every Member in Berkshire, in Oxfordshire, in Gloucestershire and probably parts of Worcestershire and Herefordshire, in south Wales, in mid Wales, in Somerset, in parts of Dorset and Devon and in all of Cornwall, this issue commands a huge amount of interest. That interest will gather pace over the next few months and years.

The closures on Sundays and over Christmas periods are starting now. There has been almost no public debate about it, save for a very good question asked by the hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East at PMQs last week. The more we can do to find consensus among Members, the better the opportunity will be to realise those opportunities, rather than hoping for the best.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you very much. May I just confirm that the application is for a Tuesday slot in Westminster Hall, and the answering Department would presumably be Transport?

Max Wilkinson: Yes.

Q5 **Chair:** That means that the first available slot would be 17 December, which is the last week that we are here before Christmas.

Max Wilkinson: That is fine for my diary. I am sure that other Members who have an interest would put aside other appointments, because it is a subject of key importance to a lot of people.

Q6 **Jack Abbott:** This is a bit of a technicality, but broadly there need to be an equal number of MPs from the Government and Opposition sides. At the moment, there are three Labour Members out of the 11 or 12 Members you have. Would you be confident of getting a couple more Labour speakers? The other thing to say, since we have mentioned people moving their diaries, is that everyone who signs up here really needs to attend the debate as well. They are not just signing to say the debate should happen—it is essentially a commitment that they will come and speak at the debate as well, if that makes sense.

Max Wilkinson: I understand entirely. I will commit to getting that number and hopefully more. There is a spread there; I did open it up to as many people as possible, and I hope that when other people see that this is being debated, some momentum will be found. Given the scale of the impact and the number of constituencies that will be affected, I would be surprised if we only ended up with that number of Members able to attend.

Q7 **Chris Vince:** I know I do this every time, and I do not want to throw a spanner in the works, but given how you have described this serious issue, are you satisfied with a Westminster Hall debate? Would you prefer to get more Members and look at a Chamber debate, or are you thinking, “Let’s just get a debate before Christmas”? What is your thinking on that?

Max Wilkinson: I think the discussion needs to start as soon as possible. I would see this as the start in public—although the hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East did ask that very good PMQ—of a discussion



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where hopefully we can get Ministers to respond on the issue. I do not think that there have been public responses on this yet, save the Prime Minister's response at PMQs last week. If we can get to a stage where this is the start of the discussion, it will not be the end.

We are not going to have one debate on this—it is going to be something that will probably consume an awful lot of constituency time for Back Benchers, and I hope that it will command a lot of time for Ministers in the Department for Transport in due course. I am relatively new here, as many people are, and I managed to get a number of people to sign up. The form guided me; it was a very good form, and I commend the work of whoever put in the information to guide new Members on how to navigate the process, because it was reassuring.

Chair: Thank you very much. The Clerks will be in touch about potential arrangements. The Committee will decide the allocation at the conclusion of this meeting.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson made representations.

Q8 **Chair:** Sharon, you have an application on increasing the provision of auditory verbal therapy in the UK. Please present your case.

Mrs Hodgson: Thank you, Chair. I am passing round a briefing document that I can leave with you so that I do not have to cover all the points, but I will try to make a good case to you today. Thank you for having me along.

The debate would allow MPs to speak to the benefits of auditory verbal therapy for deaf babies and children in the UK. I was not aware—I do not know whether some of you are—of this therapy and the difference it can make to deaf people, especially if you start when they are babies and children.

There was a parliamentary reception just a few weeks ago—six weeks at most. Well over 100 MPs went along, and a dozen of us signed up for the debate. I apologise that I am the only one who is able to come along today. We did invite others, but I think lots of them want to speak in the debate in the Chamber. There is cross-party support from Labour Members, Liberal Democrats, SNP Members, Ulster Unionists and Independents. Conservatives came along on the day, so I would be able to get Conservatives to come along to the debate as well.

The reason I feel so passionately about the subject is that on the day there were young people who I learned were deaf, but from talking to them you would not have known that these young people were deaf. There was no outward sign; I think they might have had hearing aids, but they sounded like any non-deaf person sounds. You and I know, Chair—we are probably older than some people in this room—that normally when you speak to a deaf person, you can tell: they have a particular sound. These young people did not have that.



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How that happens is the magic in this therapy. They not only learn to speak in a way where they sound like everybody else, but they are then able to access the full curriculum and go on to have a full education and then a full life thereafter. They are able to just make that transition with that disability. It does not become a barrier any more.

I am so passionate about this, because quite a number of years ago I had a private Member's Bill that got through and became the Special Educational Needs (Information) Act 2008. It was all about wanting to get more information for campaigners to be able to campaign for access and better education for children with special educational needs. My interest was my son, who was severely dyslexic, but the most interesting thing that came out when that information was published—I need to revisit it since the change of Government and make sure it is getting published again, because it sort of died a death and got buried—was about life outcomes and educational outcomes for deaf children. The societies that campaign for deaf children had never had access to that information. It showed the absolutely shocking disparities in educational outcomes for children and young people who are deaf compared with the rest of the population, when their only special educational need is not a learning difference; it is the fact that they are deaf. It is about being able to access the curriculum.

I am aware of the opportunity that exists if this therapy is rolled out, and the numbers are in the document that I have shared with you. There are 50,000 deaf children in the UK, and 7,200 are under the age of five. At the moment, there are only 32 certified auditory verbal therapists in the UK, so 90% of deaf children under the age of five are unable to access this therapy. I have the numbers for my constituency, so it would be similar for yours; there are 400 deaf children in my constituency, but there are no certified auditory verbal therapists. There is none in the north-east either.

The ability for these young deaf children to access the curriculum means they can go on to have the life that they should be able to have. It is a disability; with other disabilities, we cater for them. This one therapy is honestly so transformational. I do not understand how it works—they learn to make sense of the sounds they receive through hearing aids and cochlear implants—but however it works, it does work.

I met three of the young people. Honestly, it will stay with me forever how bright, capable and articulate they were, and they were fully deaf. We need to raise awareness of this, because I am sure that there are so many other people out there who do not know about this. There are so many MPs who do not. Lots went along to the reception—the charity is doing amazing work—and I am sure they would lobby and help us to make sure that we get a full debate.

We need to take the current therapists out there—the speech and language therapists and the therapists who are working with deaf children—and get them into the training, and then be able to roll out this therapy. It has got to more than pay for itself in the life chances of those children. I just think it would be the right thing to do.



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Q9 **Chair:** Thank you, Sharon, for that explanation. Your application is for a Tuesday slot. Would it be Health and Social Care, Education or a different Government Department answering?

Mrs Hodgson: Oh, gosh. Probably Health and Social Care, but there is a crossover. I don't know what colleagues think—whether it is more about education or health.

Jack Abbott: If it falls under SEND, it would technically be Education. The slight issue is that it is the under-fives you are particularly targeting, but I would say that it is a SEND issue, so I would gently suggest that it would be Education.

Chair: For a Tuesday slot, we have to allocate the debate for when the answering Department is answering, so that is the reason for qualifying that.

Mrs Hodgson: There is no hurry: it does not have to be this side of Christmas. The new year would give us more time.

Q10 **Chair:** The first available slot that we know of—we think we are going to get it, but it depends on the answering Department's allocation—would be Tuesday 14 January, if that is acceptable to you.

Mrs Hodgson: That sounds good to me.

Q11 **Chair:** The alternative is to take a Thursday slot. Would you take a Thursday slot?

Mrs Hodgson: I would be happy with a Thursday slot, yes.

Q12 **Chair:** We could offer you Thursday 19 December, the last sitting day before Christmas.

Mrs Hodgson: Probably not. I am here, but I have the APPG on school food and something else on in the morning, so that is not a safe day for me.

Chair: All right. Any other questions, colleagues?

Mrs Hodgson: Had any of you heard of this therapy?

Chris Vince: No, but it sounds very interesting.

Chair: That is one of the great things about this Committee: we hear about all sorts of things that we have never heard of. Thank you, Sharon. The Clerks will be in touch.

Mrs Hodgson: Thank you so much.

Dr Simon Opher made representations.

Q13 **Chair:** Our last application today is from Dr Simon Opher—Simon, come forth. Your application is for a debate on the impact of food and diet on obesity.

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Dr Opher: I am asking for a Backbench Business debate about obesity, because it is the No. 1 preventable health determinant to which we can make a difference. It is incredibly important in terms of prevention. I have just come from a meeting with Andrew Gwynne, the Minister for Public Health: in the spring his Department is going to start to develop some policy on it, but the Government need to start putting on pressure and getting this right up the agenda in the public consciousness, because it is an incredibly big problem.

Obesity and related conditions are the single most preventable form of ill health across the UK. They put an enormous amount of pressure on the NHS. Some £6.5 billion is spent annually on directly treating obesity. It is also a major drag on the economy. About half the people who are out of work for health reasons are clinically obese. There is a huge cost to that. Over the years, the Government have been toying with the subject but have never really dug into it. I think now is the time.

The purpose of this debate is to really up the awareness in the general population. A Backbench Business debate is perfect for that. There has been a House of Lords inquiry into food, diet and obesity, which reported in October; it made some quite radical suggestions on our food policy. Given the huge impact of obesity on probably all the five missions of Government, it is high time we had a debate and got different aspects of how we treat obesity into the public domain.

It is incredibly important that supermarkets re-formulate foods so that they are less fattening and have less salt and sugar. At the moment, work on planning is also going on concerning fast food outlets near schools. We need to tighten up the legislation on that: if we do not, the giants of fast food will get around any local authority interventions.

This is a really important bit of national Government business that I think would really benefit from a robust Backbench debate.

Q14 **Chair:** Your application is for a Chamber debate. At the moment, the Chamber is full until after Christmas, so the first available Chamber slot for you would be Thursday 9 January. The alternative, if you opt for a Westminster Hall debate, is Thursday 19 December.

Dr Opher: I think 9 January is better for obesity, because you do not really want to talk about obesity just before Christmas. Just after Christmas is perfect timing: hopefully we will garner some headlines and make sure that people start thinking about it in a robust way. I am very happy with that.

Q15 **Will Stone:** I did message you about this: try to get some more Conservatives onboard. It looks a little bit Tory-light. Other than that, you have a lot of support. I think it is a good idea, but reach out to them, because I am sure they will be concerned about it as well.

Dr Opher: The trouble is that I do not know many Tories at the moment, but I know a few and I shall get on to them.

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Chair: It is a great way of learning.

Dr Opher: Yes, it is—I will go up to them. I absolutely take that point, Will. We have one Conservative, with whom I appeared on “The Food Programme”: Aphra Brandreth. I am sure many of them are keen to debate the subject and have some great ideas. That is certainly important. So is it 9 January?

Chair: Yes.

Dr Opher: That is fantastic. Thank you very much.

Chair: That concludes our formal business. We will now go into closed session to consider the allocation of debates and debating time.