

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 4 February 2025

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Members present: Bob Blackman (Chair); Jack Abbott; Jess Brown-Fuller; Mary Glendon; Alison Hume; Will Stone; Martin Vickers; Chris Vince.

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Ben Obese-Jecty made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this meeting of the Backbench Business Committee. The Committee will consider 11 new applications for debates, and a series of other debates are still to be scheduled.

The first application is from Ben Obese-Jecty, for a debate on knife crime among children and young people. Ben, over to you.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I do not believe that we have had a debate on this topic in Parliament, certainly not in this Parliament. I know we have talked about it in the past, but with so many new Members and with knife crime becoming so much more prevalent and so much worse, it is vital that parliamentarians discuss it.

I feel passionate about this. I do not think that it is necessarily a party political issue. As a Parliament—650 of us—we need a very honest, very frank and very robust discussion about knife crime, particularly among children and young people, and about why so many of our children find it so easy not only to carry a knife, but to use a knife.

We saw the tragic incident this week of Harvey Willgoose. Previously, there was Kelyan Bokassa, who was 14 years old, and before that there was Leo Ross, who was 12 years old—and that is just in the last three weeks. Then there are all the other incidents that do not make the paper, where children are wounded by other children.

We need to really think about how we address this. We talk about banning knives, but zombie knives account for only about 3.6% of fatal incidents. Kitchen knives account for over 50%, and all of us have a drawer full of them at home, so they are obviously ready and accessible.

As a Parliament, we need to come together to really understand what is driving this and what has changed. I wager that all of us, when we were younger, did not fear being stabbed, even if we grew up in less salubrious parts. This was never a problem where I lived growing up, and it certainly was not something that I was aware of. Now, it seems to be so prevalent that even in my constituency in rural Cambridgeshire we are seeing instances of children in secondary schools carrying knives. Thankfully for my constituents, they are not prepared to use them yet, but it is only a matter of time before the issue spills out and affects everybody.

That is why I would like this debate. I think it is hugely important, and I would like to see as much participation as possible, because we really need to grips with this if we are to tackle it.

Q2 **Chair:** Your application is for a Chamber debate. It is well subscribed—you have more than enough speakers on both sides of the Chamber—but there is a substantial queue for Chamber debates. If we offered you a Westminster Hall debate as a starter, as it were, would you accept it? Before you answer, there would be nothing to prevent you coming back with an application for the Chamber, but I think we would expect to see a motion attached to that rather than just one for a general debate.



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Ben Obese-Jecty: How long would the wait be for a Chamber debate?

Chair: At the moment, we have a queue of debates that will take us up to the Easter recess, so it would be in May or beyond.

Ben Obese-Jecty: What if it were a Westminster Hall debate?

Chair: You would get a debate in early March, I think. You don't have to make a decision now, by the way.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Can I think about it?

Chair: Yes.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I would like to think about it. It is something that I would like to bring to the main Chamber, simply because—

Chair: At business questions, there have been many requests for a debate on knife crime, for the same reasons that you have outlined.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I think that if we have the debate in Westminster Hall, it will be difficult for everybody to be able to speak, so I would like to bring it to the main Chamber, although I am conscious that there will be a delay.

Q3 **Will Stone:** Can I chime in on that? I understand why you want it in the Chamber: obviously it is grand to be there, and this is such an important issue. I have had constituents who have been affected, including Owen Dunn, who was stabbed—it was terrible. In Westminster Hall, we could guarantee you a longer debate, which is more likely to give everyone a chance to speak. I appreciate that it is not as grand as the Chamber, but we have seen debates in the Chamber cut short or cancelled because they have been pushed around by business of the House. With a three-hour slot in Westminster Hall, you would at least be able to guarantee to all the people on your list that they could speak, which I think is quite powerful.

Ben Obese-Jecty: So you can guarantee that? I am sorry, but I thought it was limited, and potentially capped at an hour and a half.

Chair: On Tuesday mornings, we allocate a 90-minute debate; on Thursday afternoons, we allocate two 90-minute debates, but if we have a very well-subscribed application, we can allocate the full 180 minutes in Westminster Hall on a Thursday, which is guaranteed time, as Will says. The problem in the Chamber is that if we get UQs or statements on a Thursday, it concertinas the time. We had very well-subscribed debates last week, but the more subscribed one went for two hours and 25 minutes and the other for about an hour and a half. To be fair, you never get three hours in the Chamber, but you do not have to make a decision now.

Q4 **Martin Vickers:** Ben, as this is sadly so topical at the moment, don't you think that an earlier debate in Westminster Hall would at least flag up genuine concerns and perhaps an approach that the Government may be considering? You could follow that up by getting in the queue for a major

debate in the Chamber, as Bob said, probably in May.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I will bear that in mind. I just need to go away and have a little think.

Chair: Thank you very much. The Clerks will be in touch shortly.

Dawn Butler made representations.

Q5 **Chair:** The next two applications are from Dawn Butler. The first is on paper straws and potentially toxic chemicals. This is an application for a 90-minute Westminster Hall debate on a Thursday.

Dawn Butler: Thank you, Chair. I am sure everybody is familiar with having a paper straw and probably with getting frustrated that it gets soggy before you finish your drink. I investigated this, and I was shocked to find that paper straws included PFAS, which are also known as forever chemicals. They can contaminate your drink and contaminate the water supply, and they have led to an increase in kidney and liver cancers.

I think we need a debate about paper straws—how they are used, the glue that is used, the paint that is used and the forever chemicals that are used—and about alternatives that are better for the environment, such as bamboo.

Q6 **Jess Brown-Fuller:** Thank you, Dawn, for suggesting this debate. You are bit low on Opposition Members: you have lots of Labour support, but only two speakers from the Opposition. I would suggest somebody like Munira Wilson, the Liberal Democrat MP for Twickenham: she brought a ten-minute rule Bill to the House that was all about PFAS, so she would probably be really interested in your debate. If you reach out to other Opposition parties, I am sure you can find more Members who would be keen to contribute.

Dawn Butler: Yes. I put it out via email, but I will happily do that. I think when some Members saw it, they thought that we were advocating bringing back plastic straws; they did not understand the implications of PFAS. That is a good suggestion—thank you.

Q7 **Chair:** The Clerks will be in touch on that application.

Your second application is for a debate on mobile phone theft. Once again, it is for a 90-minute Westminster Hall debate, but this time on a Tuesday morning.

Dawn Butler: Yes. I am happy for it to be in the main Chamber instead, because I think it is an important debate that all MPs are familiar with: their constituents will have had their phones stolen, and a number of MPs have had their phones stolen. There were 78,000 phones stolen in the year up to March 2024, which is a 153% increase on the previous year. The biggest hotspot for mobile phone thefts is Westminster, where a mobile phone is stolen about every four minutes.

We need this debate, because we must work together to combat this crisis. We have to ensure that the manufacturing companies take



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responsibility. At the moment, it feels as if they have factored it into their business model, because they know that people will then go out and buy another mobile phone. There are ways that they can stop a stolen phone linking into the cloud. That means that we can design out the desire for people to steal mobile phones. This will be a really important debate that affects everybody.

Chair: Any questions or comments, colleagues?

- Q8 **Jess Brown-Fuller:** The same one—sorry to be a bore. You have lots of Government support and only two Opposition Members on your application. I encourage you to reach out to more Opposition Members; I am sure it is a conversation that they would all like to have. A colleague of mine had her phone stolen just last week.

Dawn Butler: Yes. We have a letter going to the Secretary of State as well.

- Q9 **Chair:** The other issue is the answering Department for a Tuesday. Obviously we can only allocate a debate when the answering Department is the right one. I am assuming that this would be the Home Office. At the moment, we do not know the allocations. It is likely to be March.

Dawn Butler: Does that mean that I should pitch for the main Chamber?

Chair: You can, but you will be waiting a long time.

Dawn Butler: Cool. Can I also ask about the International Women's Day debate?

Chair: You can, but at the moment we do not know what the Government are going to offer us in terms of time during that week. If we do get that week, it will be offered on 6 March. It will be the first debate.

Dawn Butler: Brilliant.

Chair: The proviso is that the Government must allocate us that day, so anything you can do to encourage the Leader of the House to allocate the time to us will help.

Dawn Butler: I will have a word, Chair.

Chair: The Clerks will be in touch with you.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson made representations.

- Q10 **Chair:** The next application, from Sharon Hodgson, is for a Westminster Hall debate on a Tuesday, on "The recommendations of the Hughes report: options for redress for those harmed by valproate and pelvic mesh, one year on."

Mrs Hodgson: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Committee, for giving me this opportunity.

The patient safety commissioner, Henrietta Hughes, produced a report a



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year ago into options for redress for those harmed by valproate and pelvic mesh. I am sure we have all had constituents who have been in touch on those two things—three, if we add Primodos. You will remember that Baroness Cumberlege did the “First Do No Harm” report into mesh, Primodos and valproate, whereas Henrietta Hughes just looked at two of those. Primodos was considered to be sub judice, so she could not look at that.

Henrietta Hughes made her report a year ago come Friday. It would be really good to get a debate so we can push the Government to respond, because it has been a year. I know that we have had a change of Government in that time, but the former Government did not get a chance to reply, nor have this Government yet. It would be really good if we could commemorate that anniversary, make the case, and ask the Government to look at this with fresh eyes and come forward with a response.

At least 10,000 and up to 40,000 women have been severely damaged by the mesh implantation. Lots of those women have had that mesh removed. My mam was one of them; she is 80 now, but irrevocably damaged, and will never be the same again. We do not know the exact numbers. Women now are waiting up to four years for an appointment to seek to have the mesh removed.

When it comes to valproate, about 20,000 children were exposed to harm in the womb from the epilepsy medication. It is an excellent medication if you have epilepsy, which is why so many people take it, but if you fall pregnant while taking the drug, the child is harmed. Up to 20,000 children were exposed; they have various levels of harm, both physical and developmental, including autism. Sadly, we have known about the harms of valproate since the 1980s, when it was suggested that these medicines were dangerous to babies, but it was not until 2016 that Lord O’Shaughnessy had potential effects and warnings added to the packaging. Sadly, babies are still being born damaged by valproate.

The debate would not be to talk about why, but to talk about how. Henrietta Hughes set out a redress scheme, which is the main thing we need to start looking at on both these harms, for compensation for the women and families affected. Baroness Cumberlege did the why; Henrietta Hughes has done the how. We need to look at how the Government could set about doing a redress scheme for both these harms.

There is a huge amount of support across the House. I managed to get quite a few signatures. I probably should have got more from Opposition parties—I think I got four. I am sure that if I had put it on one of the WhatsApps for Opposition MPs, I would probably have got dozens of names there. I am quite happy to try to get more names, but I am sure the debate would be really well attended.

Q11 Chair: You are applying for a Tuesday Westminster Hall debate, so I am assuming that this is Health and Social Care.

Mrs Hodgson: Yes.



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Chair: We do not have the schedule yet beyond 4 March. We have filled up all the Tuesdays between now and then, so we cannot tell you when it would be. Given the range of speakers, especially if you get a number of Opposition speakers as well, they would be looking at one minute to speak in the 90-minute debate. But it is your application, and obviously we will consider it appropriately. Any questions, colleagues?

Q12 **Alison Hume:** Thank you, Sharon, for this important application. Can I double-check that there are no legal proceedings against the drug manufacturers at the moment?

Mrs Hodgson: Not for valproate, no. There may be some individual ones for mesh. Some women have managed to take individual cases, but there is no class action for mesh or valproate. That was the issue with Primodos, but sadly they lost their case.

Chair: They were denied legal aid, weren't they?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes.

Chair: The Clerks will be in touch about your application, Sharon.

Mrs Hodgson: Thank you so much.

Mr Will Forster made representations.

Q13 **Chair:** The next application, from Will Forster, is on assessing retrospective accountability of the construction industry. The request is for a Chamber debate.

Mr Forster: Thank you, Chair. I am willing to take a steer if you think Westminster Hall is more appropriate.

I am asking for a debate in order for us to improve accountability, post-construction, on the construction industry. This follows an incident, or more accurately five separate incidents, in my constituency. What should be a reputable developer, Sir Robert McAlpine, has built a hotel that has had cladding fall off it four times. The main road through my constituency is closed to this day. It started falling off in 2021, when it was under construction.

The industry seems unable and unwilling to solve the issue. I am aware that it is not just an issue in Woking; it happens in other constituencies as well. There has been a lot of focus on building safety and fire safety post Grenfell, and quite rightly so, but there are other, wider issues. Over the last few months, some fraudulent or questionable EWS forms have come to light; I know that a lot of Members across parties have raised that. There seems to be an issue in the construction industry with a lack of dialogue.

I think a debate would shed light on the issue and make sure that Members can work together on a cross-party basis. Hopefully, we can push the Government to implement more measures, not only on Grenfell issues but on wider issues. I am happy to take questions.



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Chair: I know what you are going to say, Jess.

Q14 **Jess Brown-Fuller:** It would be remiss of me not to say that although you have lots of Opposition Members, you have a pretty poor showing from the Government side. If you are asking for a Chamber debate, we would expect to see that out of 15 names, at least half were from the Government. I would politely request that you talk to some of our Labour colleagues and try to get a little more support. If you are considering Westminster Hall, the target is slightly smaller: a couple more Government names.

Mr Forster: As I said to the Chairman, I am happy to go with Westminster Hall if the Committee thinks it more appropriate. These are the names of those who signed first. Since I submitted them, I believe that more MPs have signed up, including from the Government Benches. In particular, quite a lot of members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, of which I am a member, are very interested. I think the vibe is that they feel it goes beyond the Select Committee. It is a fair point, but these were the first names to sign up.

Q15 **Chair:** If you could kindly supply those names to the Clerks, it would change the ambit of the application.

Mr Forster: I am happy to. As I think we are probably all aware, you tend to reply a bit quicker to colleagues, but I think it is more of an even spread now.

Q16 **Chair:** You have it as a Chamber application, but if it were for Westminster Hall, would you have a preference for a Tuesday or a Thursday?

Mr Forster: I would have a preference for a Tuesday, but it is just a preference.

Q17 **Chair:** And the answering Department would be MHCLG?

Mr Forster: Yes, MHCLG. Alex Norris is the Minister in charge.

Chair: Okay. The Clerks will be in touch. If you can kindly supply the additional names, that will help your application.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith, Ms Marie Rimmer and Blair McDougall made representations.

Q18 **Chair:** We move on to Sir Iain Duncan Smith and the third anniversary of the war in Ukraine. This is a half-day debate in the Chamber.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Thank you very much indeed. Much of this is self-explanatory, but two points are relevant here. One is that the invasion took place on 24 February three years ago. We are not going to be able to hit that date, but as close to that date as possible is what we are after. The intriguing thing about this is that it took me 24 hours to get 49 names, so the cross-party sense of this is very big indeed.



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Tim Roca, Layla Moran and I came back from Ukraine last weekend, and we got up pretty close to the frontline in Kharkiv. We saw a lot of what was going on and met lots of the army, as well as politicians. We went to Zelensky's office and spoke to the head of intelligence. The message from them was stark: they are losing and they are not receiving the weapons and munitions that they were promised. Even those smaller than what they had hoped for are not getting through. Their worry is that the west seems to have forgotten them. I wrote about that over the weekend to try to gee people up. The UK has obviously always been foremost in pushing, and they are thankful for that, but with the new President and some turmoil in Europe, they are concerned about what may happen.

I hope the debate, if it is well attended—I cannot see any reason why it would not be, and I am obviously supported by colleagues who also signed this—will be more than just a debate in the Chamber to discuss among MPs. I would hope that we could persuade the media to cover the whole thing and to make the point that we cannot afford to lose Ukraine. If we lose Ukraine, my view is that Taiwan is not far down the road to follow, and we will have sent a message that we last sent to dictators back in the 1930s, as though we had not learned a single lesson. It is really vital. I think this should be a very powerful debate about what being a member of the free world is all about.

Chair: Do your colleagues have anything to add?

Ms Rimmer: I have always thought that this war is our war; it is a European war. If Russia wins in Ukraine, we know what happens. I am very concerned about what impact the election of the new US President, and his new vice-president, will have. He said that a peace proposal coming from them would start with Russia keeping what it has taken, and that Ukraine would have its own land but would remain neutral—it would not be NATO and it would not be UN. Well, we have seen what has happened with Hong Kong.

This is our war, and we should accept it as our war. I think that we need to come out strongly on this. The support is absolutely cross-party. Both the previous Government and this Government have been 100% agreed—there has been no acrimony between us on it. We have to do our best. These people are fighting our war.

Blair McDougall: I think it is worth reflecting on the importance of having a debate to mark three years into what was supposed to be a three-day war, and, if nothing else, to mark the bravery of the Ukrainians who have held out for so long. As Sir Iain points out, we have obviously had other debates in the Chamber on this, and other occasions to debate it, but we are in a completely different landscape than when we last had a substantial debate on the subject. That is partly due to the change in the political order in the White House, but we are also approaching what most people kind of believe to be a period of negotiation. Those negotiations will not only decide what happens in this conflict, but will have a significant impact on the global order, so I think this is worthy of substantial debate.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Can I make one other point that has occurred to me? While we were there, we discovered all sorts of stuff about what is going on behind the scenes that very rarely gets reported. For example, there are nearly 50,000 Ukrainian soldiers right now needing prostheses. You cannot believe the scale of the tragedy that is going on. The PTSD is enormous, and we are trying to help them through a charity. We can raise that sort of stuff in this debate to remind everybody that, below the nature of it, it is not a game; this is a very desperate situation taking place.

Q19 **Chair:** Given the nature of the debate that you want, are you wanting the Government to actually do something off the back of this? If so, what?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: We have deliberately not called for a substantive motion. We do not have a problem, in policy terms, with the Government, because, as we know, the UK has almost uniquely had no issue between parties on all of this—we have been 100% behind each other—so I do not think it is for us to lecture them.

The purpose of the debate is to draw to the attention of the wider public, as well as some of our colleagues, who may think this is all a bit of a distraction, to the fact that this really is the issue right now. With that, hopefully it will be picked up in the US, and in Europe, because the clock is ticking.

Q20 **Chair:** I think the anniversary is Monday the 24th. Is that correct?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: It is 24 February, yes.

Chair: At the moment, the Government have not allocated us time that week or the following week, so we do not know the position for that. Presumably, you would want it as close to the anniversary as possible?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Yes, absolutely. I fully understand the restrictions and so on, but I hope that the Government might be minded to make a bit of time. If they don't, as I say, the earliest slot in March would be a fall-back.

Chair: Any questions, colleagues?

Q21 **Jess Brown-Fuller:** Can I ask, Sir Iain, if you have asked the Leader of the House whether the Government will make time for this debate?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I have not officially, because I thought it was right that I came here first. Now that you have told me what you have just told me, I would be very happy to go and see the Leader of the House—I know her very well—and simply say, "Could you think about it?" But I would hope that the Committee might want to involve itself.

Q22 **Chair:** I do not want to prejudge what the Committee has to say when we go into private session and consider the application, but the earliest we could offer, because of recess, is 27 February. If we offered you that, would you be able to take it?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: We will take anything we can get—as long as possible, and as soon as possible.

Chair: Thank you for attending. The Clerks will be in touch.

Helena Dollimore made representations.

Q23 Chair: This is an application from Helena Dollimore for a general debate on women's health in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday or Thursday. Would you like to present your case?

Chris Vince: Can I declare an interest, in that I have signed up to this?

Jess Brown-Fuller: I did as well.

Helena Dollimore: We are asking for a general debate on women's health, given the importance of the issue to 51% of the population. We know that women's health disparities are a huge issue in this country. Of course, that matters to the 51% of the population who are women, but it also matters to many men who see their relatives suffer. I am pleased that a number of male MPs have signed our application.

At the moment we have huge disparities between women's health and men's health. There was recently a report from the Women and Equalities Committee on medical misogyny. That work started in the last Parliament, and the Committee has recently released the report, which exposes some of the malpractice that has been experienced by women up and down this country.

The waiting lists for gynaecological surgery in this country are extremely long at the moment. If you put all the women who are on gynaecological waiting lists in a line, they would go from London to Exeter. It is affecting a lot of women.

I know that there have been debates on specific aspects of women's health—for example, on endometriosis, and on what Sharon Hodgson was just discussing in her debate application—but I do think we would get value from a general debate about women's health, to look at all these issues in the round and to hear from the new Government about their overall holistic strategy on women's health.

There have been a number of recent developments, with the maternity health scandal and the all-party parliamentary group on birth trauma, which reported towards the end of the last Parliament, and that relates to women's experience in childbirth. There are a number of different issues.

I know that many MPs who have signed the application have specific constituent cases they would like to raise, and I think the House would get value from having this matter discussed, ideally in the Chamber, given the number and range of MPs who have put their names down.

Q24 Chair: I think you were here when we said earlier that Chamber time is very limited, and there is a long queue, so there is more chance of a Westminster Hall debate at the moment. There is a pending application for a debate on International Women's Day. You mentioned that on your application form. That application is already in, and we will try to allocate



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it when we are given time by the Government. Contributors to your debate may also make a contribution during that debate, but I am sure you want to keep this as a separate item.

Helena Dollimore: Yes. In my mind, this is separate, because this would be responded to by the Department of Health and Social Care, and it is a health-focused issue, whereas the International Women's Day debate will be on a whole range of issues affecting women and gender equality.

Chris Vince: I agree with you: this is a separate debate. Talking about International Women's Day is very important, but this is a separate issue that should be debated in a separate place.

Chair: It is a well-subscribed application. The Clerks will be in touch with you shortly, once we know the timings available.

Helena Dollimore: You have mentioned that there is a very long waiting list for the Chamber. Does that mean it is impossible?

Chair: Nothing is impossible. It is just a question of being very patient, because we are only allocated time when the Government choose to give it to us, and they do not tell us a long time in advance. We are waiting to hear about Chamber time after recess, but we have a queue of applications. If we got every Thursday available, we have enough applications pending that we would fill up the time until the Easter recess, so we are then talking about debates in May or June. Westminster Hall is a lot easier because we know the dates on which we can allocate.

Sarah Dyke made representations.

Q25 **Chair:** Our next application is from Sarah Dyke. All three options have been chosen for ambulance service delays.

Sarah Dyke: I am requesting this debate on ambulance service delays after the Darzi report stated that "the NHS is in critical condition". Since 2015, the NHS has missed every target. A&E times waiting times have got substantially worse in recent years, following a decade of funding settlements that failed to keep up with demand for services and staff shortages.

We now have the sight of ambulances backed up outside hospitals, certainly in my neck of the woods in Somerset. I suspect that that is something that all Members see. Patients are left in corridors, there are hospital bed shortages and people are left stranded in pain and waiting for hours for help. It is something that we see right across the country, but several weeks ago, the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust declared a critical incident due to the sustained pressure on services. Despite the hard work of all the ambulance crews and staff, the service sadly is ranked bottom in England for category 1 calls.

I know the Prime Minister announced plans to cut waiting times in January this year, pledging to tackle those hospital backlogs, but the plans seem to fail to adequately address how they will tackle this crisis. I feel a debate is



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pertinent now, given the critical incident in Somerset. My constituents are anxious about the state of ambulance services across my constituency and also in Somerset. I have a huge caseload on it, and it is something that I feel that we should debate here to give our constituents the confidence that we are dealing with the issue and raising their concerns in this place.

We did have a recent debate on the backlogs in the NHS, and the debate saw a really high turnout of MPs from across the House, so I believe that this debate on ambulance services would achieve the same.

Q26 Chair: As we have said, Chamber time is really challenging. Westminster Hall is a lot easier for us to allocate. Obviously, it depends on when we can make you an offer in terms of Westminster Hall. Would you accept a Westminster Hall debate, if it is offered?

Sarah Dyke: Yes, I would. My only concern is, because I think the turnout will be quite high on this, that a Chamber debate would allow more MPs to participate, given the previous debate. To me, it is very important that we have the opportunity to debate this at this particular time, given the critical situation we have in Somerset.

Q27 Chair: As you heard earlier, it is likely to be May or June before we could get Chamber time for this debate.

Sarah Dyke: That is why I would be happy with a Westminster Hall debate, because I would rather have the opportunity—

Chair: I understand. Any questions or comments?

Q28 Jess Brown-Fuller: If my hon. Friend is agreeing to a Westminster Hall debate, then I would say her application is balanced well enough. I feel like I have become the balance of Opposition and Government police! It would be great if you could re-reach out when you are given the date of the debate, particularly to the Government to encourage more Government Members to come along so that it is a nice, even split.

Sarah Dyke: I was ready to answer that: I have had some more names that have come through over email to me over the last couple of days.

Chair: If you can kindly pass those to the Clerks, that helps us considerably. Obviously, we only have the application that you have submitted.

Sarah Dyke: Of course.

Chair: The Clerks will be in touch.

Jen Craft made representations.

Q29 Chair: The next application is from Jen Craft on British Sign Language Week.

Jen Craft: Thank you for the opportunity to make the case to the Committee for this debate. I have asked for a debate in March because that is when Sign Language Week is celebrated. British Sign Language, as



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some Members will be aware, is an official language of the UK, thanks to a private Member's Bill that was passed in 2022. I looked to establish an APPG on BSL, which we have had some success with. We are working in conjunction with the British Deaf Association, who primarily represent British Sign Language first language speakers. They are very keen to raise the profile of British Sign Language. They describe it as preserving what they do have and promoting how far it could go.

British Sign Language, unlike other signed language systems, is a language in its own right. It has been a language for centuries. It is quite hard to trace the exact origins. It has its own culture that goes along with it, and British Sign Language first language speakers are keen for that to be recognised as a good in and of itself. As it is an official language of this country, as Welsh, Gaelic and other languages are, it is probably a good time to start recognising and celebrating that in this place where we make the laws that apply to people in this country.

Currently you are not allowed to use BSL on the Floor of the House without the Speaker's permission. Part of what I am hoping to do with this debate is to get permission to use BSL. I know that some Members speak BSL to a certain degree. I am trying—it is sometimes very trying—to use BSL, but part of the promotion is something that will be fairly groundbreaking in demonstrating that it is something that we are trying to embrace. A key point that a BSL first language speaker made to me was that if they became a Member of Parliament, they would not be able to use their first language in their day-to-day business, which is fairly shocking if you consider that it is a first language for 87,000 people across the UK. The debate would be a chance to showcase that it is worthy of attention.

I would encourage Members to learn some BSL. The House authorities have recently added it to their language learning service for the first time. There are two BSL intro sessions that you can join before the week that we have asked for the debate to be held in, so everyone can take part. We would also ask for permission—this is all contingent on the Speaker's Office giving permission—to have a BSL interpreter on the Floor of the House. We have BSL interpreters who sometimes come into the Gallery. If you watch Parliament on TV, there is a BSL version of all our debates. I am sure some people will be watching this right now in BSL. It will really signify the importance of this as a language—not a communication system but a language—to have that happen.

That is my pitch. I have tried to keep it short and sweet.

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

Jen Craft: Yes.

Q30 **Chair:** If it is a Tuesday, we can only allocate it when the answering Department is the relevant one. Who do you consider would be answering this?



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Jen Craft: We have considered DWP. It is interesting because it kind of encompasses the whole of Government agenda, because it is a language. We have suggested DWP because Stephen Timms holds the disability portfolio. But there is now a disability Minister in every Government Department, so it could be any Department answering it.

Chair: Cabinet Office, or Women and Equalities.

Jen Craft: It could be the Cabinet Office, yes. It could be the Home Office.

Q31 **Chair:** We just need to be clear from your perspective which is the answering Department. You have asked for a Tuesday or a Thursday. If it is a Tuesday, we do not know yet which answering Departments will be available. Tuesday 18th would be during that week. That would be a possibility, but at the moment we do not know which Departments are answering that week.

Jen Craft: There is scope to be flexible. A big ask from the British Deaf Association is around education and parents—the vast majority of deaf children are born to hearing parents—and ensuring that British Sign Language tuition and lessons are available in a way that is relevant and local to all parents of a deaf child. It is basically about giving a choice to parents who have a deaf child, and to that child, about how they wish to communicate, and enabling that in society in general. We could be quite flexible with the answering Department.

Chair: Do colleagues have any other questions? If you can do it in BSL, you get double marks.

Jen Craft: Go on, Chris.

Chris Vince: *[In British Sign Language: Scandal.]*

Jen Craft: There you go—he has learned “scandal”.

Q32 **Alison Hume:** I am sorry that I cannot do it in BSL, but I declare an interest, having signed the application. It is interesting for the public; wasn't there a bit of an outcry when Boris Johnson was doing his announcements about covid that they were not signed? We ought to recognise that the deaf signing community wants to hear from Government in an accessible way. Do you agree?

Jen Craft: It is true. It is not just the previous Government. We hear concerns around access to Government consultations. It is important to note that BSL, being a language in its own right, does not follow the same grammatical rules as spoken English, so a lot of BSL first language speakers struggle with educational attainment. Imagine reading the thing I have written down here backwards in your head. There is a need for BSL interpreters, not just for visual and audio presentations but in written Government communications.

Chair: Okay. The Clerks will be in touch with you when we have considered the application.

Yuan Yang and **Mr Lee Dillon** made representations.

Q33 Chair: We will take representations from Yuan Yang now, because I know you need to get away. Your application is for a debate in the Chamber on the financial sustainability and governance of English football.

Yuan Yang: Thank you. I am joined by Lee Dillon MP.

I recognise that there are some avid football followers on the Committee, but you do not need to be an avid follower of the sport to recognise the importance of football, both in grassroots communities all across our country and at the top of the premier league, as well as the cultural soft power that the UK has on the world stage because of its top clubs.

However, it is fair to say that football clubs, particularly those in communities, towns and cities across England, are in a dire financial state right now. It is estimated that just over half of the top 92 clubs across the premier league and English football league are technically insolvent. One club that we think is on the brink of insolvency is my local club in Reading; Lee's local club is as well.

You can see from the geography of this issue that the debate naturally garners cross-party support, and I think an even split of Government and Opposition MPs have signed the application. If you happen to be in the town or neighbourhood where there is a club with ownership problems or financial problems, you are, as a community-based MP, naturally going to be drawn into defending the club.

This is a systemic issue. I use Reading as an example of a club that has had particular difficulties in recent years, because of an absent owner, which has led to financial difficulties, but about seven clubs have gone into administration only in the last five years. You can see that there is a really high risk not just to Reading, but to clubs across the country. I am sure that one reason why we have so much Back-Bench support from different parties is because the MPs who signed the application have experience of their own club, whether it is in Salisbury, Wigan or elsewhere across the country, experiencing financial problems.

This is a debate that gives Back Benchers a chance to air the variety of concerns felt in communities across the UK. It would also be an important chance for communities who are watching to feel like there is attention being paid to the issue in the House of Commons.

Mr Dillon: Obviously football is our national game, so you would expect there to be wide interest from the public as well as Members across the Chamber. A football club is more than just the stadium or the 11 players on the pitch. Football clubs often have strong community offers. They underpin local employment opportunities. They often run academies, which are also then supportive via homework clubs and so on. They play a vital role.

I represent the seat of Newbury, Reading being our nearest major club. When the assets of the club are stripped out, you really notice what that



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does to the local community in terms of fearing for the future of the club, which is really owned by the town. Whether someone owns a football club for five or 50 years, they will pass and that club will remain in the ownership of its community—hopefully.

Q34 **Chair:** This is a request for a Chamber debate. The Football Governance Bill is going through Parliament at the moment—I do not know when it is scheduled to be heard by the Commons. Do you see any clash between the Bill and the debate you want to have?

Yuan Yang: The debate I am proposing is much wider than the governance Bill, particularly because I am proposing that we debate the financial sustainability of the football pyramid, including the distribution between the premier league and the EFL, and even lower clubs outside of that division, in this Back-Bench debate. Financial problems are related to governance in many aspects, for example when you have unfit owners, but the flow of money and media rights through the whole football pyramid, which I am sure you are familiar with, Chair, is an underlying problem that goes beyond just regulation.

Chair: I declare my interest as a platinum season ticket holder at Tottenham.

Yuan Yang: I would add that there is a time window issue for fans of Reading and other clubs in imminent financial difficulties. The transfer window for the season has just finished and, from now until the end of the football season in the spring, lots of clubs will find that their quick sources of revenue have dried up. There is an imminent financial pressure. That is why it is particularly important that we have the debate at this time.

On the timing of the governance Bill, my understanding is that it is with the Lords and possibly likely to remain there for quite a long time. Martin Vickers MP might have more—

Chair: Quite a lot of amendments have been tabled.

Yuan Yang: Exactly. I do not think that the Lords debating an issue or part of an issue would preclude the Commons from having a view on it. I am also concerned about the timeframe left to us, particularly from now until the end of the season.

Chair: There is a risk that this goes in the queue and the debate will be after the end of the season.

Yuan Yang: I hope that the numbers and the spread of Government and Opposition supporters speak for themselves.

Chair: That is perfectly fine.

Yuan Yang: Separately to that, we would much prefer a debate in Westminster Hall or the Chamber before the end of the season to waiting beyond the end of the season for a Chamber debate.

Q35 **Chair:** At the moment, the application is just for the Chamber. Are you



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amending it to include Westminster Hall?

Yuan Yang: Yes, I am happy to do that.

Chair: Okay.

Martin Vickers: Since I have signed the application, I declare my interest as a Grimsby Town season ticket holder—I will give them a mention. I have to say it is under sound ownership at the moment, but I recognise what Yuan says about the challenges that face many clubs, particularly if they have rogue owners. I know there are concerns up and down the league about one or two ownerships. I go along with the support. The debate has a wide range of Members supporting it.

Jack Abbott: I am a Spurs-supporting Ipswich MP, so I am not having a particularly good time on either front this season. I agree with what Yuan says about possibly having a Westminster Hall debate in March time ahead of when the Bill may come back. That might instruct any future debate when the Bill returns to the Commons. Timing-wise, that might work quite well in terms of the wider debate.

Q36 **Chris Vince:** We do not have to talk about what team I support. All I will say is that it was the team that had financial difficulties about 20 years ago and has not really recovered. In the '60s and '70s, it was the greatest team in the world.

Lee made a good point that it is about not just the governance, but the impact on the community. The team I support—as well as Harlow Town—did a lot of that work. The things that get cut are the youth team, the women's team and community outreach. I urge you to widen that part of the debate. Also, because Alistair is sitting here, should we be talking only about English teams? Perhaps we should also be talking about Scottish teams.

Yuan Yang: I very much take your point, particularly about the impact on women's football. Unfortunately, that part of Reading football club was one of the first to suffer from the current ownership problem. The reason why it is so important, as Lee says, is that ambassadors from these clubs promote youth football and women's football in our communities.

Mr Dillon: The Football Governance Bill going through the Lords does not address women's football. That is for the regulator to look at further down the line. It also does not go right down to community football; it stays within the national league structure.

Chair: Okay. The Clerks will be in touch shortly, and we will try to allocate a slot as soon as we can.

Mr Alistair Carmichael made representations.

Q37 **Chair:** The final application is from Alistair Carmichael for a three-hour Chamber debate on the future of farming.



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Mr Carmichael: Given the last application, perhaps I should start with a declaration of total disinterest when it comes to football.

To matters more germane to my application on the future of farming, it may help if I explain the thinking behind bringing this forward. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, which I chair, is trying to do things differently in this Parliament. You will be familiar with the standard Select Committee approach: you see something interesting and important and decide to do an investigation and report; you put out a call for evidence five weeks later and start a few weeks of evidence hearings; you do a visit and get together and write your report; then, six months later, everybody else has stopped talking about it, and you have published something that sits in a filing cabinet.

We are undertaking nine broad inquiries, which we are intending to be our work for this Parliament. Having instituted the inquiries, we can be a bit more fleet of foot when things happen, like before Christmas when we had the water price review on 19 December. Two weeks after we came back, we took evidence from consumer groups and Southern Water in relation to that. By way of another small experiment in innovation—we all know how the House loves to do things differently—we are looking to reach out to people beyond the Committee and give Members an opportunity to contribute. Essentially, we want them to highlight the areas that are of interest and importance to them. In as far as it is possible, that can inform the work of the Committee going forward.

I have to say, in the years that I have been doing Backbench Business applications, I have never found an easier one than this. We put out an email and a reminder email and—including Sarah Bool, who emailed me just before I came here—we have 68 Members, including Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Reform, SNP, DUP, UUP, Alliance and Plaid. The only figure I am slightly light on is Labour, at 11 MPs, but I am not quite sure what is going on there. I did meet one MP at Edinburgh airport who took me aside and said, “I can’t sign your application but if you get your debate I will speak in it,” which was an interesting exercise in mental gymnastics.

There is an awful lot to talk about in farming at the moment. We are at the pivotal moment where we have to decide what we mean when we talk about food security. Does it mean a reliance on imported food? That seems somewhat foolhardy given the events of recent years. Does it mean that we will have to treat domestic production differently than we have for the last couple of decades? There is the whole nature of the depletion agenda, flooding mitigation and climate change mitigation. We are expecting farmers to do an awful lot, without ever giving them much indication of how we expect them to do it or what we expect them to achieve by way of targets at the end of it.

Then, of course, there are the various controversies that we have had in relation to the Budget announcements on inheritance tax, double cab pick-ups and the rest of it. I hope—I put it no more strongly than this—that framing the debate in this way will allow us to speak about other things,



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beyond the Budget changes, because, important though they are, there is a bigger debate to be had about agriculture.

I heard what you said to others about dates and times. Given the response I have had to this, I am really keen that we find time in the Chamber for it. Also, given that the thinking behind it is that, if possible, we play it into the work of the Select Committee and its ongoing investigation, it is not as time sensitive as other applications might be. So, although my instinct is to want everything now or yesterday at the latest, I would be prepared to play a longer game with this one, if that were suitable for you.

Q38 Chair: Thank you. Do colleagues have questions? No. It is a very well-subscribed application, and thank you for presenting it. As we have said, it is just a case of when we will be able to find time and when the Government actually allocate us time in the Chamber to put a debate on. One thing I will say is that if you really get 68 speakers—it will probably be a two-and-a-half-hour debate, given the way things go on Thursdays—they are going to get maybe two minutes each at best. That is the problem.

Mr Carmichael: I anticipate that there may be some attrition.

Chair: I am sure there will be, particularly on a Thursday. Anyway, thank you. The Clerks will be in touch. That concludes the public business of the Committee.