

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 11 February 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 11 February 2025.

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

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Steff Aquarone made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this meeting of the Backbench Business Committee. We will be considering applications for debates from colleagues. We have nine applications before us today, the first of which is from Steff Aquarone on coastal communities. Over to you to present your case.

Steff Aquarone: This is my first time presenting a case for a Backbench Business debate, and I am glad to have the chance to do so.

An extraordinary number of communities in this country are on the coast; 192 of the 650 of us represent coastal communities—12 million people across the UK. They are a significant part of our nation, but there has not really been much airtime for them in this Parliament. Back in 2020, the ONS did a big study of coastal towns. It had some eye-opening findings, but they were not a surprise at all to any of us who live in or represent coastal towns: slower employment growth, fewer qualifications and higher levels of deprivation, as well as other indices, such as coastal community residents' higher than national likelihood of taking on unpaid care roles.

In 2021, Sir Chris Whitty himself published a report on the health of coastal communities and discovered some very concerning trends: generally poorer health, higher rates of disease, shorter life expectancy and an ageing population—all separate but significant challenges. What stood out was that coastal towns have more in common with each other than they have with their inland neighbours. Issues like substandard housing, lower education, higher obesity rates and alcohol dependency are clear and stark in coastal areas. He called for urgent action.

Coastal communities are not just about the challenges. They are also huge economic contributors—centrally, leisure and tourism. One in 10 international visitors comes to this country for the coast, and nearly one in five domestic tourists does the same. Before the pandemic, coastal tourism contributed £17 billion a year to the economy and supported hundreds of thousands of jobs, from first-time roles through to highly skilled business management or chef positions. Many of the communities, I am sure you will appreciate, are still recovering from that.

We cannot ignore the role that coastal communities play. They are on the frontline. Coastal erosion in North Norfolk is an issue I have been facing just this week. With rising sea levels, coastal erosion and the loss of homes, coastal communities are feeling the effects of climate change more than many other parts of the country. Given not only their challenges but the way they enrich our country, I feel it is only right that they should get the parliamentary time they deserve. A general debate would allow MPs to champion and celebrate these areas, but also to push the Government for honest answers and a real plan to tackle the issues that they face.

Chair: Thank you, Steff. This application is for a general debate in the Chamber.

Steff Aquarone: Yes, a Chamber debate.



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Martin Vickers: Just to declare an interest—

Chair: I thought you might.

Martin Vickers: I have supported the application.

Alison Hume: Yes, I need to declare an interest as well.

Chair: Do colleagues have any questions? No. We have a long queue of debates for the Chamber, so Chamber time is precious. Assuming the Committee approves the request, it will be quite a while before you actually get your debate.

Steff Aquarone: I very much understand that, and I appreciate the Committee's consideration.

Chair: The Clerks will be in touch with you in due course.

Caroline Voaden made representations.

Q2 **Chair:** The next application is from Caroline Voaden on dementia care. This is a request for a general debate either in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall on a Tuesday or a Thursday. Over to you.

Caroline Voaden: Thank you, Chair. I am here to submit an application for a general debate on dementia, which is the leading cause of death in England and Wales and has been for the last two years. Twelve per cent of all deaths are attributable to dementia or Alzheimer's. It is expected to affect one in two of us in our lifetimes, either through caring for somebody who has a diagnosis or developing it ourselves, or both. Dementia is on the rise. Its prevalence is expected to increase by 40% by 2040. There are currently 1 million people living with it in the UK, and one in six people over 80 has a diagnosis of dementia.

We know that for any family that gets a diagnosis, it is absolutely harrowing. I am sure I am not the only one whose inbox is full of stories from families who cannot get the care, support or advice that they need following a diagnosis. We know that dementia takes a huge financial, emotional and physical toll on all those families. They are suffering from long waiting times for a diagnosis and a lack of specialist support and care. There is huge pressure on unpaid carers and the costs of care are pushing families to breaking point. On top of that, there is a bit of a postcode lottery in terms of where you live and how good the care is and how good your third sector organisations are. Coming from Devon, I have to add that there is also a rurality implication for the provision of services; as always, they are much harder to come by in rural areas.

There is currently no cure for dementia, although there is a nationwide clinical trial under way that aims to revolutionise how the condition is diagnosed, which is a positive step forward. Early and accurate diagnosis is absolutely key for this condition and for advice and support for people caring for somebody who has it. There are also some really interesting science and technology innovations, particularly around things to support



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carers and patients. Some of those were on display in Parliament a couple of weeks ago. There is quite an interesting science and tech angle to the debate.

I am sure there will be interest across the House from all Members who have constituents and family members with a diagnosis of dementia. It has affected my family. Dementia does not get the airtime that, for example, cancer does. I think the reason is that people who have dementia generally cannot speak up for themselves. By the very nature of the disease, it is very difficult for them to advocate for themselves. They are older, too, and we know that older people generally do not have the voice of people who get cancer, for example, at a young age and might be great campaigners and really raise the profile of the disease. It is up to us to speak for them and to try to address some of the nationwide problems and see what we can do to support patients and families with dementia.

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you for your presentation. Your preference is for a Chamber debate. As you may have heard, there is a long queue for the Chamber. It is more likely that we can get you a Westminster Hall debate earlier. Would you rather hang on for the Chamber or accept a Westminster Hall debate when we can offer it?

Caroline Voaden: I am happy to accept a Westminster Hall debate if that comes up first. For this topic, I think a three-hour debate would be good, so that lots of Members would be able to speak.

Chair: The slots in Westminster Hall are for 90 minutes. Given the range of speakers you have got, I think you would be able to fill a full three-hour slot. The Committee will bear that in mind when it comes to decision making. Any questions from colleagues? No. Thank you. The Clerks will be in touch.

Kate Osborne made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** The next application is from Kate Osborne, a former member of the Committee, on "Lesbian visibility week: celebrating the power of sisterhood". The application is for either a Tuesday Westminster Hall slot or a Chamber slot.

Kate Osborne: It is great to be back in front of the Committee again, for the first time in this Parliament.

As my application sets out, it is for a debate for Lesbian Visibility Week. Last year was the first year that a debate was held to celebrate the week. I was able to secure that debate in the Chamber last year, but I appreciate the pressures that we have on time.

It is a landmark year: it is the 35th year that the week has been celebrated, if that is the right word. It comes at a time when we see LGBT people and LGBT rights under attack and being pushed back. I have witnessed this in our own country. I am sure we have all seen it to some degree. It certainly is the case across Europe and further afield—not just for lesbians, but for all of the LGBT community. The debate last year was



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quite well attended. It was a bit of a celebration, but, a bit like Pride, also a bit of a protest to say that there is still a lot to be done in terms of equality and pushing back on the negative narrative that we hear.

I will leave it there, Chair. If I cannot secure the debate in the Chamber, I would be happy to have it in Westminster Hall. The Tuesday that we come back from recess would be fantastic, because I happen to have a reception that day, so it would fall in nicely—maybe sometime in the afternoon. I am getting in early because I know that that is helpful to everybody. It is not till April.

Q5 Chair: Thank you for submitting early. The one thing to say about Tuesday debates after a recess is that the Westminster Hall debates slip back from 9.30 am to 11 am because we are on Monday hours, so it depends on the time of your reception.

Kate Osborne: I am in your hands. Any time that you could offer would be welcomed.

Q6 Will Stone: This is just a comment, because I think it is a really important debate. If you are looking for the Chamber, you are going to need a couple more Opposition MPs to secure that—two more should do. There are some Lib Dems in the room—you might be able to catch them on the way out. That is just something to think about.

Kate Osborne: Thank you. I have got a few more names. I did not submit them at this point, but I am sure I could if that would make the Committee feel happier about the possible attendance. I did not email it out to everybody; I just had a few people in mind that I thought would, and indeed did, support the application. If you request more names, I am sure I can deliver that.

Q7 Chair: There is another consideration. If it is the Tuesday, what would be the answering Department? Presumably Women and Equalities.

Kate Osborne: Yes, I think so. That was the Department last year, so I guess that would still be the case.

Chair: Any other questions? No. Thank you. The Clerks will be in touch with you shortly.

Wera Hobhouse and Perran Moon made representations.

Q8 Chair: The next application is from Wera Hobhouse on Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2025. This is an application for Westminster Hall on either Tuesday or Thursday.

Wera Hobhouse: Thank you, Chair, for having me again—I am not going to make it a habit to come here almost every week.

Eating Disorders Awareness Week is from 24 February to 2 March. It has been a tradition, at least since I have been a Member of Parliament, that we have a debate during Eating Disorders Awareness Week, as a sort of piece in the middle of the week, to reinforce it. All previous Backbench Business Committees have granted that debate, so there is already a



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tradition established. As the chair of the eating disorders APPG, I thought I would ask again for such a debate.

You have seen the application, so I will not repeat everything that I have said in that. In this Parliament, particularly among parliamentary colleagues, the issue of eating disorders is being picked up increasingly, so I believe there is quite a lot of interest in debating it. If you want to ask Perran, who is here to support the application, to say something, please by all means do so; otherwise, I am available for any questions.

Perran Moon: I just want to reinforce my support for this application. I am a member of the eating disorders APPG as well. As a parent of somebody that suffers with an eating disorder, I am very keen to see if we can get this debate.

Q9 **Chair:** We will not be able to honour your request for the time, because we have already allocated debates for both the Chamber and Westminster Hall for the times that you have requested, so it is likely to be subsequent to that. If it is a Westminster Hall debate on a Tuesday, can we just clarify which would be the answering Department? Would it be the Department of Health and Social Care?

Wera Hobhouse: Yes.

Q10 **Chair:** The Clerks will be in touch with you about what we can arrange, but it is unlikely to be within your timeframe.

Wera Hobhouse: So not during Eating Disorders Awareness Week? That is a bit of a shame. Is that because we were too late in applying?

Chair: Yes.

Wera Hobhouse: I do apologise, but thank you for considering it. If it is another day, that is still a very good outcome. Thank you.

Chair: There is a possibility that it would be early March for a Westminster Hall debate.

Q11 **Chris Vince:** I think it is a really important debate, and it is really important that we talk about eating disorders in this House. All I would suggest is that, if it is close to that week, we can probably leave the title as it is, but if it is a distance away from the week itself, we might want to think about changing the title to make it a more general debate about eating disorders, or eating disorder awareness.

Wera Hobhouse: Thank you. I will consider that.

Chair: The Clerks will be in touch with you shortly.

Baggy Shanker made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** The next application is from Baggy Shanker on waste incinerators. This is a request for a debate in the Chamber.



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Baggy Shanker: Good afternoon. Having taken guidance from officials, I am happy for it to be a Westminster Hall debate, if that is more suitable and would happen sooner.

Members will be aware that, in recent years, many commercial and municipal waste incinerators have been proposed and, in some instances, installed across the country. Some are much needed, but some have come with elaborate justifications that have proven not to be so when put into operation. I will come to a plant in Derby in a second, but they generally always raise severe concerns from local residents for their own health and the impact on the environment. Unfortunately, the justification for these plants in a number of cases has been misguided and misleading. We have proven that in Derby on a number of occasions.

If I may go into a little bit more detail about the Derby plant, it was a private venture by a construction company and an operating company. There were promises made that it would not cost the taxpayers one penny until the plant was operational and passed commissioning tests. After almost 25 years in planning, and 15 years or so out in the public domain, as well as 10 years more since the plant was built, it has not processed—commissioned—one piece of rubbish. It has cost taxpayers £93 million in settling a commercial arrangement with a US-owned capital venture company. It has cost another £55 million or so in preservation works and defending the claim, which was ultimately paid. Now there is pressure, and a decision has been made to start a procurement exercise to invest another circa £70 million to rectify and repair the plant, with a capacity reduction of a third and no guarantees that it will be able to operate.

I have spoken to a number of Members who have similar problems, although maybe not as extreme, in their constituencies across the country. I do not say this next bit lightly, but there are a number of resemblances in what is happening in the incineration industry, with things being covered up and hidden—when I watched the Post Office scandal video, it reminded me of some of the tactics being used, whether by council officials or by operators of these plants. I think that we would benefit from a debate that allows other Members to share stories similar to what I have experienced over the last 15 years. It is really important that the scandal in this industry is exposed and people can talk it about. Where we need plants, and where they work and are operated well, that is absolutely fine, but where we do not need plants, or they are struggling to work but companies are still coming forward with proposals that are not robust, that needs exposing.

Q13 **Chair:** Thank you for your presentation. You may want to consider a slight change in the title. If I were reading this as a member of the public, I would think about the operation of waste incinerators. You seem to be presenting a case where a waste incinerator was proposed but never actually brought into operation, which is matter of public concern and also money. It is just a case of getting the title right, but I will leave that for you to consider. I think you said you would accept a Westminster Hall debate, which amends your application.



Baggy Shanker: Yes.

Chair: At the moment, there is a queue for the Chamber, so we might be able to accommodate it earlier in Westminster Hall, but one colleague or other will no doubt want to raise a question about the balance of speakers.

Q14 **Chris Vince:** I will do it this time. The issue is that you have six Government and only two Opposition speakers. If it is an application for Westminster Hall, I suggest that you need at least two more Opposition speakers. They can be from any party.

Baggy Shanker: Sorry, I should have covered that in my opening remarks. I have five more Members from the Conservative party who have agreed—

Chair: If you could kindly supply those names to the Clerks, they will add them to the application. That helps us with the queue of debates.

Q15 **Martin Vickers:** Just to clarify, regarding the various disputes that have been going on that have cost the council, are there any current legal proceedings in progress?

Baggy Shanker: No, they were settled. That is where that settlement came from.

Chair: Thank you. The Clerks will be in touch. If you could kindly supply those names, that would be very helpful to us.

Leigh Ingham made representations.

Q16 **Chair:** The next application is from Leigh Ingham on access to sport and PE in schools. This is an application for a Chamber debate.

Leigh Ingham: Thank you, Chair and Committee. It is my first appearance here and I realise that going for the Chamber straightaway might be a big ask, but let me explain why I am keen to do that. If it helps my application, I have further support from other Members who would like to speak in the debate—particularly Labour and Lib Dem MPs.

This request for a debate was inspired by an interaction I had while visiting a school in my constituency. Before becoming an MP, I worked with young people and in the education sector, and I am a really big believer in involving young people in politics. This came from a young person who is particularly passionate about access to sport and physical education in schools, which has reduced slightly over recent years, with the focus in the curriculum on academic subjects. He particularly cited the rise in mental health issues among young people. He is quite involved in sport and pointed out examples where he has found that sport can help people deal with not only mental health issues, but physical health. There is a national move toward taking responsibility for our own health and making sure we are as fit and healthy as we can be, and he believes that increased access to sport and physical education in schools would make a substantial difference to this. So there is that argument.



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The curriculum review has just completed, and I have spoken to the Secretaries of State for Education and for Culture, Media and Sport, as well as the Minister for Sport and Members across the House, who were really supportive of this debate. I think there is a wider piece here, though, that allows young people to hear their voices and concerns heard in the highest Chamber in the land. For me, that is a really strong merit for this piece of work as well.

I have the other names to submit to the Clerk, but I invite any questions.

Q17 **Chair:** I think the names and numbers you have will be fine for the debate, and the balance is fine, so do not worry about that too much. Once again, the challenge is the wait for the Chamber, so would you consider a Westminster Hall debate if it became easier to get a debate there earlier than in the Chamber?

Leigh Ingham: Ideally, I really did want to go for the Chamber, the main reason being that I am hoping for the cohort of young people to come down and see Members in the Chamber. It is iconic, really, for them to see their voices heard in that space, so ideally it would be the Chamber, if possible, but I understand that there is a wait.

Chair: That's fine—it is your application. Any questions from colleagues? No. Good. Thank you. The Clerks will be in touch.

Perran Moon made representations.

Q18 **Chair:** Our seventh application is from Perran Moon on the governance of English rugby union. This is an application for a Tuesday Westminster Hall slot.

Perran Moon: Ideally on 11 March, but only if there is availability for that day.

Q19 **Chair:** What is the answering Department?

Perran Moon: DCMS.

Chair: Okay.

Perran Moon: This is a proposal for a debate about the governance, funding and structure of English rugby union. I have coached and refereed at a community rugby club for many years—alas, not so much recently. In terms of the state of community grassroots rugby clubs, although my application focuses quite a lot on Cornwall, because that is where I am from, I have spoken to clubs all over the country and I have spoken to Members of Parliament who represent people all over the country. This is an apolitical debate.

In my view, there is a crisis with the governance, funding and structure of English rugby union at grassroots level. Notwithstanding the fact that England won with a last-minute try against France on Saturday, this is very much about grassroots community rugby clubs. We all want to see those community rugby clubs that are at the heart of many of our communities thriving, rather than just surviving, as they are at the



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moment. In my view, there are some structural changes that need to be made to ensure that the long-term health of those rugby clubs is secured.

Q20 Chair: The number of speakers you have is fine. We do not know yet what the answering Departments will be on 11 or 18 March, which are the two Tuesday slots that might be available for the Committee to allocate.

Can I ask you one question? What role do you feel DCMS would play in rearranging the governance of English rugby union?

Perran Moon: Obviously, the English Rugby Football Union is the governing body, but I hope that a debate with DCMS responding would raise awareness about the current governance models, and for them to be accepting and willing to consider some of the recommendations that may come out of that debate.

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

Sorcha Eastwood made representations.

Q21 Chair: The next application is from Sorcha Eastwood on the impact of digital platforms on UK democracy. This is a request for a Chamber debate. Over to you, Sorcha.

Sorcha Eastwood: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Committee, for allowing me the opportunity to present my case today. I am submitting an application for a general debate on the impact of digital platforms on UK democracy.

We have been living for a long time with social media platforms, and I am not sure that we have ever fully stopped to consider how that has changed how we as individuals interact, not only with the world, but with our communities and, indeed, within this mother of Parliaments.

I think we have taken it for granted that although social media and online platforms and forums offer many ways for people in which to communicate and build online communities and forums, there is a real and present threat, not just to our constituents right across the UK, but to democracy itself.

Just last year, we witnessed in real time the impact of the actions of individuals on social media platforms, and how that directly correlated to how we do our jobs as parliamentarians. We also saw the threat it posed, not only to democracy, decision making and even, in some regards, conduct in the House, but to our constituents' lives.

Misogyny, racism and other forms of discrimination are thriving in digital spaces, creating toxic and dangerous environments both online and offline. We assume at our peril that what goes on in online spaces stays there. It does not. It seeps into the very fabric of our lives and relationships, and indeed into the very fabric of how we conduct business in this House. A number of parliamentarians have said to me that they have found themselves censoring what they choose to ask and say on the Floor of the House. To me, that is profound; in fact, I find it distressing.



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We are elected to serve the people of the UK, no matter where they are, without fear or favour.

For that reason, I have applied for a general debate in the Chamber. I do not feel that this is a party political issue; I feel that it is an issue that impacts everybody, and for that reason we need to be given the opportunity to air some of these issues on the Floor of the House. I feel that some of the names of people who have already expressed an interest to speak go some way to show the level of cross-party unity on the issue. I would be glad to take any questions.

Q22 Chair: Obviously, the same advice goes to you as to other colleagues: there is a queue for the Chamber. There is more likely to be an earlier opportunity in Westminster Hall. If you were to be offered it—if we found one at an earlier time than in the Chamber—would you accept a Westminster Hall debate?

Sorcha Eastwood: I have considered that as an option, and I do not think it would be viable for my purposes. I feel that as a Parliament we need to be given the opportunity. I understand that there may be a delay on that, but I think that this is an issue that will sadly be around for some time to come.

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

Dr Caroline Johnson made representations.

Q23 Chair: Our final application is from Dr Caroline Johnson on solar farms. Once again, it is an application for a debate in the Chamber.

Dr Johnson: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Committee, for listening to this application about a very important issue. I have applied for a three-hour debate in the Chamber to be answered to by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. The reason for requesting three hours specifically is that when there was a debate on the issue in the previous Parliament, it ran to three hours and was hugely subscribed because of the level of interest. Since then, there have been many more applications for giant solar farms, which means that there are more constituencies affected. As a result, there will be more parliamentary interest than even last time, when it was full.

There is huge support across the House, with Conservative, Lib Dem, Reform, Labour and Plaid Cymru MPs supporting the application. We have had more supporters come in today, and my team will forward those to the Clerks as they arrive. It is an issue that is important across the House.

There are many points that need debating. First, there are a lot of applications across the country due for a decision, so it is important that the issue is discussed. There are concerns about food security, particularly with the war in Europe at the moment. Food security has fallen from 75% to 61%. We are seeing a clustering in particular areas. The Government are talking about 1% of farmland, but Lincolnshire already has applications



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for more than double that, and we are one of the most fertile counties in the country.

There are concerns about land use and suitability for agriculture after the land has been used, the effects on the landscape, and rural amenity. There are concerns about the cumulative effect of multiple applications that surround villages and prevent the development and the house building that the Government would like to see by choking the villages—or in some cases small hamlets or individual houses—off from development.

The origin of the panels and whether they are being developed by slave labour is a crucial point for many Members. The question is whether the energy generated is as green as it is purported to be, particularly given that a lot of the items used to make the panels come from mines where coal is used in the energy production, and then they are being transported across the world. How green is it?

At the end of their life, how are the panels being recycled? There has not been sufficient research into the recycling of them and the quality of the land for growing food afterwards. What are the alternatives? They need to be debated, too. What about small nuclear reactors? What about solar on brownfield sites, on roofs, car parks and other such places, as has been done elsewhere? That is an important thing that needs to be debated. The way the consultation process does or does not engage our local residents is also important.

There is an effect on aviation. That is particularly acute in my constituency, where we have the Red Arrows, which will be doing loops and twirls and could be dazzled by the effect of a whole row of glass in the same line, but that applies to aviation elsewhere, too. We should consider the panels' effect on various forms of wildlife and biodiversity. There is also a lack of local benefit. Where other infrastructure of national importance has been put in, there has been an effort to provide benefit to the local community, but that has not happened with solar farms.

I hope that demonstrates that there is a large number of points for debate, and there is widespread interest across the House. Given the Gallery was reasonably full when the last debate happened in Westminster Hall about a year ago, I also think there would be significant interest, particularly from the various campaign groups that have sprung up since then with the different applications across the country. That is another reason to have it in the Chamber.

Q24 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Once again, the same thing applies here. You say that you had a Westminster Hall debate about a year ago.

Dr Johnson: Yes, which was around the time of a change in policy, so we explained a lot of these issues. The Government at the time did change—

Chair: So that was in the last Parliament, not this one.

Dr Johnson: In the last Parliament. We talked about the changing, cumulative effect. We hope that, when the debate is had in full, and hon.



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and right hon. Members from across all the main parties are able to put across these points, that will lead to a change in the Government position to one that is more compatible with those who live in rural areas while providing the clean, cheap energy that we need.

Q25 **Will Stone:** You said you have more names. Are they Labour names?

Dr Johnson: I will need to ask my office.

Will Stone: I am happy to be added to the list. I think it is an important debate. I disagree with you, but I think it is a debate that we should have. If you are looking for the Chamber, you will need four more Labour names, but you can add mine to the list.

Dr Johnson: I appreciate that. Thank you very much. So I would need eight Labour names?

Will Stone: In total. You have four already, so you are off to a good start.

Dr Johnson: Five with yours. I will ask my office. I know they said there were names coming in through the day and they were forwarding them to the Clerks, but I can't tell you which party they came from, unfortunately.

Chair: It is clear that you need more Government names.

Q26 **Alison Hume:** Thank you for your application. Can I suggest that you think about the title of the debate, and maybe add that it is about large-scale solar farms? I think the title is a little lacking.

Dr Johnson: I am very happy to take on that feedback. My interest is not in people having a solar panel in their garden; my concern is these giant solar farms that go on for miles and miles. Chair, I should also make the point that my husband is a farmer. He does not have any active solar farms, but he is an agricultural contractor. Some may extrapolate an indirect interest from that.

Chair: That is fine; we accept that. If there is nothing from anyone else, thank you very much. The Clerks will be in touch. If you could supply those names from the Government side to the Clerks as quickly as possible, that will obviously aid the speed at which you will get your debate.

Dr Johnson: Yes. Speed is of the essence. Thank you, Chair.

Chair: That concludes the applications for debates. The Committee will now go into private session to consider them.