

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench debates

Tuesday 25 February 2025

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Watch the meeting

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

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Mr Alistair Carmichael made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Backbench Business Committee, which will be in two parts this afternoon. We are considering applications for estimates day debates, which will take place on Wednesday 5 March. We have 11 applications to consider. Further to that, we have seven applications for our general debates taking place under Backbench Business criteria. The first application we are considering is from Alistair Carmichael on the financial future of farming.

Mr Carmichael: Good afternoon, Chair. Thank you very much for entertaining my application. You will see under the "Reasons for the debate" section a fairly extensive and comprehensive explanation of what is going on within the budgets of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the moment. It is for that reason that we are keen to see the estimates for DEFRA debated.

Recently, you kindly gave me a half-day debate on the future of farming, and I would say two things about that. First, I think we had something in excess of 60 people wanting that debate, so it is eminently feasible that we would fill both debates. In fact, I anticipate that the debate we have already secured will be oversubscribed.

This debate concerns the financial future of farming, including the Department's current financial position and the move towards ELMs, which has, candidly, been badly mismanaged—given what we have heard recently in the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee from senior officials in the Department about how they see it being managed. This is a significantly narrower application than the debate we have secured already, in which I would want to cover a broader range of issues in the longer term, such as the meaningful definition of food security and the rest of it. The debate I am seeking here is very much on the finances in the here and now. That is where the early ending of the basic payments scheme and of the ringfence around the money going to the devolved Administrations comes into sharper relief, and that is the distinction I would draw.

Q2 **Chair:** At the moment, your application has two Government party speakers. This applies to all applicants: in our determination, we will be looking for a balance of Government and Opposition speakers.

Mr Carmichael: That is fair enough; I would expect no less. I think I would be able to acquire a number of other Labour Members, if that were the only barrier.

Q3 **Chair:** The other question from me, before I bring in my colleagues, is regarding the fact that we have 11 applications. We are likely to be able to allow only three slots altogether. If you are not chosen, would you want to go on the list of debates that we would consider for future times, as normal Backbench Business debates?



Mr Carmichael: Yes, subject to what I have already said about having the future of farming debate. What sort of timescale would you be looking at that there?

Chair: Probably late June or early July.

Mr Carmichael: All these issues will still be pertinent in June, I fear.

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

Chi Onwurah made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** The next application is from Chi Onwurah, on the spending of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology in establishing the digital centre of Government.

Chi Onwurah: Thank you, Chair. This is my first time before the Backbench Business Committee, so apologies if I get the protocol wrong. I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words about this application.

Basically, the Government is establishing the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology as the digital centre of Government, and it is moving the machinery of government around to do that. The aim of Peter Kyle and Keir is to transform the Government to make it more digital and more accessible, to reduce costs—that is an important part of the Government's ability to meet its fiscal rules—and to make public services more tailored to eliminate fraud.

A whole heap of ambition lies within establishing the digital centre of Government, and one of the many questions is whether the finances that have been transferred to the Department from the Cabinet Office and so on—day-to-day spending in the Department is set to increase by 71%, or £430 million, in the current year—can actually drive this transformation, because it requires investment in hardware, infrastructure, broadband and computing. It also requires—this is really important—investment in people and the civil service. The public sector does not have a great record on digital transformation and IT; in fact, the history is littered with huge, expensive failures. This debate provides the opportunity to discuss as much as we know of the detail of the digital transformation.

The Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, which I chair, has launched an inquiry examining the digital centre of Government, which will be taking public evidence in late March. This project is a clear priority for the Government, but we are not clear how it will actually work. It will certainly impact every single citizen and constituent in the country, and this debate would be an opportunity for Members to raise issues around public services, digital inclusion, broadband connectivity, AI and copyright. There are a whole host of issues that can be raised, and that Members are keen to raise, as we saw in discussion of the Data (Use and Access) Bill. It would be great for Parliament and MPs to be seen to be discussing this, as digital transformation and AI touch constituents' lives.



We know that DSIT has underspent significantly across a range of projects and is handing back £800 million to the Treasury, who are investment spending. Projects including ARIA and Building Digital UK are also handing back money so, in principle, there is money there, but we do not know how it will be used or what scope and level of investment is necessary. I am particularly keen on the investment in people; I think the civil service must be part of this digital transformation, and I do not think I have seen that. I am also interested in the link between local government and central Government, because this transformation must happen in our communities as well. Again, I am not sure that we are seeing that.

Q5 Chair: Thank you for that presentation. Obviously, we can only choose three of these applications. In the event that you are not successful, would you want to be added to our waiting list for debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall?

Chi Onwurah: You said to Alistair that the debates on the waiting list would be around June.

Q6 Chair: Yes.

Chi Onwurah: I think, yes, we would. While our inquiry will have progressed, the issues would still be there, although perhaps they would not be as pertinent or immediate as they would be following the spending review.

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

Nesil Caliskan made representations.

Q7 Chair: The next application is a joint application on behalf of the Public Accounts Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee. Neither of the Chairs of those Select Committees is available, but I understand that Nesil Caliskan will be presenting.

Nesil Caliskan: It is my first time at the Committee, so here we go. The Chair of our Committee sends his apologies; he is on a pre-planned visit, as is the vice-Chair, so I am presenting the application for the debate. It is in the context of the Department of Health and Social Care being one of the high-spending Departments, as Members will be aware, and of the significant planned increase in spending.

The application comes on the back of a National Audit Office report that sets out concerns about the productivity that would be required of NHS England to meet its own targets, and to prevent a year-on-year increase in budgets and spending. The National Audit Office report also sets out a number of recommendations that were discussed at a recent Public Accounts Committee session, which officials from the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England attended. On the back of that, the Public Accounts Committee published a report that says that we were disappointed with the response from those officials. The Health and Social



Care Committee also expressed that position following its session with the same officials.

A number of important announcements have been made by the Secretary of State about the direction for reform. Given the levels of spending in the NHS, we think that this is an appropriate and important moment to shape and input into potential reforms, alongside what will be considerable spending, and an opportunity to ensure that the efficiencies that are required are delivered. I will stop there and take any questions.

Q8 **Chair:** I will ask the same question that I asked before: in the event that you are not successful, would you want to go on the waiting list for a future debate?

Nesil Caliskan: Yes, certainly; I think so. The challenges around the NHS, and particularly spending, will not disappear. I would stress, however, that this is a real moment of opportunity to input into what will be important reforms, following the Darzi report. I urge the Committee to consider that with great interest.

Chair: Your plea has fallen upon our ears. Any further questions from colleagues? No. Okay, thank you very much. The Clerks will be in touch.

Monica Harding made representations.

Q9 **Chair:** The next application is a joint application by the International Development Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee on the spending of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Monica Harding is presenting. Welcome, Monica.

Monica Harding: Thank you very much, Chair. I am here to speak to an application on behalf of the International Development Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee for an estimates day debate on the spending of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Both Committees are travelling on visits this week, so the Chairs are unfortunately unable to attend today.

The FCDO is not the largest-spending Government Department—this financial year, it spent just under £13 billion—but it is one of the four great offices of state and plays a hugely important role in promoting our values and interests, and in protecting our national security. Particularly today, when geopolitics affects our everyday life, and when we are in such a state of flux and uncertainty, we need to be nimble in our responses to ensure that the UK's influence and, indeed, our role on the world stage is absolute.

Most of the Foreign Office's spending is on official development assistance—that is, aid and international development. The Government have set out their aim of restoring the UK's development reputation and building stronger relationships with the global south, following cuts to the aid budget made by the previous Government.



In the autumn Budget, however, development spending was cut again to 0.5% of GNI—the lowest level in 14 years—and today the Prime Minister has announced that development spending will be cut again to 0.3% to raise defence spending to 2.5% of GNI. That will reduce ODA to its lowest level at any point during the 21st century.

The FCDO's ODA spend is also under significant pressure from the utilisation of around a quarter of it on the cost of hosting refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. Those costs reduce the aid budget available for the FCDO to use overseas. The Prime Minister made it clear today that ODA, even once reduced to 0.3% of GNI, will continue to be used to host refugees in the UK, which further intensifies the strain on overseas aid. Consequently, although domestic ODA spend is set to reduce this year, the FCDO budget will remain stretched and therefore must be spent as effectively as possible. That is why we want to scrutinise it.

Members will have seen that the US Administration is aiming to close its aid agency, USAID, and has frozen its ODA spending. The US is by far the world's largest aid donor, and reductions in its spending, particularly when combined with today's dramatic reduction in UK aid, raise serious questions about the likely impact on not only the world and development projects, but our development activity and strategic goals.

The FCDO plays a crucial role in promoting the UK's soft power. The Department supports several organisations, such as the BBC World Service and the British Council, that could not survive without FCDO financial support. Their long-term sustainability is not guaranteed. Cuts have recently been made to the World Service workforce. This also raises questions about the impact of today's cut on organisations such as the World Service that are looking for an increase from the ODA budget.

The FCDO's frontline diplomatic work is hugely important in supporting the UK's international partnerships and alliances and our position in multilateral institutions such as the UN. In a time of global uncertainty, that work is more important than ever. The Government have stated that UK diplomacy must support its missions, including promoting growth, which is a move away from traditional diplomacy. With today's consequential announcements, the imminent spending review and the major geopolitical upheaval, it is important that the House has an opportunity to debate how the FCDO should best use its resources and to raise these points with the Government.

Q10 Chair: If you are not successful in this round, do you want your application to go on the waiting list?

Monica Harding: Yes. I do not think this will go away.

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

John Glen made representations.



Q11 Chair: The title of the next application, from John Glen, is “Future of Health and Social Care”, which we are suggesting might be altered to “Spending of the Department of Health and Social Care.”

John Glen: I am grateful for the opportunity to make this case. This is a massive aspect of public spending—the NHS budget is £165 billion this year. The new Government have taken on lots of things, and lots of things are now under close scrutiny following the Lord Darzi report. The additional investment and the effectiveness of that expenditure are very much in focus.

This debate would provide an opportunity for all parties in the House to make constructive contributions about that additional money and air their opinions—positive and negative—about what is happening. The operational effectiveness of the NHS has universal application. This debate would therefore attract a lot of speakers on questions of both capital investment and day-to-day expenditure.

Just before Christmas, the Government committed to update the 10-year workforce plan, which the previous Government put in place. That will also attract a lot of interest. Given the extraordinary investment that the Government have put in, and the amount of political capital that has been invested in the NHS as part of the narrative around growth and enabling growth, this debate would be of wider interest to the public that we serve.

I submit to the Committee that this debate would give us scope to cover all aspects of the NHS, including its interaction with the new investment the Government have put in through the disability facilities grant and with Baroness Casey’s work on social care, which attracts a range of views across the House. We all want the NHS to work well, and this debate would be a great opportunity to scrutinise it properly in the context of the vast amounts of taxpayers’ money in play.

Q12 Chair: You heard the previous application on health and social care. Where does this application differ from that one?

John Glen: I think a member of the Public Accounts Committee would probably look at the issue from a narrower point of view, to do with efficiencies and previous PAC reports on the efficiency of the spend. There will be some of that in my contention but there is also the wider strategic direction of the NHS, looking at primary care, the interaction with local authorities and the assertions made around the capital programme. There is also more room to get into the weeds of the operationalisation of the workforce and how that is working. But obviously there is some overlap; I respect that.

Q13 Chair: Iain, do you want to add anything?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: No, because I misheard you—I thought you were calling me out. But the view here is much better, too.



John Glen: I do have his proximity and support.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Yes, you have my support.

Q14 **Will Stone:** You said that there is an overlap. Would you be open to merging the debates if that meant that you were guaranteed to get a debate? My second point is more of a statement. Shamefully, there are only two Labour MPs on the list. Have you contacted any others to try to get the 50-50 balance?

John Glen: On your first question, absolutely. Securing a debate on health linked to both applications sounds like a reasonable compromise that I would be totally happy to make. Of the 15 supporters, I think there are two Labour MPs and one Liberal Democrat MP. There is more work to be done, but my assertion would be that if we had the time we would have no trouble—given the number of Labour MPs, the constituency interests that would arise and the opportunity this would give people. It would be a well subscribed debate. There is more work for me to do to get more people submitted.

Chair: Are there any further questions? No. Thank you, John.

Patricia Ferguson made representations.

Q15 **Chair:** The next application relates to the spending of the Scotland Office. Patricia Ferguson is presenting on behalf of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

Patricia Ferguson: Good afternoon. Scotland Office spending has not been the subject of a Commons debate for many years—something that we think should be remedied. The spending of the Scotland Office has therefore not been scrutinised in quite the same way as many other spending Departments have been. We think this debate would be a timely opportunity to remind the Scotland Office and the Government that the spending of smaller Departments is just as important to Parliament as the spending of the larger Departments.

Although the spending of the Scotland Office, reflected in the supplementary estimates, is relatively small, the estimate contains significant changes to Scotland's block grant—nearly £2.5 billion. That £2.5 billion of additional funding is the Barnett consequentials arising from the autumn Budget. The additional funding impacts the everyday lives of millions of people by determining the level of public services that can be delivered in Scotland.

The issue has been the subject of much public debate and political interest and it is appropriate for the House to consider and examine it in some detail—not least because the UK Government have championed the Barnett consequentials reflected in the supplementary estimates as a record settlement. Given the importance that the Government have



attached to the settlement, we think it right that it should be scrutinised in some detail.

The Scottish Government potentially have only until the end of this financial year to spend much of the Barnett consequential that they will receive. It is therefore again appropriate that the funding, the mechanisms used by the UK Government to determine them and the fiscal constraints within which the funding can be utilised or not should be examined by the House.

We also think that the proposed debate is relevant not just to Scottish MPs but potentially to Welsh and Northern Irish MPs too. The live relevance and topicality of the subject is demonstrated through the live inquiries of the Scottish and Northern Ireland Affairs Committees. Our Committee—the Scottish Affairs Committee—is looking into the financing of the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, I understand, is looking at the funding of public services in Northern Ireland. This would seem an opportune time for us to look at this matter.

Q16 Chair: The question I have been asking everyone is: if you are not successful this afternoon, would you want to go on our waiting list for a future debate?

Patricia Ferguson: Yes; as I say, both ourselves and the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee have live inquiries into the subject anyway, so it would probably be good to have the debate a little later.

Q17 Chair: The other observation I would make is that of the 11 speakers you have, only two are from the Opposition. Would you be able to get some more Opposition Members to support the application?

Patricia Ferguson: I believe we would; in fact, we had one additional Member just before I came to the meeting—Jamie Stone from the Liberal Democrats. We would be very happy to make sure we get additional speakers. I do not think we would have a problem. If we were able to continue the discussion into the issues around Welsh and Irish funding too, it would be very helpful to those colleagues.

Chair: Are there any further questions? No. Thank you very much. The Clerks will be in touch.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith made representations.

Q18 Chair: The next application is from Sir Iain Duncan Smith on the spending of the Department for Work and Pensions on benefits.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am loath to return to a Department that I ran for six years, but I thought it would be useful at this point. After covid, the whole Department's expenditure and costs ballooned, which was obviously a feature of the nature of the breakdown in terms of employment and so on. It is therefore one of the Departments that the Government keep talking about, and it is constantly referred to in terms of what may have to

happen.

I have my own particular views on how they could do it, but the point here is that with all that talk, there has been precious little debate or time for discussion on what is a really critical issue. It seems to me that there are already rises in the budget, particularly with the running costs of the Department. I remember taking £4 billion out of that, but all that now seems to be gone. It is rising—it was rising through the last Government and it is rising now here, in the forecasts.

There are a lot of reasons why there should be a debate on this: it is one of the biggest—probably the biggest—cost expenditures in Government; it hugely dictates a lot of other counterfactuals such as the behaviour of individuals and issues around health, in particular mental health; and of course there are the ad hoc changes by Government, such as the winter fuel allowance. This would encompass those in a wider debate, not just a narrow debate about whether or not we should cut winter fuel. The question is about what are the effects in the round on the single biggest budget that the Government have, and the complexity of that.

I spoke to a number of people about this and they all agreed. Believe it or not, I have had a number of calls with various Labour colleagues who work with me on other things. They have all said yes, that they want to take part, but they are slightly edgy about putting their names down in this particular instance—three Labour Members have done so, but I can tell you that I know that others would step up to the debate without question. It would be an important debate.

Q19 Chair: I ask the same question that I have asked every other applicant. If you are not successful—we can probably have only three debates here—would you like to be added to the waiting list?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Yes is the answer, although obviously I would be astonished if it were not picked. The timing is not as important as the subject.

Chair: Are there any further questions? No. Thank you, Iain.

Kirsty Blackman made representations.

Q20 Chair: The next application is from Kirsty Blackman on, once again, the spending of the Department for Work and Pensions on social security and pensions.

Kirsty Blackman: Thank you, Chair. Social security and pensions is one of the biggest hot topics for all our constituents; it is certainly something I get a huge amount of traffic about. People are really concerned about the cost of living and about how the social security system impacts on their ability to afford heating or energy payments, or food. They are concerned about the inflation rate, especially its impact on food; this morning we have seen another increase in energy prices. People are really worried

about that, and it makes a particular difference to those at the bottom of the pile. Social security is incredibly important to the people struggling the most.

In terms of where we are right now, this is about the supplementary estimates, which specifically focus on the in-year changes. There have been a significant number of in-year announcements in relation to the DWP budget, particularly around social security and pensions. We have seen a £1.5 billion reduction in the winter fuel payment, which is a change since the main estimates. We have seen the child poverty taskforce kick off; the Government are focusing on reducing child poverty. We have seen the "Get Britain Working" White Paper and Government announcements on refocusing social security to try to get more people into work.

The Government's announcement about the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's report on the WASPI women was made in-year, since the main estimates. Forthcoming, the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, which is about tackling fraud in the benefits and social security system, is going through Parliament, and there are some changes coming to disability payments.

This debate could be really important because there is clear third-sector support and interest in this issue: a significant number of third-sector organisations get in touch with me about it. This is a UK-wide issue. Unlike some of the other issues mentioned today, this is relevant to every single one of us sitting in the Chamber. It makes a difference across the UK.

As a Member of a fourth party, I do not have any of the rights associated with being either a Front Bencher or Chair of a Select Committee, despite the fact that I wear lots of hats. I would love the Backbench Business Committee to be about opportunities like this, and it often is. That is why I thought it was really important that I make this pitch. Being able to talk about Government spend is so unusual in the Chamber of the House of Commons—we get to debate the Budget, but all those decisions are about tax—so this is a real moment.

Lastly, I have managed to get a fairly significant range of parties. I am aware that there are not enough Government MPs on the list, but I agree with Sir Iain Duncan Smith, who is applying for a similar debate, but without pensions included. If you add my MPs and his, you certainly get, in terms of the DWP, more than enough to fill a third of or half a day in the Chamber.

Q21 Chair: Thank you. You have answered one of our questions straightaway. The other question, of course, is: if you are not successful, would you want to be added to the waiting list?

Kirsty Blackman: Notwithstanding the fact that this is particularly important just now, because it is the supplementary estimates and



because of the in-year changes, I still think this will be a topical issue into the future, so I would very much appreciate it if I were added.

Q22 Chair: I would just make the observation that, if you merge the two bids, you end up with six Labour Members, as opposed to three on each. That would solve one of the issues.

Kirsty Blackman: I would have no problem with merging the bids. I don't know whether Sir Iain Duncan Smith would have a problem with that, but it would not be an issue for me. For me, it is more important that this is debated than that it has my name on it.

Chair: Are there any further questions? No. Thank you, Kirsty.

Andy Slaughter made representations.

Q23 Chair: We move on to Andy Slaughter. This application is on the Ministry of Justice's spending on criminal justice.

Andy Slaughter: Thank you very much, Chair. I will anticipate one of your questions by saying that I think I slightly misunderstood the rules, so I got my Select Committee to sign up, and only two Conservatives were there. That is why there is only one Conservative name on the list. I don't think I will have any problem, because I then filled up the rest of the application form with people asking to go on, so if I need to get Conservatives, I am sure I can do that.

The reason is that this is a very interesting subject to Members at the moment. We could have asked about other aspects—civil justice, legal aid and things of that kind—but criminal justice is a particular concern because of the situation in the courts. Some 70,000 cases are backed up in the Crown court, prisons are almost full again despite the early releases, and the Probation Service is being asked to do a lot more heavy lifting and is very underpowered at the moment, so this is a real and immediate concern.

There was extra money in the Budget—£1.9 billion. The supplementary estimates saw a £1.1 billion increase—this is all on the form. But when you look at where some of that money is coming from, we had nearly £700 million that was underspent on capital and just transferred over from the prison building firm. We have over £1 billion worth of backlog in prison maintenance, but £85 million was handed back because the main contractor was unable to spend it in that year. There are major financial issues to address here to do with supplementary estimates.

Or as a final comment, we could put it another way: there is a lot going on in policy terms at the MOJ at the moment. There is a sentencing review and criminal justice review. They are obviously intended to relieve some of the pressures, but the more difficult issue is around efficiency and resources. Are the additional resources sufficient for the problems that are there? Is there sufficient efficiency? Obviously, from what I have said so



far the implication is no. I therefore think an opportunity under the guidance of the estimates to do that would be very valuable.

In answer to your other question, Chair, on whether we would accept a reserve position, I thought that Select Committees did not generally get those slots. If that is available, yes, we would have it, but we would prefer to have the estimates debate.

Chair: Thank you. That is very helpful. Any questions from colleagues? No? Thank you, Andy. The Clerks will be in touch with you in due course.

Helen Hayes made representations.

Q24 **Chair:** The next application is from Helen Hayes on behalf of the Education Committee. The subject is the spending of the Department for Education on SEND provision. Helen, over to you.

Helen Hayes: Thank you, Chair. I welcome this opportunity to present this application to the Committee. It is an application from the Education Select Committee for a debate on the spending of the Department for Education on SEND provision.

SEND is the single biggest crisis in the whole of the education system at the moment. I do not think there is an MP in the House of Commons who does not have a substantial caseload of parents whose children are being failed by the system, who are fighting every single day for the resources that they need. There is a huge human cost to that in the lives of children who are not getting the education that they are entitled to.

It is also an enormous issue for public spending as a whole. The current crisis has ramifications not only for the Department for Education, but for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government because of the impact on local authorities.

We are at an absolute crux point now with the statutory override, which allows SEND deficits of local authorities to be taken off their books so that local authorities can set a balanced budget without accounting for their SEND deficits due to come to an end in 2026. And the Government have not yet set out how they propose to deal with that cliff edge. If there is no solution to the cliff edge, we will see around 50% of local authorities having to issue section 114 notices, so this is an imminent pressing crisis.

There are also implications for the Department of Health and Social Care as well. We know that there is an extraordinary level of interest from Members in bringing issues in the SEND system to the House. That was demonstrated in a recent Adjournment debate, in which there were about 10 Members bobbing to speak on SEND in just one part of the country. In a recent Westminster Hall debate on speech and language therapy, Members were allocated 90 seconds to speak because so many Members were crowding in. There is an enormous appetite. We had a very good level of response, and more Members got in touch with me after the



deadline for signing up for this debate. I am confident it will be an oversubscribed debate because of the level of interest.

The Prime Minister himself has acknowledged the extent of interest in this issue. I have heard him say many times that it is an issue that has been raised in every single PMQs since he became Prime Minister back in July. We would be enormously grateful if the Committee was minded to grant this debate in March. There is a real urgency to it. We have local authorities voting on their budgets this week in many areas of the country, without an understanding of what will happen at the end of the coming financial year, so I think that means it is pressing.

In anticipation of your question, which I know will come, I think the appetite to debate this issue will continue, but I hope that the Committee will take seriously the very pressing nature of it in very many Members' inboxes right now.

Chair: One comment I would make is that we have a very full list of speakers. We are considering applications for 90-minute debates, so there would be one and a half minutes, if that, for each speaker if they all turned up and wanted to speak. That is a potential problem. Any questions from colleagues? No? Well, thank you very much, Helen. The Clerks will be in touch shortly.

The applicant with the final application is due here in about five minutes—Liam Byrne on behalf of the Business and Trade Select Committee. We will suspend for five minutes while we wait for him to arrive.

Sitting suspended.

Chair: We have concluded the applications for estimates day debates, bar one. He will come in a bit later because is he stuck chairing a Select Committee at the moment.

Liz Jarvis made representations.

Q25 **Chair:** We will move on to applications for our customary Backbench Business debates. The first application is from Liz Jarvis on free school meals.

Liz Jarvis: This will be the first opportunity for Members to debate the critical issue of free school meals since the election. It is a timely moment to discuss ensuring that all children can access warm, healthy and nutritious meals each day. We know that hungry children struggle to learn, and it is clear that millions of families are struggling, yet schools are often forced to cover the shortfall in funding for free school meals themselves.

The reason for this debate came from conversations I have been having with local headteachers, who have expressed to me the pressures that they are finding themselves under. They are having to make tough decisions between buying books or feeding the children, which is obviously a huge issue. I think we can all agree that the idea of breakfast clubs is



excellent, but the question is what happens to children during the rest of day, and who is funding the free school meals. I think this will be a really useful debate. It is also an opportunity for all Members to put on record their assessments of free school meals provision in their areas. It has cross-party support, and I think it is a good time to have the debate.

Q26 Chair: Your application is for a Westminster Hall debate on a Tuesday. If we could offer you a Thursday instead, would you be able to accept? We have to make sure that we get the right answering Department on a Tuesday, but we are not restricted on Thursdays. Would you be able to accept a Thursday debate, if it were offered?

Liz Jarvis: It would depend on when the Thursday was. I know that is not very helpful, but I would prefer a Tuesday.

Q27 Jess Brown-Fuller: Is your assumption that it would be the Department for Education answering? My understanding of the issue with the roll-out of auto-enrolment for free school meals is that it is a GDPR issue in sharing the information from the Department for Work and Pensions to the Department for Education. Do you believe that the Department for Education is the best Department to answer this debate, or would it be DWP?

Liz Jarvis: I would suggest it is the Department for Education.

Chair: Thank you, Liz. The Clerks will be in touch shortly. It is likely that we will not be able to allocate this very soon, because it depends on the answering Departments.

Luke Taylor made representations.

Q28 Chair: Next up is Luke Taylor on Thames Water and customer impact. This is a request for a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall on either a Tuesday or a Thursday.

Luke Taylor: Thames Water has failed its customers across the south-east, leaving people with contaminated water, poor service and even sewage flooding homes and streets. Boat races are warned to stay out of the Thames due to E. coli, while the region's rare chalk streams are being poisoned by chemical imbalances. Local pubs and cafés once thriving by the river are now turning people away because of the foul stench of excrement in our waterways. Now, Thames Water plans to hike bills for customers by 31% this April. I am appalled by this increase and my constituents are equally as furious.

I believe that a Backbench Business debate would provide an important opportunity for Members to scrutinise the company, voice the concerns of their constituents and, ultimately, hold the company to account. The debate would provide a platform to single out Thames Water and examine the issues it has caused in unique communities across the south-east. It could explore problems such as Thames Water's environmental infractions,



governance structure, debt and bonus payouts, and monitoring commitments, among many other concerns. I am sure many of us in this House have fond memories of playing in waterways but now shudder at the thought of our children doing the same. Thames Water serves over 16 million people and 25% of the UK population. This situation must change and it starts by holding Thames Water, the company that caused this mess, responsible for its actions. Thank you for considering my application.

Q29 **Chair:** Can I just be clear? Which is the answering Department?

Luke Taylor: DEFRA.

Q30 **Will Stone:** I am on your list to speak, so I am slightly biased. Just a little quibble of mine, Swindon is not in the south-east but we are covered by Thames Water as well.

Luke Taylor: I will fire the intern who put that word in there.

Chair: Any other questions? No. The Clerks will be in touch in due course.

Ruth Jones made representations.

Q31 **Chair:** Our next application is from Ruth Jones on Christian persecution worldwide.

Ruth Jones: Thank you very much, Chair, and apologies for my lateness.

Chair: You weren't late, Ruth; don't worry. This application is for a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall on Tuesday morning. Over to you to present.

Ruth Jones: As I am sure you are all aware, in January every year Open Doors launches its annual "World Watch List", exploring the top 50 countries where it is hardest to be a Christian. This year, the situation has shown significant worsening in several countries, as well as a handful of improvements. This debate will be an opportunity to cover the wider situation across the globe concerning freedom of religion or belief, or none, around the world. It is one that has been held annually in previous sessions since 2017, so you could be keeping up a good tradition here. It has always attracted a substantial number of contributions from Back Benchers.

We know that freedom of religion or belief remains a foreign policy priority for the UK, and it is a key area of concern for many constituents. It also appeared in many of the last election's manifestos, although we accept that parties have different approaches to how the UK should tackle FoRB issues. This debate will be a good opportunity for Members to raise the situations in countries in which they have an interest, represent their constituents' concerns and debate the right approach going forward.

Q32 **Chair:** Thank you. Is there any time sensitivity to this?



Ruth Jones: No. Open Doors came out in January so we are just following up on the back of that.

Q33 **Chair:** Which would be the answering Department?

Ruth Jones: I suddenly thought about that when you asked the last application, and I am not sure. I should know the answer—I am very sorry, but I will find out.

Q34 **Chair:** The reason I ask is that this is a Tuesday application so we need to have the correct answering Department answering on that particular Tuesday before we can allocate. You might want to consider that, as we will not be in a position to allocate this straight away. Obviously, if we know the answering Department, that makes it easier for us at our future meetings.

Ruth Jones: Thank you for your advice, Chair, and I will certainly follow that up.

Jess Brown-Fuller: We were all just discussing the same thing: which Department would it be? We were throwing ideas around.

Q35 **Chair:** On the religious basis, it could either be Foreign Office or HCLG, because it has the faith-based aspect.

Ruth Jones: The special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, or the religious special envoy, is attached to the Foreign Office.

Q36 **Chair:** That makes sense. If you could kindly advise the Clerks on which answering Department you would expect, we can add that to our list.

Ruth Jones: Thank you very much.

Andy MacNae made representations.

Q37 **Chair:** The next application is from Andy MacNae on state support for victims of terrorism. Once again, it is an application for a Westminster Hall debate on a Thursday. Over to you, Andy.

Andy MacNae: Thank you, Chair. When I met my constituent Travis Frain, who was a victim of the Westminster Bridge attack in March 2017, he talked to me about his experience following that, and I was pretty shocked. I thought that as a state we would have the backs of people injured in terrorist attacks on our soil. However, what I found is that we do not: 76%, or 300, victims of terror would say that there is no or inadequate mental health or post-traumatic support for them; over 52% say that there is no financial support provided, and that includes legal support; and 46% of victims of overseas attacks rate the support they receive from the Foreign Office as poor.

There is no structure or preconditions for the support that we give, and there is effectively no promise to victims of terror in this country that the state will get their back. It has been a matter raised pretty consistently by



victims since 2017. Both Labour and Conservative parties have given commitments to a charter for survivors but as of yet, this has not come about. There was a four-year review by the previous Government that did not report before the previous election. I think that myself, my fellow Members, and the victims of terror whom we represent feel it is high time we had a proper debate on the subject. I should mention that we asked for the Thursday because 22 March is the anniversary of the Westminster bridge attack which will be the most appropriate date. Beyond that, we would be most flexible. Since we put this application in, a number of other Members have come forward to say that they would like to support it, including the full slate of Reform MPs.

Q38 Chair: Okay. I understand the time sensitivity, but I do not think we can allocate this to the day you have mentioned as we have already allocated for that date. Would the following week be acceptable?

Andy MacNae: It could work. The alternative would be 22 May which is the anniversary of the Manchester arena bombing, or 7/7. I think it would make sense to combine it with an anniversary and obviously we would like to bring victim groups down here for the debate.

Q39 Chris Vince: I have a comment as this is really important. When we talk about victims, I would be encouraged to include the emergency services who themselves will have suffered massive trauma.

Andy MacNae: Absolutely. That is one of the reasons why we felt that the anniversary of the Westminster bridge attack was particularly poignant because, of course, there was a police officer who lost his life defending this place. It will be very much about him, as well as the civilian survivors.

Chair: Thank you, the Clerks will be in touch.

Natasha Irons made representations.

Q40 Chair: The next application is from Natasha Irons, on the long-term funding of youth services.

Natasha Irons: This is my first time in front of the Committee, and it does feel a little like "Dragons Den". I am sure that you have had the opportunity to review the application, so I will keep my remarks brief. I am hoping to bring forward this general debate as I do not think there is any plan more long term than investing in the future and wellbeing of our young people. With this debate, I hope to put our young people back up the political agenda and to give Members across the House an opportunity to highlight youth services in their constituencies. Obviously, they will share the challenges, but also the things that are working and where best practice can be shared. There is much we can learn from each other.

I also want to raise awareness about having a long-term sustainable funding model and looking at statutory protections for youth services. As you have seen in my application, we have seen a 73% decline in funding

for youth services since 2010. We have had 54% of youth centres close and at the same time we have seen our children get sicker, both with their mental and physical health. We have seen rates of youth violence increase across the country and we now have the awful label of having the unhappiest teenagers in Europe, which I do not think is good enough. The Government announced that it is shaping a national youth strategy, which I think means that this is a good time to have this debate and a good time for Members to contribute to that conversation. It signals to young people outside of this place that we are taking their future seriously, and that their MPs are taking their future seriously.

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

Andrew Lewin made representations.

Q41 **Chair:** The next application is from Andrew Lewin on a closer trading relationship with the European Union. It is not clear to me whether this is intended to be a Chamber or Westminster Hall debate.

Andrew Lewin: It is intended to be a Chamber debate—I put that in an email; apologies if it did not come through in the original paperwork. That is my hope.

Chair: It is not on the application form.

Andrew Lewin: Sorry about that.

Chair: That's fine.

Andrew Lewin: The trading relationship between the UK and the European Union is of critical and strategic importance to our economy. The European Union remains the UK's largest trading partner. This Government have a stated aim of negotiating an improved and closer deal. It is important that Back-Bench Members of Parliament have the opportunity to debate this issue and put forward proposals ahead of the UK-EU summit that has been set for 19 May this year. If at all possible, April would be the optimum time for a Back-Bench debate in the Chamber.

This is a matter of great public interest, with a number of recent polls showing that a majority of people do not believe that the Brexit deal signed by the last Administration has been a success. My submission has cross-party support and I hope it will be looked upon favourably.

Q42 **Jess Brown-Fuller:** I assume that if we are unable to give you a debate before 19 May that the issues would still be pertinent afterwards. Would you be happy to have a debate whenever it could be held?

Andrew Lewin: Of course. Any debate is better than no debate and I am very conscious of the pressures on your time. However, if it is at all possible to have the debate before 19 May, I think it would capture the interest of the public as well as that of Back-Bench Members of Parliament.



Chair: To set your mind at rest, I did a quick calculation before recess and we have sufficient applications on our waiting list to take us to June—probably the end of June, as things stand. That is in addition to the applications we have received today, just to be clear. April is a very truncated month because of the Easter recess.

Q43 **Chris Vince:** On that point, are you wedded to a Chamber debate? I am guessing that we could probably get a Westminster Hall debate in earlier.

Andrew Lewin: No, I would not say that I am wedded. It is my preference, but I appreciate that you have spoken to lots of colleagues with strong cases today. If faced with the choice of a Westminster Hall debate or no debate before the summit on 19 May, my preference would be Westminster Hall, if possible.

Chair: Thank you, Andrew. The Clerks will be in touch.

Gregory Stafford made representations.

Q44 **Chair:** Our next application, from Gregory Stafford, is on an end to frozen pensions. This is an application for Westminster Hall on a Thursday afternoon.

Gregory Stafford: The End Frozen Pensions campaign advocates for the restoration of pension payments for UK pensioners living abroad in countries where their pensions are frozen. If they lived in the UK, the triple lock would protect their pensions and they would go up in the relevant increments. However, many UK pensioners living overseas in countries such as Canada, Australia and South Africa receive pensions that do not increase in line with inflation, unlike those living in the UK. That creates financial hardship for those pensioners because, like in Britain, costs are rising across the world. That means that this issue impacts their quality of life after they have paid into the British system for much, or indeed all, of their working life.

The primary goal is to push for legislation that will unfreeze pensions for pensioners living abroad and ensure that they are treated equally to those in the UK. It is worth noting that in some countries, such as Liechtenstein and Lithuania, pensions are not frozen and increase in line with inflation because of the triple lock, unlike in the places I have mentioned, such as Canada, Australia and so on—often Commonwealth countries.

A good example of this is Anne Puckridge, who moved to Canada. She came to the UK in January to highlight her case. She was 99—a few days off being 100—when she came. She served in all three branches of the armed forces in the second world war. As I said to the Prime Minister at PMQs at the time, it would have been a wonderful 100th birthday present for Anne Puckridge if he could have met with her to discuss this. Unfortunately, his diary did not permit that. Anne is currently on a fixed income of £72.50 per week, while the basic state pension here is £169 and the new state pension is £221 and some pence. It is a significant



difference for a war veteran. What we want to do in this debate is highlight the unfairness of the current system, and to ensure all British pensioners who have paid into our system receive a fair outcome.

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

Liam Byrne made representations.

Q45 **Chair:** That completes the applications for our general debates. We will return to the applications for estimates day debates. Our final request is from Liam Byrne on behalf of the Business and Trade Committee on the spending of the Department for Business and Trade. We know you were in Committee just now, Liam.

Liam Byrne: Yes, Chair. Apologies for being late; Lord Sedwill slightly ran over in his evidence, but it was so excellent I did not want to stop him in mid flow.

Thank you for looking at this application. There are basically three reasons why we have put the application in, and we are conscious that you have got the devil's choice to make of adjudicating between different Committees that are all applying. The three things that distinguish the application are, first, that the Government's growth mission is probably the most important mission. We have all got opinions on this across the House. The priorities and the budget for the Department for Business and Trade are the key to whether our country delivers on that growth mission. There is a political importance attached to this.

Secondly, as a Committee we have spent quite a lot of time and effort actually listening to the business community. We published a report for the House a couple of weeks ago, which is the fruits of about three weeks work as we toured the country and ran a big conference in Westminster to understand what the priorities of the business community are. We have got a nice seven or eight-point list of what we think the priorities of the business community are based on what we heard. The debate is an opportunity for the House to reflect on what the business community thinks, and whether the priorities in the budget of the Department for Business and Trade actually line up with what the business community thinks is important.

Thirdly, to be frank, this is a Department that has produced its accounts late and in a qualified form, where the supplementary estimates that we have just agreed to be published for the House are something like 40% up on what they were before. Much of that is obviously down to Post Office compensation schemes, but there are some significant issues with the British Business Bank and its balance sheet. We think that Departments that produce accounts late and produce accounts that are qualified need to have the scrutiny that only comes with a debate on the Floor of the House of Commons. It is about priorities, the opportunity for Members across the House to talk about their local businesses and whether the Department



has a plan that matches those, and scrutiny for accounts that are late and are qualified.

John Cooper: I sit with the Chairman on the Business and Trade Committee. I think very few Departments touch so many lives in Britain. The Department for Business and Trade, one way or another, influences all of our lives because it is so directly linked to the economy. As Liam has said, with the growth strategy, there is probably agreement across the House on the idea of growth, but the argument is then about how we achieve that. So there is a lot of interest in where we are going, what our relationship with the EU is in that, and what our relationship with the US is in that. Looking wider, there are other trade agreements around the world.

There are a lot of broad issues that we need to address. Drilling down into those points about the Department's actual spending, much of that is focused on the Post Office compensation schemes in their various forms. We have already done some work on that, and it has been remarkable that a lot of the money expended thus far has actually been on lawyers rather than on victims. So there is a lot of public interest in some of the work of the Department as well. A lot of hopes ride on the British Business Bank, but is it delivering? That is an area that we could have a look at.

Liam and I sit on opposite sides of the House, but that is a reflection of the interest in the Department for Business and Trade. I think everyone in this House has a stake in it, just as everyone in the wider public has an interest in it.

Q46 **Chair:** Before I ask colleagues if they have any other questions, obviously you were not here when we covered the broad range of these applications. We have got 11 applications, and we are only going to be able to grant three in the one day that we have available to us. If you are not successful, would you want to be added to our waiting list for general debates in the Chamber?

Liam Byrne: We think there is plenty of material and interest across the House, so yes.

Chair: There are no questions from colleagues. Thank you for your presentation and the Clerks will be in touch very shortly.