



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 14 September 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Gareth Bacon; Bob Blackman; David Johnston; Nigel Mills.

Questions 1-9

Representations

I: [Selaine Saxby](#).

II: Dan Carden and Derek Thomas.

III: Carolyn Harris and Caroline Nokes.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Selaine Saxby made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Backbench Business Committee—our second in-person meeting since we returned to Parliament. It is very good to see you all here.

We have three applications in front of us this afternoon. The first is from Selaine Saxby and the title is “Fixing the Digital Divide”. Selaine, over to you, please.

Selaine Saxby: Thank you very much and lovely to see you in person.

The debate would be a repeat of a previous debate during the last Session, when a large number of Members did not get the opportunity to speak. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on broadband and digital communication, I was keen to revisit the subject as quickly as possible because the pandemic has shown us, if nothing else, how important broadband is to us all, particularly those of us in rural constituencies, where the speed of broadband is not increasing at the rate we need it to. We feel very strongly that the debate is an opportunity to update the House and for Ministers to come and explain what progress has been made. Some has been made, but it is an opportunity to understand the pace and whether we will achieve the 85% target. That is the main focus of the application. It particularly applies to patches where there are not-spots, and specifically rural areas.

There is a secondary concern for some Members about digital division, which goes beyond broadband accessibility. That is about accessibility to the internet, even when people have broadband going past. That builds on the Minister’s work on the electronic communications code. The APPG is hearing evidence on the code.

I hope that the fact that the Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee is keen to support the application shows that this is a concern across the House. The debate would be an opportunity to really revisit where things are with broadband and for Members who have not had a chance to speak before to do that.

Chair: Thank you very much. Questions, colleagues?

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** Just to give some feedback from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee yesterday. The district councils’ representative gave strong feedback to our Committee about the lack of broadband holding up regeneration, particularly in rural communities.

As you have said, you had a debate on the subject about a year ago. Why do you want just a general debate and not a divisible motion that calls on the Government to do something?

Selaine Saxby: In fairness to the Government, they are doing something, but I also think there is a need to highlight the issues, which are beyond Government. In reality, if we gave Openreach all the money, we would still not have enough engineers to connect the whole country. I



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think it is important to have the opportunity to highlight and air that, particularly for those constituencies where this is such a huge concern.

From a constituency point of view, I have applied for a Westminster Hall debate on the specific issues of Devon and Somerset, which have not been connected at all. This application is for a more general debate.

- Q3 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously, the debate does not have to look at just the Government; it can consider a range of issues that you may wish to bring up.

As you will appreciate, Chamber time is extremely limited and we have to give priority to those debate that have to be held in the Chamber. Although you had a debate on the subject a year ago, it would strengthen the cause if there was a clear list of actions that you wanted the Government or other bodies to undertake. It is your request, but we have a queue of requests for debates that definitely have to be held in the Chamber.

- Q4 **Chair:** Is this a UK Government issue, or is it dealt with directly by the devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?

Selaine Saxby: I believe that it is a UK issue because we have had support from SNP Members and Plaid. I know that colleagues in Wales share a lot of concerns that I have on the other side of the Bristol channel in North Devon.

Chair: I certainly experienced a lack of broadband in the Outer Hebrides and on the north coast of Scotland. The fact that nobody lives there is neither here nor there. The people who live there desperately need connectivity, so I wanted to get that clarified.

If there are no other questions, your application is in, Selaine. If you want to add a divisible motion, it will, as Bob said, add weight to the application, but it is a live application and if you do not want to add a divisible motion, we will deal with it on that basis.

Selaine Saxby: Lovely. Thank you so much for your time.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Dan Carden and **Derek Thomas** made representations.

- Q5 **Chair:** You are both very welcome—it is lovely to see you. The subject of the application is the “Impact of Alcohol in Society”. Dan, over to you as lead Member.

Dan Carden: The key reasons for having a debate at this time is that we have seen some shocking statistics in recent years. In 2020, the number of deaths from alcohol was the highest on record. We know that alcohol costs the criminal justice system upwards of £12 billion a year and the national health service £3.5 billion a year, and is now the leading risk factor for death, ill health and disability among 15 to 49-year-olds. The Government’s last alcohol strategy was back in 2012 and issue was last debated in the Chamber at the beginning of 2020, before the pandemic.



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Public Health England has recently produced a report on the impact of covid and lockdowns on the consumption of alcohol and alcohol harm across society, so I hope that the Committee will see the application as timely and that it is in response to changes that are taking place in society and the negative impact on people's health and the economy.

Derek Thomas: I appreciate the opportunity to present the application to you. I was a commissioner on the Commission on Alcohol Harm. We did a report, which originated in an inquiry, "It's Everywhere". I learned during that time about the use of alcohol. None of us who supports the debate are looking to ostracise people or in any way make alcohol an evil thing, but we want to consider how we support people who have trouble with their alcohol consumption or early access to alcohol when that should not be that case. It is the health and societal impacts and what happens behind closed doors. We found in our inquiry that alcohol is just everywhere. As Dan said, we have not looked at this properly for so many years—not since 2012. The debate can really look at the ever-changing picture of how alcohol makes up part of our society, and at how, for example, the supermarkets responded to the pandemic by promoting cheap alcohol even more.

We think it is the right time for the UK Parliament to look at what is happening across the UK and examples from around the world of where countries are trying to address alcohol harm and provide the support for those who find that it is wrecking their lives and the lives of their families.

Chair: Thank you very much. Questions, please.

Q6 **David Johnston:** I note that you say that there is no date fixed, but there is an alcohol awareness week in November. Is there a particular reason why you may not want to chime with that, or would you want to?

Dan Carden: I would be happy to look at that.

Derek Thomas: That is a very timely opportunity.

Chair: It is in November?

David Johnston: Alcohol awareness week is 15 to 21 November.

Chair: That is useful to know—thank you very much. Of course, a number of charitable organisations try to get people to be sponsored to desist from taking alcohol. For instance, there is Stoptober and dry January—or dry ginuary as it is known in my house.

If there is an alcohol awareness week, you might want to think about pitching the application so that the debate would take place close to or in that week. Having said that, is that not the time of the mini-recess?

Bob Blackman: That is the week before.

Chair: Okay. That could just work, unless you do not want to wait that long because it is a little way into the distance, but in parliamentary weeks, it is only four or five weeks.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** I presume the answering Department would be Health



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and Social Care. Would you want to do this on a Tuesday or a Thursday if we offered a Westminster Hall debate? Tuesday is 9.30, and on Thursday, there are two debates—

Dan Carden: In the Chamber?

Bob Blackman: No, in Westminster Hall.

Derek Thomas: Tuesday would get a better response from colleagues. You are right that Health would be the answering Department. We are really keen to get the Government to think seriously about the support, particularly from the Department of Health and particularly as we look at the healthcare levy that many of us have signed up to. We want to make sure that it supports those with alcohol harm as well as all the other challenges.

Chair: As with the previous application, if you wanted Chamber time, a divisible motion might be the way to go about that—so actually asking the Government or an agency of the Government to do something to secure Chamber time. Otherwise, we would have to regard the application as a prime candidate for a Westminster Hall debate.

Thank you very much indeed. Good to see you both.

Carolyn Harris and **Caroline Nokes** made representations.

Q8 **Chair:** Lastly this afternoon, we have the breathless Carolyn Harris and Caroline Nokes. The application is on the subject of “World Menopause Month”.

Carolyn Harris: A subject I am sure all you gentlemen are very keen to discuss—the menopause.

Chair: Well, Carolyn, I don’t know why we wouldn’t be.

Carolyn Harris: World menopause day is on 18 October. We have traditionally had a debate in the House on the menopause during world menopause month. This year, it is probably more important than ever because Caroline’s Committee has just established an inquiry into menopause in the workplace. I have got a private Member’s Bill, which looks to literally revolutionise the menopause in terms of HRT, workplace practices, GP training—you name it, we want to revolutionise it.

We have also set up an all-party parliamentary group, which is heavily subscribed from across the House, to discuss different aspects of the menopause. We have been very successful in attracting the attention of the media and celebrity endorsement, even royal endorsement, for a subject that has been very much ignored in all walks of life—from lack of training for GPs to having to pay for HRT in England, but not in Scotland and Wales, to the way that we teach children and do not give them enough information about what is to come.

The menopause affects 51% of the population, but it actually affects 100% because if you are a wife, a sister, a mother, it affects your family. I will never forget that once when we had the debate, Nigel Adams spoke



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eloquently about remembering his mother being taken a psychiatric unit where they thought she had had some kind of mental breakdown when she was actually menopausal. Caroline and I and other colleagues from across the House want to put the spotlight on this. The more attention we get on the Floor of the House, the more assured I will be that we will change the narrative and the environment around the menopause. Parliamentarians in this country are being looked at by parliamentarians and women from across the world because we will be trend-setting. We will change the environment and we will be the first country in the world to take the menopause as seriously as it needs to be considered.

Caroline Nokes: I just want to talk briefly about the inquiry that my Committee is currently doing about menopause in the workplace. One thing that really struck me is the number of women who have submitted evidence to our inquiry and asked for it to remain confidential. Still, in 2021, menopause is stigmatised and it is taboo. They have said that they do not want their evidence to be published because they feel they will be penalised at work. I think it is crucial that we as parliamentarians take a lead and are prepared to talk about it openly—talk about our own experiences but also, as Carolyn said, stand up for the 51% because every woman has either gone through, will go through or is going through the menopause.

Some colleagues from across the House have been incredibly brave, talking about their own symptoms. Some celebrities have been incredibly outspoken on the issue and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude for being prepared to voice something that has been a taboo. It would be outstanding if we could have a debate on the Floor of the House. You will have seen from the list of MPs supporting the debate that there is no shortage of subscribers for it, and of course, October is world menopause month and 18 October is world menopause day. That would be a great opportunity to speak up for the 51%.

Chair: Of course, 18 October is a Monday and that is when we come back from the conference recess, so if we could find a slot that week, it would be good, but of course, that is really contingent on us getting time allocated to us by the Government. Obviously, the Government coming straight back from the conference recess might want to change the world that week and take up all the time themselves, but we will do what we can.

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** The obvious thing is the timing of the debate. I guess you want it either at the beginning or the end of the period you are trying to draw attention to.

Carolyn Harris: Any date in October is fine, Bob, because it is menopause month, so it is never too late or too early to talk about menopause.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That brings us to the end of our public deliberations. We will now go into private session.