

Backbench Business Committee

Representations: Backbench Debates

Tuesday 27 February 2018

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Jess Phillips; Alex Sobel.

Questions 1-15

Representations made

[I](#): Lee Rowley

[II](#): Emma Hardy and Paul Masterton

[III](#): Mr Laurence Robertson and James Cartlidge

[IV](#): Antoinette Sandbach and Steve McCabe

Lee Rowley made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this session of the Backbench Business Committee. We have four applications in front of us this afternoon, beginning with an application by Mr Lee Rowley on investment in local infrastructure to secure new homes in the east midlands.

Lee Rowley: Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. This is the first time I have appeared in front of the Committee, so please be gentle. If I do anything wrong, please let me know.

Jess Phillips: You're asking for it!

Lee Rowley: I've started well. Andrew Lewer, the Member for Northampton South—he apologises for not being here; he is currently speaking in the Chamber, or he may be on here his way now—and I hope that you will look favourably upon our request for a debate in the Chamber, if possible, on investment in local infrastructure in the east midlands to secure new homes.

The east midlands is a growth area in the UK. It has a higher growth rate than the UK average—3.9% versus 3.7%—and it is the fastest-growing area in the country outside London and the south-east. Last year, nearly 15,000 new homes were built in the east midlands, but like many other areas—including your own, I am sure—we have challenges with regard to the infrastructure to support them. Particularly in an area with a significant logistics base and a significant amount of manufacturing and commerce, ensuring that there are the roads and railways and the public infrastructure around them to support residents to live, work and play is incredibly important. As the east midlands perhaps is not always the most vocal area, we would very much appreciate the opportunity to debate this subject in the Chamber for a period of time. I hope that is helpful.

Q2 **Bob Blackman:** We will be gentle with you, as it is your first time in front of the Committee. Obviously, Chamber time is extremely valuable, so priority has to be given to divisible motions. This is a general debate. Equally, for a three-hour debate, we would be looking for 15 speakers, with a balance between Government and Opposition. At the moment, you are looking at five speakers, all from the Government side by the look of it. We would want you to identify some speakers from the other side. I do not think that would be a problem given the range of MPs. However, if the Committee offered you a debate in Westminster Hall as opposed to the Chamber, particularly given the regional nature of the subject, would you accept it?

Lee Rowley: Yes, we would be happy with either. I am very happy to go away and try to find additional support if that would help our case.

Q3 **Bob Blackman:** And which Department do you see answering the debate?

Lee Rowley: MHCLG, I would suggest.



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Q4 **Bob Blackman:** Okay, so would a Tuesday morning slot be acceptable to you? That would be a 90-minute slot, not three hours.

Lee Rowley: Yes, we would be happy with that.

Q5 **Alex Sobel:** Following that up, how many Members do you think you would attract for this debate, considering the number of Front-Bench MPs from the east midlands and the fact that the speakers in the debate will more than likely be limited to east midlands MPs? As Bob said, three hours is a long time, and the Committee offers three hours or 90 minutes.

Lee Rowley: There are just short of 50 MPs in the east midlands, and there will potentially be a small number who are close to the east midlands who also have an interest. *[Interruption.]* Here is my colleague, Andrew Lewer, who is supporting the application. Given the broad nature of the statement and the proposition, I presume it would attract a significant number of people, but I can go and check if that is helpful, and we can come back to you.

Alex Sobel: That would be helpful, because we do not want to allocate three hours and then have only 90 minutes-worth of speakers.

Q6 **Chair:** Thank you very much for your application. The application has been submitted and is in front of us, but if you have more names to add, please do that by 8 o'clock.

Lee Rowley: We will do that and come back to you. Thank you very much.

Emma Hardy and **Paul Masterton** made representations.

Q7 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Emma. Your application is on surgical mesh.

Emma Hardy: Yes, and more specifically on vaginal mesh. As you probably know, surgical mesh is a medical procedure used to treat incontinence and prolapse in women, often as a result of childbirth. An increasing number of women have reported complications and extreme suffering following the use of mesh surgery, including debilitating pain, infection, inflammation, loss of sex life and mobility issues.

We are part of the all-party parliamentary group on surgical mesh, which is chaired by Owen Smith and has vice-chairs of Paul, myself and Carol Monaghan from the SNP, who sadly could not be at this meeting. Together, we have been working with a campaign group called "Sling the Mesh" to seek the suspension of mesh until it can be proved safe, and to stop its use and insertion into women's bodies. We had a debate about this in Westminster Hall on 18 October which was extremely popular and really over-subscribed. There were contributions from 13 Labour MPs, 10 Conservative MPs, 2 SNP MPs and a DUP MP as well, so it was fully represented.



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Last week, the Government announced a retrospective audit of mesh, which was good news. In December, NICE brought out guidelines saying that it was going to use pelvic organ prolapse mesh in research only, which we understand to be surgeon code for “do not use”. Australia has banned mesh for pelvic organ prolapse, declaring it too risky. New Zealand has gone even further and has banned the use of vaginal mesh altogether. Recently, Sheffield University has announced the development of a new mesh material. If the issue is not looked at and revisited carefully, that may perpetuate existing problems.

Jeremy Hunt announced last week that there would be a review into this, but there is a feeling from all the different groups involved in campaigns about mesh that it has not gone far enough, because the idea of suspending the use of mesh was completely ruled out from the very beginning—even before we had the evidence back from the retrospective audit, and the prospective audit going forward—which was concerning. Also concerning is what appears to be a new push saying, “We’ve got a new mesh now, which is safe.”

I sent you the text of the substantive motion, but basically we want to call on the Government to put pressure on NICE to bring forward its guidelines from 2019 to 2018 and to have a full public inquiry, and if the audit suggests that this is the best course of action—the results are expected in weeks, not months—we want there to be a fuller inquiry into this.

Paul Masterton: I think Emma has covered everything. We were conscious that we did not want there to be a perception that because Jeremy Hunt has announced a review, that negated the need for this to be discussed. The review goes only a very small way in dealing with one aspect of the issue.

As this issue is becoming better known in the public sphere, more and more MPs are starting to get women coming forward into their surgeries. Even though the Westminster Hall debate was over-subscribed, we know just from the discussions that we have had on the APPG that more and more MPs are becoming aware of this and want the opportunity to get in and speak on it, and particularly to make some quite specific calls, which Emma has already outlined, that are completely separate from the scope of the review that Jeremy Hunt has announced. Although the review that has been announced is welcome, it is certainly not the case that it deals with the substantive issues that we want to be able to raise on the Floor of the House.

Q8 **Alex Sobel:** This is a good application: it has 21 names, it is cross-party and it has a clear motion. The only thing I would ask is: is there a time sensitivity around this? You are asking for the NICE guidelines to be brought forward from 2019 to 2018. We are practically in the third month of 2018. Is there urgency in terms of getting a debate?

Paul Masterton: Certainly we would want to have it as soon as possible. Since this is my first time in front of you guys, I do not know how far you

are already booked up for debates, but we would not want to leave this until after the summer.

Emma Hardy: Yes, sooner rather than later, but in the Chamber, not in Westminster Hall. We have already had a Westminster Hall debate.

Alex Sobel: Yes, and you've got a motion.

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** Just one pedantic point on the draft motion that you have put in front of us. In the fifth line down, where you have "calls on the Government to suspend prolapse" and so on, I think it should be "the NHS" as opposed to "the Government". Obviously, that is the stance that the Health Secretary will take.

To build on what Alex said, the Government announced an audit. Do we know when that is due to report?

Emma Hardy: When they mentioned the retrospective audit at the APPG, they said it would be weeks not months, but I do not have any firmer deadline than that. As Paul said, that is addressing some of the issues but not all the issues we want to discuss, so its timing will not really have a bearing on what we want to talk about.

Bob Blackman: No, I am just looking at the time sensitivity.

Jess Phillips: It is a very good application.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Mr Laurence Robertson and James Cartlidge made representations.

Q10 **Chair:** This is an application for a debate about Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism.

Mr Robertson: Yes, thank you, Chair. Unlike the previous applicants, this is not my first time in front of you, as you know. I am sorry to have to be here to apply for this particular debate, for which I have drafted a motion.

Very briefly, the background is that Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism no doubt extended the period of the troubles in Northern Ireland, but it did not just affect Northern Ireland. Bad though the effect there was, there was the Docklands bombing, the Harrods bombing and the Warrington bombing in England. As Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, I carried out an inquiry into this issue. We ran out of time towards the end because of the surprise general election, but we heard from lots of victims. I will not read them all out, but if I may, I will turn to the one from Warrington, Colin Parry, whose 12-year-old son Tim was murdered. He said, "Describing the final moments of your child's life is beyond words...because, as a parent, there is no greater pain or loss than the death of your child." That is an example of some of the evidence that we received.



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Unfortunately, the issue has not moved on, in spite of the very warm words of the previous Labour Government and this Government. The reason given for the failure to move the issue on with regard to compensation is that there is no settled Government in Libya. That may well be true, but it does not ease the pain of those who lost loved ones or were injured themselves.

At the same time, there are £11.7 billion of Libyan assets frozen in this country. The Government are very reluctant to touch those because of how it would look in front of the international community, but the motion calls on the Government to identify how much of that money is Libyan Government money as opposed to individual investors' money, and to seek the permission of the European Union and the United Nations to access some of that money to provide compensation for those who had their lives torn apart and the communities that were very badly damaged by what Colonel Gaddafi actually claimed he was doing. He admitted to doing it in a statement in June 1972. He said, "We have decided to create a problem for Britain and to drive a thorn in her side so as to make life difficult...She will pay dearly." There is no doubt about what Libya has done. The only question is: how do we move that issue on?

With your permission, Mr Chairman, perhaps I could bring Mr Cartlidge in.

James Cartlidge: Just a couple of points. I came in front of you some time ago on the same subject. You were the Chair, Mr Mearns, and you advised me to have a Westminster Hall debate and, if that was not successful in yielding the response we wanted from the Government, to come back for a backbench business debate. That is why we are here.

On my involvement, I have a constituent who is a campaigner, whose sister was a WPC murdered in the Harrods bomb. Alongside her, an American citizen died, and we subsequently discovered the family received \$5 million from the Libyan regime. So they compensated American citizens, including those killed in this country by the IRA, but there has been no deal for British citizens. As you can imagine, it is a long-running sore. I think the key thing is that yes, it is difficult with the Government in Libya being in absentia, weak or whatever, but if we do not maintain pressure at a parliamentary level this will go away, and the remaining victims will die off. So we feel we have a duty to maintain the cause.

There is strong support from all parties, including Jim Fitzpatrick and Khalid Mahmood in the Labour party and all of the DUP; and Andrew Rosindell, who is not here today, is the chairman of the parliamentary group. So there is strong cross-party support.

- Q11 **Bob Blackman:** I have every sympathy with the application. But for a three-hour debate in the Chamber—your motion would require Chamber time, and I empathise with you having had a Westminster Hall debate and not got what you wanted—we would want to see 15 speakers from a mix of Government and Opposition parties, and on my calculation there are only seven at the moment. Could you therefore make sure we get a further list of speakers? I am sure you will not have a problem getting



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them for this topic.

The only other issue is time sensitivity. Is there any particular reason why it is high priority to get a debate before Easter?

James Cartlidge: Not really. We—all the MPs who are concerned—had a meeting with the Foreign Secretary, and he has given us words that are an upgrade in commitment from previous wording, but we need somewhere to hold that to account. He said he would be more visibly proactive, which is quite a strong commitment—and he has said that in writing as well. So the need is not immediate, but obviously the longer that it goes on, the more the memory will fade and so on. Is that fair?

Mr Robertson: That is right, yes.

Q12 **Jess Phillips:** Similarly, along the lines of Bob's point, I don't think you would find any difficulty getting support. I have lots of constituents with family members who were killed by IRA bombs, and it is a very live issue where I live. But there does seem to be quite a lack of Labour names. Was that just about getting the application in, or was there any issue in getting Labour Members?

Mr Robertson: No. We have not advertised this as widely as we can do.

Jess Phillips: I think you would get a lot of Labour names.

Mr Robertson: I think so, yes. Thank you.

Antoinette Sandbach and **Steve McCabe** made representations.

Q13 **Chair:** Last this afternoon is Antoinette Sandbach. This is about energy efficiency and the clean growth strategy. Welcome.

Antoinette Sandbach: Thank you very much. I would say my application is well timed today, given the big freeze and no doubt the impact being felt in people's homes.

There is universal agreement that energy efficiency is one of the first policy issues that need to be tackled if the UK is to meet its climate change goals and make significant inroads in the next decade. A third of the UK's greenhouse gases come from powering and heating buildings. There has not been a parliamentary backbench debate specifically on energy efficiency in homes and buildings for the last six years. The clean growth strategy itself has not been debated; the only discussion of it in Parliament was on the day of its launch, when MPs had no opportunity to consider its real impact.

This is a really crucial time for energy efficiency policy, with policy decisions that need to be made urgently in order to maximise the impact of possible measures. The Infrastructure Commission is due to report in April on energy efficiency in homes and buildings as an infrastructure priority.



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I would submit that this is an important debate to have. It is supported by 22 Members, from every party with the exception of Plaid Cymru, and I am sure I will be able to persuade one of them to come and support the debate. My request is for a three-hour debate in the Chamber, given the amount of cross-party support we have had. I know that my colleague Steve McCabe would like to add a few points to this application.

Steve McCabe: I would only add that, after a number of years in which we have seen improvements in energy efficiency, particularly in homes, it is now receding, as are investment in renewables and the number of households receiving energy support. That is a good argument for giving us an opportunity to explore this.

As Antoinette says, although the clean growth strategy has been announced, we have had no opportunity to look at the detailed policies that the Government intend to use to measure progress towards that. Unless there is an opportunity to understand exactly how these policies will be implemented, and to explore and challenge the progress that will be followed, it is difficult to see how anyone in this place can make any assessment of progress on energy efficiency or support for homes where that is the biggest problem, or of how the Government could hope to meet any targets. All of that would be enabled by a debate of this order. It is clearly the sort of thing that goes way beyond party politics, and for that reason I hope you will look sympathetically at the bid today.

Chair: Thank you very much. From my perspective, most new properties and new houses have to be built with energy efficiency in mind. Where we have had previous schemes it has looked as though the low-hanging fruit, such as the beneficial effect of loft and cavity wall insulation and double glazing, has been achieved, but we still have many millions of hard-to-heat homes across the country, which have not been addressed because it is expensive on a unit cost basis to do so. This is something that certainly resonates with me because of the nature of the properties in my own constituency.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** I am very sympathetic to the application. Clearly, you have a range of speakers—I think you said potentially 22 speakers. Given that there has not been a debate on this for some time and this is a general debate, would you accept an offer of Westminster Hall for a debate? If you do not get the answers you would like, you could come back to this Committee, possibly with a divisible motion, for Chamber time—possibly in the summer, after the Government has considered what you have to say?

Antoinette Sandbach: I am certain that we would accept a Westminster Hall debate, although, given the decisions being made by the National Infrastructure Commission and the importance that they will have, particularly for hard-to-heat homes, I would respectfully submit that coming back in the summer may be a bit late for us.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** The reason I say that is that there is potential for a Westminster Hall on 8 March. You would be allocated three hours. If not,



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I suspect you will be waiting some time to get Chamber time.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am very grateful for that, and I will of course accept the earliest opportunity for us to debate the issue, given its importance. I know that in rural areas only 1% of homes that are very hard to treat have received energy efficiency measures. That is critical, given that most of our housing stock is pre-1945 build. It is an area where there is an opportunity to have an impact that could substantially improve people's lives.

Chair: Thank you very much for coming in and making your application. That concludes our formal session of the Committee this afternoon.