

Written evidence submitted by the Backbench Business Committee

1. The Backbench Business Committee is grateful for the opportunity to submit its views on the future work programme of the Modernisation Committee.
2. The Committee has been in correspondence with the Leader of the House on proposals for reform relating to backbench business in the Chamber and Westminster Hall. The Leader recommended that our proposals be formally submitted for consideration by the Modernisation Committee through this call for views process.

Summary of recommendations

3. The Backbench Business Committee recommends consideration of the following proposals:
 - a. Introducing 90-minute backbench debates in the Chamber at more high-profile times;
 - b. Appointing the Backbench Business Committee for a full Parliament; and
 - c. Amending sitting times in Westminster Hall on Thursdays, to facilitate wider participation.

Background

4. The Backbench Business Committee is responsible for allocating backbench debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall.
5. Under Standing Order No. 14(4), 35 days or its equivalent shall be allotted in each session for proceedings in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall on backbench business of which at least 27 shall be allotted for proceedings in the Chamber. In practice, the Committee allocates backbench business on most Thursdays in the Chamber.
6. Under Standing Order No. 10(7), business in Westminster Hall on a Thursday should be “so far as possible [...] divided as nearly as practical equally” between the Backbench Business Committee and the Liaison Committee. In practice, the vast majority of debates are allocated by the Backbench Business Committee. The Committee also has an informal arrangement with the Chairman of Ways and Means to allocate a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall at 9.30am on Tuesdays.
7. Under Standing Order No. 22D, the Backbench Business Committee can allocate Select Committee Statements on any full day allocated for backbench business in the Chamber and on any Thursday in Westminster Hall.

Participation in Backbench Business Committee debates

8. The Modernisation Committee published a Memorandum on 12 September 2024, setting out its strategic aims and planned areas of work. This included proposed reforms to backbench business:

There have been concerns inside and outside Parliament that backbench business in the Chamber has not been used as well as it could be. When the number of speakers is fewer than those who have called for a debate or a debate is undersubscribed, they can end early, meaning the House of Commons adjourns sooner than it otherwise would.

9. The performance of backbench business in the Chamber appears to be better than its anecdotal reputation. Our analysis of data on participation in Backbench Business Committee debates in the Chamber in the 2023-24 session, the 2022-23 session (January to October 2023) and the 2019-20 session found the following:
 - a. The average gap to the moment of interruption was 36 minutes in 2023-24, down from 49 minutes in 2022-23. There are outliers and this is affected by the number of UQs and statements, but most backbench days, despite perceptions, finished between 4.00pm and 5.00pm.
 - b. The average debate duration across all three sessions was around 2 hours. Some of these debates were restricted by time limits, due to a combination of high participation, Urgent Questions and Statements.
 - c. The average number of backbench speakers (i.e. not including frontbenchers from the three main parties) has been between 8 and 9 in the last two sessions. This is lower than the minimum required on a debate application (15), so the Committee is working to encourage higher levels of participation by debate supporters.
 - d. Some of the worst-performing debates are not obviously 'bad' debates: the debate on Knife crime on 14 December 2023 lasted just 59 minutes, Menopause on 26 October 2023 lasted just 70 minutes. The Committee is more closely assessing whether applications are better suited to Westminster Hall.
 - e. The Committee received an average of 4.5 applications per week in the six-month period to April 2024. This was a 28% increase on the 3.5 applications per week the Committee received in the same six-month period to April 2023.

Timing of backbench debates in the Chamber

10. Most debates allocated by the Backbench Business Committee take place on Thursday afternoons. Data from recent parliamentary sessions show that the backbench debates held on days other than Thursdays were frequently well attended. For example, for the Hospice funding debate on Monday 22 April 2024, 25 Members spoke and time limits were imposed.
11. A key challenge for backbench business is that many Members choose to leave Westminster on a Thursday afternoon, which significantly affects the level of participation in backbench business and the status of substantive motions agreed following debates.
12. The Committee also receives several applications that may be better suited to 90-minute debates in the Chamber at more high-profile times, rather than the half-day debates on a Thursday afternoon. Chamber debates are, understandably, more highly-sought by Members than those in Westminster Hall.
13. It is often clear when Government business is likely to finish early; it may be better to use additional time to consider matters put forward by backbench Members.

14. Recommendation: the Modernisation Committee to consider the potential merits of introducing 90-minute backbench debates at more high-profile times.

Sessional appointment of the Backbench Business Committee

15. The membership of the Backbench Business Committee, including the Chair, lapse under Standing Order No. 152J at the end of each Session. Fresh elections for the Chair and members are therefore required at the beginning of each Parliamentary Session to re-establish the Committee, unlike most select committees which are elected for an entire Parliament.
16. In practice, this has resulted in a period of weeks at the start of any new Session before the appointment of the Chair and members, when it is not possible for there to be determinations of backbench business.
17. In this time there are likely to be time-sensitive subjects that the Committee would usually have scheduled that will miss the opportunity to be debated. Whilst the Government can schedule general debates on similar topics to those usually considered by the Committee, this does not provide the same opportunities for backbenchers, namely, a chance for a backbencher to open or respond to a debate and or to put a substantive motion before the House.
18. It was understandable that when the Committee was initially created it was subject to these atypical safeguards. Now that the Committee is well established, having exercised its function effectively over the course of four Parliaments, the requirement for re-election of the Chair and nomination of members seems unnecessary. The practical effect of this is a delay to the determination of backbench business which is not in the interests of Members.

19. Recommendation: The Modernisation Committee to consider the potential merits of appointing the Backbench Business Committee for the full Parliament.

Westminster Hall sitting times

20. Towards the end of the last Parliament, Standing Order No. 10(1)(c) was temporarily amended to enable Westminster Hall to sit one hour earlier on Thursdays.
21. In the last Parliament, the Backbench Business Committee had an insufficient number of applications for debates in Westminster Hall on Thursday afternoons and recognised that debating time was often going unused. Members were increasingly declining the 3.00pm debate time, citing the likely low turnout as Members travel back to their constituencies.
22. Our proposal to change the sitting times on Thursdays was supported by the Procedure Committee and implemented by the then Leader of the House on a temporary basis until the end of the Parliament.
23. The Committee believes that the trial period in the previous Parliament was a success. The change allowed a greater number of Members to participate in Thursday afternoon debates in Westminster Hall and did so without adversely affecting the wider business or administration of the House.

24. Recommendation: The Modernisation Committee to consider the potential merits of amending sitting times in Westminster Hall on Thursdays, to facilitate wider participation.

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