



House of Commons
Backbench Business Committee

Work of the Committee in the 2010–15 Parliament

**First Special Report of Session
2014–15**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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The Backbench Business Committee

The Backbench Business Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to determine the backbench business to be taken in the House and Westminster Hall on days, or parts of days, allotted for backbench business.

Current membership

[Natascha Engel MP](#) (*Labour, North East Derbyshire*) (*Chair*)
[Sir David Amess MP](#) (*Conservative, Southend West*)
[Mr David Anderson MP](#) (*Labour, Blaydon*)
[Bob Blackman MP](#) (*Conservative, Harrow East*)
[Oliver Colvile MP](#) (*Conservative, Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport*)
[Mr Nigel Evans MP](#) (*Conservative, Ribble Valley*)
[John Hemming MP](#) (*Liberal Democrat, Birmingham, Yardley*)
[Ian Mearns MP](#) (*Labour, Gateshead*)

The following members were also members of the Committee during the Parliament:

Mr Peter Bone MP (*Conservative, Wellingborough*)
Philip Davies MP (*Conservative, Shipley*)
Jane Ellison MP (*Conservative, Battersea*)
Mr Philip Hollobone MP (*Conservative, Kettering*)
Mr Marcus Jones MP (*Conservative, Nuneaton*)
Mr George Mudie MP (*Labour, Leeds East*)
Alison Seabeck MP (*Labour, Plymouth, Moor View*)
Alec Shelbrooke MP (*Conservative, Elmet and Rothwell*)
Mr Mark Spencer MP (*Conservative, Sherwood*)

Pete Wishart MP (*Scottish National Party, Perth and North Perthshire*) has attended meetings of the Committee, at the invitation of the Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No 152J(7).

Powers

The Committee is established under Standing Order No 152J to determine the backbench business to be taken in the House and in Westminster Hall on days, or parts of days, allotted for backbench business. The powers of select committees are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, which are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/bbcom.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Dr Robin James (Clerk), Mark Etherton (Second Clerk), Sean Harris (Committee Assistant) and Gary Calder (Media Officer).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Backbench Business Committee, Table Office, House of Commons, London SW1 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 2903; the Committee's email address is bbcom@parliament.uk.

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Summary

This report aims to pass on the lessons the Backbench Business Committee has learned during its first Parliament of operation and to discuss the unresolved difficulties which its successors will have to negotiate.

The Committee has been as open and transparent as possible in reaching its decisions. It does not judge the motivation behind applications for debate, but takes decisions against a published set of objective criteria. The Committee sees itself as a resource and a scheduling forum for backbenchers.

We note changes in government policy that appear to have arisen as a result of backbench debates. However, we also note that both Members and the public feel frustration when a backbench motion is agreed but nothing further happens, because such motions are not binding on the Government. We recommend some mechanisms for improving the way in which Government responds to backbench debates: in particular, we seek an undertaking that the Government will issue a written ministerial statement after each debate setting out the action it proposes to take in response; and we recommend greater monitoring by departmental select committees of the follow-up to debates.

We consider where opinions differ as to the future role of the Committee, such as whether it should accrue powers to schedule debating time on legislation (which we reject), and how the smaller parties in the House should be represented on the Committee (an issue which should be addressed in the discussions which will take place at the start of the next Parliament).

We summarise our working methods and review the various procedural developments since the Committee was initially established.

We support the establishment of the new Petitions Committee, which we see as having a separate but complementary role to our own. The public engagement function of the new committee will be critical, and the committee should be properly resourced to enable this to be carried out.

Although there have been numerous occasions when both the government and opposition business managers would have preferred us not to schedule certain debates, we have maintained good working relationships with the front benches. The Government has provided us with sufficient time in the Chamber for backbench debate, giving us as much advance notice of dates as they realistically can.

We have tried to raise the status of debates in Westminster Hall, and urge our successors to continue to promote it as a smaller and more intimate venue than the main Chamber and one which is ideal for certain debates.

We conclude that the Backbench Business Committee has made a positive difference to the work of the House by providing new opportunities for self-expression by backbenchers and making Parliament more relevant to the outside world. We hope that its work will be continued and extended in the next Parliament.

1 Introduction

1. The Backbench Business Committee was set up by the House in June 2010 and is now coming to the end of its first Parliament. The Committee is approaching a period of uncertainty over its continued existence. Whilst the Committee has been widely used by backbenchers to raise topical and important issues, and has often been very responsive to what is being debated by the wider public, its scheduling decisions have not always found favour with either or both front benches.

2. A new Parliament may bring with it a new attitude to the Backbench Business Committee and its powers to schedule votable motions on the floor of the House. An incoming government may try to reduce the number of days available to backbenchers or remove altogether the Committee's ability to schedule votable motions by restricting to Westminster Hall its allocation of debates. We believe that this would be a retrograde step, would damage Parliament's improving reputation for debating issues of importance and relevance, and would hamper backbenchers in holding the government of the day properly to account.

3. In this context, we thought it would be useful to describe our experiences of establishing the Committee, its day-to-day running, some of the difficulties we have encountered, some of the challenges we have overcome (and some which we have not), and both our successes and—equally importantly—our failures.

4. We hope to pass on the lessons we have learned and to outline the unresolved difficulties and tensions which our successors will also have to negotiate.

2 Establishment and operation of the Committee

5. The idea of setting up a Backbench Business Committee was first proposed by the House of Commons Reform Committee (also known as the Wright Committee) in November 2009.¹ Before the Backbench Business Committee existed, only government and opposition parties could schedule votable motions on the floor of the House.

6. On 15 June 2010, early in the new Parliament, the House voted to establish a Backbench Business Committee with the powers to “determine the backbench business to be taken in the House and in Westminster Hall on days, or parts of days, allotted for backbench business”.² Other provisions in the new Standing Orders were that the Government was required to make available at least 35 days per session for backbench business, of which at least 27 had to be in the Chamber. The Standing Orders specified the number of members of the Committee (seven plus the Chair); and that members had to be backbenchers. The quorum was set high (at least four out of eight members had to be present for the Committee to be able to take formal decisions); and it was a requirement that the Chair and members stand for election by secret ballot of the whole House at the start of every session, unlike on most select committees where they are elected for the whole Parliament.

7. The Chair was not allocated by party, as was the case with other select committees, but by a vote of the whole House. The Committee’s first Chair, Natascha Engel MP, was elected on 22 June 2010 and the other seven Members on 29 June. These were four Conservative members, three Labour members (including the Chair) and one Liberal Democrat.

8. The Committee met for the first time on 6 July 2010 and published a special report setting out its provisional approach to its work on 21 July.³

9. From the start the Committee was conscious that the power it had been given to allocate debates on behalf of backbenchers presented both opportunities and dangers. The opportunities were to give Members a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for what went on in the House, make debates more responsive to public concerns and strengthen the House’s select committees by providing them with more opportunities for their work to be debated in the Chamber.⁴

10. The dangers were that control of a large part of the parliamentary agenda (one day per sitting week) would be transferred from the Executive and Business Managers to a small and unaccountable group of backbenchers.

1 House of Commons Reform Committee, First Report of Session 2008-09, *Rebuilding the House*, HC 1117

2 Standing Order No. 152J

3 First Special Report of Session 2010-12, *Provisional Approach: Session 2010-11*, HC 334

4 These were objectives originally set out in the Wright report: see HC (2008-09) 1117, para 181.

11. Taking those dangers and opportunities into consideration, the Committee used the scope afforded by the broad drafting of its remit under the Standing Orders to explore and experiment with what would work and what would not. The Committee therefore determined its own guiding principles.

12. We decided to meet in public in order to be as open and transparent in our scheduling decisions as possible.

13. We took scheduling decisions against a published set of objective criteria:

- breadth of interest across all parties
- why it is felt important for a debate to be held, when the topic was last debated (and how much interest there was on that occasion) and the topicality of the subject
- the amount of time available and requested
- how many Members have made a firm commitment to participate in a debate (as a rule of thumb, we consider that a 3-hour Chamber debate would normally require at least 15 backbench speakers)
- and why such a debate is unlikely to be secured through other routes.

14. The Committee does not make decisions on the basis of what debates it finds interesting but on whether they satisfy the above criteria.

15. We do not judge the motivation behind bringing forward a debate. There are as many different ways of being a backbencher as there are backbenchers in the House. We therefore try to provide a wide forum to allow Members to highlight national or local campaigns, to hold the Executive to account better or even to find a way to get noticed by the front bench to get promotion.

16. Thus the Committee does not itself generate ideas for debate. We have been guided entirely by our backbench colleagues who bring us their ideas. We have acted as a scheduling forum for them.

17. From the outset of the Backbench Business Committee's existence there were certain tensions which remain unresolved today. We deal with these in the following paragraphs.

How the Government responds to backbench motions

18. The area of greatest unresolved disagreement is whether a backbench motion should be binding on the Government. This will continue to be a matter of debate in the future. Many Members as well as the public have expressed frustration and anger when a backbench motion is debated and voted on (or nodded through) and then nothing further happens. For instance, when the House voted overwhelmingly (147 votes to 28) on 25 October 2012 to suspend the badger cull, or agreed without a vote on 23 June 2011 to “direct the Government to use its powers under section 12 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to introduce a regulation banning the use of all wild animals in circuses to take effect by 1

July 2012”, many people could not understand why these decisions of the House were not then implemented.

19. Backbench motions, when agreed to, become Resolutions of the House, but these are not binding on the Government. Rather, the motions provide an opportunity for backbenchers to raise their concerns and to force a Minister to the despatch box to answer them. If backbench motions were binding on the Government, then the result would be that backbench debates would be heavily whipped and each motion defeated. It would mean that the freedom currently enjoyed by backbenchers to explore issues and speak relatively freely (much more so than ever before) would be sacrificed.

20. Because they are not binding, Government is free to ignore or reject Resolutions of the House. In our conclusions to this report we suggest some mechanisms for improving the way in which Government responds to backbench motions (see paragraphs 81 and 82 below), and in which the House and its committees could follow up failures by the Government to respond.

21. It is, though, possible to identify key changes in government policy that almost certainly have had their origins in backbench debates.

22. Dr Mark Stuart of the University of Nottingham has supplied us with his own summary of backbench debates which arguably affected government decision-making:⁵

It is always difficult to measure the influence of any parliamentary process on government policy. One never knows which pressure point leads the Government to alter course. However, Backbench Business Committee (BBCom) debates and motions (although not binding on the Government) appear to have played a discernible part in altering a range of government policy on the following issues: compensation for victims of contaminated blood and blood products;⁶ government funding of the BBC World Service;⁷ the release of documents relating to the Hillsborough Disaster;⁸ and the freezing of fuel duty.⁹ Backbench pressure exerted during BBCom debates and votes may also have played a part in David Cameron’s decision to delay giving prisoners the right to vote¹⁰ and to hold a referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU.¹¹ Lastly, John Baron’s BBCom debate and vote over arms to Syria may have had an indirect effect on the eventual government defeat on Syria on 29 August 2013.¹²

5 Email dated 22 December 2014 to Clerk of the Committee, published on the Committee’s website.

6 HC Deb, 14 October 2010, cols 519-74; see government change of policy: HC Deb, 10 January 2011, cols 33-42

7 HC Deb, 19 May 2011, cols 536-57

8 HC Deb, 17 October 2011, cols 622-725

9 HC Deb, 15 November 2011, cols 622-813

10 HC Deb, 10 February 2011, cols 493-586

11 HC Deb, 24 October 2011, cols 46-144

12 HC Deb, 11 July 2013, cols 587-628

23. To give more detail about Dr Stuart's final example: in July 2013 the House supported, without a vote, a backbench motion stating that "lethal support should not be provided to anti-government forces in Syria without the explicit prior consent of Parliament".¹³ Although not formally binding, the House's decision added to the pressure on the Government and may have contributed to the Prime Minister's decision the following month to recall Parliament when he wished to accede to President Obama's request for the UK to join the US in taking military action against Syria.

24. The backbench debate on the future of town centres and high streets on 17 January 2012 influenced the Government's response to the Portas Review on 30 March 2012.¹⁴

25. In their response to backbench debates, Ministers frequently give undertakings as to future government policy and actions. One example out of many would be the announcement given by the relevant Minister in his reply to a backbench debate in October 2014 that the Department of Health would release all papers relating to the use of oral hormone pregnancy tests by expectant mothers between 1953 and 1975, and would set up an independent panel to examine those documents, as requested by the motion before the House.¹⁵

26. The announcement on 14 January 2015 of a backbench debate on the timing of publication of the Iraq Inquiry's report, scheduled for 29 January, was followed on 21 January by a statement by the Chair of that inquiry, Sir John Chilcot, on that same matter.

27. In some cases Ministers responding to a backbench debate may give undertakings from the despatch box which are not then met, or subsequent government action, even when taken, may be regarded as unsatisfactory. This is different from the Government choosing to ignore Resolutions founded on backbench motions. If and when a Minister makes a commitment or agrees an undertaking on the floor of the House, we have encouraged Backbenchers to return to our committee for a follow-up debate to enable continuing pressure to be placed on the Government. An example would be in the case of the passing of infection via blood products (known as 'contaminated blood') to those with haemophilia and others during the 1970s and 1980s. Several years after the original debate on this matter (first scheduled in October 2010), widespread concern remained over government policy, and we accordingly scheduled a further debate in January 2015.¹⁶

Whether the Committee should accrue powers to schedule debating time on legislation

28. During the course of the Parliament and particularly during the Procedure Committee's inquiry into Private Members' Bills, it was suggested by some Members that the Backbench Business Committee should take responsibility for selecting Private

13 Votes and Proceedings, 11 July 2013

14 HC Deb, 17 January 2012, cols 622-722

15 HC Deb, 23 October 2014, col 1114

16 The debates were held on 14 October 2010 and 15 January 2015.

Members' Bills for debate.¹⁷ The Backbench Business Committee was concerned about this for a number of reasons.

29. First, it would mean our having to rank the comparative merits of competing campaigns to change the law. This would be an impossible task and could not be done objectively. It is far better for bills to be selected for debating time, as at present, through a random ballot of all Members.

30. Secondly, it would mean that the Backbench Business Committee was potentially scheduling legislation. We have argued that it is the role of the democratically-elected government to do this, not that of a small committee of backbenchers. It is why we rejected the power to schedule votable motions to revoke negative statutory instruments.

31. This is another area of unresolved disagreement and we are certain that these issues will continue to be debated by the next Parliament.

Backbench motions which are binding on the House

32. There are a number of areas where motions scheduled by the Backbench Business Committee and agreed to by the House will have automatic effect, because their application is to the House itself and not the Government: in particular, motions to change the Standing Orders of the House or to set up select committees. The Committee has provided time for standing order changes to be debated on several occasions.¹⁸ This has enabled Procedure Committee proposals to be put to the House for decision even if they are not supported by the Government. The Committee has also allocated time for debate on setting up, or giving a formal instruction to, a select committee: for instance, on 12 May 2011, when the House agreed to a backbench motion instructing the Committee on Members' Allowances to review the operation of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, and on 10 September 2014, when the House agreed to a backbench motion to set up a Select Committee on the Governance of the House of Commons.

33. If an application were put to us to debate a motion to set up a select committee with a remit overlapping with the remit of one of the House's existing select committees, in deciding on the application we would be mindful of the risk of duplicating effort and resources. In those circumstances, or where an application for debate on an Instruction to an existing committee had been made, we would also normally seek the views of the existing committee's chair, and take those into account along with other relevant factors, before making our decision on the application.

17 Procedure Committee, Second Report of Session 2013-14, *Private Members' bills*, HC 188-I and Fifth Report of Session 2013-14, *Private Members' bills: Government response and revised proposals*, HC 1171

18 For example, standing orders changes recommended by the Standards and Privileges Committee, on 2 December 2010, and ones relating to sittings of the House, on 11 July 2012.

How smaller parties should be represented

34. From the outset, the lack of representation on the Backbench Business Committee for smaller parties was a problem. It continues to be so at the end of this Parliament. The Standing Orders made it impossible for Members from smaller parties to be nominated to the Committee, as a Member needed to have their nomination papers signed by at least 10 members of the candidate's party.

35. In a 2011 report, the Procedure Committee recommended that Standing Orders be amended to increase the size of the Committee to nine Members, including the Chair, to enable the additional place to be allotted to a Member from a minority party to be elected by the whole House.¹⁹

36. In the event, the Government chose to put two different proposals before the House, which were agreed to on 12 March 2012. One was to enable a Member from one of the smaller parties (or of no party) to stand for the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. The other change provided that:

“The Committee shall have power to invite Members of the House who are not members of the Committee and who are of a party not represented on the Committee or of no party to attend its meetings and, at the discretion of the chair, take part in its proceedings, but -

(a) no more than one Member may be so invited to attend in respect of the same meeting;

(b) a Member so invited shall not move any motion or amendment to any motion, vote or be counted in the quorum.”²⁰

37. There was an initial reluctance on the part of the minority parties to exercise their right under this provision to participate in the proceedings of the Committee. Pete Wishart MP, giving evidence on behalf of those parties, commented that they were “not prepared to accept a second-class status when it comes to the composition of the Backbench Business Committee”.²¹ However, a representative of the minority parties has taken up the Committee's invitation to participate. This followed an undertaking from the Procedure Committee that it would review this matter before the end of the Parliament. In pursuance of this undertaking,²² **the Chair of the Procedure Committee has written to the Leader of the House “to ask him to ensure that he or his successor as Leader in the new**

19 Fifth Report of Session 2010-12, *2010 elections for positions in the House*, HC 1573, para 61

20 Amendment to Standing Order No. 152J

21 Procedure Committee, HC (2012-13) 168, para 19

22 Letter dated 23 June 2014 from Charles Walker MP to Natascha Engel MP, entitled “Minority party membership of the Backbench Business Committee”, published on the Procedure Committee's website

Parliament address the need to ensure appropriate minority party membership representation on the Backbench Business Committee and across all select committees in the discussions which will take place at the start of the Parliament”. We support this request.

3 Subsequent developments and procedural changes

38. During the course of its first session—the unusually long, two-year Session 2010-12—the Committee experimented with a variety of new ideas, some of which have put down roots and survived, some of which have not. In April 2012 the Committee produced a report on its work during that session as a way of consulting with Members about their views of the work and operation of the Backbench Business Committee.²³

39. At the same time, the Procedure Committee had been asked to review the work of the Backbench Business Committee by the beginning of the second session of the Parliament.

40. The Procedure Committee published its report on 22 November 2012.²⁴ It made several recommendations which were implemented by the House in Standing Order changes on 2 December 2013. These were as set out in the following paragraphs.

41. The Committee was given a formal power to “hear representations from Members of the House in public”. This regularised the position whereby the Committee heard bids for debates from Members in public and on the record, despite having no formal power to take evidence. The new provision fell short of a being a full power “to call for persons, papers and records”, to reflect the fact that the Backbench Business Committee is not a select committee authorised to conduct inquiries but has a more tightly specified role. The Procedure Committee had noted “the widespread approval for the Committee’s innovative approach in hearing representations from Members pitching for debating time in public, and we think that approach has proved a courageous choice which has helped cement the Committee’s reputation with backbenchers”.²⁵

42. A new Standing Order gave the Committee power to allocate time for select committee statements, within five sitting days of a report being published or an inquiry launched.²⁶ This, again, regularised a practice of the Committee, which had previously provided time for this purpose under the guise of a mini-debate (on a motion “That this House has considered the publication of the report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, etc.”), with the committee chair having to make a speech and take interventions by other Members. Under the new procedure, the chair makes a statement and then takes questions, just like a Minister making an oral statement in the House.

43. Another Procedure Committee recommendation was implemented without any need for a formal decision by the House. This related to adjournment debates in Westminster Hall.²⁷ The Procedure Committee recommended that responsibility for scheduling one of

23 Second Special Report of Session 2010-12, *Work of the Committee in Session 2010-12*, HC 1926

24 Second Report of Session 2012-13, *Review of the Backbench Business Committee*, HC 168

25 HC (2012-13) 168, para 24

26 HC (2012-13) 168, para 51

27 HC (2012-13) 168, para 54

the four 90-minute adjournment debates each week be transferred from the Speaker to the Backbench Business Committee, initially on a trial basis. A trial was carried out from January to July 2014. The Committee has concluded that this is a useful addition to the range of timetabling options at its disposal; but it has not been possible to fill the slot every week (if not filled, the fallback position is that the Speaker allocates it, as before, from the weekly ballot conducted by his office), and we do not seek responsibility for more than one such Westminster Hall debate per week.

44. Two changes proposed by the Procedure Committee were rejected by the House. One was to provide that the figure of 35 days of backbench time which the Government was required to provide per session should be increased by one day for each week the House shall sit in a session in excess of a year.²⁸ The Backbench Business Committee did not seek this power, on the grounds that it was not needed: the existing informal arrangements for approving a pro-rata allocation of backbench days in an extended session had proved successful, and in any case it was unlikely that Parliament would ever see an extended session like 2010-12 again.

45. The second proposed change to be rejected would have conferred on the Committee a formal power to table business motions to regulate the time for which it is responsible.²⁹ Such motions would not have been able to suspend the moment of interruption, and would have been most likely to be used to set a time-limit for debate on the first of two debates sharing the same backbench time. This proposal was rejected by the House on the grounds that the existing informal arrangements for managing time in the Chamber allow flexibility to respond to events on the day, such as ministerial statements or urgent questions, and to take account of the balance of speakers in each debate. The Committee also noted the Government's undertaking that it would be responsive to any request from the Chair for the Government to propose a business motion if the need for this were to arise. It has always done so: for instance, on 8 September 2014 the Government put forward a business motion, which was agreed to by the House, guaranteeing two hours' debate on the backbench motion to set up a Select Committee on the Governance of the House, scheduled for 10 September.

46. The final recommendation in the Procedure Committee's review was that "Standing Order No. 47 be amended to allow the Speaker, where he sets a limit on speeches in debates on backbench business, greater discretion than at present to apply and set a suitable limit on frontbench speeches".³⁰ This recommendation has not been implemented. It was an attempt to remedy a continuing problem. Often a disproportionate amount of time in a backbench debate is taken up by frontbenchers. This can lead to frustration when the debate is heavily subscribed and the Chair imposes a tight limit on backbenchers. **We support the Procedure Committee's recommendation and hope that the House will make the necessary change to protect backbenchers' time.**

28 HC (2012-13) 168, para 28

29 HC (2012-13) 168, para 61

30 HC (2012-13) 168, para 64 (our underlining)

47. One significant change to the Standing Orders governing the Backbench Business Committee was put forward by the Government with no prior consultation with the Committee or the Procedure Committee. This change, agreed to by the House on 12 March 2012, provided that the members of the Backbench Business Committee would be elected, not by a secret ballot of the whole House as hitherto, but by members of the political party to which they belonged, “by whatever transparent and democratic method they [the parties] choose”.³¹ The Government argued that this brought the Committee into line with other select committees. However, the lack of prior consultation by the Government on this change, and the way it pre-empted the conclusions of the Procedure Committee’s review of the Backbench Business Committee, was against the spirit of the relationship that had grown up between the Backbench Business Committee and the Government. During the debate on this proposal, the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee suggested that the Government might withdraw it in order to allow a swift consideration of its merits by the Procedure Committee.³² However, the Government did not take up this suggestion. We continue to regret this change and the way in which it was brought in.

31 Votes and Proceedings, 12 March 2012

32 HC Deb, 12 March 2012, col 50

4 Day-to-day running of the Committee

48. The Backbench Business Committee meets weekly, currently on a Tuesday at 1 pm. Meetings are open to the public and are shown on Parliament TV. Members make applications for debate before midday on the previous Friday by submitting a pro-forma. The form prompts Members with various options and aims to elicit as much relevant information as possible in advance of the hearing.³³ Each bid usually takes five to 10 minutes. When all Members have been heard, we hold a private meeting to decide which bids to schedule in the time slots allocated to us by Government.

49. A key part of our process is engaging in dialogue with Members to ensure that they bid for the type and timing of debate that best suits their purposes. The options on offer are as follows:

- A choice between a general debate and one on a substantive motion. The former is on a neutral, unamendable motion, noting simply that the House has considered a matter. The latter gives the House an opportunity to express its opinion on a matter and may give rise to a division. Debates on substantive motions only take place in the Chamber, not in Westminster Hall.
- Debates in the Chamber or Westminster Hall. Most Thursdays in the Chamber are devoted to backbench business. In Westminster Hall such business is also usually taken on Thursdays, though fewer days are available because 20 Thursdays a session in Westminster Hall are appointed for debates on select committee reports chosen by the Liaison Committee (this means that about one Thursday in three in Westminster Hall is available for backbench business).³⁴ In addition to Thursdays, time is occasionally available in the Chamber at the end of government business on other days. In these cases the time is treated as “unallotted” backbench time, i.e. it does not count towards the entitlement of 27 days of backbench business in the Chamber provided for in Standing Orders. Finally, backbench time is also available in Westminster Hall every week for 90 minutes on Tuesday mornings.
- Timing of the debate: usually either a maximum of three hours (half-day, the most common option) or of six hours (full day)—though in practice debates in the Chamber are usually shorter than these timings because Ministerial Statements and Urgent Questions eat into the time available. In Westminster Hall, the overall timing of debates is fixed (three hours on Thursdays, 90 minutes on Tuesday mornings).
- Debate on an electronic petition on the government website which has attracted more than 100,000 signatures; these are three-hour debates held in Westminster Hall on Mondays.

33 A sample application form is appended to this report (Annex 1).

34 Standing Order No. 10 (15). The choice of which Thursdays should be allocated by which committee is made on the basis of informal discussions between the two committees.

- Announcement of a new committee inquiry or a newly published report, usually by the chair of the committee, either in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall.

50. The Committee issues weekly news releases aimed at backbench Members and at the media. It has also aimed to communicate with the wider public. It publishes regular website news items to publicise individual backbench debates. In March 2013, with the approval of the Committee, the @CommonsBBCom Twitter account was launched to update the public on decisions made by the Committee and to raise awareness of the debates scheduled. The Committee meetings on Tuesdays are normally live-tweeted, with tweets including details of the bid and Members making the representation. Individual news items on the Committee's website are also publicised by the Committee's Twitter account and information is provided on the website about how the Committee operates, including how it handles representations from Members on Government e-petitions exceeding 100,000 signatures.

5 E-Petitions

51. In July 2011 the Government relaunched its e-petitions website and announced that the Leader of the House would send to the Backbench Business Committee any petition signed by 100,000 or more people, and would ask the Committee to consider finding time for a debate on it.³⁵ Whilst the Government argued that this fulfilled a commitment in the Coalition's 2010 Programme for Government,³⁶ it was neither debated in the House nor voted on, nor was the Backbench Business Committee warned or consulted about the role it would have to play in scheduling e-petitions which reached 100,000 signatures.

52. The Procedure Committee, which had also not been consulted in advance of the Government's announcement, held a short inquiry and recommended that the Standing Orders should be changed to allow the Backbench Business Committee to schedule debates on government e-petitions between 4.30 and 7.30 pm on a Monday in Westminster Hall.³⁷ The House agreed to such a change on 17 July 2012, initially for an experimental period until the end of Session 2012-13. This ensured that all e-petitions were able to be scheduled for debate and had the necessary time to allocate. Nevertheless, a bid still had to be made by a Member to lead the debate in Westminster Hall to the Backbench Business Committee for a debate to be scheduled. This Standing Order change also does not debar a Member making representation for a voteable motion in the Chamber on an e-petition.

53. Towards the end of Session 2012-13 the Procedure Committee reviewed the experiment.³⁸ It noted that there had been three debates in Westminster Hall to consider e-petitions, each of which had been well attended, with contributions from all sides of the House. It concluded that there had not been overwhelming demand for the House to hold debates on e-petitions, but that interest amongst Members and the public had remained high. It endorsed the view of the Backbench Business Committee (expressed in evidence to it³⁹) that the experiment had been a success, and recommended that the change be made permanent. On 4 July 2013 the House agreed to keep the new provision in force till the end of the present Parliament.

54. We remain of the view that our ability to schedule Westminster Hall debates on e-petitions has been valuable. We note that the number of e-petitions on the government website which attract more than 100,000 signatures is relatively small and that our initial fears that the Backbench Business Committee would be overwhelmed by demand for debates on e-petitions proved to be unfounded. In Annex 2 to this report we list all e-petitions with more than 100,000 signatures since November 2011. There have been 37 in

35 "Public petitions website could lead way to Commons debates", Leader of the House of Commons News Release LHoc/11/02, 29 July 2011

36 *The Coalition: our programme for government* (2010), p 26

37 Seventh Report of Session 2010-12, *Debates on Government e-Petitions*, HC 1706

38 Sixth Report of Session 2012-13, *Debates on Government e-Petitions in Westminster Hall*, HC 1094

39 We set out the evidence in Annex 4 to this report.

total, of which 32 have been debated in the House (either in Westminster Hall or, in some cases, the main Chamber).

55. Of the five e-petitions which have not been debated, two have yet to close,⁴⁰ one was recently scheduled for debate but has been postponed by the Member in charge at the request of the petitioner,⁴¹ one was not debated but a similar e-petition had earlier been debated,⁴² and one was not presented to the Committee but did end up being selected as a Westminster Hall adjournment debate through the Speaker's ballot.⁴³

56. When a petition passes the 100,000 signatures mark, we announce the fact in our weekly email communication to backbenchers, and invite a Member to take up the petition. Where necessary we have been pro-active in approaching Members and suggesting they might 'adopt' a petition.

57. We have consistently held the view that the current system for bringing e-petitions to the attention of Parliament is flawed. The website is operated by the Government, not by Parliament. There is no telephone helpline or email advice service; and, as a result, when people sign an e-petition, their expectations cannot be managed. Often people believe that when an e-petition reaches over 100,000 signatures, this immediately triggers a debate, a vote and a change in the law. It means that many people have been angered and frustrated when they discover that all they are getting is a debate in Westminster Hall.

58. The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee submitted proposals to the Procedure Committee for reforming the petitions system. She recommended that the House should set up a Petitions Committee to deal with both paper and e-petitions on the model of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee; focus the petitioning on Parliament not on Government; allow that dedicated committee to become the initial contact point for anyone thinking of starting a petition; have House of Commons Clerks and Library staff to support the committee in conjunction with the Outreach and Education Units to ensure that anyone who contacted Parliament to petition it would learn about the parliamentary processes in order to influence those processes better; and remove the arbitrary threshold of 100,000 signatures.⁴⁴

59. In May 2014 as a result of public and parliamentary frustration with the existing e-petitions system, the Government brought forward for debate a proposal to allow the Procedure Committee to carry out a further inquiry into implementing a better system.⁴⁵

40 Petitions entitled "Protect religious slaughter in the UK and EU" and "Make CCTV mandatory for all slaughterhouses"

41 Petition entitled "The immediate release of Marine A"

42 Petition entitled "Please bring forward Kevin Williams Inquest"

43 Petition entitled "Protect Police Pensions". The debate was held on 28 November 2012; the Member in charge was Keith Vaz.

44 Procedure Committee, Second Report of Session 2012-13, *Review of the Backbench Business Committee*, HC 168, ev 37

45 Votes and Proceedings, 8 May 2014, p 1285

60. The Procedure Committee carried out an inquiry and reported in December 2014.⁴⁶ Their report recommended that the House set up a Petitions Committee which would consider both e-petitions and paper petitions, would be able to take a range of relevant actions on petitions, and would oversee a major improvement in the advice and assistance offered to petitioners.

61. We strongly support the Procedure Committee's proposals and are pleased that on 24 February 2015 the House agreed Standing Order changes to implement them from the start of the new Parliament. We see the role of the new Petitions Committee as being separate from but complementary to that of the Backbench Business Committee. We believe that the public engagement function of the new committee will be critically important. The committee should be well enough resourced to enable petitioners and potential petitioners to be able to talk through with well-informed specialist staff the full range of options open to them. These might include being invited to watch a debate in Parliament, making a submission to a select committee inquiry or being signposted to how a person can make representation to their MP. We hope that our successors in the new Parliament will liaise effectively with and support the work of the Petitions Committee.

6 Pre-recess adjournment debates

62. For many years it was customary for the last day before each of the main parliamentary recesses to be used for a day-long general debate where Members could raise any subject and a government response would be given at the end of the debate, usually by the Deputy Leader of the House.

63. Since 2010 the Government has made most or all of these days available for backbench business. We experimented with a new approach to these pre-recess debates. We invited Members to submit in advance a subject and answering department of their choice. We then grouped speeches into subject areas and invited a Minister from the department or departments with the greatest number of speeches to respond to the issues raised. We also retained part of the debate (the last two hours) for Members who wished to raise other subjects which were not included in the departmental sections.

64. After several debates organised in this new way had been held, we reviewed the experiment. It had brought some gains, in that Members who raised subjects relating to the chosen Departments undoubtedly received a more detailed and specialised response from the departmental Ministers. There were, though, several problems.

65. Firstly, there was an even spread of Departments from which Members wanted responses. This meant that we had to select three Departments at random and meant everyone else had to wait till the last two-hour general debate slot. The time available during the debate, therefore, was not evenly distributed between the full range of subjects which Members wished to raise.

66. It also meant that Members who had not submitted their names in advance were able to jump in to the departmental debates, thereby shortening further the general part of the debate of those Members who had submitted in advance. This was an insurmountable problem without having a speakers' list, which we felt was highly undesirable.

67. The additional time used by Ministers responding also ate into the time in which backbenchers could have made contributions, rather than leaving it to the Deputy Leader of the House to wind up at the end.

68. We concluded that, on balance, the advantages of the new procedure were outweighed by the disadvantages and therefore discontinued it and reverted to the earlier practice of holding a single general debate. We have, though, ensured that the Deputy Leader of the House follows up issues raised in Pre-Recess Adjournment Debates more assiduously.

7 Successes, failures and thoughts for the future

69. The Backbench Business Committee has developed good working relationships with the government and opposition Business Managers. There have been numerous occasions when both the Executive and the Shadow Executive would have preferred us not to schedule certain debates, but we have always had our allocation of time met and often exceeded. These professional relationships have allowed the Backbench Business Committee to embed itself in the wider workings of Parliament, but it will be for our successors to decide in which direction they want to take these relations. (Annex 3 to this report contains a detailed breakdown of backbench time in both the Chamber and Westminster Hall since 2010.)

70. One significant constraint on our ability to plan backbench business has been the amount of notice we are given by the Government as to which sitting days will be treated as backbench days or half-days. In our initial report in July 2010, we expressed the hope that enough notice would be given to enable us to take firm decisions on the timing of debates three or four sitting weeks in advance.⁴⁷ It rapidly became apparent that this would not be possible.

71. In practice, Government gives us a firm indication of the backbench time to be provided in a particular week on Monday or Tuesday of the preceding week. That enables us to make a determination of the backbench debates in that week at our Tuesday meeting, and announce those decisions usually later that day. Sometimes decisions are delayed awaiting the outcome of post-meeting discussions with applicant Members about the timing of debates. We aim always to have reached firm decisions by, at the latest, the time of the Leader of the House's oral business statement on Thursday morning. Often the Government will give us provisional information as to backbench time in later weeks, but this is subject to change in response to the Government's own business needs.

72. The shortness of notice of debates can make it difficult to persuade Members to take debate slots. It also creates difficulties for outside organisations and members of the public who have an interest in a debate and wish to attend, but who may not be able to make the necessary logistical arrangements at only a few days' notice. We regret these inconveniences, but, given the nature of the Government's cycle of business and the many uncertainties that arise in planning it, we understand why hitherto the Government has felt unable to give us several weeks' formal notice of available days.

73. Some Members have suggested that the Backbench Business Committee be given a set day every week to allocate. The suggestion has usually been that either Tuesdays or Wednesdays should be backbench days. This may be something our successors wish to explore further, but in our experience we have made Thursday a more interesting and

47 HC (2010-12) 334, paras 23-24

lively sitting day than it has been in recent years, with Members with a particular interest in a topic participating whilst allowing others to return to their constituencies. We have argued successfully that the Government allocate us days other than Thursday, for instance when necessary to coincide with anniversaries. We have not found Thursdays to be a problem and can see the advantages of flexibility on which day of the week to hold our debates.

74. In our April 2012 report we noted that, during session 2010-12, demand for backbench debates greatly exceeded the time available for them.⁴⁸ Since then the situation has improved, and as a general rule demand and supply have recently been more or less in balance. This has meant that during the last two sessions, almost every debate application which has satisfied our criteria (as set out in paragraph 13 above) has been successful in securing a debate.

75. However, it has not always been possible to accommodate Members' wishes over timing, and debates have sometimes been held in Westminster Hall when the original bid expressed a preference for the main Chamber, or vice versa.

76. As a Committee, we have tried to raise the status of Westminster Hall. Frequently when Members make representation to us, they say that they would like the main Chamber because Westminster Hall does not do the importance of their subject justice. We have unfortunately not succeeded in our endeavour to persuade them otherwise, and would urge our successors to keep trying. Westminster Hall is a smaller and more intimate venue and is ideal for certain debates. For instance, debates on cycling safety and on travel companies charging extra during school holidays were highly successful, well attended and received a large amount of media coverage.⁴⁹ By raising the status of Westminster Hall, we would effectively raise the status of the debates which are scheduled there and provide ourselves with a more effective additional Chamber.

77. The level of interest among the general public in the Committee's work is difficult to measure, but BBC Parliament has informed us that 330,000 people watched the backbench debate on an e-petition relating to the disclosure of documents on the Hillsborough disaster (17 October 2011), and that 480,000 people watched the debate on whether there should be a vote on EU membership (24 October 2011). These were among their highest viewing figures ever recorded.⁵⁰

48 HC (2010-12) 1926, para 21

49 See HC Deb, 23 February 2012, cols 343-98WH (cycling safety) and 24 February 2014, cols 1-38WH (school holiday pricing).

50 BBC Parliament communication to Committee secretariat

78. In Annexes 5 and 6 to this report,⁵¹ we list the applications we received and the subjects which have been debated in backbench time since 2010. Before 2010, these debates would have included regular set-pieces. These were listed in our 2010 report as follows:

- Defence–5 days
- Pre-recess adjournment debates–4 days
- Welsh affairs–1 day close to 1 March
- International Women’s Day–8 March
- Public Accounts Committee (PAC) reports–1 day (usually taken as two half days)
- European affairs–2 days before EU Council meetings
- Fisheries–1 day
- Intelligence and Security Committee reports–1 day.⁵²

79. Whilst the Backbench Business Committee has continued to schedule annual debates for Welsh affairs, International Women’s Day and fisheries, these have only come about when Members have made specific representation. These subjects have not been automatically scheduled as they would have been in the past. Without doubt, there has been a loss to the House of set-piece debates on defence, general EU issues and PAC reports since the Backbench Business Committee started its work. However, the overall range and scope of subjects is now wider and is led by the demand of backbenchers themselves.

51 [Annex 5 and 6](#)

52 HC (2010-12) 334, para 6

8 Conclusion

80. We believe that the Backbench Business Committee has made a positive difference to the work of the House. The new opportunities for self-expression by backbenchers have enlivened this Parliament and made it much more relevant to the world outside. This has benefitted not only Parliament's reputation but also the Government's decision-making, which is better for being more carefully scrutinised.

81. In conclusion, we revert to the subject of how the Government responds to backbench debates. It is damaging to the reputation both of the House and the Government if it simply ignores those debates. Expectations amongst people outside the House are raised only to be dashed. We recommend that when the House has agreed to a backbench motion, the Government should undertake to make a written ministerial statement setting out what if any action will take place in response to the House's decision. This may simply result in the restatement of the Minister's speech in the debate, but it could form part of a series of consultations or meetings with Members and others on how to carry forward action on the topic debated. At the very least, even if the Government takes no action, they will have to explain why they are taking no action.

82. We also recommend that the House's committee system, particularly the departmental select committees, should play a role in monitoring the Government's response to debates in their subject area. If a Minister makes a commitment from the despatch box, the relevant committee can follow it up during the course of their inquiries and regular sessions with Ministers. If no action follows, the original sponsoring Member or the appropriate select committee could pursue the matter by tabling another backbench motion.

Annex 1

Application form for a debate in Backbench time

The Backbench Business Committee meets in public every sitting Tuesday at 1pm to hear representations from Members for debates in backbench time. Please complete this form and email it to bbcom@parliament.uk by noon on the preceding Friday.

See notes at the end of this form for guidance on your application. For applications related to e-petitions or Select Committee Statements, please contact the Committee staff.

LEAD MEMBER/S¹

TOPIC²

MEMBERS WHO WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE DEBATE³ (see guidance overleaf; use additional sheet if necessary)

WHAT TYPE OF DEBATE ARE YOU APPLYING FOR?⁴

General debate (on a motion for the adjournment or “*That this House has considered [topic]*”)

In the Chamber

In Westminster Hall (Thurs)

In either

In Westminster Hall (Tues)

Debate on a substantive motion (expresses an opinion; can give rise to a division; Chamber only)

Draft text of substantive motion

SUGGESTED TIME TO ALLOW FOR DEBATE⁵

--

ANY FURTHER INFORMATION TO BE CONSIDERED BY THE COMMITTEE⁶ (use additional sheet if necessary)

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GUIDANCE NOTES

1. **Lead Members** are those making the application and their co-sponsors; typically one, two or three Members who will lead the debate. They should not be frontbenchers or PPSs.
2. The **topic** will be the title of the debate. It should be expressed briefly, and in neutral terms.
3. **Members who want to take part in a debate** should not be frontbenchers. Please do not copy lists of names from related EDMs or membership of APPGs—the Members listed must have explicitly given their support for this debate application. Use an additional sheet if necessary. The Committee will use the list of names to gauge the likely level of cross-party interest in a debate. (As a rough guide, a 3-hour Chamber debate would normally require at least 15 backbench speakers.)
4. **Types of debate:** A general debate is on a neutral, un-amendable motion and does not usually give rise to a division. If you are proposing a substantive motion, please feel free to contact the Clerks of the Committee for advice on wording.

On a pilot basis from January 2014, the Committee will be able to allocate one 90 minute debate each Tuesday morning in Westminster Hall, in addition to backbench time in Westminster Hall on certain Thursdays. Please include the names of supporting Members as for other types of application. As these debates are subject to the usual departmental answering rota in Westminster Hall (set out in the Announcements section of the Order Paper), an indication of the likely responding Department and the date on which the debate is sought would be helpful; these can be included in the box for any further information. Members seeking these debates should plan to attend a meeting of the Committee to present their application.
5. **Suggested time:** Typically 90 minutes, 3 hours or 6 hours (the latter represents a full day's debate in the Chamber and will only be granted if interest is likely to be exceptionally high). The time actually available on the day will depend on the discretion of the Chair, and on other business including ministerial statements and urgent questions.

6. **Additional information:** The Committee will select topics for debate based on all or some of the following criteria: topicality, the amount of time available and requested, why it is felt important for a debate to be held, when the topic was last debated (and how much interest there was on that occasion), breadth of interest across all parties, and why such a debate is unlikely to be secured through other routes.

For applications related to **e-petitions** or **select committee statements**, please contact the staff of the Committee.

Please note that the Committee is normally unable to make firm allocations of debates more than nine days in advance of the debate taking place. However, early applications are helpful, especially if you would like to express interest in a particular week or month.

CONTACT

The staff of the Committee can be contacted for any queries through bbcom@parliament.uk or on extensions 3752, 3751 or 2903.

Annex 2

E-Petitions with more than 100,000 signatures submitted through the Government website since November 2011

E-petition title	Signatures	Closing date
Protect religious slaughter in the UK and EU	134,909	30/03/2015
End non-stun slaughter to promote animal welfare	118,241	30/03/2015
Make CCTV mandatory for all slaughterhouses	110,758	30/03/2015
Harvey's Law	122,752	17/03/2015
Sophie's Choice: smear test lowered to 16	327,827	14/03/2015
No to proposed increase in fees for nurses and midwives	113,776	05/02/2015
Millie's Trust campaigns to train all nursery nurses in paediatric first aid	103,059	16/12/2014
The immediate release of Marine A	107,252	12/11/2014
End the conflict in Palestine	124,502	07/10/2014
Make Eid and Diwali public holidays	123,869	12/08/2014
Stop FGM in the UK now	110,478	16/07/2014
Ban the sale of young puppies and kittens without their mothers being present	111,571	02/05/2014
Provide more funding and awareness for pancreatic cancer to aid long overdue progress in earlier detection and, ultimately, improved survival rates	106,409	08/04/2014
Stop holiday companies charging extra in school holidays	170,929	07/03/2014
Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 - Impact assessment	134,805	15/02/2014
We call for a cumulative impact assessment of welfare reform, and a new deal for sick and disabled people based on their needs, abilities and ambitions	104,814	12/12/2013
Stop mass immigration from Bulgarian and Romanians in 2014, when EU restrictions on immigration are relaxed	153,827	12/11/2013
Save UK Justice	104,066	10/10/2013
Stop the badger cull	304,254	07/09/2013
Save children's cardiac surgery at the EMCHC at Glenfield Leicester	109,306	06/07/2013
Return Shaker Aamer to the UK	117,467	20/04/2013
Restoration of Age Related Tax Allowances	114,499	22/03/2013
West Coast Mainline franchise decision	174,578	17/02/2013
Stop the beer duty escalator	108,848	15/02/2013
Return VAT on air ambulance fuel payments	154,662	10/02/2013
The Oliver King Foundation - SADS	110,704	10/02/2013
Please bring forward Kevin Williams inquest	106,210	29/01/2013
Protect Police pensions	102,697	11/11/2012
No to 70 million	145,543	20/10/2012
Full disclosure of all government documents relating to 1989 Hillsborough disaster	156,218	09/08/2012
Cheaper petrol and diesel, by Robert Halfon MP and Fairfuel UK	148,373	05/08/2012
"Drop the Health Bill"	179,466	16/05/2012
Public and private pension increases - change from RPI to CPI	113,489	08/05/2012

Make financial education a compulsory part of the school curriculum	118,875	12/02/2012
Convicted London rioters should lose all benefits	258,276	09/02/2012
Give Kevin Williams his inquest under section 13 of the coroners Act, we have all the evidence under this section but keep getting refused	118,475	19/01/2012
Put Babar Ahmad on trial in the UK	149,470	10/11/2011

Annex 3

Applications received 2010-12 session

General debates in the Chamber	15
Chamber debates on substantive Motions	21
Westminster Hall debates (Thursdays)	7
Westminster Hall debates on e-petitions (Mondays)	6
Total number of applications	159

110 of the applications received did not specify any of the above or fit into the categories listed

Time allotted 2010-12 session

Days allotted	55.25
Debates in the Chamber	73
General debates in the Chamber	22
Debates on Motions in the Chamber	47
Select Committee Reports debated	4
Agreed on division	3
Agreed without division	34
(3) Disagreed on division	5
(4) Amendment agreed	3
(5) Amendment agreed without division	2
Total	<u>47</u>
Debates in Westminster Hall	36
Westminster Hall debates (Thursdays)	35
Westminster Hall debates on e-petitions (Mondays)	1

Applications received 2012-13 session

General debates in the Chamber	9
Chamber debates on substantive Motions	31
Westminster Hall debates (Thursdays)	5
Westminster Hall debates on e-petitions (Mondays)	3
Total number of applications	88

40 of the applications received did not specify any of the above or fit into the categories listed

Time allotted 2012-13 session

Days allotted	35.75
Debates in the Chamber	54
General debates in the Chamber	22
Debates on Motions in the Chamber	26
Select Committee Reports debated	6
Agreed on division	3
Agreed without division	20
(3) Disagreed on division	1
(5) Motion lapsed/withdrawn	1
Total	<u>26*</u>
Debates in Westminster Hall	18
Westminster Hall debates (Thursdays)	14
Westminster Hall debates on e-petitions (Mondays)	4

*One debate had a series of substantive Motions and did not fit into any of the categories listed

Applications received 2013-14 session

General debates in the Chamber	32
Chamber debates on substantive Motions	38
Westminster Hall debates (Thursdays)	3*
Westminster Hall debates on e-petitions (Mondays)	2**
Westminster Hall debates (Tuesdays)	5
Total number of applications	99

*only 3 applications specified that they were applying for a WH debate on a Thursday

**only 2 applications specified that they were applying for a WH debate on an e-petition on a Monday

19 of the applications received did not specify any of the above or fit into the categories listed

Time allotted 2013-14 session

Days allotted	41
Debates in the Chamber	80
General debates in the Chamber	45
Debates on Motions in the Chamber	23
Select Committee Reports debated	12
Agreed on division	4
Agreed without division	19
Total	23
Debates in Westminster Hall	26
Westminster Hall debates (Thursdays)	17
Westminster Hall debates on e-petitions (Mondays)	3
Westminster Hall debates recommended to the Chairman of Ways and Means	6

*This figure does not include the recommendations to the Chairman of Ways and Means for debates in Westminster Hall, the total of which is 1.5 days.

Applications received 2014-15 session

General debates in the Chamber	37
Chamber debates on substantive Motions	33
Westminster Hall debates (Thursdays)	2
Westminster Hall debates on e-petitions (Mondays)	3
Total number of applications	95

20 of the applications received did not specify any of the above or fit into the categories listed

Time allotted 2014-15 session

Days allotted	34*
Debates in the Chamber	63
General debates in the Chamber	28
Debates on Motions in the Chamber	29
Select Committee Reports debated	6
(1) Agreed without division	23
(2) Agreed on division	1
(3) Disagreed on division	1
(4) Amendment agreed	1
(5) Motion lapsed/withdrawn	3
Total	<u>29</u>
Debates in Westminster Hall	34
Westminster Hall debates (Thursdays)	14
Westminster Hall debates on e-petitions (Mondays)	8
Westminster Hall debates recommended to the Chairman of Ways and Means	12

*This figure does not include the recommendations to the Chairman of Ways and Means for debates in Westminster Hall, the total of which is 3 days.

Annex 4

Extract from Procedure Committee, Sixth Report of Session 2012-13, *Debates on Government e-Petitions in Westminster Hall*, HC 1094 (p 9):

Memorandum from the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee

Sittings in Westminster Hall (E-Petitions)

The Backbench Business Committee has reviewed the operation of the temporary change to Standing Order Nos. 10, 14 and 152J to allow the Committee to schedule debates on e-petitions between 4.30 pm and 7.30 pm on Mondays in Westminster Hall up till the end of the present Session.

Since this change came into effect last September, the Committee has scheduled four such debates on e-petitions, two of which were held in the autumn, and two of which will take place before the end of the Session.

The Committee's unanimous view was that the pilot has been a success. The level of demand for Monday debates has not been overwhelming; the Committee retains its right to assess whether particular petitions which have reached the eligibility threshold of 100,000 signatures are suitable for such a debate; and in the four cases where it has given its assent to a bid for debate, it felt that a sound case had been made that the debate would secure a good attendance by Members and be of widespread interest to the public.

The Committee would therefore support a further amendment to the relevant Standing Orders to make this change permanent. It does so on the assumption that, as was the case during the pilot, days allocated under this procedure should continue not to count towards the total of 35 backbench business days per Session provided for by Standing Order No. 14(4).

20 March 2013

Annex 5 and 6

- [Annex 5: Backbench business](#)–Applications received 2010-15 (by session)
- [Annex 6: Backbench business](#)–Debates held 2010-15 (by session)

These annexes can be found on the Committee's publication page at www.parliament.uk/bbcom.

Formal Minutes

Tuesday 17 March 2015

Members present:

Natascha Engel, in the Chair

Sir David Amess
Mr David Anderson
Bob Blackman

Mr Nigel Evans
John Hemming
Ian Mearns

Draft Special Report (*The Work of the Committee in the 2010-15 Parliament*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 31 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 32 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 13, at the end to add “Although the committee has held back an application because of opposition from a select committee chair it is the committee’s view that select committee chairs should not be able to veto the tabling of motions affecting their committees and such a decision by the committee should not be taken in the future.”.—(*John Hemming*.)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 1
John Hemming

Noes, 5
Sir David Amess
Mr David Anderson
Bob Blackman
Mr Nigel Evans
Ian Mearns

Paragraph agreed to.

Paragraph 33 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 4, at the end to add “In those circumstances, or where an application for debate on an Instruction to an existing committee had been made, we would also normally seek the views of the existing committee’s chair, and take those into account along with other relevant factors, before making our decision on the application.”.—(*The Chair*.)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 5	Noes, 1
Sir David Amess	John Hemming
Mr David Anderson	
Bob Blackman	
Mr Nigel Evans	
Ian Mearns	

Question put, That the paragraph, as amended, be agreed to.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 5	Noes, 1
Sir David Amess	John Hemming
Mr David Anderson	
Bob Blackman	
Mr Nigel Evans	
Ian Mearns	

Paragraphs 34 to 82 read and agreed to.

Annexes and Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Special Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[The Committee adjourned.]