

PARLIAMENT 2020: VISIONING THE FUTURE PARLIAMENT

Report on the UK Parliament Focus Groups

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Acknowledgements

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The authors are grateful to Professor David Gauntlett, University of Westminster and Paul Bowers, UK Parliament for their support and assistance with the project and to all the participants for their time and contributions. Thanks also go to Daniel Baldwin and Virginia Gibbons for their assistance and support.

This research was supported by the Group on Information for the Public, UK Parliament.

Cover image: Taken from the first-time voter focus groups, the meaning of this image is described on page 7.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parliament 2020 is a multi-country visioning exercise undertaken to discover how new and emergent technologies are being or could be used to transform the processes of Parliament and, in particular, its relationship with the public. In the UK part of the project, we undertook a number of semi-structured discussions through face-to-face focus groups with stakeholders from Parliament (including officials and parliamentarians) and the public. The aim was to find out what these different groups thought a Parliament of the future might look like and how new digital media might affect and influence the way that citizens engage and communicate with Parliament and MPs – and vice versa. The focus of this project was not on the technology; rather it sought to identify how digital technologies might support new models for democratic engagement and improve parliamentary procedures to increase transparency and accountability. The project also sought to identify what the barriers to implementing these might be.

The three focus groups make it clear that Parliament is an important institution with a large number of roles to fulfil. Also obvious is that there are an even larger number of perspectives, needs and groups to navigate and satisfy in delivering these roles. As this report was being written a sea-change in British politics was occurring with numerous scandals over MPs' expenses claims, the first resignation of a Speaker of the House of Commons in 300 years and the election of a new Speaker by secret ballot. Unlike most political scandals, more than individuals' reputations were at stake; the whole political system is now subject to a level of interest and scrutiny not seen before and this includes the inner workings of Parliament. This turbulent period for British politics indicates a real need to reform the workings of Parliament to avoid damaging democracy and the political system irreparably and further disengaging the electorate.

What the findings from our research show are that, whilst officials and politicians may be trying to work towards the same end, they do not perhaps have the most effective channels of communication. This results in a deficit of understanding about what each other needs and where Parliament as an institution should be heading. The officials provide what they think the Members want but not all Members have the same needs. How can they satisfy the majority of Members' needs whilst also improving the accountability and transparency of the institution to satisfy the public?

The remit of this project does not include constitutional elements such the voting system, reform of the House of Lords or a Bill of Rights but focuses on the internal workings of Parliament which provide their own challenges and are now in the limelight more than ever. Internal parliamentary reforms may be controversial and difficult for parts of the institution

to accept but if ever there was a time to address structural issues now is it - when constitutional reform at Westminster is very much on the agenda, the turnover of MPs at the next election is likely to be much larger than in previous elections and the focus is on how such an old and antiquated institution can adequately serve the needs of its citizens and members in the 21st century.

There are several key themes to emerge from the focus groups. Areas where the groups mostly agreed on the importance of an issue to improving Parliament were the greater use of new technologies and proactive engagement with the public (as opposed to simply providing information and relying on the public to come to Parliament to find it). On other issues there was disagreement to the extent that an issue was important or even on that group’s radar. The table below shows the key themes that emerged from the focus groups and shows the importance attached by the different sectors surveyed¹. Areas where the groups mostly agreed on the importance of an issue to improving Parliament were: the greater use of new technologies and proactive engagement with the public (as opposed to simply providing information and relying on the public to come to Parliament to find it). On every other issue there was disagreement to the extent that an issue was important or even on that group’s radar.

Issues	MPs and Peers	Parliamentary officials	First time voters
Greater use of new technologies	☆☆☆	☆☆	☆☆☆
Modernising procedures	☆☆☆	☆	-
Interactive communication	☆☆	☆☆	☆☆☆
Educating the public/outreach	☆	☆☆	☆☆☆
Diversity of representatives	-	-	☆☆☆
Proactive engagement	☆	☆☆	☆☆
Access to information	☆☆☆	☆☆☆	☆
Understandable language	☆☆	-	☆☆☆
Transparent and accountable	-	-	☆☆☆

Key:
 ☆☆☆ Crucial
 ☆☆ Important
 ☆ Unimportant/low priority
 - Not mentioned

¹ Note that omission of a theme by one particular group does not mean that the topic was not important to them, merely that it did not get referenced in the context of the focus group.

The first-time voters prioritised Parliament coming to engage them - whether this was physically through MPs going to visit school children or using methods of communication that the public are already familiar with such as TV or YouTube - as well as improving the interactive nature of representation. This group was also very interested in finding the 'human' element of their representatives and wanted to identify with them. They wanted to feel as if MPs came from their community, were 'real' and were practising what they preached. This group prioritised trust through increasing the links between MPs and their constituents as well as improving the transparency and accountability of their representatives. Both internal groups were interested in two-way engagement but it is clear that they still have a long way to go before the public recognises that Parliament has moved away from the traditional 'broadcast mode' in other Hansard Society research. MPs and Peers, seemed very interested in modernising procedures and using new technology to make parliamentary processes more efficient and understandable for those both within and outside Parliament. The same strong interest in process improvement was common amongst officials as was a clear feeling that they were there to serve Members and would take their lead from them regarding any changes that were to be made to modernise the way Parliament works.

The report provides 21 recommendations to refine and improve how Parliament communicates and engages with the public, the technology and information that support this work and the procedures around how Parliament works. These focus on modernising an institution that is steeped in tradition but sometimes constrained by its own history and culture and in doing so suggest how Parliament can provide information in more understandable and usable formats, harness the potential of new technologies and better engage the public.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the internet and mobile technologies has created a paradigm shift in terms of how we communicate with each other and convene our lives. As Hansard Society research shows², Parliament is not immune to this and the benefits of new information and communication technologies (ICT) to elected representatives, their constituents and to the wider democratic process are increasingly well documented. It is now much easier to get in touch, keep in touch, research and campaign. It is far easier to bring issues to the public's attention – although, perhaps ironically, it is harder to maintain topical interest – and to connect with like-minded individuals. This instant society places new expectations on politicians; citizens increasingly expect them to be accessible, available and responsive.

This project is a visioning exercise designed to identify how new and emergent technologies can be used to transform the processes of Parliament and its relationship with the public. To do this, the project undertook a number of semi-structured discussions through face-to-face focus groups with a range of stakeholders. This project aimed to find out what different groups of people think a Parliament of the future might look like and how new digital media might affect and influence the way that citizens engage and communicate with Parliament and MPs. The focus of this project is not on the technology, rather it seeks to identify how digital technologies might support new models for democratic engagement and improve parliamentary procedures to increase transparency and accountability. It also seeks to identify what the barriers to implementing these might be.

The next section of this document will describe the methodology used for the research and the make-up of the focus groups. The sections that follow describe the findings of the three focus groups - the first-time voters group, the parliamentary officials group and the parliamentarians group. The findings are then summarised and recommendations provided.

METHODOLOGY

Data for the project was collected through three focus groups held with key stakeholders of Parliament; the public, parliamentarians and officials working in Parliament. The purpose of this was to get a variety of different perspectives on where Parliament was currently failing these groups and how it might improve this in the future. This research focused on internal procedural reforms rather than reforms of the parliamentary system more generally.

² Williamson, A. (2009). MPs online: Connecting with constituents. London: Hansard Society
Williamson, A. (2009). Digital citizens and democratic participation. London: Hansard Society

Focus groups do not need to be statistically representative but should be selected using a considered sampling approach; in this instance a ‘purposive sampling’ technique was used, whereby the participants were selected based on the researcher’s prior knowledge of them, their proximity and availability (accepting that only a small sample of the group will be involved in the focus group). The individual focus groups are described below.

First-time voters

This focus group was made up of first-year media students from the University of Westminster. They were chosen because the 18-24 year age group is consistently shown to be disengaged from formal political structures³ and their perspective on how Parliament should change to reconnect with their peer group was considered valuable. Due to a likely lack of interest or knowledge about politics or Parliament, this focus group was conducted in a different way from the others, using the Lego Serious Play™ methodology⁴. This is an innovative, experiential process that allows participants to develop, in this case, their ideal Parliament through metaphor (literally by making metaphorical models using Lego and through discussion of the resultant models). It was felt that this would make it easier for the participants to express themselves about this topic and also ensure the data collected was high-quality.

In-Parliament focus groups

Data collection from parliamentarians and officials was conducted using a traditional focus group method. These took the form of one-hour, semi-structured focus groups designed to identify and examine the general themes of engagement, communication and technology. Whilst a high-level question pro-forma was developed, it was not rigidly applied, allowing the discussion in the group to flow. Parliamentary officials were recruited through contacts within Parliament. The invitation list was developed to include a range of levels of seniority, experience and roles. The parliamentarians were recruited via an email invitation sent to 461 MPs and 192 Peers. This led to a balanced focus group of 21 parliamentarians that included a mix of ages, genders and representation by party and location (e.g. urban versus rural):

Party	MPs	Peers
Conservative	3	3
Crossbench	-	5
Labour	3	2
Liberal Democrat	2	2
Scottish Nationalist	1	-

³ Hansard Society. (2009). Audit of Political Engagement 6. London: Hansard Society.

⁴ More at www.seriousplay.com

To assist analysis, an audio recording was made of each of the focus groups and, in addition, the first-time voter's focus group was video recorded as well.⁵ Audio and video were analysed in depth to identify emergent themes and areas of connection and disconnection between the disparate groups.

FOCUS GROUP 1: FIRST-TIME VOTERS

This focus group was made up of eight first-year media students from the University of Westminster with varying levels of political knowledge and interest. Parliament and how it works was a subject that they were unlikely to feel comfortable talking about in a traditional focus group so the research was conducted using 'Lego Serious Play'. This research method encourages participants to visualise their thoughts in Lego and allows more complex or daunting topics to be discussed in a less formal way, with ideas explored over a longer period.



After some introductory exercises, looking at the individual group members' feelings about politics and politicians, the main group was split into three smaller groups containing two or three people. Each group was then asked to build a representation of their ideal Parliament, thinking about the features it would have and the ways it would carry out its three main tasks: representing the public, checking on Government and passing laws. Once the models had been built, each group was asked to explain what their models represented and how their Parliament would carry out the functions effectively.

The groups were then asked to continue to build on the model they had already made and explore how their Parliament would communicate and connect with the public. Each group explained how their model would carry out these tasks. The groups then merged their separate Parliaments into one large model of Parliament. This allowed for extensive group discussions and disagreement about what could be included in the Parliament and why.

⁵ A short video of the highlights of this is available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_OH1oSyGhg

Finally the group was asked to think about how its model would cope with a variety of scenarios that might test its capacity to fulfil its remit effectively.

Initial thoughts about politics and politicians

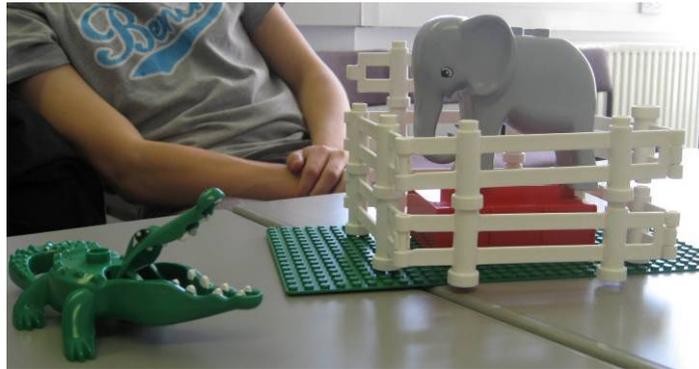
As a warm-up exercise and to get participants used to building in metaphors, each participant was asked to build a model that represented their views about politics and politicians. Two of the models are chosen and the explanations discussed below to show these initial perceptions.

This model represented confusion about politics:



The participant explained that the Lego men standing on each corner of the model showed the polarisation of politicians from one another. They all had different, inter-changeable heads because they were perceived to be two-faced and readily changed their opinions. The model is packed with objects in a chaotic manner. This represents the instability of politics and the likelihood that it is liable to fall apart at any minute. The model was placed on wheels to represent the speed at which politics moves and to reflect the participant's inability to keep up with it.

The second model represented the impenetrability of politics:



The participant explained that politics was like a desert island and that, to get there, the people had to swim through crocodile-infested waters, climb over a high fence and deal with an elephant before getting to the red box that represented politics and Government. The red box contained skeletons, representing the people that work in politics as being 'old and dead'. The participant described himself as an outsider from the political world and said that getting involved in politics was like 'mission impossible'.

Visioning an ideal Parliament

The second part of this exercise involved participants working in groups and asking each group to visualise what their ideal Parliament would look like.

Group 1



In this model, Parliament was described as an island that was accessible to citizens via a speed boat. The boat actively went out and brought the people to the island so they did not have to struggle to find their way to Parliament. This follows on from the previous model that described politics as a desert island that was almost impenetrable and suggests how such a space can be opened up to make it more accessible and friendly to citizens. Citizens were guided around the

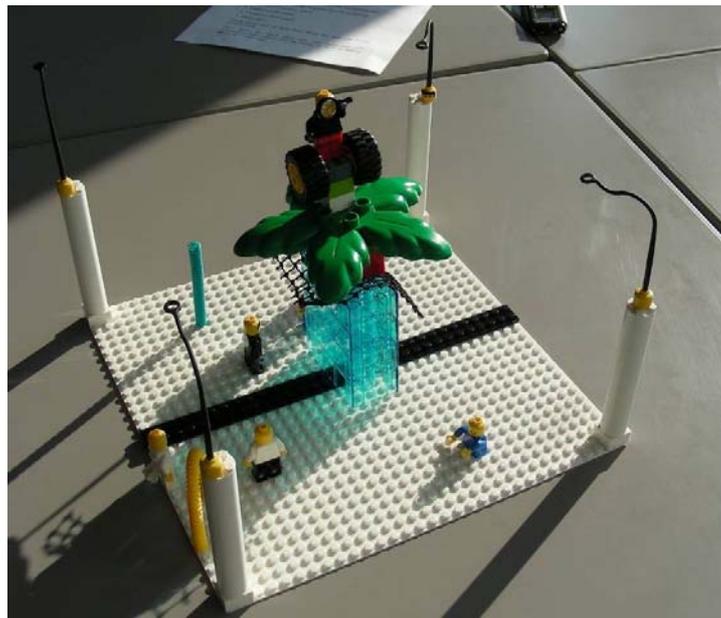
Parliament by representatives who carried their problems, leaving citizens free to engage with all the 'good stuff' in Parliament. Parliamentary representatives were there to

help people... like customer service... like big businesses have customer service people.

The public were able to discuss their issues with Government through parliamentary representatives who informed them and answered their questions. Laws and policy were always decided by more than one person in order to ensure a diversity of opinion and views were included in these processes. In the model above, these are represented by one older, wiser person with lots of experience and one young person, whom it was thought would be creative in imagining policy and able to look to the future.

Innovation was seen to be vitally important for Parliament and is also represented by the younger character. The giraffe is intentionally standing at the centre of the island as it represents oversight of the entire project and there is a ladder placed on its back (obscured in the photograph above) that allows all citizens to oversee everything that is going on in Parliament and to be involved in checking on Government whenever they want.

Group 2



This model represents a Parliament that is very open – there are no doors so it is accessible to the public, who, in turn, are themselves also a part of the parliamentary process as active citizens. This Parliament is built on solid and stable foundations and is designed to accommodate many views, ideologies, parties and backgrounds – represented in the model by the five-pronged leaf. This is also a metaphor for those representing different views and people being able to communicate and work together.

The antennas on the corner posts garner information from the public so that Parliament is constantly updated and aware of their concerns. Parliament is able to understand people's

problems and can then go about fixing them. The heads under the antennas are described as 'the watchdogs' of Parliament and democracy. Government is represented by transparent blocks and is

open and honest, so you can see what they're doing.

The wheels represent the flexibility required to adapt to a constantly changing society such that Parliament and the laws it makes are able to change with time. The leader has a magnifying glass, representing wisdom and watchfulness. The leader has also been placed on top of the variety of views, on the one hand as a unifying figurehead but also as a reminder that they must listen to all those views when making decisions. The net represents a safety net and always having a 'plan b' in case something does not work as expected.

Group 3



Parliament again was described as having a sturdy base, which makes it trustworthy and reliable. The cog represents the system being reliable – working like clockwork. There is a group of three leaders, the intention being that no one person holds all the power and the odd number avoids a tie in any disagreement. Those in power look the same to represent equality.

An antenna allows communication and Government is transparent as the leadership can be looked at through a window and monitored on a TV. This also means that every citizen is responsible for checking what Parliament and Government does. Power is represented by a pylon that gives power to the whole country, not just to some parts of it.

Communicating and connecting with the public

Group 1



This group added an extra piece of land to their original model representing the 'real world' and 'normal people's lives'. They wanted politicians to be shown going about their daily lives to emphasise they are the same as other citizens and to check they were

acting out their policies.

This led onto politicians' private lives being highlighted:

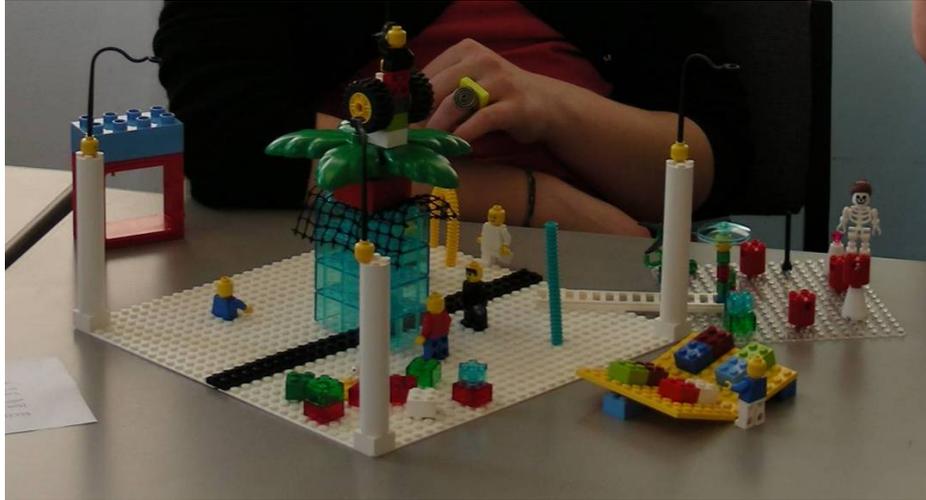
If you see a politician partying you're more likely to relate to him because that's what we do.

There were more links between the two islands representing politics and the 'real world' through boats and bridges. These also represented online technology, TV and communication between the two different worlds. Whales around the islands represented the myriad of ways that communication could happen through more innovative and radical methods, such as Twitter.

Effective use of communication technology was seen to enhance the image of politics, the group cited Barack Obama as an example of a politician who was able to be seen simultaneously as an ordinary person and a serious politician. The current situation of political disengagement and disenfranchisement was seen to be unable to get any worse as,

politicians are seen as untrustworthy... basically cheaters and liars... if we can show who they really are we might start trusting them more and be more interested in how our lives are involved in politics.

Group 2



The second group wanted to implement an education programme to raise public knowledge about politics and suggest that this should occur from an early age. This way, they argued, political understanding becomes part of young people's culture and it would then be seen as normal to be involved in politics throughout their lives. Political education, it was suggested, needs to be mandatory from an early age and a language should be created especially for children to make politics more playful and engaging. Young people do not generally stumble across political information on the internet and, even if they do,

the language used is very bureaucratic and vanishes people away.

The playground represents making politics more colourful and fun for children as well as connecting young people and schools with politics and Parliament, enabling them to be active citizens. Politics should be more understandable for everyone:

Some things need to be mandatory... if there were... people chosen, like a jury, to be there, to be present and contribute as sometimes the people that are not interested can make the best contributions.

Group 3



Group 3 also thought it was important that there was education about politics and that this needed to be compulsory from an early age, so that politics is something young people take for granted:

I regret not being made to learn anything about [politics].

Politicians need to speak more directly to children and young people, starting from an early age, and inform them about politics. Learning about politics needs to be gradual so children do not become overwhelmed and uninterested. Communicating through television was suggested and the group proposed that short slots of information about politics could be delivered in between programmes, preferably using celebrities (particularly comedians), such as Stephen Fry or David Mitchell.

Combining all the visions of Parliament

Politics and real life need to be brought more closely together and become accessible to everyone. The ideal Parliament is one based on strong foundations, representing stability. The leader is on a transparent base that represents keeping the public up-to-date with what politicians are doing, why and how. The safety net represents the fallback position but also thinking about the consequences of policy before it is introduced into law. Political parties need to be seen to build relationships based on compromise and contribute to Parliament; however, the groups felt that there should be one figurehead with the wisdom and the knowledge to look to the future. The Parliament itself as an institution must always be listening to the public and understanding their views through a process of constant dialogue.

Schools and education programmes should inform children about politics with politicians as the teachers. A new language should be used to explain politics and help people engage and understand Parliament. TV should be a symbol of politicians' presence in everyday life

explaining what they are doing with the public's money on a regular basis. Celebrity popularity should be used to make politics more accessible and interesting for everyone.

Key themes from first-time voters

Emergent from the focus group of first-time voters are five key themes:

- Communication
- Education
- Consensus and representation
- Transparency and openness
- Trust

These are discussed below.



Communication

Communication was a central theme running through all the Parliaments. Parliament had to listen to the public and incorporate their feelings into how it was run, as well as explaining to citizens what they were doing on a regular basis. It was clear from the examples given that communication would have to be carried out on the public's terms and in a format that they were comfortable and familiar with. New and innovative ways of communicating were valued, and Parliament reaching out to the public and actively drawing citizens in was seen as an important way of doing this.

Education

Education was also suggested by the groups as an important way of getting citizens involved in the political system. Mandatory education about politics from a young age was something that might not have been popular with children but was seen as necessary and would keep citizens interested in the political system and engaged in politics throughout their lives. Politicians

having some involvement in the teaching of children about politics was seen as a good way to implement political education. There was also a need expressed for talking about politics in a more playful way to engage children and young people as well as creating a new language to discuss politics that could be more easily understood by everyone.

Consensus and representation

All the groups included ways of working that highlighted the varied perspectives that make up politics and the wide array of viewpoints that should be included in an effective Parliament. Both those with power and those feeding into the process of making laws should be numerous and from varied backgrounds. Some of the groups chose a leader as a 'figurehead' but even then this person was obliged to consult with others and to take into account a number of different views. Citizens were also given the opportunity to feed their thoughts into the process by asking questions and being active citizens involved in the processes of governing.

Transparency and openness

Transparency and openness were central and being able to see what Government was doing at all times was highlighted as crucial in all the Parliaments. Being able to see that the politicians were acting out and feeling the impact of their own policies in their everyday lives was also mentioned as being important and grounding them within the citizenry. Being able to see representatives as 'normal' human beings that didn't live in a different world to other citizens was an important part of politics and was thought to create more trust and respect for political representatives.

Trust

Trust can be identified as a unifying outcome of the four previously described themes within the context of political systems. Through giving people adequate education to understand, challenge and support the political system, trust was created. Likewise, by communicating regularly what was happening in Parliament in a way that was accessible and understandable to the public, and allowing citizens to view a process that was open and transparent, trust was also created. By taking decisions in a collective way and by involving as many different viewpoints and people as possible, power was seen to be held more accountable and trust in the system and political representatives was created.

FOCUS GROUP 2: PARLIAMENTARY OFFICIALS

The second focus group was made up of 12 officials working in Parliament in a variety of capacities and levels of seniority. They are involved in various roles within Parliament dealing with parliamentary procedures, management, information technology or outreach. The discussion focused on these areas of work – particularly how Parliament might change and

adapt to deal with issues arising around these functions in the future, as well as the current challenges and opportunities for those working within Parliament.

Parliament is a unique organisation which has a number of specific issues that stem from the fact that it has a lot of history and a lot of 'political baggage' which can sometimes make change more difficult to implement, as well as meaning that there is not always a consistent strategic direction. The big challenges for how Parliament works, now and in the future, were drawn out in this focus group and place the rest of the discussions in context.

Structural challenges for Parliament

Parliament has a variety of roles that can sometimes pull in different directions; supporting Members, communicating the work of Parliament to the public, informing, educating and engaging citizens.

[Parliament] doesn't have a single institutional point of view

This can make external communications more challenging.

Parliament is not able to independently decide its own direction and working practices but relies on Members to make decisions on how it works. This can be problematic because Members are not a homogenous group and do not agree on how this should be done.

Parliamentary staff are acutely aware that they must always carefully negotiate 'internal politics'. Whilst it was seen as tempting to privilege certain issues or debates because they would be more engaging for the public, doing so would be problematic and would be controversial internally. Equal treatment of Members, issues and debates was seen as important.

Everything is political here it's not straight forward... information... is a tool for politicians to use against each other.

There was a perceived lack of understanding of the role of Parliament (both internally and externally) and where it sits in relation to the public. Should Parliament be another voice within civil society or does it sit outside as an observer of civil society in a parallel sphere? This impacts on what the primary focus and work of Parliament should be.

Departments operate in separate silos generally not sharing their expertise, something that the focus group saw as undesirable. It was suggested that increased collaboration through linked up working and sharing expertise were valued but don't happen automatically.

Our legacy is information silos – we've got hundreds of them all over the department not linked together.

Communication and Information

One of the primary problems when communicating with the public was a lack of understanding of who Parliament is actually talking to.

We don't really know who the punter is and we're trying to guess what they might want and to that extent we always seem to be a bit behind the curve.

Parliament was seen as good at communicating with those already interested but not so good at communicating with those who are not interested or don't know if they're interested. An 'arm's length' approach to communicating was preferred in certain projects or areas, as it can allow more radical or experimental projects to be realised without Parliament having to shoulder all the risks initially.

Parliament was seen as good at 'broadcasting' itself but it doesn't always market or promote itself enough – you need to know the information exists or be interested in the first place. Two-way communication with the public was seen as more challenging, in particular providing information that resonated with the public and was seen as relevant to them.

The relevance of the work that goes on here is not communicated... effectively to the public.

The public are often put off by 'politics' but are interested and engaged with issues. The key is showing how those issues are connected with Parliament or how they are relevant to the public. Highlighting debates and parliamentary business through themes – particularly on the website – was seen as a way of drawing people in through search engines and links about the topic as opposed to the process.

Another key issue was the sheer amount of information Parliament produces in a number of competing places.

There is so much information and it's so diffuse...two different Houses, you've got Hansard, the television channels, the committee reports etc... how do you find what you're interested in?

There is no sense of central guidance, priorities or joined-up working in communicating the work of Parliament across the Houses and committees. Lots of parts of Parliament are trying to communicate their own areas effectively but without linking to other areas trying to do the same:

There are lots of little bits of the place that are trying to communicate...each individual select committee is trying to communicate as effectively as it can to its own interest group and more widely but you don't really work across select committees as a whole.

It was felt that the traditional media does not help Parliament to be seen as a relevant and useful organisation. Key and core messages and strategies for the different parts of

Parliament's external communications are crucial. Getting these messages out is the challenge but all media – new and traditional – need to be used to disseminate the key messages. Parliament is also needed to explain the basics of how Parliament works as the traditional media does not pick up on it.

Connecting with people through communications was seen as the primary issue. An example of this is that many of the services Parliament provides are over-subscribed – showing that they can be of interest to the public if framed in the right way.

It's a question of relevance... What does Parliament do for me? I think that's what we need to clarify because on the physical side of things – the lobbying, the physical protests on Parliament square, the historical tours, the educational visits – they're all massively over-subscribed... it's how we connect with people... we need to try and get into that psyche of how we can be more relevant.

Engagement

It was accepted that in order to engage a broader range of people, information had to be pushed out through other means that the public were already engaged with, rather than expecting them to come to Parliament or the parliamentary website. Collecting data in a way that other organisations could use and communicate to their networks on behalf of Parliament was seen as a crucial way of engaging a broader range of people with it.

Often an initial misunderstanding of what Parliament does can fuel disengagement with it. Making clear exactly what Parliament does is important to engaging people with the institution so education and outreach work can be a good starting point for engagement.

The public does find the party political system in this country off-putting... Parliament in people's minds is connected with the party political system.

In engaging the public, it was seen as vital to emphasise the two-way nature of Parliament, its relevance to the public and the fact that it does not take place in a vacuum. It was suggested that people do not realise they can use Parliament to address issues that they are interested in – and that once citizens do realise that they can engage with Parliament, they are more interested in doing so.

There are many routes to influencing Parliament but they are not always seen to be communicated to the public well enough.

I wonder whether it's sufficiently well understood and communicated that actually everyone can communicate with their own MP even if their MP is not of a party that they would ever have voted for.

The value and profitability of engaging with Parliament was also seen to be important. People would not invest time in a process they felt had little influence or where the outcome was not

clear – the Downing Street petitions website was given as an example of where the point of engaging was insufficiently clear. It was suggested that engagement needed to be ‘personalised’ and dependent on the issue(s) involved. Not all issues would benefit or be successfully addressed by using the same forms of engagement. How to engage with Parliament effectively to get the outcome that you want needs to be better communicated.

People won’t necessarily know what process they’re interested in... we can try and say if you’re interested in this sort of issue that’s the route in... trying to put our energy and their energy into things which are actually going to have some sort of a use rather than things which may just run into the sand in the end.

There was also concern that some Members did not see engagement as Parliament’s job independently of them. Should engagement be only or primarily through representatives or does Parliament as an institution have a role to play in engaging the public as well?

Digital technology

Digital technology was seen to play a big part in the Parliament of the future but there were concerns that Parliament was years behind where it should be in its take-up of new digital technologies. It was felt that this needed to be remedied in order to enable Parliament to use new technologies better in the future. Parliamentary procedures were not seen to be that difficult to include new technology in, but there are gate-keepers in certain departments that may not let other parts of Parliament have access to certain information or processes that might be necessary to embed new technologies.

As mentioned previously, collecting data in standardised formats and making this data widely available was seen as a crucial way of improving the reach of Parliament’s website through viral networks. Similarly the re-designed website approaches the organisation of information differently which it’s hoped will have a broader appeal. It attempts to editorialise Parliament, using news and specific issue areas to emphasise relevance and draw people in from other websites. Making links between Parliament and the issues of interest to the general public was seen as vital to improved communication. Thematic searches not just for the progress of a bill but the topic and contents were seen as a good way to do this for business currently going through Parliament. As well as providing information thematically there was an understanding that the public may want information organised geographically as well. It was also suggested that links to other levels of governance, for example the European Union or local authorities, would be more efficient and may increase understanding with the public about which body has power over which issues.

The [direct.gov.uk](https://www.direct.gov.uk) model was suggested as a good way to bring all online resources across Parliament, Government, local and regional levels together. Also, giving greater information about where bills start and end was seen as a good way to inform the public about procedure through issues they may be interested in or have heard about in the media:

The life of a piece of legislation starts way before it comes into Parliament... then there's the issue of post legislative scrutiny about what happens to a bill after it's been passed. That might be something we could improve on linking up... linking more closely with the over-arching story of how the legislation travels.

Linking between different departments and issues, as well as processes, was seen as important to avoid duplication of work and fully take advantage of the expertise within Parliament. Technology exists to allow greater collaboration but Parliament doesn't currently have the correct tools, it is

still stuck in a word processing age rather than a collaboration age and we need to make that leap.

As was mentioned earlier, one effect of shifting from information-based processes to processes based on workflow is to bring information together in one place, which was seen as a useful and necessary development for the future.

Online versus offline

There was seen to be a cultural shift needed to allow Parliament to more fully embrace new technologies. Printed resources were privileged over online resources with offline still provided first and online resources seen as an added extra if there were the time and resources available. Offline and online resources are not automatically linked and therefore expertise in some areas is lost. Offline resources were privileged because this is what officials thought Members expected and demanded. Switching from wholly offline to wholly online resources was not possible as it was thought many Members would cease to function in that environment. Parliament has a tradition in print and the offline is therefore privileged over the online:

Paper is the core bits of information that we're using and it always has to take priority. You have to get the basic stuff done first... we can't jump into every new technology that comes along if we don't have the resources for it.

Processes such as petitioning and lobbying are still not available online although the reach of Parliament would be improved by also providing them in this format. It's not clear why this is the case. As with any discussion of online technology, there is still the need to provide offline materials in order not to disadvantage those without digital access.

Resources

Parliament was not seen as opposed to new technologies but certain projects were not sufficiently bought into to allow them to go ahead, due mostly to having to update technology regularly and therefore commit significant resources in the long term. An example of this is a pilot project to introduce PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants) to Parliament which was not taken up purely due to budgetary constraints as it needs ongoing investment to keep technology up-to-date.

Security

The security of information was also seen as a key issue, due to worries that digitisation and the centralising of information could potentially increase the risk of leaks and cyber-attacks. There was also a concern expressed that even simple administrative functions could be politically sensitive for Members.

FOCUS GROUP 3: PARLIAMENTARIANS

The focus group was attended by 21 MPs and Peers from across the political spectrum:

Party	MPs	Peers
Conservative	3	3
Crossbench	-	5
Labour	3	2
Liberal Democrat	2	2
Scottish Nationalist	1	-

As was seen in the parliamentary officials' focus group, the structure of Parliament was quickly identified as problematic and leading to issues of communication and engagement with the public being more difficult to address than the participants felt they should be. The challenges facing Parliament as an organisation include:

- **Disagreement about what the role of Parliament was and should be**, as an institution separate to MPs and Peers.
- **Concerns about how much Parliament should be marketing itself** to the public and how democratic it was to attempt to engage people pro-actively as opposed to simply providing information for people to access if they wished.
- **How much do people want to engage with an institution?** The individuals that make up Parliament might be its most effective conduit for engagement with the public.

Process and Procedure

It was agreed that although there was disengagement with the political process, many people are interested in politics and what happens in Parliament when it relates to issues they care about. Allowing the public to more easily find out about the areas they are interested in was seen as a key way of engaging more people with Parliament, but would need some significant changes in the way information is collected and provided. Bills were a particular focus as they provide a point for the public to lobby Parliament before legislation has been completed. Many Members thought that the procedures and information around the passage of a bill were too hard to understand:

many people are interested just in one particular bill or one issue in one bill... it's very hard to see what points to influence anything from and you even have to know the technical name of the bill... there's no easy way to find out what we're doing.

Parliament was seen to be particularly poor at providing details of its current business in an understandable way:

There are plenty of people interested in the issues we're discussing... its almost impossible for them to work out when it's being debated, how it's being debated and, if they do find it, what the hell is going on, it's incomprehensible to outsiders.

It was suggested that the public have greater interest in the often more controversial or current private members' bills and less in the Government bills. The outcome of a debate or lobbying process was seen to be more important to the public than simply having their voice heard or being involved - so informing people about how they can *effectively* influence the outcome of a political process is crucial.

It was felt that the public only engage with Parliament as a last resort when they feel the executive is taking too much control over an issue they feel strongly about, yet feel powerless to effect any significant change, for example, smoking legislation.

Parliament is not regarded as a driver of the legislation but there's a bit of hope that if you lobby enough you might stop some of the idiocies in [the legislation]... if Parliament can reassert through its backbenchers some control over the worst excesses of the Ministers... I think this will revitalise the whole issue.

E-petitions were suggested as a potentially good mechanism for engaging people with the processes of Parliament, particularly as this is just an electronic version of a process that is already in place. However, it was suggested that Government was put off by the price of e-petitions as it was proposed by the Procedure Committee in their inquiry into the issue:

They wanted a Rolls Royce for five bob... if we are serious about it then we can do it but we need to resource it properly.

There was also concern that this sort of system may simply engage the 'usual suspects', the well-resourced and the 'single-issue fanatics', as the Downing Street petitions website was seen by some commentators to have done.

The cost of politics and Parliament was seen to be an issue in the current economic and political climate, and perhaps a factor in holding back modernisation and improvements in parliamentary procedures. It was agreed that the important thing to focus on was value, that Parliament should be improved and modernised but not necessarily made cheaper. New

technologies like email and social networking increase work loads and more resources are needed to support new ways of working:

We're selling ourselves short by imagining we can have 21st century democracy with 19th century costs, it's a completely self defeating argument that the more we repeat it the less respect the public have for us.

Engagement and Information

There was disagreement about whether Parliament should actually try to reach out to engage the public, if this was their role and if this was actually democratic when there is so much information available if people want to find it:

a lot of parliamentary material is passive, it's put online and is available if people want to access it.

Some MPs thought that showing Parliament in a good light and supporting democracy (as parliamentary engagement was seen to be doing) included value judgements and was therefore a different function to the role of providing information and access to parliamentary material, which should be value neutral. There was also concern that some legislation may be very important and necessary but not all that interesting or engaging to the public. It was felt this kind of legislation must not be sidelined for the 'sexier' topics. Discussions about engagement revolved around two key questions:

Should Parliament allow people to find them or to seek the people out?

Are people not interested in politics because they're fairly content with how it works?

However, mechanisms to alert people to the subjects they're interested in and when related debates would be happening in Parliament was seen as useful to engage and inform people, regardless of wider debates on engagement. The civil society engagement website theyworkforyou.com was mentioned as a helpful tool to alert people to certain debates, although the audience was seen to be made up of people that were already interested in politics. The need to index debates better and tag them with keywords online where they can be easily searched, was seen as important to allow people to find information on topics they're interested in. The advantage of web2.0 is that you can provide people with information that they're interested in very specific terms but Parliament needs to decide to set their processes up in a way that allows this to happen

you can actually break [the information] all down and you can give people the bits they're interested in if we only package it in a way that is accessible to them and accessible to those media and we just don't do that at the moment.

People's attention spans were seen to be getting shorter and the media was seen as necessary to package and mediate what is said in Parliament and provide it in an accessible way. All the

mediums available to do this should be used to have the maximum impact. Those mentioned as being particularly useful or popular with the public included; Youtube, Facebook and Wikipedia. Wikipedia was seen as especially useful due to its voluntary and collaborative nature and the way it

aspires to package complex information in really comprehensible and easy to grasp ways... so we need to provide content for that kind of medium in a way that's accessible.

Information should be produced to fit in with these kinds of formats and allow them, as tools people already use and are familiar with, to engage and inform people about Parliament.

Communication

It was mentioned that you can't really talk about 'the public' as there are many different publics with different needs and communication preferences. However, the way Parliament communicates currently was not seen to engage many people

It's one thing to just speak words and if no-one understands them is that really communication?

The traditional and archaic language used in Parliament was seen as a barrier to good communication and it was considered to be totally incomprehensible to most people:

There are aspects of the way we go about things that leave people completely befuddled... when some junior whip stands up in Westminster Hall and the person in the Chair has to call the 'Prime Minister' people just don't understand... this sort of gobbledegook, I think, turns people off.

The culture of Parliament and how this is displayed to the public through the media was seen to be a serious barrier to good communication and understanding. Representatives come into Parliament as normal people and become taken over by the tradition which does not help get the right messages across:

People come into the place... talking normally and gradually are worn down into using this impenetrable language... most listeners wouldn't know where the 'other place' was. Are we talking about Bognor or what?!

One of the members of the focus group suggested that Parliament being more professionalised and understanding its audience in a media driven age was no bad thing. MPs are increasingly media savvy or good at presenting themselves to the public and may be elected because they are better at communicating or getting their message across.

There was concern that MPs are under-resourced. As communication preferences and methods have changed dramatically to make parliamentarians more accessible, the work load has increased but support and resources have not necessarily followed suit. If you want to connect directly and engage the public, the resources need to be there to support this and something

needs to happen with the engagement that is created to ensure people aren't turned off by the process. There was some concern that the media tends to over-emphasise the bad news related to Parliament, with the good work that parliamentarians do rarely reaching the public.

Some respondents felt that currently there was too much emphasis on visual online resources, noting that not all members of the public sat at computers all day, and that printed resources have been neglected:

We want to get away from the visual, the visual is dangerous, the visual has been captured by arguments and by shots of people rubbing their eyes and looking bored... the printed medium - I think we have written it off too readily; that's what lies around in the tube and at home.

An example given was the free papers that circulate on the underground in London as they have a captive audience:

Could Parliament create their own free newspaper?

There was an overarching concern that in fact very little was known about how people want to be communicated with – most of the parliamentarians were making assumptions about how people like to communicate:

How do the different sectors of the public want their information?

Television

Television was seen as a very powerful medium to connect with the public but there was a feeling that in its current form it was not doing this as effectively as it could. Some members of the focus group were in Parliament when the original debates about televising the chamber were happening and this gave a useful context for some of the current rules about broadcasting the Houses of Parliament. One of the issues mentioned when the television coverage rules were originally decided was that coverage should be equal and there should be no editorial bias. Therefore the rules about what could and could not be broadcast are fairly restrictive and inflexible. Editors are constrained by parliamentarians in order to protect politicians' own images but it is recognised that this has had the effect of making the programmes stilted and disengaging:

The thing about the Parliament channel is the extreme nervousness of politicians about how they're presented, therefore they've constrained the editors to a format that is strangely stilted... in order to protect their image Parliament sought to control communication... and actually damaged the presentation even more.

It was suggested that the televising of Parliament was not implemented for democratic reasons but for the benefit of the media:

It was a for the News at 9 and the News at 10 tarting up the news bulletins with a couple of clips from the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

Suggestions for improving the way Parliament is televised were based on other systems that were seen to work well in other legislatures, particularly the Oasis system in Canada, and C-Span in the United States. It was suggested that a dedicated channel was needed (as is currently the case with BBC Parliament) but it also needed proper interpretation of the material and packaged programmes to engage and inform more effectively. Having Parliament on a 'permanent loop' was not seen to be engaging for the public.

The most widely broadcast event in Parliament currently, Prime Minister's Questions, was seen by some participants to be disadvantageous to the House of Commons as it makes Parliament look 'adversarial and childish'. Media coverage, it was thought by some, would be better focused on Members working together on certain issues in select committees or cross-party groups. Allowing the audience to view the debates and bills they are interested in would help engage people with what happens in Parliament as well as showing it in a more realistic, less confrontational way:

We don't televise Parliament, we televise the chambers... we televise a very few sexy select committees.

An interpretive body, such as C-Span can package different debates, making them understandable and accessible as well as able to be commented on by the public. These kinds of improvements would cost money and it was thought that Parliament would not currently be prepared to resource these kinds of changes.

Members' Needs

The House of Lords is not as well resourced as the House of Commons which makes it hard for Peers to engage effectively. It is particularly hard to find researchers for the specialised topics that Peers are in the House of Lords to discuss:

I don't know how I'm supposed to find information... I've made genuine mistakes... because I don't have anyone to keep me up-to-date for various specialised topics.

It was suggested that the House of Lords needs a secretarial pool and a body of researchers on specialised topics to keep members of the House of Lords up-to-date with their areas of expertise. The House of Lords Library was seen to be helpful but was not large enough to support the current number of Peers.

Most MPs felt that not enough information in the Commons was produced electronically and at the same time as the printed information:

Everything else in the rest of my life is nicely done electronically; there is still a lot of the stuff which is not available electronically... iPods, iTouch, maps, mapping that doesn't seem to be part of this building. When it comes to the bills... it would be far nicer if one could just click onto one's iPhone and just click through the bill and look at the amendments.

It was felt that producing information, particularly about bills and amendments, in an online format was crucial for keeping members up-to-date and able to do their jobs efficiently:

They've got it [in the whips office] – they know to get information to you quickly it's got to come through electronically.'

It was also suggested that the website isn't updated quickly enough to allow Members to use it and is designed more for informing the public. The bills and amendments are not easily available online and should be available in one place, along with previous committee enquiries and debates from the 'other House' that have fed into the bills during their journey through Parliament. Opposition parties are also more reliant on lobby groups because they do not have so much support from within the system; the concern being that these lobby groups are not as neutral as parliamentary staff and have their own agendas. Charities were seen to be becoming oppressive in the way they encourage their members to target their constituency MPs, and particularly in expecting instant answers to mass produced questions.

Changes to the chamber were suggested to bring it more up-to-date and to allow the Members to be effectively supported and better informed about what they are debating and voting for:

Maybe it's high time everybody actually had a screen in front of them where we sit... maybe even big screens up showing the actual amendment as we're talking about it and what's being amended... everyone's scrabbling through their papers we should just give in and have a screen in front of every one of us.

The difficulty in finding out what was being debated either in the chamber or beforehand was mentioned by a lot of members in the focus group:

You have an amendment book which doesn't list the amendments in numerical order so you can't find them then you have a list of amendments... which doesn't list them in either numerical order or the order which they're in the amendment book... you end up with a mess of papers... I looked in envy when I visited the Welsh Assembly at the screens they have where amendments come up and the bit of the bill that's being amended.

It was also suggested that bills should have italics explaining the point of amendments so time isn't wasted having the Government explaining things unnecessarily during a debate. Explanatory notes were also seen as necessary to make the process more efficient and understandable:

We have to use technical language in legislation clearly, but if we could have a parallel arrangement which would cut down the time [spent explaining amendments].

However, some of these suggestions imply re-designing the chambers as everyone would need a seat and the accessibility of the information for visually impaired Members would also need to be considered.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report and its recommendations have the benefit of including views, opinions and perspectives from both parts of Parliament – the officials and the Members – as well as the public. The officials and politicians may be trying to work towards the same end but perhaps do not have open channels of communication that mean they adequately understand each other's needs and where Parliament as an institution should be heading in the future. The officials provide what they think the Members want but not all Members have the same needs. How can they satisfy the majority of Members' needs whilst also improving the accountability and transparency of the institution to satisfy the public?

What is clear from the three focus groups held is that Parliament has a large number of roles to fulfil and an even larger number of perspectives, needs and groups to navigate and satisfy. As this report was being written a sea-change in British politics was occurring with numerous scandals over MPs' expenses claims, the first resignation by a Speaker of the House of Commons in 300 years and the election of a new Speaker by secret ballot. Unlike most political scandals, more than individuals' reputations were at stake. These ructions have affected the whole political system and encouraged the electorate and the media to scrutinise the inner workings of Parliament as never before. This turbulent period for British politics indicates a real need to reform the workings of Parliament to avoid damaging democracy and the political system irreparably and further disengaging the electorate.

The remit of this project does not include constitutional elements such the voting system, reform of the House of Lords or a Bill of Rights but focuses on the internal workings of Parliament which provide their own challenges and are now in the limelight more than ever. Internal parliamentary reforms may be controversial and difficult for parts of the institution to accept but if ever there was a time to address structural issues now is it - when constitutional reform at Westminster is very much on the agenda, the turnover of MPs at the next election is likely to be much larger than in previous elections and the focus is on how such an old and antiquated institution can adequately serve the needs of its citizens and Members in the 21st century.

The table below shows the key themes that emerged from the focus groups and shows the importance attached by the different sectors surveyed. Areas where the groups mostly agreed

on the importance of an issue to improving Parliament were: the greater use of new technologies and proactive engagement with the public (as opposed to simply providing information and relying on the public to come to Parliament to find it). On every other issue there was disagreement to the extent that an issue was important or even on that group’s radar. Note that omission of an area does not suggest dis-interest in it, merely that it did not emerge in the context of the discussion on the future of Parliament and its processes. For example, issues of transparency and accountability are clearly highly pertinent and topical for parliamentarians, however, the nature of this research meant that this topic did not arise in the focus group with them.

Issues	MPs and Peers	Parliamentary officials	First time voters
Greater use of new technologies	☆☆☆	☆☆	☆☆☆
Modernising procedures	☆☆☆	☆	-
Interactive communication	☆☆	☆☆	☆☆☆
Educating the public/outreach	☆	☆☆	☆☆☆
Diversity of representatives	-	-	☆☆☆
Proactive engagement	☆	☆☆	☆☆
Access to information	☆☆☆	☆☆☆	☆
Understandable language	☆☆	-	☆☆☆
Transparent and accountable	-	-	☆☆☆

Key:
 ☆☆☆ Crucial
 ☆☆ Important
 ☆ Unimportant/low priority
 - Not mentioned

The first-time voters prioritised Parliament coming to engage them - whether this was physically through MPs going to visit school children or using methods of communication that the public are already familiar with such as TV or YouTube - as well as improving the interactive nature of representation. This group was also very interested in finding the ‘human’ element of their representatives and wanted to identify with them. They wanted to feel as if MPs came from their community, were ‘real’ and were practising what they preached. This group prioritised trust through increasing the links between MPs and their constituents as well as improving the transparency and accountability of their representatives. Both internal groups were interested in two-way engagement but it is clear that they still have a long way to go before the public recognises that Parliament has moved away from the traditional ‘broadcast mode’ in other Hansard Society research. MPs and Peers, seemed very interested in modernising procedures and using new technology to make parliamentary processes more

efficient and understandable for those both within and outside Parliament. The same strong interest in process improvement was common amongst officials as was a clear feeling that they were there to serve Members and would take their lead from them regarding any changes that were to be made to modernise the way Parliament works.

Recommendations

The following sections focus on recommendations for Parliament that aim to:

- modernise an institution that is steeped in tradition but sometimes constrained by its own history and culture;
- provide information in more understandable and usable formats;
- harness the potential of new technologies; and
- better engage the public, particularly about how they can influence the legislative process.

As this report was being written the House of Lords Information Committee was carrying out its inquiry into how Parliament can better engage the public and provide them with information in more useable formats. The footnotes attached to the recommendations below show where our recommendations and those from the report *Are the Lords listening? Creating connections between people and Parliament* share common ground.

Communication

1. Both Houses should drop the archaic language used in debates and accept that this creates unnecessary barriers to communication and distances representatives from the public they are meant to serve⁶;
2. Research should be carried out with different sectors of the public to ascertain how they would like to be communicated with by Parliament and to allow Parliament to understand their audiences better;
3. Parliament should use the tools and media outlets (both new and traditional) used by the public rather than expecting the public to come to them;⁷ and
4. The communication allowance for MPs was implemented to allow individual MPs to engage better with their constituents but has it worked? Research should be carried out into what impact this has had on the resourcing of MPs;

Technology

5. Both chambers should embrace multimedia tools and should provide visual displays to help Members follow debates, amendments and votes;
6. Online and offline resources should be produced and disseminated in parallel with neither being privileged over the other⁸; and

⁶ Para 104

⁷ Para 44, 46, 66, 78, 79

7. There should be an acceptance by those providing materials to Members within Parliament that a growing number of Members they serve do wish to have information in digital formats;

Information

8. TV from Parliament should record more than just the main chamber debates, package content to provide better context and allow the audience to choose which debates they would like to watch⁸;
9. Data should be collected in formats that other applications use so information from Parliament can reach people at the places they already visit on the web and be better spread through informal networks rather than expecting more visitors to the Parliament website⁹;
10. All documents produced should be properly indexed (or tagged if online) to allow them to be searched for their entire contents (rather than just by title or excerpt) and enable the public to find information on the issues that they are interested in; and
11. A greater number of specialist researchers and secretaries are required in the House of Lords to allow Peers to do their jobs properly;

Engagement

12. Providing alerts that the public could sign up to about specific issues and receive notifications when it was debated or voted on and so linking issues to the parliamentary process¹⁰;
13. The journey of legislation should be more clearly shown and specific to that type of legislation, possibly using visual aids such as timelines, with all the information feeding into it made clear, as well as the points of influence for the public¹¹;
14. Encouraging Members of both Houses to go into schools to explain the processes of Parliament and their roles within it – both to educate and to break down barriers between often disparate worlds¹²;
15. If Parliament and its Members wish to engage properly with the public this engagement must feed into the parliamentary process and there must be sufficient funds available for them to do this¹³; and
16. Could Parliament buy a page in one of the daily free newspapers to explain what went on in Parliament that day?

Procedure

17. Bills should be available online, with notes explaining amendments and related information from previous inquiries, votes and debates¹⁴;

⁸ Para 66, 76, 79,

⁹ Para 83, 89, 92,

¹⁰ Para 44, 46, 66, 78, 79

¹¹ Para 77

¹² Para 60, 73, 76,

¹³ Para 29

¹⁴ Para 56, 60, including the use of online, themed, topic-based discussions for young people

18. It has been noted that Parliament must use technical language in order to produce useful and rigorous legislation. However, it is also important that the general public can understand it – explanatory notes should be provided alongside the legislation at all stages¹⁶;
19. Improve links between departments, select committee inquiries and other levels of governance to enhance understanding of where decisions are made and where the power lies on different issues;
20. Improve information flows, collaboration and technology-enabled processes within Parliament - but for these to be implemented across the institution serious consideration needs to be given to their ownership at the very highest level within the organisation; and
21. Ensure that parliamentary officials and politicians have channels of communication available to ensure they better understand each other's needs and difficulties.

¹⁵ Para 66, 73, 76, 78, 79, 92,

¹⁶ Para 80

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Pro-forma Questions

The following questions are indicative of what can be asked in the focus group; they are intended to provide some prompts but should not be considered linear or prescriptive. It is better to allow the group to explore issues itself rather than simply going through the list so it is best used to guide the facilitator who would not expect to use all the questions nor to strongly adhere to the order or format shown.

Communication

1. Can you think of some ways in which Parliament communicates well with the public and some ways in which it communicates poorly?
2. How do parliamentary processes and procedures impact on your ability to communicate with the public (support or impede)?
3. What do you think could be done to improve the way that Parliament communicates with the public?

Engagement

4. What do you think could be done to encourage greater public understanding of how Parliament works?
5. What impact do you think digital technologies (such as the internet and mobile phones) have on representative democracy and do you think there are ways in which their use could lead to increased participation by the public (or do you think that the effect will be neutral or negative)?

Information

6. How are the information needs of Members changing and how are they likely to change in the future?
7. How are the information needs of parliamentary staff changing and how are they likely to change in the future?
8. What can Parliament do to better support these changing needs?

Resources & Culture

9. Email and newer social media tools such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter, have created expectations amongst some members of the public about the level of intimacy and speed of response from their elected representatives and the parliamentary authorities. Do you think that Parliament can change its processes and procedures to reflect this or is this expectation unrealistic on the part of the public?
10. How receptive is Parliament to change and the take-up of new technologies – do you feel that it embraces them openly, carefully considers and then adopts them or has a tendency to block and avoid them?
11. What do you think the staff and resource implications of increasing the use of digital technologies would be for Parliament?

Hansard Society

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Established in 1997, the eDemocracy Programme was the first dedicated research unit to explore the political and social impact of information and communications technology (ICT). Today, we undertake research and evaluation and produce expert commentary and analysis. Our current programme of work explores the many faces of digital participation, engagement, political campaigning and parliamentary process.

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