

SUBMISSION TO SPEAKER'S COMMISSION ON DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

MP CASELOAD – Stakeholder Referral System

Submitted by: DOCUMENT DIRECT

Document Direct is pleased to respond to the Call for Evidence from the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy.

Document Direct is a British company that improves the efficiency of documentation with the use of cutting edge digital technologies.

Our submission to the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy addresses three of the five themes outlined in the commission's terms of reference:

- Representation
- Engagement
- Facilitating dialogue

In the course of his consultation with interested parties, the Speaker was particularly keen to hear of any digital solutions that could address the growing constituency caseloads of Members of Parliament. This is an important, and often under-looked area in the modernisation of parliamentary communications. Constituency casework has increased and yet, constituents still feel under-engaged. This can partly be explained by the conundrum that the more time an MP has to spend on casework and correspondence, the less time he or she can spend engaging with the vast majority of constituents who have not written to them.

MPs will recognise that case-work is the part of their job that needs streamlining the most.

Hansard Society surveys of new-intake members a year following their election show that MPs spend up to half their time on constituency case-work compared to 14% in the Chamber, 14% on committee work and 22% of their time on other duties.

A separate Hansard Society Report in 2009 "Connecting with Constituents - A study into how MPs use digital media to communicate with their constituents", by Andy Williamson showed that while email is a commonplace form of communication for MPs with their constituents, "many still struggle with managing emails, both in terms of quantity and how best to respond".

And while the quantity of emails has increased dramatically, there has been no corresponding fall in the number of letters received.

Email has had a democratising effect, closing the gap between constituents and their MPs but it has added to the workload of the MP rather than reduced it.

The study shows that elderly people are as likely to email their MP as younger people are.

Although many constituents still value a letter from their MP, emails are highly convenient but this, in turn has raised expectations of an instant response.

MPs also need to be sure that the correspondent is a constituent, not always apparent in an email message.

Another concern MPs have with email correspondence is that it encourages un-necessary to-ing and fro-ing.

The nature of casework has changed over recent years. MPs will now say that most of their involvement in a case will be in referring a constituent with a legitimate concern to the relevant authority. This is in part because of a reduction in the availability of services such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau.

It is a sign-posting function which is, in itself, an important responsibility given that constituents are in genuine need of advice about who to contact and also the MP's name carries some credibility when referring a constituent to the relevant authority. However, the time and effort required to make the referrals are hugely burdensome for the MP and his or her office.

New digital technologies can reduce this burden without any impact on the one-to-one engagement (both real and perceived) that a constituent has come to expect from the MP's office.

Document Direct has been developing a stakeholder referral and information system which organises the MPs inbox and instantly signposts correspondents to the relevant authority.

The end-result would be much more efficient case-load handling and more time for the MP to engage with the vast majority of their constituents. This referral system would also be able to indicate to each constituent that their enquiry is being properly dealt with and provide alerts and greater comfort that their voice is being heard.

We would be happy to share more information about this system with the Commission and better understand their needs and concerns in this important area, and demonstrate how new technology can make a significant impact on parliamentary engagement with the public.

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