Contribution from Involve[1]

Involve are very pleased to offer our input to the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, which is currently exploring the opportunities that digital technology holds for enriching UK parliamentary democracy.

Here are our ten key points for the Commission's first call for evidence, Making Laws in a Digital Age:

1. Quality engagement begins with transparency. A key contribution that digital technology could make is to clarify what is going on in the law-making process, and enable citizens, stakeholders and professionals alike to easily follow legislation from start to finish. The immediate opportunity is to use digital infrastructure to improve the tracking process for bills; embed an effective document management system and facilitate the tracking of amendments. These are the foundations on which deeper, more interactive dialogue with citizens can then be built.

2. Let the purpose, not the tools, be the driver. As with any effort to improve citizen engagement whether digital or offline) it is critical to clarify the purpose first and then find the right tools to achieve it. Whilst we can suggest lots of possible ways that technology might be deployed to help integrate citizens views in the legislative process, the essential first step is to determine *why* citizen voice is desired within a particular process, and what citizens add that actors already in the process don't already bring.

3. Of course you shouldn't need to be a lawyer to understand and use an Act. But don't expect to be able to write for "everyone" either, as jargon is subjective and technical language is sometimes important. Focus on getting the information in the public domain where it can be translated and interpreted by intermediaries, and on organising the documents so stakeholders and the public can see the big picture. The structures for tying together the process should be for everyone; even if the language isn't.

4. Be careful not to place all the emphasis on the Public Reading Stage. Whilst a positive addition to the law-making process, it does not take in the whole legislative programme and should not distract energies from the broader and more structural challenges. Committee stage is also a key element to strengthen, and the greatest opportunities for engagement may in fact be at pre-legislative stages, or as part of post-legislative scrutiny.

5. Involve's new programme, NHS citizen, is developing some innovative methods to draw citizen's voice into the governance of NHS England, and may have some particularly useful insights on how digital tools can help connect different conversations within a complex lawmaking system. Further information is at http://www.nhscitizen.org.uk/ .

6. BIS's Sciencewise programme has a wealth of experience engaging the public in dialogue around a host of legislative issues – from water management to health research, and has particular expertise in linking online and offline methods. Further information is here: http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/.

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[1] Original submission posted online at: http://www.involve.org.uk/blog/2014/03/31/the-speakers-commission-on-digital-technology-a-submission-from-involve/

7. Internationally there is inspiration to be found South America. The Chilean parliament has made strong strides in document management, and El Salvador has an entire digital drafting and amendments process in place. Brazil has made significant investments in digitising parliament and putting the legislative process online – and both Brazil and Chile have web based systems to let citizens comment on and discuss legislation.

8. The UK is different – but we can move forward positively. Our history as the world's oldest parliamentary democracy means we are working with a system that is more complex and overlaid with detail than newer parliaments. It won't be possible to import solutions wholesale, but we can be encouraged by experience and precedents from elsewhere.

9. As in all good engagement practice, be careful to set establish realistic expectations in advance for how much influence citizens are likely to have in the process, and set up plans (and budgets) ahead of time for closing the feedback loop. Embed a culture of continual learning, and be positive from the outset that making changes as you go along is an indicator of quality.

10. Digital technology can't fix a bad process. If the underlying legislative model is cumbersome, unwieldy and opaque it is not possible to overlay a digital infrastructure that is clean, effective and transparent. The Commission should not limit itself to addressing the potential of digital technology in isolation from opportunities to improve off-line structures, or the broader legislative process itself – and should work across parliament to deepen democracy in the round.

March 2014