

Parliament and the public: Public information/engagement services in the House of Commons

A briefing paper by the Director of Public Engagement, House of Commons

1 Introduction

Parliament's current public engagement strategy dates back, in the main, to an agenda initially set out in 2004 in the House of Commons (HC) Modernisation Committee report, *Connecting Parliament with the Public*¹ and the Hansard Society Commission's *Parliament in the Public Eye*² (the "Puttnam Commission"), further developed by the HC Administration Committee and House of Lords (HL) Information Committee reports on *Improving Facilities for Educational Visitors to Parliament*³ – covering not only education services, but also visitor management, regional outreach officers and Parliament's website. More recently, the HL Information Committee restated its support for increased public engagement in its 2009 report *Are the Lords Listening?: creating connections between people and Parliament*,⁴ and the HC Administration Committee similarly in its 2012 report *Visitor Access and Facilities*.⁵

Public engagement is not about Parliament providing information to a passive public. It is about encouraging engagement with Parliament, its Members, and its proceedings. The House of Commons Reform Committee (the 'Wright Committee'), in its 2009 report *Rebuilding the House*, stated explicitly that 'the primary focus of the House's overall agenda for engagement with the public must now be shifted beyond the giving of information towards actively assisting the achievement of a greater degree of participation'.⁶

2 Strategic aims and vision

Parliament's strategy of engagement with the public is incorporated in both Houses' corporate plans. The House of Commons and the House of Lords each have their own information offices and media teams. Otherwise public engagement activity is delivered by shared parliamentary services on behalf of both Houses.

The vision for the public engagement services is that by 2015 the public should recognise that:

- **Parliament is the heart of our democracy:** respected, effective, efficient and informed;
- **Parliament holds the government to account:** it is not the same as government and provides checks and balances to its power;
- **Parliament's work matters to everyone:** it is relevant to our concerns and welcomes our participation.

¹ June 2004 (HC 368 2003-04)

² *Members only? Parliament in the Public Eye*, May 2005

³ April 2007 (HC 343 2006-07)

⁴ HL Paper 138 2008-09, para 15

⁵ HC Paper 13 2012-13, para 76

⁶ *Rebuilding the House*, House of Commons Reform Committee, HC 1117 2008-09, para 232

Over the period 2011-2015, to reach key audiences, the services will:

- Maintain efforts to reach all **schoolchildren**;
- Extend these efforts to reach others involved in formal education, including those in **further, higher, adult and lifelong learning**;
- Give an emphasis to engaging with **adults who want to change things** but do not know enough about Parliament to engage effectively;
- Also focus on those adults who are “**politically contented**” but do not yet actively engage with Parliament either because they have little knowledge or interest or because they do not yet see the benefits to them of doing so;
- Continue to reach all other groups through its main programmes of activity.

It will reach these groups through a series of campaigns involving its main continuing programmes of activity:

- Parliament’s Education Service;
- Visitor services and onsite facilities;
- Online and broadcasting services;
- Outreach, public engagement events and media services;
- Parliamentary Archives, Information office services and publications.

3 Current priorities

Current priorities of the public engagement strategy have been centred around the main recommendations in the Modernisation Committee and Administration Committee reports, and approved by both Houses, namely:

- Providing a dedicated **Education Centre** at Parliament enabling the Education Service to welcome 100,000 learners a year
- Further improving **Parliament’s website** to make Parliament and its work more accessible and better understood
- **Strategically expanding our media work beyond news**, by promoting media coverage which explains the work and role of the House and the day to day work of Members through features, factual programming, and online
- Developing the parliamentary outreach programme with **regional outreach officers** working throughout the UK, and encouraging participation in the parliamentary process
- Improving arrangements for **managing visitors to Parliament**

4 Public engagement services

4.1 Education Service

4.1.1 School visits programme

The bicameral Education Service runs a programme of **education workshops** at Parliament for schools. Numbers of students have increased from around 11,000 in 2005-06 to a record 47,000 in 2013-14. The programme is vastly oversubscribed. A planning application is currently in progress to provide a **dedicated education centre** to accommodate 100,000 learners per year. A **transport subsidy scheme** is offered to encourage school groups from remoter constituencies to visit Westminster.

4.1.2 Education print and digital resources

Teaching resources linked to the national curriculum are produced for all key stages. The **education website** includes all teaching resources, alongside educational films, information, activities and games. It is constantly being developed with new and engaging material for schools, including the critically acclaimed **MP for a Week** game, the **My UK** law-making activity, the interactive



Houses of History timeline, and the most recent mini- game – **The Campaign Trail**. A new set of curriculum-linked publications has been produced for different age groups, and an annual wallplanner advertising all resources and events is sent to all schools and all Members. <http://www.parliament.uk/education/>

4.1.3 Education outreach

An **educational outreach** team works with around 1000 teachers a year to train and support them in delivering the citizenship and politics curricula. A popular and successful “**Teacher Institute**” residential training week for citizenship teachers, and a separate one for primary teachers, is run at Westminster each July. The team is also developing a new regional model, working with teachers, school pupils and Members running **regional events** throughout the UK.

The Service also organises visits to schools around the UK for the **Speaker** and for the Lord Speaker.

4.1.4 Awards, competitions etc

The Speaker of the House of Commons sponsors an annual [Speaker’s School Council Award Scheme](#), launched in March 2010 and run by the Education Service. Other awards and competitions include the [Lights, Camera Parliament! film competition](#), the **Democracy by Design** art project, and an **Art House** competition.



4.2 Public Information and Outreach (PIO)

Both Houses of Parliament have for many years produced publications and responded to enquiries from the public. Until 2005 the main focus was on those people who approached Parliament seeking information. Engaging with communities across the UK is now recognised as an essential strand to the public engagement strategy (alongside using the web and welcoming visitors). The emphasis of the outreach strategy has been to take Parliament out to citizens across the UK. Working on the principle of going to where people are, the challenge has been to extend reach from the tens of thousands who are already motivated to contact Parliament to the tens of millions who are not. Important issues, such as the relationship between what it is right for Parliament as an institution to do in this area to complement the work of individual elected constituency MPs, have been worked through in developing the bicameral outreach service.

4.2.1 Regional outreach

Parliamentary Outreach Officers works with a wide range of third party organisations to raise awareness of the institution of Parliament, increase knowledge of parliamentary processes, and encourage engagement. Training and information workshops are offered and the successful “**Train the Trainer**” initiative helps to significantly spread reach through the multiplier effect.

Parliamentary Outreach also identifies suitable opportunities for the **Speakers** of both Houses to address large groups of voluntary, community and special interest groups in support of their individual outreach programmes.

4.2.2 Procedural engagement

The PIO team also supports **Select Committees** and **Public Bill Committees** in their calls for evidence and regional evidence sessions, and runs Public Bill seminars and drop-in information sessions at Westminster and around the country. The team has a digital engagement strategy working with online communities, and it manages the [@HouseofCommons](#) twitter account to give real; time updates on results of divisions etc.

4.2.3 Universities programme

A new strand of work has been successfully developed, **Engagement with Universities**, comprising four strands: developing a Parliamentary Studies teaching module; running a series of Open Lectures; in conjunction with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) offering bursaries for students writing a dissertation on Parliament; and developing an area of the website specifically for universities, signposting useful resources.

4.2.4 Information Office

The Information Office produces a range of **publications and information** in hard copy and on Parliament's website focusing on the work, role and history of Parliament and the role and day to day working lives of Members of the House of Commons. It also answers **enquiries** from the public on the work of the House. The Office is responsible for the management of a database of Commons Members' information which is available on the website and is used to produce lists of Members, their contact details and government and opposition posts held. The Office works with colleagues in the Library to produce custom lists of MPs on request. Both the 'calendar' and 'bills online' databases on the Parliament website are maintained by the Information Office, in partnership with the Lords Information Office, to provide access to the business of the House and the progress of primary legislation.

4.3 Visitor Services

Parliament has offered tours of Parliament both during sitting times and in recesses for many years. Since 2005, the strategy has been to improve the welcome visitors receive and to find innovative ways of enriching a visit to Parliament so that all visitors leave with a better understanding of the institution than when they arrived.

4.3.1 Well-informed welcome and orientation

Central to the strategy has been the recruitment of a team of **Visitor Assistants**. This team has been progressively expanded over the period and now provides a service at all times when either House is sitting. Their task is to welcome visitors and help ensure that their needs are met. They also form the core staff for summer and Saturday opening and assist with special events and exhibitions.

4.3.2 Visitor tours

The Central Tours Office administers **tours for Members' visitors** which are free of charge, and take place on weekdays during sitting periods. On Saturdays and during parliamentary recesses, Visitor Services run **commercial tours** of Parliament and associated visitor retail services. The commercial operation now has ambitious income generation targets, and the revenue goes towards reducing the cost of the House Administration and upkeep of the building. The **Clock Tower tours** team is also part of Visitor Services. Other **specialist tours** have been introduced, starting with an art and architecture tour of Portcullis House and a "Royalty and Splendour" tour in the House of Lords.

4.3.3 Retail and catering services for visitors

Three retail outlets are run: an internal gift shop for Members and their guest and staff; a visitor shop in Westminster Hall (a joint enterprise with the House of Lords); and an external shop (on the corner of Parliament Square, but soon to move to much improved premises at 50 Parliament Street). The Jubilee Cafe is provided for visitors, and commercial tour visitors can purchase afternoon tea with their tour.

4.3.4 Visitor access

The main public entrance to Parliament is through the **Cromwell Green entrance**, opened in April 2008. Arrangements at the entrance improved the security of access,



the quality of the welcome and the capacity of handling, which is up to 500 visitors per hour. However, it is recognised that at certain peak times current visitor facilities are still inadequate to meet the growing volume of different categories of visitor. As well as constraints of space, there are considerations around reconciling public accessibility with the operational needs of a working Parliament and of security and heritage issues.

4.4 Web & Intranet Service

Parliament's bi-cameral Web & Intranet Service (W&IS) is responsible for the strategic development of all parliamentary online channels including the **website** (www.parliament.uk), **intranet** (<http://intranet.parliament.uk>), **corporate social media** sites (e.g. www.twitter.com/ukparliament), and the delivery of those sites for **mobile devices** and related **web applications**.

4.4.1 Online services

Parliament's digital channels have been developed significantly over recent years increasing visitor numbers and extending reach and engagement through the use of social media and online communities. Content on both the website and the intranet is now managed by some 400 staff across both Houses who have been trained on Parliament's content management system, and improvements continue to be made to the presentation and functionality of business papers, online publications and other key online content and services. The website currently has more than 1 million unique visitors every month on average, by users who primarily want to find out about their Member of Parliament, the business of the House and the work of select committees. The focus for current development is on continuing to improve the search function and ensure all the key business information is easy to find.

Key milestones in the development of the intranet include the development of the **Online Members' Centres** providing quick links for members and their staff to key information and the development of a mobile intranet. The W&IS are currently focussed on developing applications for **tablet devices** (such as iPads) for the summary agenda and order paper which are currently being piloted with Members.

4.4.2 Social media

Social media is now a primary online engagement tool for Parliament; the UK Parliament Twitter channel www.twitter.com/ukparliament now has more than 238,000 followers. Other social media initiatives have been incredibly successful such as #AskGove which crowd-sourced questions for the Education Select Committee to ask the Secretary of State as part of an inquiry. The hashtag #AskGove was used over 7,000 times, with more than 5,000 questions received before the deadline, making it one of the most successful question crowd-sourcing exercises ever conducted on Twitter in the UK.

We are increasingly using **video online** to better engage with people about the work of Parliament, publishing PMQs and other key statements on YouTube. A new embeddable video player is about to be launched which can be embedded on select committee pages and a new mobile video player is also currently being trialled.

4.5 Media and broadcasting

4.5.1 Media and Communications Service (MCS)

In addition to the select committee media officers, who provide support to individual committees, the House of Commons Media and Communications Service (Chamber and Corporate) exists to:

- **promotes better understanding** of, and engagement with, the work of the Chamber in print, broadcast and online media;
- provides a professional media service for journalists and serves as a **central press office** for media enquiries;
- provides **strategic media and communications advice** and support to domestic House committees and the Backbench Business Committee;
- works with officials across both Houses to **improve public information and access**
- provides **photography and image services** to the House and the media.

The MCS encourages innovative approaches to media publicity and public engagement. In recent years its role has steadily expanded, with a strong focus on actively promoting the House's scrutiny role.

4.5.2 Broadcasting

Linked to the work taken forward within the internet programme described above, there has been a major upgrading of the facilities for **broadcasting and webcasting** of parliamentary coverage. Changes to the rules of coverage have also supported improved broadcasting of Parliament. The webcasting site was redesigned in 2006, and functionality has been upgraded, for instance to allow access while a meeting is taking place. Since 2007 there has been a programme to install unattended webcams in committee rooms. In 2008 the current audio visual archive was extended from 28 days to one year. A new AV strategy is being developed to modernise the production and distribution process.

4.6 Other engagement activity

Once a year, the **UK Youth Parliament** sits in the House of Commons Chamber to discuss its campaign focus for the year. The sitting coincides with Parliament Week each year. In recent years, more innovative means of trying to reach new audiences have included:

- the [Arts in Parliament](#) programme – a cultural programme of events in and around Westminster Hall to accompany the London 2012 Festival during the Olympic year
- the introduction of [Parliament Week](#) – an annual awareness raising week that aims to engage people with Parliament and democracy, working with Members and external partners throughout the UK
- [TEDxHousesofParliament](#) – hosting a day of high quality presentations on democracy and representation in the TED format, with videos of the talks going online.

TEDxHousesofParliament

Venue: QEII Conference centre
Audience: 800
Speakers: 23
Live stream: 25k views

Views online of talks:
2012 event: 2.2 million
2013 event: 1.3 million

The image shows a TEDx event with a speaker on stage and an audience. A smaller inset photo shows a man in a suit speaking at a podium.

Plans are also underway for public engagement activity during 2015, which as well as being a general election year, is also the 750th anniversary of the De Montfort Parliament and the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta.

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February 2014

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(July 2014)