

The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP  
Speaker of the House of Commons

3 April 2020

Dear Mr Speaker,

Thank you for your letter of 31 March in which you ask for an update on progress in developing new technological approaches to connect Members and Parliament together in the unprecedented circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. You also ask that the Parliamentary Digital Service (PDS) and Broadcasting team prioritise the application of such technology to the proceedings of the House.

As you know, the House Service and PDS have already worked rapidly to enable select committees to hold virtual meetings, following the House's decision to authorise this change in our proceedings – which it is worth remembering was only passed on 24 March. These procedural and technological changes have meant that committee members have been able to continue to scrutinise Government and question Ministers, and others, in a much safer way than would otherwise be possible. Three Committees have so far taken evidence with both witnesses and Members participating remotely, with one broadcast live, and four live-broadcast “virtual committees” are scheduled for next week. Thanks to very hard work by teams across the House and PDS, we will be able to increase the number of virtual evidence sessions we are able to hold once the House returns. If Committees can be flexible in terms of the day of the week when they sit, we hope to be able to support as many as 20 virtual committees starting from the week commencing 20 April. This would represent a typical weekly volume of evidence sessions.

At your request, we have ensured that a suitable temporary video-conferencing solution is available to Members to facilitate their work while a more robust solution is developed. PDS will very shortly be offering every Commons Member a licence for a parliamentary version of Zoom. PDS has worked at speed to enable this. We could not make it available sooner because we needed to ensure that our version of Zoom meets relevant legal, security and privacy requirements. This version of Zoom is closely aligned to that used within Government and is therefore more secure than Zoom's consumer offerings which many Members are currently relying on.

We are of course keen to enable the House, if it so wishes, to make similar virtual arrangements to allow Ministers to keep the House as a whole informed, and to answer questions from Members. There is also nothing to stop Government ministers finding other means of responding to queries asked by Members other than through formal proceedings of Parliament in advance of the House altering any of its procedure.



The Managing Director of the Parliamentary Digital Service and the Director of Broadcasting, and their teams, are already working flat out to identify and deliver a solution that would allow Members to participate remotely in questioning of Ministers, alongside the work already referred to above, including departmental question times, Ministerial statements and urgent questions – although these would need to take place in a modified form from our usual practice. They are drawing on the expertise and the additional capacity of external partners, including the BBC, to help them achieve this objective as quickly as possible. Colleagues are also in touch with other legislatures and assemblies to learn lessons from their experiences, including for example the Senedd in Cardiff which held their virtual sitting on 1 April.

As you will appreciate, there are challenges to be overcome, not just technological but also relating to information security and cyber security. We will also need to work out what adjustments need to be made to our usual practices and procedure in order to ensure the new arrangements work as smoothly as possible. For this reason, I have asked a senior Clerk to coordinate closely with colleagues in Digital and Broadcasting, and other parts of the House service, to ensure all these issues are worked through together. I am hopeful that by the week the House is due to return from the Easter recess, we will have developed a way forward which would allow us to trial a first version of this kind of virtual scrutiny, if agreed to by the House, as a first step which could then provide a basis for more informed decisions about other proceedings.

As you know, it is for the House as a whole to decide what changes it wishes to make to its ways of working, and for the House Service and PDS to make them work. The recent successful work – done at great speed – to enable virtual committee meetings to take place, shows the ingenuity and commitment of my colleagues in many parts of the House service. I am confident they will display the same level of commitment in delivering new, virtual ways for Ministers to keep the House informed and for Members to discharge their vital function of holding the Executive to account.

Yours sincerely,

**Dr John Benger**

Clerk of the House