Report for the discussion on 'Scrutiny' within the Digital Democracy Commission: Student Forum

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Executive Summary

Scrutiny is an aspect of Parliament that in the students' discussions was credited with being a strength of the current political system. The Commission's student forum accepted that parliamentary committees and independent commissions provide positive contributions to the scrutiny process. However, what did concern the forum was the awareness of the accessibility of information and avenues for participation in the work that these groups do for the public. Mechanisms such as e-petitions were also discussed and not seen as something that can currently be placed into the category of scrutiny. The forum believes improvements can be made to the technological aspects of scrutiny in several areas. These improvements include: improving online accessibility to hearings, alerts for areas of scrutiny that interest the individual, strengthening the e-petition process, and the general improvement of awareness of the readily available access the public already has to the scrutiny process.

Recognised Issues

Scrutiny is seen as divided

Scrutiny is seen as an area of 'insider' and 'outsider' status, with limited accessibility for the public to become involved. This is an issue especially in cases that the electorate are affected by, such as expenses and security. This in turn affects the public's perception of the scrutiny process and the trust they place in it. If channels of scrutiny were to merge in certain areas at a point that heavily involved the expertise and ability to make change by those seen as 'insider' as well as making sure the 'outsider' public had their voices heard on a level that could be seen to be effective in bringing about real forms of accountability to the political process, then an improvement in democratic participation in these areas may result.

Forms of scrutiny that are accessible are not widely known about

Awareness that there are ways in which the public can be involved in scrutinising the political process is not high enough. Multiple mechanisms exist in which members of the public can become involved in scrutiny, yet these channels are not known about by enough people and therefore are not utilised to their full potential, which if it were to be done would allow the public to feel much more involved in the democratic process and increase trust in the political system. These mechanisms currently include, contacting MPs, e-petitions, and e-consultations on issues. Access to committees' work and progress is attainable but not at the level it should be in

terms of public awareness, and use of the e-petition system is one that is perhaps lacking public confidence in terms of its effectiveness as a form of scrutiny.

Suggested Actions

Increase awareness of current access to scrutiny

It was suggested that this problem of lack of awareness could be improved by the use of technology in the form of tailored alerts. These alerts could be via email and could be specified to the interest of the individual; these would provide a link to access scrutiny hearings. This would remind people of these occasions rather than them having to remember and search for the ones they were interested in. Increasing the awareness of online consultations and strengthening the use of social media (i.e. asking questions to committees on Twitter) were also recommended as forms of improving democratic participation in scrutiny. If these ideas of strengthening the interactive element of scrutiny for the public were considered then the divide of 'insider' and 'outsider' would be decreased.

Simplification and centralisation

Suggestions were also made that information and outcomes of the scrutiny process should be placed in an area that is coordinated and easily accessible. For example, committee hearings have not been accessible across all devices and platforms (i.e. Chrome on iPad), therefore centralising them to a well-known platform such as YouTube would improve access. Also the outcomes of the hearings should be simplified and easy to find in one place.

Role of e-petitions

The role of e-petitions is one that the forum felt lacked in terms of providing a form of scrutiny for the public to parliament. Questions were asked as to the purpose of e-petitions and to whether or not they were meant for scrutiny. In this case, the role of e-petitions should be clarified to the public, therefore if properly understood they would be used to better effect and efficiency. It was also proposed to implement a committee for the e-petitions, rather than be seen as backbench business, which would strengthen the value of them in the public's eyes, increasing participation.