



March 2020

Dear Karen,

Thank you for your letter to me of 11th March. The spread of coronavirus presents both the country and Parliament with formidable challenges and I welcome the fact that you have moved swiftly to examine some options which need to be considered. I agree that consideration of practical changes to House practices and procedure is very timely and the Clerk of the House and his senior colleagues are putting together further thoughts which will be sent to your Committee early next week. I understand that many Members may be concerned that some of our procedures may create unnecessary risks.

I am working with the Government and Public Health England to ensure that we have the best and most up to date advice and that we then act on the basis of that advice. I will also ensure that the House Service communicates fully and openly with Members on developing risks and the actions being taken to mitigate them. The House will want to know that any changes made serve the purpose intended, that is to mitigate the risk of coronavirus being spread among members of the parliamentary community, and others thereafter.

I will offer my views on those of your proposals which directly relate to my role but will also suggest that others are more properly matters for the House or the usual channels.

Arrangements for divisions

You suggest that a direction might be given to keep the doors of the lobbies locked until tellers are appointed. Standing Order No. 38(2) directs that tellers should be appointed "no more than two minutes" from the direction to clear the lobbies that the occupant of the chair gives, after the division is called. I imagine the idea is that this stops Members being pent up in the lobby waiting for the doors to be unlocked.

Firstly I would draw your attention to the Leader of the House's reassuring comments regarding the use of division lobbies at [Business Questions](#) yesterday. Secondly, a potential problem might be that this simply displaces the queue to another area (and potentially a different tightly constrained space). It seems to me that the Whips from the Government, Opposition and other parties, consulting the Serjeant at Arms, Head Doorkeeper and Clerk of Divisions, might arrive at a different logistical solution where they smooth the flows of people using informal systems (perhaps an analogy might be the systems airlines use when planes are boarded).

There might also be benefits in ensuring that tellers are ready to be appointed far sooner than within two minutes, and preferably as soon as the question is put the first time. Whatever system is used – and I do not think that Standing Order changes would be necessary – you see merit in potentially extending the normal time taken for a division. I can confirm there would be no practical difficulties in this from my perspective, though of course there would potentially

be an impact on sitting or debate timings. Standing Order No. 38 (3) stipulates only that there should be an interval of “*at least*” eight minutes between the direction to clear the lobbies to that to lock the doors. As Erskine May notes (25th edition, ch 20.62) “The Chair has discretion to increase the period which must elapse before the doors are locked.”

Extension of proxy voting

I know that your Committee is considering the proxy voting trial at the moment and it would be for the House to consider any further changes. The current system requires a Speaker’s certificate and I would need to be very clear about what categories of Members would be included if proxy voting were to be extended in this case. The current system is designed for use by a limited group of identified individuals and could not readily operate in place of pairing, for example.

Extension of pairing

As May notes, “The practice of pairing is not officially recognised in the procedures of the House [and] is therefore conducted privately by individual Members, or arranged by the Whips of the respective parties” (ch 20.87). I am assured that the House authorities would be able to publish lists of paired Members provided the parties were able to agree a procedure.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lindsay Hoyle', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP
Speaker

Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP
House of Commons