



House of Commons
Administration Committee

**Communicating the
Commons: how effectively
does the House of
Commons Administration
communicate about
Parliament?**

First Report of Session 2023–24

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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The Administration Committee

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Summary

The UK Parliament stands as one of the most respected legislatures, with its practices and procedures replicated by both emerging and deep-rooted democracies across the world. Visiting delegations from other parliaments tell us our role is significant: to many we represent a place with powerful procedures which enable politicians to scrutinise Government, and celebrated services which deliver the many complex functions of our two Houses.

At home we do not hear the same story. Parliament can at times represent a place of scandal and gossip, seeming to the public to be far away at best, and untrustworthy at worst. People can be confused by how it works, feel shut out of its mechanisms with not enough easy access to material that elucidates what we do in the Chamber and committees. Many do not see the full breadth of an MP's role, which stretches from constituency to the Chamber. We are often seen as caseworkers first and lawmakers last.

As the Administration Committee, the group of MPs responsible for advising the House of Commons Commission on how the House should run its services, this perception is far from our own. In our view, Parliament is a place that conducts serious business, with a House Administration employing thousands of experts across different fields to facilitate our work as MPs. We have clerks and library teams advising on procedure and policy whose expertise is admired and consulted around the world; a bolstered Health and Wellbeing Service which is of note to many; an Independent Complaints and Grievances Scheme which is the first of its kind. These are some of the many groups in Westminster which go above and beyond to make the machinery of Parliament run.

We launched this inquiry into the House of Commons communications and engagement services so that we could ask big questions. To what extent can the Administration uphold the reputation of Parliament through its official communications? How can the Administration improve public understanding of parliamentary procedure, and why it matters? And how can Members be better involved in the storytelling of Parliament?

Complex questions are rarely met with simple answers. And yet we identified clear and concrete actions for officials to take in their efforts to communicate the Commons:

- Governments come and go but Parliament remains a constant. We need an overarching strategy towards how we promote the institution of Parliament and its deliberative and democratic proceedings. This consolidated strategy should be presented to the Committee annually.
- We need to generate innovative ideas on how to make the website more user-friendly.
- We need to harness the potential of parliamentlive.tv to provide more real-time information about what is happening in the Chamber and committees.
- We should launch flagship video content, supporting the public to understand more about the procedure which binds Parliament.

- MPs should be seen as the voice of Parliament: the Administration should equip us to spread the word about what Parliament does well and how it works.

We should value the work of the UK Parliament. It is an ever-evolving institution that has stood the test of time to deliver laws, and scrutiny of laws, for centuries. The daily work of its Members has become increasingly nuanced, and huge demands are now placed on us at home and in Westminster. Now is the time for the House to assess how it tells this story, and how it counters narratives of dysfunction and distrust. A clear message about the effective things that Parliament does is fundamental.

Communicating the Commons has never been more complex - but has also never been more accessible. Let us use the tools we have before us, from digital to physical, to turn the tide on attitudes towards the UK Parliament, and remind the public that it is there for them, and there to be celebrated.

1 How we ran our inquiry

1. We launched this inquiry to learn more about how the House of Commons Administration communicates about the excellent services it provides, and how it informs the public about the important role that MPs play. Communications matter: it is central to an effective parliamentary democracy that people understand how - and why - it works. Beyond supporting the political job of the House of Commons, the House of Commons Administration delivers practical services to thousands of people every day. Official communications are the main way for the public to see some of the important work that UK Parliament teams do.

2. This was the first time the Committee has investigated, through a formal inquiry, the House's communications and engagement services. We focused on external rather than internal communications, and examined work from communications and public engagement teams across the Administration's functions, seeing them as co-existing methods for communicating Parliament's messages. We also considered whether improvements could be made to how Parliament broadcasts and facilitates the broadcasting of proceedings. Given the more technical nature of this theme, we decided to return to it in later work. We thank the contributions of broadcasters to this inquiry, and will be using their evidence as the basis for our future scrutiny. Our report here focuses largely on our communications and public engagement teams.

3. Our inquiry was timely. The Select Committee Communications team is implementing changes following an internal review of its work, and the central Communications Office is in the process of developing a House-wide communications strategy in support of the wider House Administration strategy. A new Head of Broadcasting for the UK Parliament was appointed in the summer of 2023. This was a key opportunity for Members to inform the approach these teams will take.

4. We explored the important questions of our inquiry with a range of experts. In public evidence sessions we spoke to leading academics in the fields of parliamentary studies and political communications, including Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira, Chair of the International Parliament Engagement Network; Dr Martin Moore, Director of the Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power at King's College London; the Lord Norton of Louth, President of the Study of Parliament Group; Professor Meg Russell, Director of the Constitution Unit; and Dr Hannah White OBE, Director of the Institute for Government.

5. We heard from practitioners who talk about parliaments for a living, including Mark D'Arcy, former Parliamentary Correspondent at BBC News; and parliamentary communications officials Arwyn Jones and Jane McEwan, Director of Communications and Engagement at Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament and Head of the Parliament Communications Office at Scottish Parliament respectively.

6. We took public evidence from Jon Davies, the Chief Executive Officer at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK, to understand international attitudes towards the House and how it communicates.

7. We held private, informal discussions with communications and engagement leads from across the House. We spoke to officials in the central Communications Office, Select Committee Communications team, Participation team, Research and Information team, Broadcasting Unit, and the Serjeant at Arms team, as well as the then Clerk of the House, Sir John Benger. Finally, we received written evidence from broadcasters such as ITV Nations & Regions News, C-Span and Sky News, as well as oral evidence witnesses and a submission from Catherine West MP. We thank everyone who contributed to our inquiry and who informed our scrutiny of these vital services.

Who are our communications and engagement teams?

The Central Communications Office

Responsible for corporate messaging, procedural queries, internal communications, design and brand, and central social media channels. Runs a 24/7 media relations team.

The Select Committee Communications team

Advises 29 committees of MPs on media and communications. Oversees the Committee Online Services team which provides digital advice to all select and domestic committees and publishes committee reports. Manages the bicameral Select Committee Engagement team which connects the public with committees of MPs and Peers.

The Participation team

A bicameral department which uses public engagement to explain the work of parliamentarians. Delivers a number of initiatives, including tours, visits by schoolchildren, outreach activity and teacher-training. Is also responsible for UK Parliament Week, an annual event which spreads the word about what Parliament is and does.

Local communications experts

Other departments are supported by embedded communications and engagement experts. This includes the Research and Information team, home to the House of Commons Library and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology; the Strategic Estates team, which manages the Parliamentary Estate; the Restoration and Renewal project, which oversees the restoration of the Palace of Westminster; and the Parliamentary Digital Service, which provides IT and digital services to Parliament. The Petitions Committee is supported by a team of communications and engagement officials using petitions to connect people with Parliament.

2 Celebrating excellence in Parliament

To what extent should the Administration celebrate Parliament?

8. The UK Parliament is renowned by many for the services it provides. Jon Davies, Chief Executive of the UK Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, said that “This Parliament, whether it likes it or not, is a reference point internationally”. He told us that there is a “huge appetite to know more”, and that international audiences look to the UK Parliament for “innovation [...] answers, ideas and solutions”. He cited work done by committees, outreach and engagement, and investment in research and library support as key areas of interest - and envy - for visiting delegations.¹

9. Our communications and engagement services are particularly well regarded. Chair of the International Parliament Engagement Network, Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira, said that “the UK Parliament is actually well known for its innovation and the work it does on public engagement and communication”.² Comparing with other Parliaments, Jon Davies said that “people are often struck” by how open the UK Parliament is. He said that “while you may be looking at how you communicate more openly, I think this place already is much more open than many.”³ It is clear there is excellent work done by teams to bring Parliament to the public.

10. Beyond services, witnesses highlighted where chambers and committees of the UK Parliament are seen as facilitating challenging and effective scrutiny. We heard that visiting delegations are struck by how Members can question Ministers directly, and by the long hours Parliamentarians spend working in chambers and committees.⁴ Prime Minister’s Questions, where the Prime Minister is questioned for half an hour every sitting Wednesday, was raised by several witnesses as a key event of interest, perhaps because of its engaging nature and “important galvanising effect inside Government”.⁵ The House of Commons was seen as facilitating other processes well, such as petitions and backbench debates for tackling “human issues”,⁶ and departmental questions for offering a “clearer form of accountability on details of policy”.⁷ It is evident that the UK Parliament is a respected legislative body.

11. We heard examples where the House is publicising this scrutiny well. Communications teams were commended by witnesses for promoting the work of select committees,⁸ connecting the public with petitions and backbench business debates,⁹ and offering targeted procedural support to journalists.¹⁰ Engagement officials were praised for the Teacher Ambassador programme, the Outreach programme, committee engagement and the Chamber Engagement team, and work done to reach people less likely to engage with Parliament.¹¹ The broadcaster ITV Nations and Regions News noted “the giant strides”

1 [Q36, Q40](#)

2 [Q43, Q21](#)

3 [Q40](#)

4 [Q40](#)

5 [Q10](#)

6 [Q2](#)

7 [Q10](#)

8 [Qq3–4](#) and [Q9](#)

9 [Q13](#)

10 [Q13](#), ITV Nations and Regions News ([CES0003](#))

11 Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira ([CES0005](#))

that Parliament has taken to assist media with transmitting the work of parliamentarians; another parliamentary correspondent praised a weekly procedural briefing delivered to journalists.¹² Indirect communications such as House of Commons Library briefings and committee reports were seen as processes that are “probably not part of the comms strategy, but they are a fantastic resource that helps people understand what is going on in Parliament”.¹³

12. At the same time, witnesses said that positive communications initiatives can be lost. We heard that it is a complex task to communicate from an institution consisting of so many groups. Dr Hannah White, Director of the Institute for Government, said that “the way Parliament currently talks about itself is patchy and fragmented”.¹⁴ Professor Leston-Bandeira said that, while there is innovation in the House’s communications and engagement practice, it lacks overall “strategic oversight” and “coherence” in its approach.¹⁵ She identified that efforts to coordinate and share innovation across the organisation could be improved.¹⁶

13. When developing messaging about Parliament, officials are restricted by the politics of what they can do and say. In its written evidence, the House Administration set out its position as an impartial communicator, in contrast to Members who can speak from a range of perspectives:

Members themselves are of course the most significant way that the House communicates with the public. What MPs do and say—collectively and individually—influences understanding about, and the reputation of, Parliament.

When communicating on behalf of, and to, the House of Commons the key consideration at all times for the House Administration is whose voice that is. The House of Commons is made up of 650 Members of Parliament who hold a spectrum of views. The House Administration is an impartial body supporting parliamentary democracy by delivering excellent services to the UK Parliament.¹⁷

14. House services are first and foremost for Members, and we recognise that the House’s communications teams aim to communicate on a strictly impartial basis in order to deliver the best service on behalf of Members. This does not prevent the Administration from going further in some areas.

15. It was acknowledged that the Administration could take steps to contribute positively to discourse around Parliament. While officials emphasised the challenge for the impartial Administration to claim Parliament as excellent, they agreed that the House could go further to tell the story of how MPs as a group work for their constituents both at home and in Westminster. It was suggested in these informal discussions with officials that increasing efforts to open up the interface between Members’ lives, from

12 [ITV Nations and Regions News \(CES0003\), Q13](#)

13 [Q4](#)

14 [Q21](#)

15 [Q22](#)

16 [Q22](#)

17 [House of Commons Administration \(CES0008\)](#)

their constituency to the Chamber, by showing what they do and how they contribute to the work of Parliament, would help to countervail general, and often misplaced, cynicism towards politics and politicians.

16. Several ideas were put forward for bolder approaches to celebrating the story of Parliament. We were told that:

- Given the challenge of there being no single voice for Parliament, Members themselves could be better involved in communicating about Parliamentary excellence. “A spirit of co-creation [between Members and officials]” was seen as missing in the UK Parliament.¹⁸
- The House could be more creative and harness other ways to bring out positive messages about Parliament, for example by facilitating in-depth documentaries which give an exciting behind-the-scenes view of parliamentary life.¹⁹
- The House could develop a more coherent approach towards the official partners it works with which encourage audiences to engage with Parliament. The Participation team already outlines an extensive list of official and reputable partners online, including for example the Electoral Commission and British Youth Council.²⁰ Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira identified a risk that Members may not always be aware of partnerships the House is using.²¹
- Visiting international delegations could be used more as a key audience to target with messaging about services, and they can continue our storytelling beyond a single visit. The materials shared with other legislatures about how we work could be developed.²²

17. We commend the breadth of work done by the House’s communications and engagement teams. We note that their work is seen by many as sector leading. The communications and engagement function has developed significantly in the last two decades, and has a distinct and professional offer.

18. More can be done to consolidate how we promote Parliament as the historic and respected legislature that it is. Our inquiry has identified a need for an overarching strategy which draws teams together and establishes an institutional approach to how the Administration communicates about Parliament.

19. In developing a more unified approach to our messaging about the institution of Parliament, we empower the Administration to be bolder in how it communicates the excellence of Parliament’s services. We support the House to develop messaging not only connecting the public with the services it provides, but rightly promoting these services as outstanding. The Administration should not be afraid to speak positively of its own work.

18 [Q43](#)

19 [ITV Nations and Regions News \(CES0003\)](#)

20 [Q28](#), and for more details see <https://www.ukparliamentweek.org/en/partners/>

21 [Q30](#)

22 [Q36](#)

20. **The Administration should utilise other voices to help celebrate Parliament as an institution. We are a key legislature globally, looked to by many - there is a clear appetite beyond Westminster to learn more about what we do. The House should focus on its engagement with visiting delegations, broadcasters, reputable documentary-makers and partnership organisations to showcase excellent projects and events in Parliament.**
21. **Importantly, we should recognise Members' crucial and historic role as legislators and harness them to be the voice box of the organisation. Members should be at the centre of efforts to communicate about scrutiny and services, and involved in the design of any messaging.**
22. *Governments come and go but Parliament remains a constant. We need an overarching strategy towards how we promote the institution of Parliament and its deliberative and democratic proceedings. The strategy should be developed with Members, led by senior leaders, and brought to the Committee to review regularly. It should set out not only the how of Parliament, but the why.*
23. *The central Communications Office should create digital toolkits for Members which amplify messages from the House of Commons and UK Parliament. These resources should promote the excellence of Parliament's services and facilities, and provide behind-the-scenes insight into how these services work. Members should be engaged in the development of this kind of communications activity.*
24. *Communications officials should continue work to develop delegate packs for visiting officials which illustrate how the House facilitates scrutiny, legislation and debate. The House might explore featuring the views of visiting delegates in its promotional content about House services, exploring how our facilities compare with others elsewhere.*
25. *The Administration should seek to increase media and public engagement with the excellent work that teams are already producing, such as research from the Research and Information team, while ensuring this work is still primarily intended for use by Members and their staff.*
26. *The Administration should seek to facilitate more reputable, behind-the-scenes documentaries and continue to ensure that the Administration Committee is involved in any sign-off to do with documentary making. It should continue to focus on developing content for regional media, showing how local representatives are involved in the running of Parliament.*
27. *Delegates of this Committee or other Members should be involved in efforts to attract and retain suitable partners for public engagement with Parliament.*
28. *The House Administration should ensure that a cohesive approach is taken towards public engagement, with good practice shared across teams and sourced externally where appropriate. Members should be involved in developing this strategy.*

3 A strategy towards explaining how Parliament works

How can the Administration improve public understanding of how Parliament works?

29. We come to parliamentary procedure as a specific lens through which to understand the legislative role of Members and Parliament. After all, central to celebrating the story of what Parliament *does* is explaining *how* it works.

30. There are efforts across the House to explain parliamentary procedure. The central Communications Office regularly updates X (formerly Twitter) followers on upcoming parliamentary business, and links them to content explaining how procedures work. It runs procedural briefings for the press. The Participation team is perhaps the most involved in explaining Parliament: it educates organisations, teachers and schoolchildren on Parliament's functions. It runs an enquiry service taking questions on the House of Commons and UK Parliament. In the last year, this team dealt with 17,866 enquiries via email or telephone, with around 15,400 explainer guides picked up on-site by visitors. There is clearly an appetite for learning about how Parliament works, which is met by widespread effort across the House's communications and engagement teams to explain its practices and procedures.²³

31. Other teams prioritise communicating the issues that Parliament is addressing. The Select Committee Communications team focuses more on raising awareness of the work of select committees, such as the outcomes of an inquiry, than the procedures governing them. Given that several witnesses commended communications from select committees, this approach works for this team.²⁴ The Research and Information team briefs groups on issues being addressed by upcoming business, for example through its weekly newsletter highlighting topical research to MPs and staff. The team is similarly successful in this approach: its Monday newsletter sees an open rate of around 25–40%, which we were told compares well to industry standards; its recent summary of the Spring Budget, sent late in the evening of Budget Day, was opened by 40% of recipients.²⁵

32. Less mainstream examples of how Members are using procedure could be publicised better. In a “basic analysis” of the website, Professor Meg Russell and Sophie Andrews-McCaroll of University College London identified a range of procedural events which are under-promoted or hard to find.²⁶ For example:

- Stories featured on the Commons homepage focused largely on the work of select committees (84% of stories), with no stories about other proceedings such as oral question times, government statements, opposition day debates etc., or the progress of bills;

23 House of Commons Administration ([CE50008](#))

24 [Qq3-4](#)

25 House of Commons Administration ([CE50008](#))

26 Professor Meg Russell ([CE50009](#))

- Professor Russell and Ms Andrews-McCarroll could find no easy way to identify bills currently under parliamentary consideration, or a list of private members' bills due for debate;
- Their analysis drew up no obvious means to work out which oral question slots or adjournment debates were coming up.²⁷

33. While this analysis focused on stories about scrutiny, it applies more widely to the House's approach to explaining procedure. The Administration acknowledged this, telling us in its written evidence that the central Communications Office has started working to expand explainer content to include other procedural events such as Departmental Questions, e-petitions and backbench business debates.²⁸

34. There is less available information to explain the *why* of procedure, which we consider as important as the *how*. Professor Meg Russell of the Constitution Unit said that:

much existing material (e.g. on the website) focuses on particular procedures or mechanisms, rather than the role of parliament as a whole, or the key role of parliamentarians as ambassadors for our democracy.²⁹

In a similar vein, Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira suggested that there are “key ideas” about the role of Parliament that need to remain a focus, such as the difference between Parliament and Government, the role of different parties in the parliamentary process, and the way Parliament can support citizens in pursuing issues.³⁰ Both tell us that explaining the definition of individual proceedings does not go far enough: procedural explainers must include the fundamental principles underpinning our procedures, and therefore Members' wider role as legislators.

35. Citizenship teaching was identified as an opportunity to ground the public in the “why” of Parliament. Lord Norton of Louth said that citizenship teaching is under-resourced but can in the long run “raise more pervasive awareness of what Parliament is doing”, calling it “the route in” to the public.³¹ The House's written evidence informed us that while the Participation team delivers sessions on how Parliament works to an impressive 200,000 schoolchildren annually, the majority of learning about Parliament is still through schools' citizenship classes.³² Given the significance of citizenship teaching to establishing a foundational interest in Parliament, more might be done to bring the expertise of the Participation team into curriculum-planning by the Department for Education.

36. Again, Members can be better involved in the House's storytelling when it comes to explaining parliamentary procedure. Lord Norton said that material which focuses solely on explaining a procedure might turn electors off, but that a more creative approach which brings people in through the use of individuals “could engage people far more”.³³ Examples of the Lord Speaker's podcast, where the Speaker interviews Members, and the

27 Professor Meg Russell ([CES0009](#))

28 House of Commons Administration ([CES0008](#))

29 Professor Meg Russell ([CES0009](#))

30 Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira ([CES0005](#))

31 [Q20](#)

32 House of Commons Administration ([CES0008](#))

33 [Q18](#)

Commons' "Committee Corridor podcast", a pilot podcast hosted by select committee chairs, were cited as communications innovations.³⁴ Centring people in discussion of processes was seen as a way to bring those explanations to life.³⁵

37. This inquiry presents a valuable opportunity for the Administration to review and refresh its explainer content, taking a creative eye to make this material more relevant and engaging. We welcome the fact that, because of our inquiry, the central Communications Office has already started work to expand explainer content to other procedures such as Departmental Questions.

38. The Committee emboldens the Administration to link content about parliamentary procedure with individuals by identifying key Members and staff who can explain how Parliament works in digital content. We judge this is an excellent way through which to engage the public with parliamentary procedure.

39. Flagship video content, such as a parliamentary take on the TED Talks series, could offer an effective space to bring out wider questions about procedure. These videos might address: how do the procedures that Members use work? What are the principles underpinning them? And what do the procedures contribute to our wider function as one of the most respected parliamentary democracies in the world? The House shouldn't be afraid to reinforce any explanation of the *what* and *how* of Parliament with the *why*.

40. *Communications and engagement officials should review and update materials explaining parliamentary procedure. Explainer content should not only explain how procedure works, but why, giving a clear foundation on the principles underlying procedures. The House should continue to expand its explainer content to other examples of procedure.*

41. *Materials explaining how parliamentary procedure works should be developed for use by Members as well. The Committee would particularly welcome production of public engagement resources tailored for use by MPs on constituency visits such as school visits. These should be accompanied by digital resources for MPs to use on their social media.*

42. *The House should explore the development of long-form digital content, featuring Parliamentary locations, which explains how and why procedures and business work. Members and officials should be centred in presenting this content to make it as engaging as possible.*

43. *Given its expert experience, the Participation team should seek to be involved in any reviews of the citizenship curriculum done by the Department for Education.*

34 [Q18](#), Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira ([CES0005](#))

35 [Q18](#)

4 Parliament's presence online

What role can key websites play in communicating about Parliament?

44. The parliament.uk site is the central location where people go to find about what is happening in Parliament, and how it works. This was summarised in the Administration's written evidence, where it said that "the collection of domains that make up the UK Parliament website is perhaps the most important tool for communicating the work of Parliament".³⁶ Despite this, the website frequently arose as a barrier to people accessing information.

45. We heard that the website can be helpful but is hard to navigate. Witnesses agreed that good information exists but is hard to find when our digital channels are ordered according to a "Parliament perspective, which is structures and processes", rather than "what matters to people outside and what drives them".³⁷

46. At the same time, we learned that information needs to go where people are. Political communications expert, Dr Martin Moore, told us how the "media and communications environment has been transformed", and said that people expect information "will potentially find them rather than the reverse".³⁸ Both Dr Moore and Professor Meg Russell said that alerts are a key means to ensure information reaches people in a targeted way.³⁹ Alerts for following parliamentary business do exist; Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira praised e-petitions alerts which enable people, after they have signed a petition, to hear when Parliament or Government address their issue elsewhere.⁴⁰ We heard however that increasing visibility and access to alerts is vital for bringing information stored on the website directly to interested audiences.

47. The House might better use its other sites, such as parliamentlive.tv, to explain what is happening in Parliament. According to the Administration's written evidence, through parliamentlive.tv, Parliament is one of the biggest live broadcasting services in Europe. On its busiest days, the Broadcasting Unit runs up to 20 concurrent live broadcasts across both Houses, and up to 80 hours of video is made available in a single day.⁴¹ Peter Knowles, now Westminster Producer for C-SPAN, and formerly Editor of 'Today in Parliament', suggested alongside others that the House invest in the technology to add live information to the parliamentlive.tv feed, for example identifying speakers by name, constituency and subject matter.⁴² He said this would "transform the accessibility of Commons debate and encourage much greater use of it in a wide range of contexts".⁴³

48. Parliamentlive.tv represents a model opportunity for displaying other content about Parliament. Witnesses commented on the reduction of explainer content over recent years on BBC Parliament which used to provide more information accompanying coverage of parliamentary procedure.⁴⁴ Professor Leston-Bandeira referenced parliaments such as the

36 House of Commons Administration ([CES0008](#))

37 [Q13](#), [Q21](#), Professor Meg Russell ([CES0009](#))

38 [Q21](#)

39 Professor Meg Russell ([CES0009](#)), [Qq21-22](#)

40 [Q22](#)

41 House of Commons Administration ([CES0008](#))

42 Peter Knowles ([CES0006](#))

43 Peter Knowles ([CES0006](#))

44 [Qq13](#) and [Q18](#)

French, Brazilian and Canadian legislatures whose professionalised TV channels offer “a full scheduling programme, information about how Parliament works, [and] debates”.⁴⁵ The relatively bare parliamentlive.tv gives the House the chance to refresh a popular site with engaging explainer content, showing not only who is speaking in Parliament, but what is happening and why.

49. We heard consistently that the website can be a frustrating barrier to people wanting to find out more about Parliament. We agree with the Administration in its written evidence that it is vital that the maintenance and future development of the website is adequately funded and properly prioritised, thus giving it recognition as a key place. The website should also be recognised as a key place where people go to sign up for alerts connecting them with future parliamentary business.

50. Communications teams should work with the Parliamentary Digital Service to make Parliament’s online presence easier to engage with. The House should explore the possibility of featuring explainer content more centrally on the website to help users understand proceedings. The Administration should review the process and visibility for alert sign ups.

51. The House already has popular sites visited by thousands, if not millions of people. Not only might parliamentlive.tv be made more accessible by featuring real-time information on what is happening in the Chamber, the Administration might use sites such as parliamentlive.tv to bring to the foreground other explainer content that it is creating.

52. The Administration should look into the possibility of adding real-time metadata to the Parliamentlive.tv feed to identify speakers, including those intervening in debates. The House should explore featuring explainer content on Parliamentlive.tv to accompany live and past business, and linking explainer content to other highly visited pages such as the Parliament’s YouTube channel, the e-petitions site and committee and Library pages.

Conclusions and recommendations

Celebrating excellence in Parliament

1. We commend the breadth of work done by the House's communications and engagement teams. We note that their work is seen by many as sector leading. The communications and engagement function has developed significantly in the last two decades, and has a distinct and professional offer. (Paragraph 17)
2. More can be done to consolidate how we promote Parliament as the historic and respected legislature that it is. Our inquiry has identified a need for an overarching strategy which draws teams together and establishes an institutional approach to how the Administration communicates about Parliament. (Paragraph 18)
3. In developing a more unified approach to our messaging about the institution of Parliament, we empower the Administration to be bolder in how it communicates the excellence of Parliament's services. We support the House to develop messaging not only connecting the public with the services it provides, but rightly promoting these services as outstanding. The Administration should not be afraid to speak positively of its own work. (Paragraph 19)
4. The Administration should utilise other voices to help celebrate Parliament as an institution. We are a key legislature globally, looked to by many - there is a clear appetite beyond Westminster to learn more about what we do. The House should focus on its engagement with visiting delegations, broadcasters, reputable documentary-makers and partnership organisations to showcase excellent projects and events in Parliament. (Paragraph 20)
5. Importantly, we should recognise Members' crucial and historic role as legislators and harness them to be the voice box of the organisation. Members should be at the centre of efforts to communicate about scrutiny and services, and involved in the design of any messaging. (Paragraph 21)
6. *Governments come and go but Parliament remains a constant. We need an overarching strategy towards how we promote the institution of Parliament and its deliberative and democratic proceedings. The strategy should be developed with Members, led by senior leaders, and brought to the Committee to review regularly. It should set out not only the how of Parliament, but the why.* (Paragraph 22)
7. *The central Communications Office should create digital toolkits for Members which amplify messages from the House of Commons and UK Parliament. These resources should promote the excellence of Parliament's services and facilities, and provide behind-the-scenes insight into how these services work. Members should be engaged in the development of this kind of communications activity.* (Paragraph 23)
8. *Communications officials should continue work to develop delegate packs for visiting officials which illustrate how the House facilitates scrutiny, legislation and debate. The House might explore featuring the views of visiting delegates in its promotional content about House services, exploring how our facilities compare with others elsewhere.* (Paragraph 24)

9. *The Administration should seek to increase media and public engagement with the excellent work that teams are already producing, such as research from the Research and Information team, while ensuring this work is still primarily intended for use by Members and their staff. (Paragraph 25)*
10. *The Administration should seek to facilitate more reputable, behind-the-scenes documentaries and continue to ensure that the Administration Committee is involved in any sign-off to do with documentary making. It should continue to focus on developing content for regional media, showing how local representatives are involved in the running of Parliament. (Paragraph 26)*
11. *Delegates of this Committee or other Members should be involved in efforts to attract and retain suitable partners for public engagement with Parliament. (Paragraph 27)*
12. *The House Administration should ensure that a cohesive approach is taken towards public engagement, with good practice shared across teams and sourced externally where appropriate. Members should be involved in developing this strategy. (Paragraph 28)*

A strategy towards explaining how Parliament works

13. This inquiry presents a valuable opportunity for the Administration to review and refresh its explainer content, taking a creative eye to make this material more relevant and engaging. We welcome the fact that, because of our inquiry, the central Communications Office has already started work to expand explainer content to other procedures such as Departmental Questions. (Paragraph 37)
14. The Committee emboldens the Administration to link content about parliamentary procedure with individuals by identifying key Members and staff who can explain how Parliament works in digital content. We judge this is an excellent way through which to engage the public with parliamentary procedure. (Paragraph 38)
15. Flagship video content, such as a parliamentary take on the TED Talks series, could offer an effective space to bring out wider questions about procedure. These videos might address: how do the procedures that Members use work? What are the principles underpinning them? And what do the procedures contribute to our wider function as one of the most respected parliamentary democracies in the world? The House shouldn't be afraid to reinforce any explanation of the what and how of Parliament with the why. (Paragraph 39)
16. *Communications and engagement officials should review and update materials explaining parliamentary procedure. Explainer content should not only explain how procedure works, but why, giving a clear foundation on the principles underlying procedures. The House should continue to expand its explainer content to other examples of procedure. (Paragraph 40)*
17. *Materials explaining how parliamentary procedure works should be developed for use by Members as well. The Committee would particularly welcome production of public engagement resources tailored for use by MPs on constituency visits such as school visits. These should be accompanied by digital resources for MPs to use on their social media. (Paragraph 41)*

18. *The House should explore the development of long-form digital content, featuring Parliamentary locations, which explains how and why procedures and business work. Members and officials should be centred in presenting this content to make it as engaging as possible. (Paragraph 42)*
19. *Given its expert experience, the Participation team should seek to be involved in any reviews of the citizenship curriculum done by the Department for Education. (Paragraph 43)*

Parliament's presence online

20. We heard consistently that the website can be a frustrating barrier to people wanting to find out more about Parliament. We agree with the Administration in its written evidence that it is vital that the maintenance and future development of the website is adequately funded and properly prioritised, thus giving it recognition as a key place. The website should also be recognised as a key place where people go to sign up for alerts connecting them with future parliamentary business. (Paragraph 49)
21. *Communications teams should work with the Parliamentary Digital Service to make Parliament's online presence easier to engage with. The House should explore the possibility of featuring explainer content more centrally on the website to help users understand proceedings. The Administration should review the process and visibility for alert sign ups. (Paragraph 50)*
22. The House already has popular sites visited by thousands, if not millions of people. Not only might parliamentlive.tv be made more accessible by featuring real-time information on what is happening in the Chamber, the Administration might use sites such as parliamentlive.tv to bring to the foreground other explainer content that it is creating. (Paragraph 51)
23. *The Administration should look into the possibility of adding real-time metadata to the Parliamentlive.tv feed to identify speakers, including those intervening in debates. The House should explore featuring explainer content on Parliamentlive.tv to accompany live and past business, and linking explainer content to other highly visited pages such as the Parliament's YouTube channel, the e-petitions site and committee and Library pages. (Paragraph 52)*

Formal minutes

Monday 20 November 2023

Members present:

Sir Charles Walker, in the Chair

John Cryer

Sir Michael Fabricant

Marion Fellows

Sir Greg Knight

Dame Maria Miller

Navendu Mishra

Giles Watling

Communications and engagement services provided by the House of Commons Administration

Draft Report (*Communicating the Commons: how effectively does the House of Commons Administration communicate about Parliament?*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 52 agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

Adjourned till Monday 27 November at 4.30pm.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Monday 5 June 2023

Mark D'Arcy, Parliamentary Correspondent, BBC News; **The Lord Norton of Louth**; **Professor Meg Russell**, Director, Constitution Unit, University College London [Q1–19](#)

Monday 12 June 2023

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira, Chair, International Parliament Engagement Network; **Dr Martin Moore**, Director, Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, King's College London; **Dr Hannah White OBE**, Director, Institute for Government [Q20–32](#)

Jon Davies, Chief Executive Officer, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK; **Arwyn Jones**, Director of Communications and Engagement, Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament; **Jane McEwan**, Head of Parliament Communications Office, Scottish Parliament [Q33–45](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

CES numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 House of Commons Administration ([CES0008](#))
- 2 ITV Nations & Regions News ([CES0003](#))
- 3 Knowles , Mr Peter (Westminster Producer , C-SPAN) ([CES0006](#))
- 4 Leston-Bandeira, Professor Cristina (Professor of Politics, University of Leeds) ([CES0005](#))
- 5 Russell, Professor Meg (Director, Constitution Unit, University College London) ([CES0009](#))
- 6 Sky News ([CES0007](#))
- 7 West MP, Catherine (Member of Parliament, Hornsey & Wood Green) ([CES0002](#))