



House of Commons
Administration Committee

**Communicating
the Commons: how
effectively does the
House of Commons
Administration
communicate about
Parliament: Response
from the House of
Commons Commission**

First Special Report of Session 2022–23

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The Administration Committee

The Administration Committee considers the services provided for Members, their staff and visitors by the House of Commons Service and makes recommendations to the House of Commons Commission, the Speaker and Officials on how those services are delivered.

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First Special Report

The Administration Committee published its First Report of Session 2023–24, *Communicating the Commons: how effectively does the House of Commons Administration communicate about Parliament?* (HC 306), on 23 November 2023. The response from the House of Commons Commission was received on 18 January 2024 and is appended below.

Appendix: House of Commons Commission Response

The House of Commons Commission (the Commission) welcomes the report of the House of Commons Administration Committee which considered how we communicate what Parliament is and does. The report reflects the challenges of the dynamic communications and news landscape that now exists.

We accept the recommendations in full and welcome the political commitment behind them.

Responses to individual recommendations and conclusions are set out in the next section of this paper.

In developing their communications approach, the House Administration will apply the following general overarching principles:

- Delivering 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.
- Delivering a more user-friendly website.
- Harnessing the potential of parliamentlive.tv to provide more real time information about what is happening in the Chamber and Committees.
- Using flagship video content, supporting the public to understand more about Parliamentary procedure.
- Seeing MPs as the voice of Parliament - that is the House Administration should equip Members to spread the word about what Parliament does well and how it works.

Conclusions and recommendations and the House Administration's responses

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)

We welcome this observation from the Committee. There has been significant development and modernisation of the House Administration's communications and engagement functions in recent years, in line with changes in how the public consume information.

As the House Administration set out in evidence to the Committee, an ongoing focus of the House Strategy is to ensure that the House Administration has the right strategy, skills and capabilities to support the House of Commons, which is one of the most high profile, scrutinised and nationally significant institutions.

Emerging technological trends are set to transform communications further still, making how we consume information faster, more efficient, personalised, and immersive. This future requires us to adapt to changing technologies, platforms, and communication channels to effectively reach and connect with our audiences.

The House Administration will continue to adapt to this landscape as it takes forward the Committee's recommendations.

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)

The House Administration Strategy was published in 2023 and guides planning and prioritisation for the organisation until March 2027.

The Communications Strategy (2023–2027) sets the direction, scope, and approach to delivering communications and engagement in support of the House Strategy.

The key objectives of the communications strategy are:

- Improving access to – and understanding of – the work of the House of Commons.
- Helping ensure that everyone who works in the House of Commons has the information they need to do their job.
- Explaining the work of the House of Commons, the Chamber and Committees to the public in Westminster and beyond.

The overarching purpose is to be the trusted source of information about the House of Commons.

Early conversations with the Committee helped to guide the development of the Communications Strategy and this will be refreshed regularly with the Committee's recommendations in mind.

As the strategy is implemented, communications teams across the House will consider what more they can do to draw teams together and roll out a unified approach and messaging which has Members at its heart.

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)

We welcome the Committee's endorsement of a bolder approach in communicating the excellence of Parliament's services.

The Communications Office has recently been working closely with procedural experts and colleagues in broadcasting, catering, the library and the security team to better promote their services both internally and externally. They are using this approach to support the development of an 'employee value proposition' with the recruitment team to attract and retain the talent we need in our organisation now and into the future.

Additionally the Communications Office is, in collaboration with the General Election Planning Group, reviewing how the House Administration's 'offer' to new and returning Members and their staff is communicated following the next general election. Messaging will be better coordinated across the House Administration in order to avoid competing messages from different services.

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)

The Speaker's External Affairs team have developed an excellent engagement programme for Mr Speaker to help explain and promote the work of the House.

As discussed with the Administration Committee, the team will now work with the Interparliamentary Relations Office and the Speaker's Office to develop delegate packs to help visiting delegations better understand the work of the House Administration and the role of the House in scrutiny, legislation and debate.

The team will also continue to provide the secretariat for the Interparliamentary Communications Network (bringing together communications teams from the UK, Ireland and Crown Dependency Legislatures) and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Communications Network, ensuring there is knowledge sharing and regular contacts between people working in similar fields.

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)

We welcome the steer from the Committee to put Members at the centre of designing more general messaging, and as supporters and amplifiers of UK Parliament and House of Commons corporate social media accounts.

Select Committee chairs regularly act as spokespeople in the ways suggested and provide clear direction and messaging for their committee's communications output.

The communications teams are looking to develop more digital toolkits and products that Members could use to support House of Commons and Parliamentary messaging. This works well already for activities such as UK Parliament Week and could be done more often.

A new section of the intranet will be established as a hub for procedural explainer and other social media content that could be used by Members.

The bicameral Participation team gives Members of both Houses the opportunity to contribute to a range of digital resources used to explain the role and work of Parliament to our key audiences, particularly in relation to engaging with schoolchildren and teachers.

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)

As set out above, the House of Commons Communications Strategy has been developed to support delivery of the House Administration's Strategy, and the team would be happy to bring the strategy back to the Committee at review points ahead of 2027.

The Communications Office has started working to expand 'explainer' content to include events such as Departmental Questions, e-Petitions and Backbench Business debates. In addition to promoting these via established, and owned, channels such as YouTube, the team are investigating how these can be integrated into parliamentlive.tv and explore the potential of sharing via external stakeholders, such as BBC Parliament.

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)

Agreed – see paragraph 5.

The Participation team is producing a range of specific engagement tools for Members to use when engaging with their constituents. This will include resources and guidance for Members visiting young people at the Education Centre and when taking their constituents on tours of the Palace of Westminster.

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)

Agreed – see paragraph 4.

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)

Although the focus will remain on ensuring that Members and their staff are aware of and have access to the impartial information and analysis that is provided by the Library and POST, more could be done to promote this externally.

For example, the House Administration could:

- Provide ‘behind the scenes’ insight into the spaces, people and processes behind the research.
- Increase media engagement – for use as background research for stories. Increasing references to the House of Commons Library in the press has the two-fold benefit of increasing awareness amongst constituents, but also with MPs who may not be aware of the range of service provided.
- More promotion via corporate communications channels and encouraging Members to share on social media.

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)

The Communications Office will keep this steer from the Committee in mind when engaging with documentary makers and engage the Chair as part of this process.

The Communications Office will continue to develop content for regional media and will continue to send targeted procedural briefing notes to media in the nations and regions and hold a series of regional media briefings throughout 2024.

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)

The involvement of external partners for public engagement has been mentioned in various contexts during the Committee’s inquiry, which we will take on board in our approach to engagement.

Participation would welcome the opportunity to involve the committee in developing an overall approach to identifying suitable partners, particularly in relation to education-related activity.

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)

We agree. The Participation team is developing a new medium-term strategy and will begin shortly a period of internal stakeholder engagement before presenting the draft strategy to the Administration Committee.

In brief, the draft strategy sets out our ambition to help make the work of Parliament accessible to all and is centred around three key priorities:

- Using public engagement to explain and demonstrate Parliament’s role in forming Governments, making law, debating public policy and holding Government to account.
- Prioritising engagement with school-aged children both directly and via their families, networks and learning frameworks.
- Involving Members of the House of Commons and House of Lords in the planning, delivery and evaluation of Participation services.

Participation colleagues would welcome the opportunity to provide regular updates to the Administration Committee on the implementation of the new strategy.

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)

The Committee has proposed reviewing and refreshing explainer content, with ideas running through paragraphs 13 to 18.

For the purposes of this response, we will group these together.

Key principles that emerge from these recommendations, and which we will keep in mind while developing content, include:

- Member involvement in scope, content development and messaging
- Explainer content to address the underlying principles, not just the procedure or process in question, that is, ‘the why’
- Engagement with schools.

The Communications Office has started working to expand explainer content to include things such as Departmental Questions, e-Petitions and Backbench Business debates.

We are currently developing ideas for content to explain the role of an MP, and further developing content on what Select Committees do. Given the role of an MP is complex and wide in scope, our challenge is explaining this simply, and in an engaging way that reflects how 650 different MPs contextualise their roles. The Communications Office would welcome further discussion with MPs across the House on how this is best done in a fair and impartial way.

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)

Agreed. The House Administration will also constantly assess performance of content, and adapt our approach, in order to reach our audiences.

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)

Please see paragraph 13.

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)

Please see paragraph 13.

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)

In addition to the proposed materials set out in paragraph 13, the House will also continue to promote range of procedural tools internally to Members and their staff. This includes things such as promotion of the Guide to Procedure, “how-to guides” for Parliamentlive.tv and the range of procedural briefing notes produced at the start of a Parliament.

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)

Please see paragraph 13.

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)

The Participation team will contact the Department for Education directly and offer assistance in any review of the citizenship curriculum.

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)

The Parliamentary Digital Service (PDS) are the team with lead responsibility for changes to UK Parliament Online.

PDS are adapting how they continuously improve the multiple websites that sit behind UK Parliament online (i.e. 'the website'). They will work closely with communications teams on next steps to prioritise changes to the website.

Six multi-disciplinary product teams will be set up and embedded between April 2024 and March 2025, implementing and supporting continuous improvement work across bespoke applications, as well as UK Parliament Online.

Priorities for improvement work will be agreed in partnership with key stakeholders from both Houses.

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)

We will explore the possibility of including more 'explainer' content (such as the videos we use on social media) to help users understand proceedings.

Implementation of an alert sign-up feature would require resource intensive changes which aren't currently planned for within existing work programmes or budgets but will be considered as part of the wider evolution of the website.

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)

The Director of Broadcasting and the Deputy Director of Communications (media) will attend the Administration Committee in January on filming and broadcasting. These sessions may provide a further update on this recommendation.

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)

The Director of Broadcasting and the Deputy Director of Communications (media) will attend the Administration Committee in January on filming and broadcasting. These sessions may provide a further update on this recommendation.