

Written evidence submitted by Barbara Keeley MP (CVR 103)

I am submitting evidence to the committee as the Member of Parliament for Worsley and Eccles South.

Following treatment for cancer last year, I have self-certified for a Proxy vote since March as being unable to attend Westminster in person for health reasons. Although I am not ill, my doctors have advised me to reduce the number of contacts I make during the Coronavirus pandemic. The current voting system would not be safe because it involves queuing to vote with hundreds of MPs, many of whom are not wearing a mask and not observing social distancing. This goes against the medical advice I have received.

The current rules on self-certifying for a Proxy Vote during the Pandemic mean that, while I have a Proxy Vote, I am not able to take part in debates in the Chamber on legislation, in backbench debates, in adjournment debates or in debates in Westminster Hall. I cannot even present a Petition on behalf of my constituents. This has and will continue to affect my ability to raise issues of concern to my constituents.

Although I can take part in scrutiny through Oral Questions, Urgent Questions and Statements, this is limited by selection through shuffles and call lists and limited to asking a question rather than making a speech.

And I am unable to take part in debates. This restriction is hampering my ability to do my job as an MP

Debates, both in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall, should be and normally are a central part of my role as an MP. They offer the main opportunity for me to raise issues on behalf of my constituents. There have been a wide range of debates in which I had contributions to make but in which I was prevented from speaking by the current procedures.

For example, there have been backbench debates on support for the aviation sector (10th September) and support for self-employed workers (17th September). I represent a constituency with large numbers of people in both of these groups, partly due to our proximity to Manchester Airport and Media City at Salford Quays. This means that, throughout the crisis, support for self-employed workers and the aviation sector have been among the most frequently raised issues with my office but I was unable to raise these concerns in the debates on the topic.

These restrictions have also limited my ability to carry on campaigns in which I have been active for some time, on areas such as social care and the value of the classical music sector and issues caused by the pandemic for that sector.

As Co-chair of the APPG on Ageing and Older People and an officer of the APPG on Learning Disability, debates such as one on testing for health and care staff (24th June) would have been a vital opportunity to raise issues affecting the groups on whose behalf these APPGs are campaigning.

Similarly, I am the Chair of the APPG on Classical Music, and often its sole spokesperson in the House of Commons. Given this, the fact that I have been unable to speak in debates such as one in Westminster Hall on Cultural Attractions: Contribution to Local Economy (6th October) means that the vital perspective of the classical music sector has not been made.

I know from discussions with other MPs in the same situation that my experience has been repeated across Parliament, with members unable to speak up on behalf of their constituents in crucial debates over recent months. While the ability to take part in scrutiny proceedings is welcome, such proceedings are invariably heavily oversubscribed, as they represent the only opportunity for MPs participating remotely to raise concerns. Also, MPs participating remotely are competing in shuffles with members who can take part physically.

To give an example of how limited the opportunities in Scrutiny sessions are, I have submitted for Oral Questions 69 times since we had the MemberHub portal and I have been successful on only 3 occasions. Although I am a member of the Health Select Committee and enter every ballot on Statements on Covid-19, I have only been successful and made it to the Call List on 5 occasions of a possible 16 since the virtual Parliament ended.

The original hybrid system worked well and has since been used by the Petitions Committee to include contributions from members participating remotely.

Finally, I want to add that the remote voting system worked well in my view. It must be possible to reinstate that voting system and remove the risk to the health of both members and staff that the current voting system presents.

Parliament has a duty to protect the health of members and staff and members should not have to weigh taking risks with their health against the desire to fulfil their duties as MPs. I urge the Procedure Committee to recommend a return to a system of hybrid participation and to permit remote voting.

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