

Written evidence submitted by:

STAMMA, Afasic, Ambitious About Autism, ASLTIP, Auditory Verbal UK, BATOD, British Deaf Association, British Dyslexia Association, Bury People First, CICS (Cochlear Implanted Children's Support Group), CLAPA, Disabled Children's Partnership, Down's Syndrome Association, Headlines Craniofacial Support Include.org, Mikey's Wish Foundation, NAPLIC, National Association for Hospital Education, National Deaf Children's Society, NatSIP, NDTi (National Development Team for Inclusion), Royal College of Occupational Therapists, Royal College of Speech and Language, Therapists, SAPHNA, SMiRA, Speakeasy, Special Needs Jungle, Speech and Language UK, Speech Bubbles, Square Peg, The Co-op, The Michael Palin Centre, Total Communication Services CIC and Voice21

1. Executive summary

- We are a group of over 30 organisations representing and/or working with signers and people of all ages who have communication disability, difficulty, or difference.
- Our submission is based on their experiences and the experiences of those working with and supporting them.
- We welcome the establishment of the Modernisation Committee and support its strategic aims of driving up standards, improving culture and working practices, and reforming parliamentary procedures.
- Action is needed in all three of these areas if the House of Commons – and Parliament and the political process more widely – is to be accessible to and inclusive of the people we represent. This includes people seeking political office, parliamentarians, staff on the parliamentary estate, and constituents seeking to engage with their MP.
- Currently, the House of Commons (both at Westminster and in constituencies) can be inaccessible to the people we represent. It can, arguably, actively, even if unintentionally, discriminate against those people, whether they are parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, or constituents. The latter includes people of all ages, ranging from children and young people, including disabled children and young people, to adults with life-long, or acquired, conditions.

- Given so much of parliamentary business is time-limited, and delivered verbally, any parliamentarians who sign or have communication disability, difficulty, or difference may face barriers to engaging effectively and meaningfully in debates if no adjustments to timings, and ways of delivery, are made.
- As parliamentarians do not enjoy the protections of the Equality Act, we recommend that some way is found for them to be covered by the Act's reasonable adjustments requirement. This could be done, for example, through amending Standing Orders and the issue being covered in Erskine May.
- We further recommend that:
 - the Committee prioritises auditing standards, culture and working practices, and parliamentary procedures for:
 - their accessibility to and inclusivity of the people we represent; and
 - their compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), specifically Article 29 on participation in political and public life.
 - the Committee works with us, and the people we represent, on that audit;
 - the audit is used to:
 - identify the reasonable adjustments that are needed to make standards, culture and working practices, and parliamentary procedures accessible and inclusive; and
 - develop basic communication access requirements applicable to the parliamentary estate (which could act as good practice for MPs' constituency offices and the political process more generally).
 - given such an audit would take time, and the urgency of the need for Parliament to be inclusive to its members, its staff, and MPs' constituents, as an immediate first step, parliamentarians, and parliamentary staff should undertake the [Communication Access UK](#) training, a free online course; and
 - the Committee, and parliamentary authorities, should work with individual charities on how Parliament can be made accessible to their beneficiaries and the people they represent. For example, ensuring accessibility for deaf parliamentarians and constituents, including those who have a sign language, such as British Sign Language (BSL), as their first, mother, or family language, whether they have hearing loss or not.

2. Why this matters and why action is needed

2.1 The need for action is clear. Right now, parliamentarians with communication disability, difficulty, or difference are facing a series of issues. So are candidates seeking election to the House of Commons. Constituents seeking to engage with their MPs are also facing issues. People who sign face the same issues.

Impact on parliamentarians

2.2 Current and former MPs have spoken about their experiences. [Rosena Allin-Khan](#) has spoken about her experiences as someone who stammers. Former MP Paul Maynard reported he had his cerebral palsy [mimicked in the Chamber](#) and revealed he was [accused of being drunk](#) when he spoke in Parliament.

2.3 During the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act in 2021, Lord Shinkwin revealed that while speaking during one debate in the Chamber he was [told to speed up](#). He said that until he entered the Lords, he had hardly ever experienced disability discrimination.

2.4 As Parliament is exempt from the provisions of the Equality Act, it is not required to make reasonable adjustments for parliamentarians as other public bodies would be. However, it should set an example of communication accessibility and inclusion by finding a way of ensuring reasonable adjustments can be made for parliamentarians.

2.5 For any parliamentarians who wished to sign, it is not clear if they would be able exclusively to use BSL, a recognised language of Great Britain, rather than the spoken word, in the Chamber in which they sit and have their contribution recorded in Hansard.

Impact on candidates

2.6 Ahead of the 2024 General Election, [Chris Nelson](#), withdrew his candidature because of the abuse he received about his stammer from other political figures, including through the mimicking of his speech.

2.7 Candidates can face barriers in standing for elected office. Until March 2020, the UK Government provided a fund to meet the costs of reasonable adjustments for disabled candidates to elected office. As [Disability Rights UK](#) argues despite evidence that such a Fund is necessary, it has not been re-established. In 2019, [a deaf candidate](#) planned to take legal action against the then Government over the issue.

2.8 People have shared their experiences of being put off from standing for office because of their communication disability, difficulty, or difference. One person said they would have

chosen to enter politics, but did not do so because they stammer. Another told us that they were hesitant to pursue a political career because of the need to give speeches.

Impact on people engaging with their MPs

2.9 The people we represent can also face issues engaging with the political process. This can include Westminster processes, meeting MPs at Parliament, and engaging with them in their constituencies.

Engaging with parliamentary processes

2.9.1 Parliamentary processes are not always accessible to the people we represent.

2.9.2 It is important to note that materials about the Committee's work have not been provided in alternative formats, for example through easy read versions.

2.9.3 Parliamentlive.tv is not always accessible to the people we represent. The experiences of deaf people have been shared with us. BSL is often only provided for deaf-related issues; but what about everyday issues? There are also no captions and/or subtitles. The accessibility page requires people to email a request for transcripts; but this is after the debate or event, and not while it is live. So, accessibility is effectively an afterthought. This acts as a barrier to deaf people effectively engaging with the democratic process.

Meeting MPs

2.9.4 Negative experiences when meeting MPs at Westminster have been reported to us.

2.9.5 Speech and language therapists have shared their negative experiences of supporting people on parliamentary visits. One reported that on the rare occasions people with cognitive communication needs meet MPs, there is a lack of awareness of how to make processes and information accessible, for example, through the provision of easy read information about topics, visual supports, the reduction of verbal communication and complex language, and the provision of additional time. Another reported on a visit they had made to Parliament with people with communication disability, difficulty, and difference. They were told they were not allowed to bring in props, aids, and other support. This meant people were reliant on verbal language, without visual prompts. The impact of room and format changes on people who had been supported beforehand over many months to expect a particular set-up was also noted.

2.9.6 The lack of quiet spaces at events as standard where required, at no additional cost, has been highlighted. Such spaces are of fundamental importance for autistic people and for people with other forms of communication disability, difference, or difficulty.

2.9.7 Signers also face barriers. MPs are expected to pay interpreting costs for meetings with signing constituents. This has the potential to create a postcode lottery, and barriers and delays for signers seeking to raise issues with their MPs. This can effectively, even if unintentionally, deprive them of their democratic right to raise issues. This could be addressed, for example, through a dedicated Parliamentary Fund for BSL.

2.9.8 Some of these issues will also be applicable to meeting MPs in their constituencies.

Engaging with MPs' offices at Westminster and in their constituencies

2.9.9 MPs' Westminster and constituency offices are not always accessible or inclusive.

2.9.10 Not all MPs offer a choice of how appointments can be made with them. We have heard of appointments needing to be made over the telephone, rather than, for example, having the option to meet in-person or via video call.

2.9.11 In 2023, STAMMA, the national charity supporting people who stammer, reviewed the websites of 60 MPs and found that the majority did not state what format they offered appointments in, for example, face-to-face or some other way. STAMMA did not find a single example in those 60 which acknowledged that some constituents might have disabilities or that invited any conversation around reasonable adjustments. So, all the work to find out about formats and initiate conversations about reasonable adjustments fell on the constituent.

3. What topic(s) do you think the Modernisation Committee should prioritise and how do they link to one or more of the strategic aims set out in the Leader's memorandum?

3.1 To address these issues, the Committee should prioritise an audit of the House of Commons' - and Parliament's and the political process's – accessibility to and inclusivity of the people we represent.

3.2 This would help deliver the strategic aims in the Leader of the House of Commons' Memorandum to the Committee. Specifically, it would help to:

- make the House of Commons representative of society and an attractive place to work for future generations. (Paragraph 22)
- ensure that the House of Commons is an organisation that looks open and accessible to people from all walks of life so the House of Commons is

representative of the society which we serve. Diversity and an inclusive working environment is of vital importance for members, staff and the wider parliamentary community alike. (Paragraph 23)

- make the House of Commons an accessible and inclusive place of work. (Paragraph 24)

4. Why would the topic(s) benefit from the attention of the Modernisation Committee?

4.1 This topic would benefit from the Committee's attention because to be effective the House of Commons must be accessible and inclusive. Improving communication accessibility and inclusivity would not only make Parliament more effective, it could also act as a catalyst for the wider change in society that we need to see for the people we represent. It would also help to determine if Parliament – and the wider political process – is compliant with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), specifically Article 29 on participation in political and public life.

4.2 This matters because communication is fundamental and foundational, affecting our ability to understand, be understood, and our interaction with others; and it is, of course, through communication that MPs represent their constituents, hold government to account, and make a difference.

4.3 Many people in the United Kingdom (UK) sign or have a communication disability, difficulty, or difference.

- Over 10% of children and young people – some 1.4m in the UK - have long-term communication needs.
- 20% of the adult population may experience communication difficulties at some point in their lives.

4.4 For many people who sign or with communication disability, difficulty, or difference, Parliament – and the political process - can be inaccessible, non-inclusive, and unwelcoming.

4.5 The culture, procedures, and working practices of the House of Commons can act as a barrier to people who sign or with communication disability, difficulty, or difference engaging with the political process. Some of those barriers affecting MPs (and peers) can be seen. For example, time-limited procedures, requirements to use a fixed form of words, uncertainty

over when or whether an MP will be called to speak, quick call outs with the time pressure in a narrow window to say a particular word, the requirement to present everything oneself without support from another person. Some of the barriers can be unseen. For example, affecting people's confidence and sense of safety to take part in debates and in the political process.

4.6 As seen above, people affected include those standing for election to the House of Commons, as well as people who have been elected to the House of Commons. It can also affect members of the House of Lords. As importantly, it can also affect people engaging with their MPs.

5. Is there any existing work relevant to the topic(s) which you think the Modernisation Committee can build on?

5.1 As argued above, we recognise that the audit we are proposing, and the implementation of any reasonable adjustments it identifies, would take time.

5.2 There are, however, things that could be done right now to improve the House of Commons' standards, culture and working practices, and parliamentary procedures in the interests of people who sign or with communication disability, difficulty, or difference, be they MPs (and peers), staff on the parliamentary estate and in constituency offices, and constituents.

5.3 One is for parliamentarians and their staff, wherever they are based, to undertake the Communication Access UK training. This would help to address the substantial disadvantages that the people we represent and their families and carers can face in every area of their lives. Completing the training would enable MPs' offices to display the Communication Access symbol. It would give constituents and colleagues confidence that they would be treated fairly and equally, with reasonable adjustments made.

5.4 Work can be undertaken with specific charities and organisations and how accessibility and inclusivity can be improved for their beneficiaries. For example, organisations working with deaf people could offer advice on the changes required to make the House of Commons and its work accessible to and inclusive of deaf people, including those who use BSL.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Inclusive and accessible communication is a basic human right. For too long, the people we represent have faced barriers to participation, including in engaging with Parliament and the political process. If the Committee works with us as suggested a start will be made on making the Commons – and Parliament, the political process, and wider society – more accessible and inclusive, and effective.

December 2024