

Written evidence submitted by The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR)

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) appreciates the opportunity to respond to the House of Commons Modernisation Committee's consultation regarding potential topics for prioritisation as it develops its work programme. As the professional body representing over 11,000 public relations practitioners in the UK, the CIPR plays a vital role in fostering ethical practices in lobbying and engagement with government institutions. We believe that the Modernisation Committee's focus on transparency and accountability aligns with the broader public expectation of integrity in the political process.

1. 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?

The Modernisation Committee has outlined its strategic aims: driving up standards, improving culture and working practices, and reforming procedures to make the Commons more effective. To achieve these aims, the Leader's memorandum rightly highlights the need to address not only the rules on second jobs but also to "turn the page" on high-profile incidents of bullying, harassment, and abuse.

While the CIPR fully supports these priorities, we believe that achieving the strategic objectives outlined in the memorandum also requires prioritising the relationship between MPs and lobbyists as a critical area for reform. Lobbying is a routine and essential aspect of an MP's role, yet current systems and standards fall short in equipping MPs to manage these interactions responsibly and transparently.

We suggest focusing on topics that deliver practical measures to improve procedures, standards, and working practices in Parliament, including:

A. Parliamentary training on lobbying

One of an MP's most common interactions is with lobbyists, however many engage lobbyists often without a full understanding of the legal and ethical standards that apply to these interactions. The CIPR believes that by introducing compulsory training, Parliament can ensure that MPs and their staff are equipped to manage lobbying relationships responsibly, enhancing their confidence and protecting the integrity of their work. Training will help MPs navigate potential pitfalls, such as conflicts of interest or inappropriate lobbying tactics, which can undermine public trust.

This training would also provide MPs with a clear understanding of lobbying laws, ethical expectations, and best practices for transparent engagement. It would also foster a stronger culture of accountability within Parliament by making MPs more aware of their responsibilities in lobbying interactions. Periodic refresher courses could be offered to ensure all MPs remain up to date as the lobbying landscape evolves.

Compulsory training for new MPs will not only benefit individual MPs but also improve Parliament's overall reputation. In recent years, Parliament has been rocked by numerous lobbying scandals, including the Greensill and Owen Paterson cases, which have undermined public trust in the system. By introducing compulsory training we may reduce the likelihood of similar scandals happening in the future. It would also send a strong message to the public that Parliament takes its role in

regulating lobbying seriously and is committed to maintaining high ethical standards. Over time, this will contribute to greater public trust in the policymaking process.

B. The methods to register lobbying activity

Transparency is at the heart of trust in democratic institutions, yet there are currently no formal mechanisms by which MPs can register their interactions with lobbyists. The outgoing government committed to the creation of a new “single public source of transparency data” with a new database to collate and publish all the data on meetings, gifts, hospitality and travel – but this has yet to happen 18 months after it was promised.

A simple, centralised website where MPs can log meetings with lobbyists in real time would transform the transparency of lobbying interactions. This system could build on voluntary practices already adopted by some MPs and can be scaled for broader use. By standardising the process for disclosing meetings, this platform would create a level playing field where MPs can be proactive in their transparency and the public can easily access information on who MPs are meeting, when, and why. It would also reduce the administrative burden on MPs by offering a streamlined, user-friendly tool, making compliance with transparency standards straightforward and efficient.

A real-time meeting record system would also strengthen public trust in Parliament by making lobbying interactions more visible and accessible. It also reinforces the importance of ethical lobbying practices, encouraging MPs and lobbyists alike to operate with greater integrity. Such a platform aligns Parliament with modern transparency practices used internationally, further demonstrating its commitment to accountability.

Aligning with the strategic aims of the Leader’s memorandum

In the Leader’s memorandum, it is acknowledged that recent scandals and the misconduct of individual members has “eroded public trust and confidence” in parliament and that the onus is on parliamentarians to restore public confidence in the institution.

The proposed parliamentary training on lobbying practices would aid in this endeavour by empowering MPs with the knowledge to engage with lobbyists ethically and transparently. Additionally, the training and real-time meeting records system would improve working practices by fostering accountability and simplifying processes for MPs. Both initiatives will also ensure the Commons operates more effectively, aligning Parliament with modern expectations of transparency and efficiency.

By adopting these measures, the Modernisation Committee can tangibly address its strategic priorities, fostering a Parliament that is better equipped to serve the public interest with integrity.

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

Lobbying plays a vital role in the wellbeing of our democracy; it often allows members to be more informed which, in turn, allows them to meaningfully scrutinise the government and provide quality answers to parliamentary questions. However, public scrutiny of lobbying practices has intensified in recent years driven by high-profile lobbying scandals such as the Greensill and Owen Paterson cases that have undermined trust in Parliament. Furthermore, a poll by the CIPR found that voters also believe that this is a critical issue. The survey of almost 2,100 UK voters found:

- A clear majority – 62% - had heard of the string of lobbying scandals and almost half thought that lobbying rules are too weak
- Almost three quarters of respondents said that lobbying scandals make them less confident in the political system, whilst 44% said scandals make them much less confident

Compulsory training for MPs would ensure that all newly elected members understand the legal and ethical frameworks governing lobbying. Scandals such as Greensill and Owen Paterson have highlighted the gaps in MPs' awareness of best practices in dealing with lobbyists. Training would prepare MPs to identify inappropriate lobbying tactics and handle interactions responsibly. This proactive approach would also signal to the public that Parliament is committed to fostering a culture of ethical behaviour from the outset.

However, the issues around lobbying run far deeper than a simple lack of awareness of the rules from many of our MPs. There are structural flaws which undermine the trust and transparency in the system. Serious weaknesses and exemptions in the lobbying register, mean that a wide range of lobbying activities are exempt from mandatory reporting, from in-house lobbyists, to firms that don't pay VAT. The lack of a mandatory code of conduct for all lobbyists and the insufficient integration of lobbying regulations with broader government transparency measures further exacerbate these problems.

These issues are not isolated to backbench MPs. Indeed, the latest departmental lobbying transparency data for ministers was the first published since new [guidance](#) produced by the Cabinet Office in April 2024 laid out minimum standards of reporting to provide a "meaningful and clear description" of the purpose of meetings. Not only was this data published two months late, a review of the data shows that many descriptions don't meet even this low threshold and fall far short of the guidance, particularly in identifying specific policy areas affected.

The creation of a real-time meeting recording platform would go some way to provide a practical, efficient solution to concerns about opaque lobbying practices. By enabling MPs to disclose their meetings with lobbyists in a timely, standardised manner, Parliament can build public trust while reducing the administrative burden on members, making it easier to report interactions with lobbyists and demonstrating Parliament's commitment to transparency.

These measures also enjoy strong support within the lobbying industry. The CIPR's survey of lobbyists and public relations professionals found that 86% of industry professionals think that there should be greater transparency around who is lobbying Westminster politicians.

It is essential that Parliament acts decisively to rebuild public trust in the democratic process and ensure that lobbying is conducted in a manner that is open, ethical, and in the public interest. By adopting these recommendations, Parliament can demonstrate leadership in ethical governance, rebuild public confidence, and strengthen the democratic process, making it a model of integrity and transparency.

3. Are you aware of examples from other Parliaments relevant to the topic(s) which may be interesting for the Modernisation Committee to consider?

The UK's lobbying regulations currently lag behind those of many comparable democracies, where more comprehensive frameworks ensure greater transparency and accountability between lawmakers and lobbyists. In countries such as Canada, the US, and Ireland, lobbying is regulated more robustly through measures like extensive disclosure requirements, broader definitions of lobbying activity, and mandatory training for legislators.

On a procedural level, a significant gap in the UK system is that, unlike other systems, Westminster's lobbying framework lacks compulsory training for legislators to equip them with knowledge of lobbying rules and potential pitfalls. This omission is critical because proper training ensures lawmakers are equipped to navigate lobbying interactions responsibly, enhancing public trust in the process.

Examples of Compulsory Training for Parliamentarians:

- **Canada:** Canadian legislators and their staff receive compulsory training, offered by the Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying, including practical guidance on avoiding conflicts of interest and recognising inappropriate lobbying tactics. These sessions are supplemented by regular updates to ensure MPs remain informed about evolving lobbying standards.
- **United States:** Under the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act (HLOGA), members of Congress undergo mandatory ethics training. This covers lobbying regulations, financial disclosures, and rules for avoiding conflicts of interest. The training is designed to prevent misconduct and strengthen accountability within the legislative process.
- **Scotland:** Scottish MSPs are required to participate in training on lobbying transparency, as outlined in the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. This ensures they understand their responsibilities for managing lobbying interactions and complying with disclosure requirements.

Examples of a more centralised approach to registering activity:

While centralised platforms specifically designed for legislators to record meetings with lobbyists in real-time are rare across international parliamentary systems, several countries demonstrate a more centralised approach to registering lobbying activity:

- **Canada:** Canada's Lobbyists' Registry requires lobbyists to disclose their interactions with public officials within specific timeframes. This system captures details of the parties involved, the subject matter, and the intent of the lobbying activity, ensuring transparency and allowing for public scrutiny.
- **Ireland:** Ireland's Register of Lobbying mandates the disclosure of lobbying activities three times annually. This register records not only who was lobbied but also the issues discussed, offering the public a comprehensive view of policymaking processes.
- **European Union:** The EU's Transparency Register requires lobbyists to declare meetings with EU officials and their agendas. This creates a robust, publicly accessible record that fosters greater transparency and accountability.

By contrast, the UK's Office of the Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists (ORCL) is far less comprehensive and relies on outdated and inconsistent reporting mechanisms. These shortcomings contribute to public scepticism and undermine trust in democratic institutions.

That said, there are some examples of UK MPs voluntarily using real-time tools, such as personal websites, to document their interactions with lobbyists. While not standardised, these efforts point to a potential model for increasing transparency and accountability in lobbying practices.

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

The Modernisation Committee can draw on a wealth of recent reviews and inquiries that have examined lobbying practices and highlighted areas for reform. The Committee on Standards in Public Life's 2021 [report](#) on upholding standards in public life, underscores critical shortcomings in the existing lobbying framework, suggesting the current system is "not fit for purpose". The review identified the need for clearer definitions of lobbying and comprehensive guidelines for managing informal lobbying activities, particularly those conducted via digital communication platforms like WhatsApp.

Similarly, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's (PACAC) 2023 [report](#) on post-legislative scrutiny of the Lobbying Act 2014 offers valuable recommendations to enhance transparency. While PACAC ultimately advised against extending the Lobbying Act to cover all lobbying activity, it acknowledged that the Act as it stands "requires too little information to be disclosed to ensure proper transparency." PACAC further recommended more frequent reporting of lobbying interactions with senior government officials, explicitly including communication via instant messaging platforms.

Other inquiries, such as the [Boardman Inquiry](#) and reviews conducted by the Office of the Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists (ORCL), have also provided essential insights. These investigations have highlighted deficiencies in oversight, enforcement, and the operational definitions of lobbying, offering a solid foundation for targeted reform. Addressing these gaps through measures such as enhanced training and centralised registration systems, as outlined in the CIPR's recommendations, will be instrumental in delivering meaningful improvements to transparency, accountability, and ethical standards in Parliament.

Conclusion

In summary, in order to achieve the strategic aims outlined in the Leader's memorandum, the CIPR urges the Modernisation Committee to prioritise practical reforms to lobbying practices. By doing so, the Committee can take decisive steps to rebuild public trust, enhance transparency, and ensure members are adequately supported to scrutinise the Government's programme meaningfully and effectively.

Specifically, the CIPR is calling for the adoption of the following measures:

- Compulsory Training on Lobbying for MPs and Parliamentary Staff
 - This training would foster a culture of accountability and provide MPs with the tools to navigate potential conflicts of interest and inappropriate lobbying tactics.
- Improved Methods for Registering Lobbying Activity
 - Developing a centralised, real-time platform for MPs to log their meetings with lobbyists will significantly enhance transparency. This user-friendly system would standardise reporting processes, reduce administrative burdens, and align the UK with international best practices, reinforcing Parliament's commitment to reforming procedures and making the Commons more effective.
- Leveraging Existing Evidence to Shape Reforms
 - The Committee can build on findings from recent inquiries, such as the Standards Matter 2 Review and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's 2023 scrutiny of the Lobbying Act. These reports highlight the need for

clearer definitions, enhanced reporting standards, and greater transparency in digital communications—key areas where the CIPR’s proposals align with broader structural reforms.

These recommendations not only address the immediate need for practical improvements in lobbying transparency and accountability but also complement CIPR’s ongoing call for more comprehensive reforms to the regulatory framework. These include:

- Expanding the Scope of the Lobbying Act 2014
 - Reforming the Act to include all lobbying interactions with senior government officials, MPs, and Peers will create a level playing field and ensure consistency in ethical practices.
- Modernising the Office of the Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists (ORCL)
 - Transforming ORCL into a broader Office of the Registrar of Lobbying (ORL) will enable the monitoring of all lobbying activity with greater effectiveness and transparency.

The CIPR stands ready to assist the Modernisation Committee in implementing these reforms and looks forward to collaborating on initiatives that advance transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct in public life.

December 2024