

## Submission to the Modernisation Committee: focusing on public engagement

Written evidence submitted by Prof. Cristina Leston-Bandeira (Chair of IPEN), Dr Elise Uberoi (Deputy chair of IPEN) and Dr Sarah Moulds (Deputy Chair of IPEN), on behalf of IPEN – the International Parliament Engagement Network

### About IPEN

IPEN brings together academics, officials and third sector representatives working on connecting citizens with parliaments from around the world (over 400 members from over 80 countries). We aim to share knowledge about new research and practice to improve how parliaments design, deliver and evaluate public engagement activities.

In this submission of evidence, we draw on our members' extensive knowledge and experience of what makes public engagement work.

### Key points from this submission:

- The Committee should make public engagement one of its priorities to drive improvement in the strategic coordination and delivery of relevant activities across the House.
- Better public engagement can help to build people's trust in their representatives, and can contribute to better scrutiny. This can in turn improve legislative standards and avoid costly unintended consequences that can flow from enacting legislation that has not been carefully considered from a range of different perspectives.

#### 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?

IPEN urges the Committee to prioritise **public engagement**. Better public engagement helps to build people's trust in their representatives, and results in better scrutiny: it supports the Committee's strategic aim of reforming procedures to make the House of Commons more effective and talks to the concerns identified in the memorandum of the Leader of the House around trust.

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

The Modernisation Committee can instigate changes to how Parliament works. The start of a new Parliament with an exceptionally high number of new MPs creates an exciting opportunity to establish new expectations and ways of working. We argue these should include the expectation of seeking out and responding to views of the public, outside elections, as part of the normal functioning of parliament. In other words, we want to see public engagement embedded across parliamentary functions.

Public engagement matters at a time of populism, polarisation and the slide towards authoritarianism we see in other democracies. Trust in Parliament has been relatively low in the UK for some time;<sup>1</sup> turnout rates have been around 60% in recent decades;<sup>2</sup> and anti-establishment

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<sup>1</sup> National Centre for Social Research, [Trust and confidence in British's system of government at record low](#), June 2024; King's College London, [UK has internationally low confidence in political institutions, police and press](#), March 2023

parties have attracted increasing numbers of votes.<sup>3</sup> Giving people opportunities to have a say in what their representatives debate and decide, outside of elections, helps to maintain the connection between citizens and MPs alive and to keep parliamentary democracy relevant to people's daily lives. People also have an expectation today to have a say during the time between elections. Gone are the days when engagement happened only at election time.

The former Modernisation Committee's 2004 report on *Connecting Parliament with the Public* was a key milestone in the development of the UK Parliament's public engagement services and activity.<sup>4</sup> This led to the development of many of the services and activities that we know today, such as the outreach programme and select committee engagement, and placed the UK Parliament at the forefront of parliamentary public engagement worldwide. However, twenty years later, maintaining the UK's leadership role in this area entails a need to think more strategically about the role of public engagement in enhancing perceptions about MPs and Parliament, and in enhancing parliamentary business.

Engaging the public with parliamentary activities helps to give MPs a better sense of how the policies, legislation and issues they are scrutinising and debating play out in real life. Public engagement can give insights into public opinion as well as the lived experiences of different groups in society. Improving the knowledge base MPs can draw on to inform their work will enhance their scrutiny work, which could lead to better outcomes for the people they represent. This could also help make Parliament more efficient: better scrutiny of legislation, bringing in insights from the public, should help to reduce errors and unintended consequences. This should result in a reduction of parliamentary time spent on correcting issues in legislation.

We suggest the Committee considers embedding public engagement in two ways: **(a)** leadership and strategy and **(b)** improving existing processes.

#### **(a) Leadership and strategy**

We firmly support the Administration Committee's recommendations that the Commons needs a more strategic approach to public engagement that should be regularly reviewed by MPs, included in its *Communicating the Commons* report last year.<sup>5</sup>

The UK Parliament currently benefits from a well-developed public engagement offer across different teams. However, the links between these teams are mostly loose and informal, often relying on personal connections. This means teams may use different approaches and lessons learned in one area may not always be effectively shared with others.

Despite many excellent examples of collaboration across teams, the delivery of public engagement in Parliament would benefit from a more strategic, coordinated approach that links different teams and activities together in a single strategic vision that clearly connects public engagement to parliamentary business and embeds it across parliament's functions. This vision should outline core aims and principles for all activities and show how activities complement each other as well as how

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<sup>2</sup> Commons Library Insight, [2024 general election: turnout](#), September 2024

<sup>3</sup> Casal Bértoa F, Rama J. [Party decline or social transformation? Economic, institutional and sociological change and the rise of anti-political-establishment parties in Western Europe](#). *European Political Science Review*. 2020;12(4):503-523; see also Sophie Stowers, [Apathy in the UK: how does political discontent compare with other European countries?](#), UK in a changing Europe, April 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons, [Connecting Parliament with the Public](#), 2004 (PDF)

<sup>5</sup> Administration Committee, [Communicating the Commons: how effectively does the House of Commons Administration communicate about Parliament?](#), 2023

they feed into specific items of parliamentary business (for example, legislation or select committee inquiries). It should sit above and integrate existing communications and participation strategies.

This vision should be supported and continuously reviewed by senior leaders. This includes both senior officials, for example by making its delivery the responsibility of a Commons Executive Board member, and MPs.

### **(b) Improving existing processes**

Despite the range and quality of the public engagement initiatives delivered by the UK Parliament, 20 years on since the *Connecting Parliament with the Public* report, there are plenty of opportunities to improve the current offer, especially by:

- Better resourcing teams designing, delivering and evaluating public engagement activities, including by hiring more skilled staff and/or upskilling existing staff, focusing particularly on digital skills.
- Embracing the opportunities of technology and AI, including to deal with large volumes of public submissions (as other parliaments already do).
- More careful thinking about how public engagement initiatives fit with parliamentary procedures and vice-versa, so that public engagement is not simply an add-on and is able to add value to parliamentary processes.
- Improving how Parliament reaches seldom heard communities, for example by using community organisations as mediators, using accessible language, and ensuring different teams in Parliament join up to raise awareness of opportunities for participation (with, for example, better connections between the education teams and the Petitions Committee).<sup>6</sup> This requires teams to interact regularly to be aware of opportunities in other areas, and reviewing communication materials to ensure these reflect participation opportunities across Parliament.
- Improving connections between submitted e-petitions and other parliamentary business. This would maximise the value of e-petitions, but also ensure that the rest of parliamentary business benefits from what is a huge source of potentially valuable insights into people's lived experiences across a wide range of issues. The Petitions Committee already tries to make these links, but the House would benefit from considering this at a more strategic level.
- Improving how Parliament communicates to MPs about public engagement and what training they can access, including highlighting how public engagement serves scrutiny, what activities the House can deliver and how they can request these, and how public engagement can help them connect with and represent their citizens. This helps to build awareness of and support for public engagement among MPs.
- Building on the experience of the participatory democracy pilots in recent years to develop in-house capability in this area.<sup>7</sup> Select committees should be able to access financial resources, subject to controls, in order to use participatory and deliberative methods to inform their work, where appropriate.

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

There are many examples of parliaments across the world undertaking innovative and effective approaches to public engagement. But we have outlined a few examples below, across a range of areas of public engagement:

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<sup>6</sup> Cristina Leston Bandeira and Blagovesta Tacheva, [Petition platforms must reach beyond the usual suspects](#), LSE Blog, February 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Shaw, [Select Committee pilots on participatory democracy at the UK Parliament](#), IPEN, March 2024

- The Chamber of Deputies in Brazil enables citizens to share their views on bills, and uses AI to analyse these views and make them available to Members in a range of automated and simplified formats.<sup>8</sup>
- The Italian Senate uses AI to help citizens engage with information on its website interactively, and to help citizens understand the process and contents of bills and legislation.<sup>9</sup>
- The Scottish Parliament has a [Participation and Communities Team](#) that designs and delivers activities to bring the views of citizens into the work of their committees (which have a different remit to those in the UK Parliament, including delivering a regular programme of deliberative exercises, mostly in-house).<sup>10</sup>
- The Danish Parliament’s Citizens Initiative enables citizens to propose new legislation. Proposals that gain 50,000 signatures are debated in Parliament.<sup>11</sup>
- The Parliament of Chile enables citizens to give comments on bills going through parliament through its Congreso Virtual platform.<sup>12</sup>
- The Parliament of South Africa has embedded (institutionalised) public engagement into its procedures and structures.<sup>13</sup>
- The Rito Youth reference group in the Parliament of New Zealand serves as a way of integrating voices from young people into parliamentary business.<sup>14</sup>

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

Research on parliamentary public engagement is still in its infancy, but we have listed below some overarching sources that may be useful:

- Administration Committee report (2023), *Communicating the Commons: how effectively does the House of Commons Administration communicate about Parliament?*, available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7704/communications-and-engagement-services-provided-by-the-house-of-commons-administration/publications/>
- Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Programme (2022), *Global Parliamentary Report: public engagement in the work of parliament*, available at: <https://www.ipu.org/impact/democracy-and-strong-parliaments/global-parliamentary-report/global-parliamentary-report-2022-public-engagement-in-work-parliament>
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024), *Guidelines for AI in Parliaments*, available at: <https://www.ipu.org/ai-guidelines>
- Cristina Leston-Bandeira and Sven T. Siefken (2023) ‘The development of public engagement as a core institutional role for parliaments’, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 29:3, 361-379, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2023.2214390>
- Liaison Committee report (2019) *The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system*, available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmliaisn/1860/186002.htm>

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<sup>8</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union AI Use Case: [Analysis of citizens’ opinions on bills, Brazil](#), June 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union Use Case: [Website content navigation chatbot, Italy](#), June 2024; Inter-Parliamentary Union Use Case: [Natural-language querying of legislative processes and contents, Italy](#), June 2024. For more examples of how AI is used in parliaments, see Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Index of parliamentary use cases](#), last updated September 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Scottish Parliament, [Participation and Communities Team](#).

<sup>11</sup> Danish Parliament, [Citizens Initiative](#).

<sup>12</sup> Parliament of Chile, [Congreso Virtual](#).

<sup>13</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, [South Africa: mainstreaming citizen engagement in the constitution](#), 2022.

<sup>14</sup> New Zealand Parliament, [Rito 2024](#).