

Written evidence submitted by MySociety

About mySociety and TheyWorkForYou

[mySociety](#) is a charity with a mission to help people access information and participate in democracy, using data and digital tools. Our main work is in the UK, but we have a wider role creating and championing [pro-democracy tech](#) around the world.

From parliamentary monitoring to Freedom of Information - our services make our democracy and governments more understandable and transparent - both to citizens, and to people working on the inside.

In the UK, we have run [TheyWorkForYou](#) for twenty years - and in doing so have been a major force in increasing the transparency of how the UK's Parliaments operate - and in inspiring more and better transparency from Parliament itself.

This document covers lessons we have learned over our time running TheyWorkForYou, as well as insights from our current WhoFundsThem project, in which we are working with volunteers to create new analysis of the RMFI and APPGs. We will release a full report and recommendations on this project in February 2025.

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?

While we argue for some longer term changes, our submission is focused around small changes that can have a big impact. On the standards side especially, there is low hanging fruit around proper enforcement of existing rules, and better data publication.

Driving up standards

1. Review and update the Register of Members Financial Interest (RMFI) categories to better capture appropriate information.
2. Chairs should more proactively remind MPs of rules around declaring interests in debates.
3. Interests declared when tabling Parliament questions should be published on the website and in Hansard.

4. Parliament should require disclosure and publish centrally information required from APPGs.

Improving culture and working practices

5. Allow all MPs to access the proxy vote system, for a set number of days in each year.
6. In normal circumstances, groups vote together in a 'decision time', and introduce faster ways of voting.
7. Further explore locum or stand-in MPs.

Reforming Parliamentary procedures to make the House of Commons more effective.

8. Better publication of parliamentary motions
9. More availability of "track changes" Keeling schedules on legislation.
10. Return to and complete Public Service Ombudsman reform.

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

Driving up standards

- 1. Review and update the Register of Members Financial Interest (RMFI) categories to better capture appropriate information**

The financial landscape around UK politics and elections has changed, and the 10 categories of the register have not kept up with these changes. We recommend a review to ensure that appropriate questions are asked for the kinds of disclosures that are made in practice.

For example, in recent years a number of front bench and shadow front bench MPs have received large donations specifically for the purpose of funding staff for their offices. These are declared under Category 2 (Donations), however the space to provide relevant details other than the donor name and total donation figure is only free text "Payment description", leading to huge variation in the amount of information provided. Relevant information that could be required might include: job role, type of contract, length of contract, FTE hours worked in total.

Category 3 is another example of different types of interest being grouped together, to the detriment of the quality of the information as a whole. For MPs who regularly take part in media appearances, category 3 (Gifts, Benefits and Hospitality) can become cluttered with small amounts of money to pay for transport to and from recording studios, which is a

different kind of interest to the most common type of entry in this category - tickets and hospitality for sporting, social and cultural events.

2. Chairs should more proactively remind MPs of rules around declaring interests in debates.

Following the [Rules for the Conduct of MPs](#), MPs should be making a full declaration of what their potential conflict of interest is (and its relevance to the debate), but in practice many MPs continue to just say “I refer to my entry in the Register of Members Interests”. This was valid under previous sets of the rules, but is insufficient under the current set.

Reviewing speeches made by current MPs in the last 12 months, our volunteers found that a significant proportion of speeches referencing interests were unclear about the nature of their interest.

From the outside, we’re working on better monitoring of this, and are considering how we can nudge MPs to make fuller declarations — but this is also something the Chair in a given debate should do as a matter of course. A few comments from the Chair after incomplete disclosures would be very helpful in bringing Parliamentary practice into sync with the rules.

3. Interests declared when tabling Parliament questions should be published on the website and in Hansard.

On the form to table Parliamentary questions, MPs are required to indicate if they have a conflict of interest, and also give some details on what it is. However, most of this information goes nowhere. The ‘yes/no’ is made public, but the nature of the conflict is never published.

This is out of step with the rules for clarity in debate: some MPs are likely to be declaring things right but there is no visibility on this, and it makes it hard to differentiate where MPs are declaring a personal rather than financial interest.

When [we’ve raised this before](#), the Speaker’s Office has said they were conducting a review around publishing the contents of the interests. The Committee should take an interest in that process and encourage bringing the different standards into alignment.

4. Parliament should require disclosure and publish centrally information required from APPGs

In response to concerns that APPGs operate as backdoor access to Parliament and decision makers, new rules were adopted to improve the transparency of APPGs. The current rules

require APPGs to either publish on their website, or make available on request, a range of information (for instance, membership lists, financial reports etc).

In practice, this doesn't work well. We ran an experiment to test these rules, writing to all APPGs as they existed in September and asking for the information.

This process had a low response rate; we emailed 34 APPGs and had 18 responses back. In some cases, we were told they published all the relevant information on their website. Some did, but most only had some of the required information published.

Practically, if Parliament wants something to be public, it should take an interest in making that happen. Our recommendation is that where the current rules say something should be public, this should be deposited quarterly for publication by Parliament.

Improving culture and working practices

5. The House of Commons should defer most votes to a 'decision time', and adopt new processes to make counting individual votes faster.

Grouping votes is the standard working pattern in the Scottish Parliament and Senedd. The Scottish Parliament groups votes into a "decision time" at the end of the day; the Senedd similarly has a "voting time". Combined with electronic voting systems – these parliaments can handle a [number of votes in the time it takes the Westminster Commons to do one vote](#).

A basic goal is having a single accurate division list. The double lobbies were introduced [after the 1834 fire](#) to create accurate division lists over the informal ones printed at the time. Today we have a problem of two systems that can produce different numbers. Votes are counted collectively by the tellers and individually through the pass system: the collective vote is the one that decides the result of the vote, but sometimes the total differs. On tight votes this could be significant: in [May 2024 a division that was won by one vote](#) was recorded differently in different systems.

But there is a wider efficiency issue that Parliamentary time is precious and this is an opportunity to reclaim some of it. Quicker votes in a centralised block can maintain the social aspect while freeing up time.

6. Expanded and on-demand proxy votes

Sometimes MPs can't make it to Parliament for reasons that are part of the normal human experience. People have children and people get sick. These are things we recognise as

important to safeguard in employment law, but there are difficulties in applying this to MPs who are effectively self-employed, but with obligations to constituents.

The way Parliament currently balances this is through proxy votes where MPs can, in circumstances like maternity/paternity leave or prolonged sickness, designate another MP to cast a vote on their behalf.

This system is a good innovation, but it should go further. While some circumstances that lead to prolonged absences are explicitly included, people often need time off work to handle other important issues in their lives. Currently, this remains managed through informal pairing approaches, where whips can give MPs permission to be absent (“slips”).

The problem with this informal approach is it gives parties arbitrary power in one aspect of an MP’s life, that can be used to encourage discipline more widely. In 2022, [female Conservative MPs argued](#) there was sexism in when slips were and weren’t allowed. The solution to this is to manage slips through the same proxy vote mechanism. MPs should be given the equivalent of leave through a set number of times they can designate a proxy for the day, no questions asked.

7. Further research into making a locum/stand-in MP system work

A locum (or stand-in) MP is the idea that when MPs have a substantial period of absence (e.g. parental leave or long-term sickness) there should be a process to appoint someone who can temporarily fulfil their duties.

The need here is to find an approach that starts with the fact that MPs are people, and we need a political process able to handle prolonged absence well — both for constituent representation and the wellbeing of MPs. In fact, this doesn’t just affect MPs: it also applies to the much larger group of local councillors.

In the absence of the PR list system used to identify stand-ins in places where this is practiced, our suggestion is creating a new role with speaking rights in Parliament, while voting continues to be handled by proxy vote. But other approaches are possible, and what’s important at this point is trying to draw out objections and views, and trying to find ways forward.

We [have published our research on the current international picture](#), and potential subsequent research questions. This change would pose new democratic challenges, but our view is that the current situation already creates democratic difficulties, creating a chilling effect on who stands for office.

In the meantime, we would support an extension of current proxy arrangements from 7 to 12 months to match [statutory maternity leave](#).

Reforming Parliamentary procedures to make the House of Commons more effective

8. The House should maintain and publicly publish a motions database

One of mySociety's goals is to make it easier for everyone to understand what MPs are voting on in any given division.

We're currently working on a system of extracting motions from Parliamentary debates to improve the information we provide, and to include better information on what different kinds of motions mean. But unlike the Scottish Parliament, which [maintains and publishes a motions database](#) that can be easily associated with votes and decisions, this data is not part of the UK Parliament's outputs.

Capturing and publishing this information would help improve both our and Parliament's own efforts to explain its processes — both to the public and Parliamentarians.

9. Parliament should ensure that Keeling schedules are available for all proposed legislation and amendments

Many laws are making changes to other laws. Understanding the actual effect of new draft bills or amendments is easier if you understand the full picture. Keeling Schedules (or "track changes" documents) show what these changes do in context. They are sometimes produced by the sponsoring government department, but not reliably.

The US House of Representatives has a good working system in the [Comparative Print Suite](#), and there are experiments being pursued by the DSIT i.ai team in improving automated creation of such schedules.

The Committee should adopt a goal of having Keeling Schedules speedily available, take an interest in existing work, and consider where this work is best placed between government and parliamentary technical capacity.

10. Parliament should revisit Public Ombudsman reform

Following years of reports recommending a change, in 2016 there was significant progress made on proposals to merge several ombudsmen together to create the Public Services Ombudsman, with the goal of reducing complexity to the citizen, and modernising the structure.

Functionally, this meant removing the “MP filter” from complaints made to the Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman. Currently PHSO has to turn away complainants who have not gone through their MP for non-health complaints, but can just accept health-related complaints. The proposed reform also gave it a new role in improving complaint handling and promoting good practice through issuing recommendations.

Completing this oven-ready reform is vital to lighten MPs’ workload and improve public services (and people’s lives) by turning complaints into long-term solutions.

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

There is not enough learning from the experiences of the UK’s other Parliaments. This is not to suggest that these Parliaments are perfect, but do provide clear counterfactuals to many ways the UK Parliament works.

On backbench business, the Senedd has an explicit 3:2 rule on government time, and the Scottish Parliament refers bills to select committees rather than individual Public Bill Committees. Many proposed reforms are changes where we can learn from experiences within the UK.

On the stand-in MP question, the debate would benefit from understanding more about the experiences of both MPs and stand-ins in countries that have a process in place. Belgium’s House of Representatives allows substitution of members on committees, while The Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, and some Austrian Länder parliaments allow full substitution of members.

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

We have written fuller explanations of many of the proposals above:

- [It should be easier for MPs to vote / mySociety](#)
- [Stand-in MPs - Exploring models for UK legislatures](#)
- [To fix Parliament, fix the Public Ombudsman / mySociety](#)
- [The Big Ben rule: reducing Parliamentary jargon / mySociety](#)
- [Giving more power to Parliament helps MPs keep their promises to us / mySociety](#)
- [Using citizen assemblies to set standards and support for MPs / mySociety](#)

On wider technological modernisation: US examples [given by the POPVOX foundation](#) are helpful, and Bússola Tech [has a wider library](#) of global examples of technological modernisation programmes in Parliaments.

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