

Written evidence submitted by UK Open Government Network

CONTENTS

1.0 Introduction

1.1 About Us

1.2 What is Open Parliament and Open State?

1.3 The Opportunity of the Modernisation Committee Inquiry

2.0 Topics the Modernisation Committee Should Prioritise

2.1 Transparency and Accountability

- a. Proactive Publication of Parliamentary Data
- b. Legislative Footprint System
- c. Enhancing Ethical Oversight, Including MPs' Second Jobs

2.2 Inclusive and Safe Workplace Culture

- a. Strengthening Harassment and Bullying Mechanisms
- b. Gender Equity and Diversity Initiatives
- c. Enhancing Family-Friendly Policies

2.3 Procedural Reform and Public Engagement

- a. Mandating Pre-Legislative Scrutiny for All Bills
- b. Mandating Public Consultations
- c. Strengthening Parliamentary Communication
- d. Modernising Parliamentary Practices

3.0 Why These Topics Would Benefit the Modernisation Committee

3.1 Rebuilding Public Trust

3.2 Addressing Cultural Challenges

3.3 Enhancing Procedural Effectiveness

4.0 Examples from Other Parliaments

- International Examples
- Domestic Examples: Scotland's Participatory Budgeting Model, Wales' Future Generations Act)

5.0 Existing Work the Modernisation Committee Can Build On

- a. Open Government Partnership (OGP) Membership
- b. Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS)
- c. OECD Research
- d. Lessons from Previous Modernisation Committees

6.0 Conclusion

1.0 Introduction

1.1 About Us

The [UK Open Government Network](#) (UK OGN) is a coalition of civil society organisations dedicated to fostering trust through open government, defined by the OECD as a culture of transparency, integrity, accountability, and stakeholder participation.

For over a decade, the UK OGN has worked with the UK government to produce [open government plans](#) as part of the 77-country [Open Government Partnership \(OGP\)](#). This is a multilateral initiative, launched in 2011 by the then US President, with the UK as a founding member.

The Scottish and Northern Ireland governments, Glasgow City Council and Greater Manchester Combined Authority have since joined OGP as 'local' members.

It is a model of co-creation that has established structures, governance, and independent oversight, and has led to major reforms, including:

- The UK being the first in the G20 to introduce a register of beneficial ownership to combat illicit finance;
- The UK being the first in the G20 to adopt the Open Contracting Data Standard, for transparency in procurement;
- The development of the world's first algorithmic transparency standard.

Recommendations made in this submission could potentially be included in future national or local OGP processes, via a standalone Open Parliament Plan, as part of a widespread promotion of openness, or an '[open state](#)' approach

1.2 What is Open Parliament and Open State?

- a. An [Open Parliament](#) fosters transparency, participation, and accountability within legislatures and across government, allowing parliaments to engage citizens and civil society between elections, stay informed about governmental commitments, and access global peer learning and expertise. Parliaments can also hold governments accountable for open government reforms, embed transparency and inclusivity in parliamentary operations, and open oversight of these processes to public scrutiny. The [OGP Memorandum on Parliamentary Engagement](#) outlines these principles, there is more information on the evidence from parliamentary engagement in OGP [here](#) and guidance on parliamentary oversight [here](#) with recommended reforms and examples from around the world. The OGP's [Global Strategy](#) also includes a recommendation that members aim to 'make open government central to how all levels and branches of government function and deliver on their priorities.'

- b. An '**open state**' approach, as defined by the OECD, is when the executive, legislature, judiciary, independent public institutions, and all levels of government collaborate, exploit synergies, and share good practices and lessons learned to promote open government.

1.3 The opportunity of the Modernisation Committee Inquiry

The Modernisation Committee has a timely opportunity to address cultural and structural issues in Parliament, where public trust has declined (only 24% of people trust Parliament in the 2023 ONS Trust in Government Survey).

This submission focuses on driving up standards, workplace culture, and parliamentary procedures to rebuild trust and enhance Parliament's relevance and effectiveness.

It is important to stress that open government is a collaborative process between civil society and government, fostering continuous, inclusive dialogue to co-create solutions. Consequently, the success of recommendations contained in this submission relies on further engagement with diverse voices.

2.0 Topics the Modernisation Committee should prioritise and how they link to the strategic aims set out in the Leader's memorandum

The UK OGN identifies three interconnected areas related to open parliament that should form the backbone of the Modernisation Committee's priorities:

2.1 Transparency and Accountability

Transparency reforms are critical to rebuilding public trust and enhancing confidence in Parliament. To restore credibility, Parliament must demonstrate a strong commitment to openness, accountability, and engagement with citizens, aligning with the Leader's memorandum (Section 14) on driving up standards and institutionalising high ethical practices.

a. Proactive Publication of Parliamentary Data

Parliament should adopt a Parliamentary Transparency Framework to standardise and institutionalise transparency practices, combining elements such as legislative tracking, ethical oversight, and public accountability mechanisms. This aligns with the Leader's memorandum's emphasis on openness (Section 14) and accountability.

Estonia offers a model, publishing all parliamentary data (including plenary debates, committee sessions, legislative drafts, and voting records) in machine readable formats, allowing easy analysis and visualisation by civil society, academics, and citizens.

b. Legislative Footprint System

A legislative footprint system is vital for tracking the progress of bills through Parliament. It should document all stages of a bill's development—consultations, amendments, and decisions—allowing citizens to follow the legislative process transparently.

The OECD [recommends](#) introducing a regulatory footprint in public decision-making to detail lobbying, influence actors, and stakeholders involved. Canada focuses on procedural tracking to ensure transparency in legislative progression, while countries like Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Poland emphasise ex post disclosure, to enhance accountability and understanding of decision-making. Together, these approaches offer a framework for a robust and transparent legislative system.

c. Enhancing Ethical Oversight including regulating MP's Second Jobs

While the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and related bodies already publish annual reports, these could be expanded with systemic insights, proactive audits, and transparent follow-ups. This would align with ongoing efforts to establish the Ethics and Integrity Committee and the Leader's memorandum on behavioural standards (Section 20 / 21) to foster a proactive culture of accountability. Key enhancements:

- **Broader Mandate:** Empower the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to conduct proactive, system-wide reviews rather than focusing solely on case-specific investigations.
- **Systemic Risk Analysis:** Include data-driven risk analysis in reports to identify trends and areas requiring reform across Parliament.
- **Tracking and Follow-Up:** Publish follow-up reports detailing Parliament's progress in implementing past recommendations.

Recent reforms banning MPs from lobbying roles are positive. To complement these, further measures are recommended to address concerns around external engagements, including: capping external earnings, mandating full transparency in income sources, or requiring MPs to allocate a proportion of their external earnings to public funds.

These measures align with public demands for MPs to prioritise their parliamentary duties and build on recent steps outlined in the Leader's Memorandum (Section 16) and the forthcoming Ethics and Integrity Committee.

2.2 Inclusive and Safe Workplace Culture

Parliament must lead by example in creating a workplace culture that is safe, inclusive, and reflective of societal diversity. Such reforms link to Section 22 to 26 in the Leader's Memorandum.

a. Strengthening Harassment and Bullying Mechanisms

The [Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme \(ICGS\)](#) should integrate better with political party complaints systems and include mandatory anti-harassment training for MPs, staff, and stakeholders. This would ensure consistent behavioural standards, prevent misconduct, and signal Parliament's zero-tolerance approach to harassment and bullying

b. Gender Equity and Diversity Initiatives:

Parliament should adopt benchmarks to improve diversity in leadership roles and policymaking drawing on examples including:

- **Canada's Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+)** is a systematic approach used to assess how policies, programs, and initiatives impact diverse groups of people differently. It incorporates gender as well as other intersecting factors like race, ethnicity, age, and disability. The UK could adapt a similar analytical tool to ensure that all legislative processes and budgetary decisions are evaluated through an inclusivity lens.
- **Scotland's Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs)** mandates EIAs to evaluate how public policies and spending decisions affect different groups, particularly marginalised ones. They are already part of the UK framework and can be a model for extending similar evaluations to the entire UK Parliament.

Furthermore, activating **Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010**, which requires political parties to publish candidate diversity data, would enable more targeted efforts to address underrepresentation in politics.

c. Enhancing Family-Friendly Policies

Measures such as improved proxy voting procedures, flexible scheduling, and childcare support would make Parliament more inclusive, attracting representatives from diverse backgrounds, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities.

2.3 Procedural Reform and Public Engagement

Reforming parliamentary procedures is crucial to keeping Parliament effective, relevant, and accessible in a diverse and connected society. This aligns with emphasis in the Leader's Memorandum on encouraging diverse input and scrutinising government business effectively ((Sections 23, 27-32).

a. Mandating Pre-Legislative Scrutiny for All Bills:

Requiring pre-legislative scrutiny would ensure that bills introduced in Parliament are evidence-based and well-considered. Rigorous impact assessments and consultations with diverse stakeholders before tabling legislation would improve governance and legislative quality while reducing errors.

b. Mandating Public Consultations:

Public consultations at key stages of drafting legislation ensure policies reflect citizens' needs. Transparent reporting mechanisms should demonstrate how feedback influenced decisions, fostering trust and participation. Ireland's citizen assemblies on complex issues, like constitutional reform, offer a model for incorporating diverse voices into UK policymaking.

c. Strengthening Parliamentary Communication

Parliament should enhance transparency and inclusivity through improved communication including:

- **Digital Engagement Platforms:** Create a more user-friendly portal for live debates, real-time feedback on legislative (and pre-legislative) proposals, and policy explanations. Estonia's digital governance model shows how technology fosters transparency and trust.
- **Improved Accessibility for Vulnerable Groups:** Ensure all proceedings and documents are accessible to individuals with disabilities, using sign language interpreters, real-time captioning, and multilingual formats to promote inclusivity.

d. Modernising Parliamentary Practices:

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) have been criticised as adversarial and unproductive. The Committee should explore alternative formats. This aligns with international trends that prioritise evidence-based dialogue over partisanship and relates to Section 27 to 32 in the Leader's Memorandum.

Proposed reforms:

- Introducing **monthly thematic sessions** focusing on key national issues.
- Encouraging participation from **subject-matter experts** or external stakeholders.
- **Structuring debates** to limit interruptions and focus on policy content.

The [OECD](#) highlights structured and thematic questioning practices in countries like Finland, Germany, and Sweden as models for balancing accountability with effective discourse in its **OECD Parliamentary Governance Reports**.

- **Finland: The Eduskunta** focuses on **thematic discussions and evidence-based debates**. Plenary sessions often revolve around specific policy areas, fostering detailed discussions supported by expert testimony and reports.
- **Germany: The Bundestag's** Question Time (Fragestunde) prioritises ministerial accountability and detailed responses supported by facts. Germany's sessions emphasise substantive answers to policy questions.
- **Sweden: The Riksdag** employs **Interpellations** and **Debates on Current Affairs** for in-depth discussions. Ministers must provide comprehensive answers and debates can include expert input.
- **Norway: The Storting's Thematic Question Hours** (Spørretimen) focus on specific challenges, encouraging well-researched, evidence-based ministerial responses.

3.0 Why these topics would benefit from the attention of the Modernisation Committee

These proposed priorities address several pressing challenges facing Parliament and UK democracy more broadly.

3.1 Rebuilding Public Trust

The decline in public trust in Parliament poses serious challenges for democratic governance. The 2023 ONS Trust in Government Survey revealed that only 12% of respondents trust political parties, reflecting concerns over scandals, conflicts of interest, and a lack of transparency.

3.2 Addressing Cultural Challenges

Parliament's workplace culture has been criticised for being exclusionary and, in some cases, toxic. By strengthening the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, promoting gender-sensitive policies, and adopting family-friendly reforms, Parliament can position itself as a model employer and a reflection of societal diversity. An inclusive workplace culture is both a moral imperative and essential for fostering effective governance.

3.3 Enhancing Procedural Effectiveness

Parliamentary procedures must evolve to meet the demands of a digitally connected and increasingly diverse society. Practices such as PMQs, while traditional, are often viewed as adversarial and outdated. Reforms to improve public engagement, such as introducing public consultations and modernising debate formats, will ensure that Parliament remains relevant and accessible.

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

As a partnership of 77 countries and 150 local governments (including Scotland, Northern Ireland, Greater Manchester Combined Authority and Glasgow City Council) the Open

Government Partnership has a considerable number of examples for the Modernisation Committee to consider.

Furthermore, it connects to civil society organisations like the UK Open Government Network, which themselves connect to civil society expertise domestically and across the world. Examples in this document include:

Proactive Publication of Parliamentary Data	Estonia
Legislative Footprint	Canada, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland
Gender Equity and Diversity Initiatives	Sierra Leone, Canada, Scotland
Modernising Parliamentary Practices	Finland, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Scotland, Wales

There are examples from Parliaments closer to home too:

- **Scotland’s Participatory Budgeting Model:** Scotland has pioneered participatory budgeting, empowering citizens to influence how public funds are allocated. Parliament could explore applying similar practices to its internal budgets, fostering greater transparency and civic engagement.
- **Wales’ Future Generations Act:** Wales’ focus on long-term impact through its Future Generations Act offers a blueprint for incorporating sustainability into legislative decision-making. Parliament should evaluate its alignment with future-oriented governance principles.

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

The Committee can build on several existing initiatives:

a. Membership of the Open Government Partnership (OGP)

As a founding member of the OGP, the UK government and civil society (through the UK OGN) have pioneered world-leading reforms (see 1.2) which the government publishes in National Action Plans for Open Government.

b. Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS)

The ICGS has laid a foundation for addressing workplace misconduct. Strengthening its coordination with political party complaints systems and providing additional resources for oversight bodies would enhance its effectiveness.

c. OECD Research

The OECD's Trust in Government Survey identifies five key drivers of trust: integrity, responsiveness, reliability, openness, and fairness. Parliament could adopt these principles to shape its reform agenda, with measurable indicators to assess progress. For example, tracking improvements in citizen satisfaction with parliamentary engagement would provide a tangible metric for evaluating reform success.

d. Lessons from the Previous Modernisation Committee

The [Constitution Unit's research](#) highlights the successes and challenges of the previous Modernisation Committee. By prioritising cross-party collaboration and public engagement, the new Committee can avoid the pitfalls of its predecessor.

6. Conclusion

The Modernisation Committee has a unique opportunity to deliver transformative change in UK parliamentary history. Addressing declining trust, workplace inclusivity, and outdated procedures requires bold, evidence-based action. By adopting the recommendations in this submission, the Committee can rebuild public trust, foster inclusivity, modernise processes, and draw on international expertise.

The UK Open Government Network is ready to support the Committee in this mission.

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