

**Written evidence submitted by Catherine McKinnell MP,
Chair of the Petitions Committee (CVR 118)**

In light of the Leader of the House's announcement this weekend that the Government will once again consider the extension of hybrid proceedings, I am writing to raise the issue of participation in Westminster Hall.

After being unavailable for more than 6 months, the reopening of Westminster Hall to debates has been welcome; however, it remains the case that those Members who cannot travel to Westminster are entirely unable to participate. Westminster Hall is the arena in which most backbench debates take place and almost exclusively the venue for petition debates, which are among the most watched of all pieces of Parliamentary business.

While Westminster Hall was unable to sit, the Petitions Committee trialled two 'e-Petition Sessions' where Members from across the House were invited to give evidence, in the form of speeches, in a format similar to Westminster Hall debates, with me in the Chair. Opposition parties and the Government sent frontbench speakers to respond to the debate. These debates allowed, and indeed prioritised, participation from Members who were unable to attend in Westminster, and the Committee has received representations from Members welcoming this innovation asking us to hold more such debates to ensure they are not excluded entirely from substantive debates in the House.

We will, of course, consider occasions to hold these debate-style sessions in future in addition to our Westminster Hall time, but I hope that the Procedure Committee will consider recommending that the Government and the House authorities should pursue options to allow a form of virtual participation in Westminster Hall debates.

I appreciate that resourcing is the main barrier to enabling virtual participation and it is right that the Chamber must be a priority, but the Petitions Committee have already been able to demonstrate how a hybrid debate might work with the same resources as a hybrid Select Committee meeting. If helpful to the Committee's work, I and the Clerk of the Committee would be happy to provide you with further information about how our hybrid e-petitions sessions were managed.

16 November 2020