

Twelve recommendations to strengthen public engagement by Commons committees

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Since the Wright reforms which strengthened the independence of select committees against the government and party front benches were implemented, committees have improved their visibility and policy impact. Here, **Ian Marsh** reports 12 recommendations to strengthen the public engagement by committees to improve their impact and visibility further.*



In a previous post, the general case for seeing the select committee system of the Commons as a critical node in democratic renewal was briefly summarised. In this follow-on note, we sketch the 12 recommendations which figure in our report on public engagement by the committee system. These suggest ways of developing committee system outreach in the 2015-2020 Parliament.

1: Committee members and particularly Chairs must embrace public engagement.

The first and central element in building engagement is that committee members, and notably the Chair, **embrace** this notion and understand how and why it is an increasingly significant element of any committee's work. It is not an add-on or after-thought but a way of 'doing' politics that has the potential to rebuild links between the formal political system and its many publics.

2: Individual committees should 'think big': public engagement should figure in all inquiry activity

The single most important step in terms of building public engagement involves the adoption of an explicit strategic orientation. Committees should *'think big'* or think strategically about the nature of the core themes and issues that they want to examine and then locate their specific inquiries as far as possible within this broader framework. Not only is this approach likely to cultivate a degree of cross-learning between inquiries, as knowledge is accrued by

members, but the adoption of a 'big issue' focus is likely to capture the public's interest, stimulate the media and it will also signal committee ambitions.

3: Deliberately cultivate committee profiles and deliberately extend numbers of supporters and followers

The profiles or 'brands' of committees need to be cultivated in order to augment their standing and influence. These strengthen committees by increasing their total number of followers, by increasing the number of influential followers, and by improving a committees' own public recognition and standing. These three sources of influence are interconnected. The accessibility and format of reports and other documents is also inextricably associated with the development of committee profiles and followers. This was underlined by the Hansard Society's excellent *#futurenews* report of March 2013. That report included detailed suggestions covering the presentation of reports in searchable and accessible formats.

4: Extend outreach through intermediary platforms and existing online communities

Several committees have demonstrated that engaging with segmented public audiences that are present in on-line communities is not the same as 'dumbing down', but arguably demands a quite different skill-set to the one that has traditionally been acceptable within committees. Committees need to adopt informal partnerships with these communities or off-line public groups that can introduce them to large pre-existing public audiences. A number of committees have already experimented with this approach (using platforms provided by, for example, *Mumsnet* and *The Student Room*) but there is far more that could be done in relation to working with and learning from such external brokerage organisations.

5: Individual chairs and members have many opportunities to build committee media profiles and impacts.

Such data as is available from the last parliament indicated wide discrepancies in media attention to individual committees. Of course national media attention is not the only relevant index. But national media remains an important agenda setter for other more dispersed political conversations. The development of wider public awareness and interest is important for the evolving impact of the committee system. Media attention can also stimulate direct engagement. The committees that featured most prominently in the national media achieved reach partly through their attention to topical issues and partly through the media skills of their chairs. Opportunities to develop the media judgment and skills of chairs could be extended.

6: Enhance the democratic quality of committee processes.

Democratisation of the committee system has started with the introduction of elections for committee chairs and members but could it be taken further in terms of how the committee then engage with their broader communities? On the whole the present system generally mobilises a pre-existing set of established organised interest associations and individual experts and although several committees have experimented with new ways of reaching-out, this remains the dominant approach. In addition to reaching-out to a more diverse range of individuals, communities and organisations, committees might think about encouraging those actors to: consider the democratic quality of their own consultative processes; to reflect upon how members of their own community or organisation were consulted and how they might be kept in touch with the progress of the inquiry and the broader work of the relevant committee.

7: Resources are critical

The debate about the resources of select committees is perennial and the history of parliamentary modernisation is the slow but gradual leveraging of slightly more resources for committees. Constitutionally it is for parliament to decide on the level of resources it needs to fulfil its functions but in practice this debate takes place in the shadow of an executive that has little incentive to increase the scrutiny capacity of the legislature. And yet resources have been agreed, new staff appointed, a Scrutiny Unit established, etc. but the beginning of a new parliament is arguably an appropriate moment to make the case that increasing engagement in a meaningful manner requires some increase

in resources.

8: Use social media experimentally to extend engagement

Social media is clearly growing as a vehicle for political mobilisation. But it is also a medium that, in a political context, presents special challenges. Recall the way an individual citizen can try to persuade her fellows to support a motion at party branch level. If successful the motion might pass to a regional conference where extra support would need to be mobilised to sustain the argument and indeed to advance a further step. If successful here the motion might then proceed to a national conference. Here an agenda committee would consolidate similar proposals into a composite motion. This would then be debated and if successful would in some form enter a manifesto or platform. Although this process provides multiple opportunities for proposals to be rejected, it also provides a clear procedural framework for their advance. Even in the case of unsuccessful proposals, then, procedural norms will have been fulfilled – proponents would have the satisfaction of participating in a process that is regarded as legitimate. Further, there would always be later opportunities to renew the effort. The challenge is to create a functionally equivalent outcome around single issues, partly in digital space and via other media.

9: Explore opportunities to enhance two-way learning

A focus on professional skills and resources is not in any way to suggest that select committees have not been professional or adequately resourced in the past. But it is to suggest that the professional skills and capacities of committees arguably need to change in both cultural and institutional terms. Part of this transition is around ‘thinking big’ and thinking ‘more creatively’ and although these terms might grate against the small ‘c’ conservatism of the British political tradition this report has found many examples of innovative behaviour. One option in terms of taking this forward would be for committees to think not so much in terms of engagement but also in terms of *deliberation* in the sense of a more meaningful two-way dialogue and learning process. The procedure for oral evidence sessions, for example, is framed around MPs asking witnesses questions, but rarely allows witnesses to ask questions of MPs. The initial ‘questions and answers’ document that generally accompanies the announcement of a new inquiry invites responses around a set of pre-agreed questions or themes, but could more be done to allow respondents to highlight the questions or themes that have been missed? This is where a richer and more interactive sense of community engagement could play a role.

10: Involve committee publics in setting and refining agendas and inquiries.

Several committees have experimented with allowing the public to nominate issues and themes for further scrutiny, others have allowed the public to suggest questions for witnesses. A more radical approach might, however, draw upon the research literature on deliberative democracy in order to suggest more innovative ways of bringing multiple publics with a cross-section of viewpoints and backgrounds together around a specific theme or topic. From mini-publics to participatory budgeting and from citizens panels to participatory community videos – not to mention the potential expressive power of theatre, dance, drama and photography – committees need to engage different communities in different ways. Curators and *rapporteurs* could be used to feed the findings of these events or processes back into the more formal committee process and this is one area where committees can piggyback on the activities and expertise of external organisations, such as *Involve*, that specialise in facilitating creative public engagement.

11: Adapt the theatre of engagement to specific publics.

This focus on *difference* has very practical and cost-free elements in the sense that being different can involve a simple focus on the *clothes* worn by MPs, the use of *language*, the *location* in which engagement takes place and the impact of *layout* in terms of structuring engagement dynamics. These are fairly basic issues that have never been given the attention they deserve within the House of Commons but are vital in terms of building engagement, especially with ‘hard-to-reach’ groups. Politicians, like most professionals, tend to use a very specific vocabulary and a number of esoteric terms. They are also overwhelmingly white, male and middle-class. The use of language – and

thinking about language and accessibility – is a crucial element of any engagement strategy but to some extent this potential barrier can be off-set by selecting locations for engagement in which the public is likely to feel relaxed and at ease.

12: Connections

The argument is not about one model or another, one room layout or another but about the existence of a choice and the promotion of a debate about the advantages and disadvantages of building engagement through a more creative approach to how committees fulfil their roles. The work of committees does not take place in isolation. The emphasis of this report has been on how select committees are building public engagement and one of the conclusions is that they could benefit from using the existing resources and platforms of a great number of community group and organisations in order to maximise the breadth and depth of their work. But select committees might also benefit from being more closely connected with a whole range of internal units and activities that may offer capacity in terms of engagement. A closer relationship with the Education Department, with the Outreach Department, with the Parliamentary Officer for Science and Technology, with the Universities Manager or the regional officers could all add value and new opportunities for committees.

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Building Public Engagement: Options for Developing Select Committee Outreach, A Report for the Liaison Committee, Matthew Flinders, Ian Marsh, & Leanne-Marie Cotter. [To see the full report click here.](#)

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