



**How parliamentary libraries can empower citizens:
lessons from the development of the Outreach Service,
Houses of Parliament, United Kingdom**

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Abstract:

The Strategy for the House of Commons Service 2010–15 has as one of its key aims that:

“The House of Commons will be valued as the central institution in our democracy: effective in holding the Government to account, scrutinising legislation, and representing the diverse views of the electorate. This will be achieved through encouraging public participation in parliamentary business, including the work of select committees and the legislative process, developing our outreach and education services and making the House more welcoming to the public.”

The Parliamentary Outreach Service, alongside other public engagement work, seeks to address the issues - as identified by the Modernisation Committee of the House of Commons in their report of June 2004 – of diminishing levels of public trust of politicians as a group¹ and the subsequent disconnection from the institutions of democracy².

¹ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, First Report of Session 2003–04, HC 368 (June 2004), *Connecting Parliament with the Public*, p.9

² *Ibid*, p.9

The Committee's report noted findings that there was increasing activity at local level where more people write to their MPs about issues yet 67% of the public knew nothing or very little about Westminster³. The Committee also noted that the task for the House of Commons was to harness that interest⁴.

The Parliamentary Outreach service spreads awareness of the work, processes and relevance of the institution of Parliament, encouraging greater engagement between the public and the House of Commons and House of Lords. The service was launched in 2008 with an intended three year roll out.

During 2011, 522 public information sessions were delivered across the whole of the United Kingdom to over 20,000 attendees. The Service organised awareness-raising and evidence-gathering events with seven different Select Committees and promoted several other Committee inquiries. The Service also plans and implements a national engagement programme for both the Lord Speaker and the Speaker of the House of Commons; 21 events took place in 2011 ensuring that both Speakers were able to meet a wide cross section of the public throughout the UK.

The work of the Outreach Service is based in the Department for Information Services in the House of Commons, although the service itself is bi-cameral and embedded in the core strategies of both Houses. The Service has moved beyond its initial remit to find ways in which it could increase public awareness of the work of Parliament, to actively seeking to encourage public participation with Parliamentary processes.

Getting started: establishing an engagement strategy

On 26th January 2005, the House debated the 2004 Modernisation Committee report *Connecting Parliament with the Public*. A motion agreeing that

“the House should make itself more accessible, make it easier for people to understand the work of Parliament and do more to communicate its activity to the general public”

was carried by 375 votes to 14. The motion also contained a series of specific authorities from the House for action in this area. The Hansard Society Commission Report *Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye*⁵ followed shortly thereafter with a further powerful rallying cry for urgent and serious action.

³ Hansard Society and Electoral Commission, *An audit of political engagement*, March 2004.

⁴ *Connecting Parliament with the Public*, HC 368, p.10

⁵ The House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/PC/4106 *The Puttnam (Hansard Society) Commission: Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye* provides a summary of the report. This can be found on the Parliament website at <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/briefings/snpc-04106.pdf>

Members had given a mandate to officials to act. It was now for officials to follow through.

The cross House Group on Information for the Public (GIP), with a reporting line direct to the House of Commons Board of Management was the natural choice to be the governance body to develop and deliver against the new agenda.

Its membership of senior officials encompassed the House of Commons Library (most notably the Parliamentary Education Unit and the House of Commons Information Office), the Serjeant at Arms Department (Central Tours Office), Clerk's Department (Publications, Bookshop and Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit) and Office of the Clerk (Media and Communications Service) and the Librarian and Director of Communications for the House of Lords.

GIP had a distinguished track record in coordination and oversight of communications activities. Members of GIP, located in the various departments, were well placed to reach out to their colleagues and ensure that the job of communication with the public was to be seen as part of the core work of Parliament, not just the job of a separate unit within it. This aspect has been important in making things happen on the ground, especially where there have been potentially competing interests. Notable amongst these has been the challenge of opening up Parliament to the public whilst ensuring that it remains an efficient and effective workplace for the conduct of parliamentary business.

GIP took the lead in developing a coherent plan based on the evidence gathered by the Modernisation Committee, Members of both Houses, the Hansard Society and others. The plan was shaped through the management boards, discussed widely across the administration, including at the House of Commons management conference in November 2005, and finally adopted by the House of Commons Commission and published in December 2005. A linked process took place in the House of Lords.

This plan established overarching aims:

- **To inform:** Parliament must ensure that the wider public is well informed about the work and role of Parliament
- **To promote:** Parliament must promote itself as an institution and describe why it is something which people should value
- **To listen:** Parliament must seek and respond to feedback in order to engage people with its work

The GIP plan also set out specific goals to be achieved by 2011:

- A well used and intuitive website
- Young people reaching voting age understand the importance of democracy

- The media are well informed about Parliament - projecting it as a working institution
- Westminster is the hub of a network of outreach across the UK
- A parliamentary visitor centre is up and running
- Visitors to Parliament feel welcome
- Parliament works effectively with other local institutions
- A programme of exhibitions is in place

With an agreed plan to follow, GIP transformed itself into a delivery body, responsible for providing assurance to the two management boards that progress was on track.

The key challenge of reaching the (at times seemingly disinterested) public remained. The Administration Committee had concluded in April 2007 that:

“there has been a growing recognition that much of the public has little awareness of what we as Parliamentarians do, how Parliament works and how to find out more”⁶

and consequently recommended that the Group on Information for the Public should develop concrete costed proposals for a pilot scheme of regional outreach officers for consideration by the relevant committees before the Summer Recess. The House of Lords Information Committee repeated the recommendation in June 2007⁷.

How to deliver: the creation of the Parliamentary Outreach Service

In October 2006, GIP considered how discussions for an outreach service could be delivered. In order to assess options for meeting this goal, the Hansard Society had been commissioned to undertake research and to provide outline costings. These outline option costs draw on the research carried out by the Hansard Society in their 2006 report *Reaching the public: An examination of options for parliamentary outreach*.

GIP agreed to recruit a member of staff, who was based in the Library of the House of Commons, for a year who would prepare the business case and take it to the relevant domestic committees.

The first challenge was to identify what “outreach” actually was and how it should be delivered. The central connotation of ‘outreach’ is to go outside an institution or

⁶ House of Commons Administration Committee, First Report of 2006-07, HC 434 (April 2007) *Improving Facilities for Educational Visitors to Parliament*, p.34

⁷ House of Lords Information Committee, First Report of Session 2006-07, HL Paper 117 (June 2007) *Improving Facilities for Educational Visitors to Parliament*.

centre. Various pilot initiatives were tested and crucially, there was much consultation with Members to agree a model for delivery of outreach which they would welcome as complementary to their relationship with the public.

This was put before the House of Commons Administration Committee and the House of Lords Information Committee who agreed that there should be a three year development of the Service.

This resulted in a dedicated outreach service whose aim was to raise awareness of the work and processes of Parliament and to reiterate its role within democracy and developed through long-term strategic links with national organisations with a remit to increase levels of civic participation, working through their infrastructures as a means of reaching the public.

Another key work stream was to be the implementation of a rolling regional training programme, aimed at the third sector, voluntary and charity sectors. The sessions would cover all aspects of parliamentary processes and be delivered at various locations throughout the region and without charge.

There were two main costs associated with the recommended proposal: staff costs and material production costs.

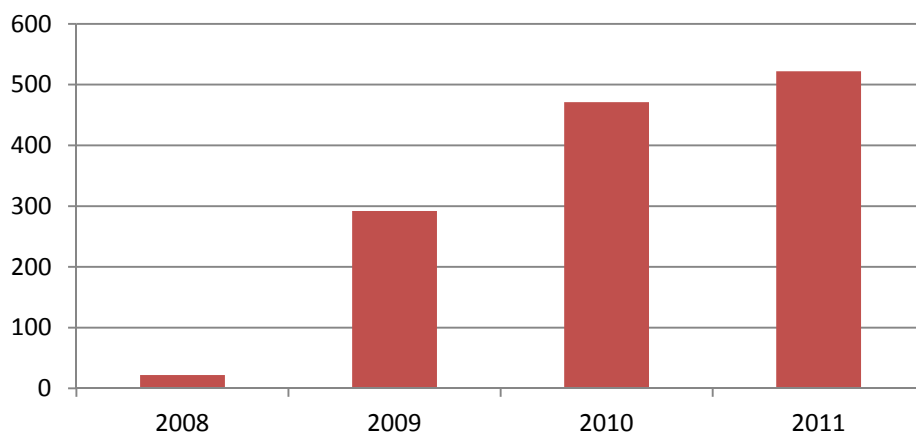
The service initially consisted of a small team, based at Westminster comprising a parliamentary outreach manager and four outreach officers who worked most of their time out of the office delivering information sessions to the public. Four regional outreach officers were recruited in the first year; four additional in year two and in the third year, a further complement of four staff were recruited, in line with the initial business plan.

The service established a management structure based on the key work streams of **regional delivery** and **procedural engagement**. The focus of activities has evolved from spreading awareness of the work and relevance of the institution to actively encouraging engagement with the core work of Parliament.

The responsibilities of each team are as follows:

- **Regional Delivery** - the delivery of outreach across the entire UK, including the roll-out of the Training the Trainer and the Universities programme and delivery of the national engagement programmes of both Speakers.
- **Procedural Engagement** - finding ways of aiding the public to engage with Parliament's core functions of holding the Government to account and making laws.

The growth of Parliamentary Outreach: Number of events held across the UK, 2008-11



Regional Delivery

The Regional Delivery team now covers the whole of the UK, consisting of six outreach officers who report to the Regional Delivery Manager. Each officer is responsible for particular regions within the UK and / or one of the devolved administrations.

The key role of an outreach officer is to build relationships with a variety of different contacts at a regional level in order to identify demand for both one off workshops and to create sustainable programmes of delivery. The vast majority of outreach events are delivered in partnership with regional or local organisations.

Every event covers the **five key messages**:

- To ensure attendees understand what Parliament is (Commons, Lords and Monarch)
- To ensure attendees are familiar with what Parliament does and why is it important / relevant (legislate, scrutinise, set taxes)
- To ensure that attendees understand the difference between Parliament and Government
- To encourage and support public engagement with Parliament through an exploration of the various processes.
- To ensure that every attendee knows how to access further information

In addition to these five key messages each event will focus on a particular topic such as legislation, Select Committees, Parliamentary questions and debates.

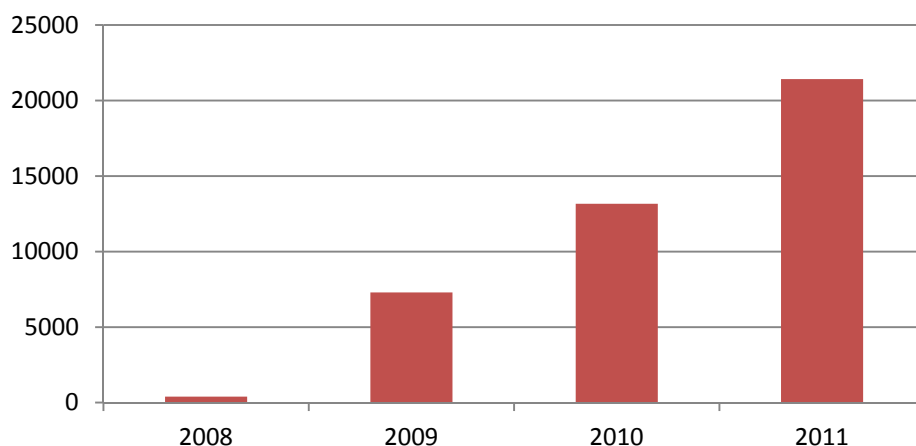
All events delivered by the regional delivery team are evaluated using a standard set of questions including:

- How relevant did you find the workshop to you and / or your organisation?
- Do you feel you now have a greater understanding of how Parliament works?
- Do you now feel better equipped to engage with Parliament?
- Has the workshop altered your perception of Parliament and its work?

Feedback has demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of attendees feel they have a greater understanding of how Parliament works and feel better able to engage with its work.

Contact details are held on a central Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system which leads to more efficient sharing of information, record keeping and strategic marketing.

The growth of Parliamentary Outreach: Total numbers of attendees at Outreach events, 2008-11



Tailored programmes

Specific programmes have been developed to increase the reach of the Service, eg the Training the Trainer programme and The Engagement with Universities work stream.

Training the Trainer

This is a quality assured training resource that creates a greater reach by utilising the multiplier effect of organisations and their members. Individuals and organisations apply to become certified trainers. After attending a rigorous training programme, they are then given a comprehensive series of licensed and copyrighted training resources, with Houses of Parliament branding. These resources include quizzes, a board game, presentations and training exercises.

In 2011, Parliament delivered nine sessions to a total of 105 successful applicants. The multiplier impact of these was 5371 attendees: factoring in the delivery over the next 12 months, this will result in an average rate of return of 104 to each organisation involved in the programme. Evaluation has shown that the average rate of return per certified trainer is 443. More details about this programme can be found on the Parliament website at www.parliament.uk/trainthefacilitator.

Engagement with Universities

This project works closely with the higher education sector both to increase awareness of the relevance of Parliament amongst students and to provide resources and support to assist universities teach students to about Parliament's processes, business and work. Particular efforts are made to highlight the value of the House of Commons Library as a source of specialist, impartial information and its potential as a gold-plated research source for a wide range of academic disciplines.

The package for universities, launched on Thursday 5th April, includes the following elements.

- A dedicated area on the Parliament website for university staff and students (www.parliament.uk/universities).
- A new series of 'Open Lectures', initially at Westminster, delivered by senior figures, including the Clerk of Committees, the Clerk of the Parliaments, the Curator of the Parliamentary Art Collection and the Lord Speaker, covering a wide variety of subjects about Parliament and its work. Videos and transcripts of the Open Lectures are made available on the Parliament website after the event.
- The launch of a 'Parliamentary Studies' module, in partnership with Professor Matt Flinders at the University of Sheffield. This will be taught to final year politics students. It has been heavily oversubscribed and other universities have asked if they could teach it from the following academic year.

The Universities programme is evaluated using electronic feedback collected through SurveyMonkey and shows a strong level of appreciation for it. Feedback from the recent lecture *An Insider's Guide to the House of Lords*⁸, delivered by the Clerk of the Parliaments, David Beamish showed:

- 92% rated the event 'Good' or 'Excellent'
- 88% said they now had a greater understanding of the House of Lords
- 52% said they would use the information they learnt in their studies or research
- 60% said their perception of Parliament was now more positive

⁸ Video and transcript of lecture are available on the Parliament website at: <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/outreach-and-training/resources-for-universities/open-lectures/an-insiders-guide-to-the-house-of-lords/>

Box 1: Selection of comments taken from feedback by attendees of Open Lecture, *An insider's guide to the House of Lords*, delivered 4 May 2012.

"Looking at the historical parliament and House of Lords was very interesting with the visual aids."

"Extremely worthwhile, thank you."

"David Beamish's lecture was interesting, and the way he came across was certainly genuine and different to the common stereotype of someone who works in Parliament."

"Really interesting, illuminating event. I really felt that we were hearing a talk from someone on the 'inside', who mattered, and that he wanted us to understand more about his work."

Parliamentary Outreach and the Speaker of the House of Commons

Since February 2010 Parliamentary Outreach has developed and managed a UK wide outreach programme for the Speaker of the House of Commons, providing him with regular opportunities to meet a range of civic society groups.

These groups include: students (schools, colleges and universities), trade and business associations, voluntary and community groups, schools and campaigners and regional media. Each visit takes place in a different region of England, or in the devolved nations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

Since February 2010, a total of 43 events have taken place, attended by 9571 people.

Box 2: A typical regional visit by the Speaker of the House of Commons, as organised by the Parliamentary Outreach Service

During a visit to Yorkshire on 23rd and 24th February 2012, the following events took place:

- Lecture at the University of Hull - 250 attendees
- Address to Chamber of Commerce Conference, Barnsley - 210 attendees
- Secondary School visit, Sheffield - 50 senior pupils
- Address to South Yorkshire Police Women's Network, Sheffield - 90 attendees
- Lecture to journalism students, University of Sheffield - 300 attendees

During this visit Mr Speaker gave interviews to one regional television station, two radio stations and three regional newspapers.

Procedural Engagement

The Procedural Engagement Programme has two key long-term aims:

- To increase public understanding of the relevance of Parliament's work
- To increase productive public engagement with Parliament's scrutiny of Government policy and legislation

The work of the Procedural Engagement team falls into two categories:

- **Work commissioned directly in response to current Parliamentary business**, e.g.
 - Public Bill workshops
 - Select Committee inquiry engagement
- **Work initiated by the Procedural Engagement team**, e.g.
 - Thematic events ('Parliament Talks...')

Public Bill workshops

Public Bill workshops⁹ are free events aimed at encouraging the public to engage with, and contribute to, Parliament's scrutiny of legislation.

The workshops take place both at Westminster and around the UK, typically to audiences of 100 to 150. Procedural Clerks outline how Bills are considered by Parliament and highlight the key stages at which to engage. A panel of cross-party backbench Members from both Houses share their views and experience on what they have found most effective when seeking wider views during the scrutiny of legislation. Where appropriate, subject experts from the House of Commons Library provide contextual information on the proposed content of the Bill.

These workshops have proven to be very popular and demand for future sessions is high. Following the Queen's Speech in Spring 2012, we intend to shift the focus of Public Bill workshops to the newly-published programme of draft Bills.

⁹ Further details available on the Parliament website: www.parliament.uk/bills-workshops

Box 3: Selection of comments taken from feedback from attendees of Public Bill Workshop, Friday 10 September 2010.

“Really excellent and illuminating event last Friday. Well done to you and your team for setting it up. I hope it will be the first of many.

“May I suggest a Statutory Instruments as a future topic. The process for introducing legislation through the SI process remains a mystery to me despite having studied the available fact sheets!”

“I heard from a number of people how great the workshop had been, so thank you for making all this knowledge so accessible!”

“I just wanted to say what an excellent session you guys put on. I found it really useful and would be keen to see more events like this in the future.”

‘Parliament Talks...’

‘Parliament Talks...’ is a new series of regular, subject-specific events held around the UK. Each event features a range of expert speakers who explain and lead discussion on Parliament’s role in effectively scrutinising public policy and holding the Government to account.

They highlight how the relevance of the work of Parliament specific subject or issue and the opportunities to engage with and influence the Members and Committees of the House of Commons and House of Lords. Topics to date have included science and dog control issues and the sessions provide a valuable platform for demonstrating the breadth of Parliament’s work which is not always recognised in the mainstream media.

Working with Select Committees

The Procedural Outreach team has a number of ways of working with Select Committees to promote their work and different inquiries. These activities not only support Committees in engaging with individuals and organisations across the country, but also approach those who may not ordinarily be familiar with their work but nonetheless have valuable evidence to submit to their inquiries.

One of the simplest but most effective ways that the Houses of Parliament Outreach Service works with Select Committees is to promote inquiries using the extensive networks of contacts we have on our CRM database. With our network of several thousand contacts, we can identify those individuals and community groups with interests in particular subjects and policy areas and use them to disseminate information about parliamentary activity more widely.

Recent examples include sending out information about the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's inquiry into Library Closures and the Welsh Affairs Committee inquiry into Support for Armed Forces Veterans in Wales.

We also work with external websites and online communities to help get experience-based contributions to specific committee inquiries from members of the public. These can help give wider context to an inquiry and provide real-life examples. These are especially effective when presented as case-studies during evidence sessions and when considering the recommendations made in a committee's report.

A recent example of this is the work we did with *The Student Room*¹⁰ website for the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee inquiry into science practical experiments in schools. In conjunction with the website's Marketing Team, we created a dedicated discussion thread in their online forum for students and school children to contribute.

This resulted in 277 posts to the discussion thread by the submission deadline with a total of 6,588 views. Contributions were fed into evidence session planning and an annex section that summarised the contributions received over the duration of the forum was included in the final report. In its report, the Committee noted that the forum exercise had

“the advantage that we could hear from much wider ranges of students than could be heard at an oral evidence session and it filled a gap in the written material evidence as we received no written submission from students at school.”¹¹

Parliamentary Outreach also assists Select Committees when organising visits/evidence gathering sessions at locations outside of London.

Regional officers have extensive networks of contacts across the UK and are able to recommend venues and groups that it would be helpful to contact in order to make these events as useful as possible for the Committee.

Recent examples include gathering evidence in Aberdeen, Suffolk and Southampton for the Energy and Climate Change Committee's inquiry *Consumer Engagement with Energy Markets*¹² and helping organise a visit to Croydon for the Home Affairs Committee to meet those affected by the London riots.¹³

¹⁰ www.thestudentroom.co.uk/sciencepracticals

¹¹ House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2010–12, HC 1060-I (September 2011), *Practical experiments in school science lessons and science field trips*, p.36 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmsctech/1060/106009.htm>

¹² At the time of writing, the House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee is deliberating the findings of its inquiry with the final report scheduled for publication before the end of 2012. Further information on the inquiry can be found on the Parliament website at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/energy-and-climate-change-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/consumer-engagement/>

Looking forward: What next for Parliamentary Outreach

The Parliamentary Outreach service has recently integrated with the House of Commons Information Office. The creation of the new Public Information and Outreach Service opens up a wealth of exciting possibilities for enhancing the dissemination of information about Parliament's work in innovative and engaging ways.

Particular emphasis will be given to online and real-time information provision, drawing heavily upon the House of Commons Library research materials.

This will allow us to engage with new and relevant audiences and through doing so, increase Parliament's interaction with the public.

¹³ Further information, including the final report of the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee's inquiry *Policing Large Scale Disorder* can be found on Parliament's website at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/policing-large-scale-disorder/>