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How public engagement became a core part of the House of Commons select committees

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Abstract:

This article explores the role of public engagement by select committees of the House of Commons. It shows that committees' public engagement activity has been transformed since 1979, when departmental select committees were introduced. We start by outlining the different elements of public engagement, showing that it entails a wide range of types of activity from information about committees' activity to opportunities through which citizens can shape parliamentary decisions. We then proceed to outline how public engagement has become a core activity of select committees in the House of Commons. We show developments taking place within all elements of public engagement. Through the use of case studies, we illustrate specific innovations that have led towards more agile and inclusive ways to consult and involve the public into committees' activities. We finish by identifying some of the challenges still present, namely the need to reach new and more varied audiences.

Keywords:

Select committees; public engagement; House of Commons; 1979 departmental select committees; innovation in parliament.

Word count:

7,754 words, with references included; 7,033 words, without references included.

Introduction

As this special issue demonstrates, select committees of the House of Commons have changed dramatically over the past 40 years. One clear example is the way public engagement has expanded, becoming a core part of committees' activity. While the 1979 departmental select committee system was set up primarily to enhance the House of Commons' scrutiny role, the need to reach out to the public became increasingly important, being eventually recognized as one of committees' core tasks in 2012. The establishment of the committees and their methods of working have also made a significant difference in terms of opening-up parliament and its processes to the public. Still, while there has been an expansion of activity, its effects are not always as clear-cut.

Committees have a number of characteristics that make them potentially valuable sites for engagement with the public. They focus on issues, they tend to work on a cross-party basis, and they are constituted of a small number of Members, which facilitates conversations, agreements and compromises more easily than within a whole parliament. Committees have more scope to delve deeply into policy areas and to examine the impact of legislation on citizens. In short, they are mini versions of Parliament, but without some of the elements that hinder engagement with the whole institution, such as its adversarial nature. Highlighting the work of committees is therefore a useful way of explaining parliament's scrutiny function, but can also facilitate more effective engagement of the public with parliamentary business.

Although the phrase "public engagement" may not have been used much relating to committees before 1979, consultation with groups and publics was traditionally part of most select committees' way of working. What has changed is that public engagement is now articulated and made explicit as a core element of committee work, and that technological and other developments have afforded greater opportunity to improve the effectiveness of committee engagement, as discussed below.

Our contribution draws from our collective expertise and experience with public engagement by parliamentary committees; together, as authors, we include two practitioners with considerable experience in implementing public engagement in parliament, besides two academics. We begin our analysis by exploring the concept of public engagement, identifying five steps in the process of parliamentary public engagement, and summarising developments in how committees have engaged with the public over the last 40 years. We then explore different types of public engagement activity that committees have been experimenting with recently, demonstrating how this activity has expanded and showcasing innovative practice. We finish by outlining key challenges still faced in committee public engagement.

What does committee public engagement entail

In a context of rising dissatisfaction with democracy (Clarke et al 2018, Norris 2011), public engagement has become a key priority for political institutions. But the concept is used to refer to a wide range of activities and purposes, from dissemination of information to in-depth deliberation events, whilst assuming a common understanding. In order to understand how select committees have developed their public engagement activity, and its potential impact on their work, it is important therefore to identify the different elements it may entail.

Public engagement with political institutions draws from its application in a range of subject areas (Shein et al 2015), combined with the urban studies public participation tradition (Arnstein 1969), and

the participatory and deliberative democracy literature (e.g. Pateman 1975, Dryzek 2002). The combination of these different approaches to public engagement naturally results in varying understandings of the concept, expressed through different types of activity, which can vary from access to information to the involvement of citizens in policy-making. These differences embody more than a simple academic discussion, they matter in practice. This is clear in Coleman and Firmstone's analysis of public engagement strategies in local government (2014), where officials from different services had different interpretations, and therefore expectations, of what public engagement entailed. This is particularly relevant in the case of parliamentary committees, as a forum that brings together different types of actors, such as MPs, clerks, media officers and public engagement officials; each may have different understandings, and therefore priorities, of public engagement. These differences also affect the extent to which public engagement informs committee work, a key issue for engagement effectiveness as we see below.

In their typology, Rowe and Frewer (2005, p.255) break down the concept of public engagement into three elements: public communication, public consultation and public participation, each defined in relation to the direction of flows of information, according to who initiates it. This is a valuable conceptualisation because it recognises the importance of identifying who initiates the engagement activity and whether it embeds an interactive element. However, it does not integrate a key component of engagement: understanding and relevance, that is, how the flows of information are received. Arnstein's ladder of engagement identifies varying levels of citizen involvement (1969), from being manipulated to controlling policy-making, therefore recognising a potentially more active role to citizens in interpreting and leading policy. Referring specifically to the UK Parliament, Walker outlines three key challenges that its 2006-2011 public engagement strategy tried to address: knowledge about the institution, openness of parliamentary decisions and outputs, and relevance and worth of parliament to the public (2012, pp.272-276). Building on these contributions, Leston-Bandeira differentiates five steps of public engagement with parliament (2014, pp.418-419): **information**, **understanding**, **identification**, **participation** and **intervention**. This assumes a succession of steps: firstly access to information about parliament; that this is received and processed by the public; who may be able then to establish parliament's relevance to their life; feeling then compelled to act in areas of interest, such as by writing to their MP; and finally, the public may actually lead the process and engage with parliamentarians in discussions contributing to a parliamentary decision.

Public engagement can therefore be seen as involving disseminating information about parliamentary business, at a deeper level to educate the public about parliament and policy-making, and at higher levels public consultation on policy and even participate in the co-production of parliamentary decisions. This is of particular relevance to parliamentary committees. As Hendriks and Kay have shown, committees play a crucial role "in reaching outwards: to seek, represent and include public views in deliberations on collective issues (2019, p.27)". Stirbu and McAllister (2018) demonstrate the value of public engagement within the context of parliamentary committees, using it as a core criterion in their analysis of the overall development of committees in the National Assembly for Wales. Committees' potential to provide deliberative spaces is particularly noted by these authors, and by Davidson and Stark in their analysis of the Scottish Parliament's committees (2011). Committees therefore embody particularly valuable forums to develop public engagement, from information to deliberation, but its focus may vary considerably.

Since 2012, explicit mention of public engagement has been included in the list of core tasks for select committees in the House of Commons, although expressed as a fairly limited, passive ambition: "*Task 10: To assist the House of Commons in better engaging with the public by ensuring that the work of the committee is accessible to the public"* (Liaison Committee 2012). This wording seems to assume a very narrow understanding of public engagement, limited to the first step outlined above, with the core focus being to make the work of committees accessible to the public. In fact, committee practice had generally exceeded this basic requirement of accessibility well before 2012; and since then many innovations have been introduced in how information is communicated to the public, in how inquiry evidence is gathered, in identifying engagement opportunities at other stages of the inquiry process and in the use of these opportunities to inform committee activity and reports. In the next section we explore how public engagement has developed into a key role for select committees.

How select committee engagement has developed

The way committees employ and utilize public engagement has been transformed since 1979. We map these developments against the five steps in the process of public engagement with parliament outlined in the previous section - information, understanding, identification, participation and intervention **(**Leston Bandeira 2014) – in order to identify the key changes in practices and context over the years.

Steps 1 and 2: Information and understanding

There have undoubtedly been improvements in the quality and level of provision of **information** about committees, as well as its accessibility; the emergence of the internet at the end of the 1990s has made a clear difference here. This, in turn, has helped spread awareness and **understanding** of committees and their scrutiny role.

The House of Commons had a public information office from the early 1980s, dealing with enquiries from the public about all aspects of parliamentary work and history. In pre-internet days, the information office answered enquiries about committee membership, powers, inquiries, and reports. The printed *Weekly Information Bulletin* also alerted the public to calls for evidence and set out the week's forthcoming evidence sessions. However, access to these was likely to be limited to those particularly interested in the work of parliament, or those directly involved in committees' inquiries. The Committee Office too has traditionally produced information leaflets and guidance for witnesses coming before select committees. In recent years, more attention has been given to promoting this type of information to support witnesses, as well as developing material for different types of audiences. The *About Parliament* pages on Parliament's website provide a range of explanatory written and video information about how committees work and how to submit evidence, and committees are increasingly publishing their reports in a range of different formats. For example, the Defence Committee used a digital shorthand story to summarize their report about veterans' mental health,[1] while the Petitions Committee used eight different report formats (including full report, plus

[1] https://houseofcommons.shorthandstories.com/Mentalhealthinsoldiersandveterans/index.html?fbclid=IwAR35Fo8mpGvbLzODYUzWYpoaEwnUqLjDZQGRT7dqEFeL1MQBIvC6egxlFrE

shorthand, large print, easy read and audio versions) for their inquiry into online abuse of disabled people.[2]

It is now much easier to keep abreast of committees' work via their webpages on Parliament's website, and all departmental select committees run a Twitter account. Each committee publishes information on its dedicated webpages, and this goes beyond simply listing evidence sessions and publishing reports, also including reports of one-off sessions, news items, press notices, forthcoming inquiries and, in some cases, weekly summaries of activity. The availability of material given in evidence to committees is available almost in real time: written evidence and draft transcripts of oral evidence are published on the day they are received. The range of views and evidence presented to committees is therefore open and transparent for other witnesses and the public to see (unlike, for example, government consultations). What we know less about is whether this information is being accessed by a wide range of users.

That committees meet in public, are broadcast and anyone can turn up to see one in action, is still not generally well known. As select committee activity increased, the Palace of Westminster did not contain enough committee rooms to accommodate the new departmental select committees comfortably. A new parliamentary building, Portcullis House, was built in 2001 to provide much needed additional committee rooms, which has opened up committee proceedings more to the public. Committee meetings are now often seen on television, as well as being broadcast via the parliament website; overall they are far more accessible (Kubala 2011).

Televising the proceedings of the House of Commons came relatively late, in 1989. The issue of televising had been debated several times, with supporters advocating that it would make Parliament seem more relevant to the public (Barnett and Gaber 1992). Committees were first broadcast in 2002 (UK Parliament 2019). Kubala demonstrates a rise in media coverage of committees' work (2011), with specific chairs and committees being particularly adept at getting media coverage of their work (D'Arcy, 2018). The annual Audits of Political Engagement show the internet and TV are the main means through which people obtain information about parliament (Hansard Society 2019). Seeing television clips from Parliament in news programmes has made people more familiar with what goes on in Parliament. And while that familiarity may breed some contempt, giving rise to criticism of the "yah-boo politics" of Prime Minister's Question Time for example, committees have generally benefited by comparison (Hansard Society 2014). They have benefited by being able to show that committees seek expert information and views from the public, that they quiz ministers and conduct oversight and scrutiny of government departments, and that Members from different parties work together in a more consensual way.

Steps 3 and 4: Identification and participation

Beyond information and understanding, the step of **identification** involves citizens perceiving the relevance of parliament to their own lives and experiences. This can lead to the next step –

[2] https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/petitions-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/online-abuse-17-19/

participation – where people act on an issue that matters to them and contribute to a parliamentary activity or process.

Thanks to the establishment of Westminster Hall as a second debating chamber in 1999, and the introduction of debating time in the Chamber and Westminster Hall in the gift of the Backbench Business Committee, there are now more opportunities for debates on select committee reports (Goodwin and Atkins 2018). This helps to bring committee work to the attention of the public, by presenting it in a different arena, with further debate and dissemination, showing that committees look in detail at issues which concern citizens.

The advent of the internet and social media channels has revolutionised all aspects of parliamentary communications, presenting both opportunities and challenges. Undoubtedly it is now much easier for committees to identify and engage with communities of interest. Technology and the development of social media has made it easier for committees to reach more diverse groups, to keep them up to date with what they are doing, and to encourage them to get involved in inquiries in a variety of ways. Committees have been keen to test and exploit these opportunities. They now routinely use a wide variety of methods to engage the public, such as crowdsourcing questions to ministers, Twitter Q and As, web forums, running debate threads on third party websites, using Facebook and Instagram Stories, publishing reports accompanied by interactive digital summaries, and promoting individual recommendations via social media (Leston-Bandeira and Walker 2018, p.311).

These developments have resulted in committee communications with the public being more two-way, responsive, inclusive, and participatory. But it is not always clear how wide the reach of these initiatives is beyond the usual suspects, nor their impact on committee inquiries.

Step 5: Intervention

The fifth step of the parliamentary public engagement process – **intervention** – refers to a process in which citizens not only participate, but engage with politicians to lead, or significantly shape, an activity that contributes to a parliamentary decision.

Committees have increased their use of events and activities to reach out to the public on specific issues through, for example, meetings outside Westminster with specific communities and conducting their own surveys and polls, all of which can provide the public with a direct say in shaping committees' recommendations. For example, the survey run by the Communities and Local Government Committee among local park users (in which over 13,000 citizens responded) was quoted directly in the report (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2017a). Polling was carried out by the Petitions Committee with young people aged 7-18 on the use of plastics in supermarkets, with its results from 971 participants being referenced in the debate (12 Nov 2019, HC Deb, Vol 649 c4WH). Table 1 shows a considerable increase since 2016 in events and activities aiming to consult with the public to inform committees' inquiries. This is particularly clear if we compare 2016/17 and 2018/19 (the general election in 2017/18 meant that committees were not meeting for some months).

Table 1- Public engagement initiatives* by committees 2016-2019

	2016-17	2017-18**	2018-19
Number of engagement initiatives	21	12	43
Number of committees involved	9	9	19

Number of people reached***	46, 886	69, 838	61, 515
Percentage of people agreeing and strongly agreeing their input will shape the committee's inquiry	72.8%	82%	84.9%

Source: House of Commons Select Committee Engagement Team 2019.

Notes: * Initiatives includes events led in Westminster and outside Westminster.

** Due to the general election, there were no activities between April and November 2017.

*** People reached through email, participants at events/activities and polling. The GDPR legislation of 2018 resulted in a reduction by a third in the number of contacts in the database, which explains the slight dip.

The development of activities explicitly seeking the public's views on specific issues, beyond the formal call for evidence, marks an important turning point for committees. This has resulted in innovative and wide ranging types of activities, reaching larger and more varied audiences. Additionally, as Table 1 shows, the vast majority of those participating in these initiatives feel their input shapes committees' inquiries. However, what is less clear and consistent across committees, is the extent to which the views collated through these activities affect committees' activity, often being poorly integrated with their reports. Thus while the evidence may now be more representative of "the general public" and more visible in reports, its influence compared with other pieces of evidence is less clear; in fact, being an initiative managed by the committee itself, it is possibly less of a public "intervention" than an unsolicited piece of evidence. Meaningful intervention probably requires a more deliberative method of engagement, such as committee members taking part in roundtable events with members of the public, deliberative workshops, or citizens' juries.

One example of a deliberative process deserves particular mention. In 2018, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee used a Citizens Assembly (House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local government Committee, 2018) as part of their joint inquiry into adult social care. This was the first time such a mechanism had been used, although another, on climate change, was announced in June 2019.[3]. The Citizens' Assembly produced its own report and was an integral part of the inquiry, with its results feeding into the Committees' recommendations. Other legislatures are also experimenting with this method, such as the Scottish Parliament's Citizen's Jury on land management (Scottish Parliament 2019). But given the significant resources implications, it is not clear how regularly this tool can be used, despite positive feedback from citizens involved (Involve 2018, Blackstock 2019) and from committees' members. Sarah Wollaston MP, Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, said (House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee 2018):

> *"Parliament has been reaching out and engaging with the public for many years. Using a citizens' assembly takes this further in helping to gauge informed opinion on one of the key issues of the day. "*

The following section explores further case studies of innovations in committee engagement activity.

[3] https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/business-energy-industrial-strategy/news-parliament-2017/climate-change-and-net-zero-chairs-comments-17-19/

Committee engagement activities

Public engagement is used for a variety of purposes by committees, with no standard model of what engagement could or should look like. Each public engagement activity is therefore determined in the context of what it aims to achieve, the information it wants to gather, who the relevant audiences are, and the location of the activity. Public engagement also takes the form of knowledge-building and sharing. Increasingly, committees are consulting with the public at different points in their inquiries, as opposed to the more traditional time when evidence is being submitted. Examples of these activities are discussed below.

Crowdsourcing input from the public

Committees have used public engagement to scope inquiries, inform their thinking, and widen their consultation. For example, the Science and Technology Committee's #MyScience Inquiry and the Scottish Affairs Committee's #MyScottishAffairs Inquiry initiatives encouraged the public to suggest forthcoming topics for enquiries, as explained in Box 1.

Box 1: Case study – Scottish Affairs Committee

The Committee crowdsourced suggestions in 2017 for areas of scrutiny under the social media hashtag **#MyScottishAffairs** using its webpage and its Twitter account. 113 submissions were received – in writing, by email, by video, and via an evidence session in Edinburgh and public events in Selkirk and Inverness.

As a result, the Committee produced a digest of the main issues that were raised (2017) and went on to conduct an inquiry onto Digital Connectivity in Scotland (Fifth report of session 2017-19, HC 654).

Crowdsourcing is also used regularly as a way for the public to input ideas into committee inquiries. This illustrates a general trend amongst committees to seek public input in a variety of ways, going well beyond formal written submissions and oral evidence sessions. Box 2 illustrates this through an example from the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Box 2: Case study – Foreign Affairs Committee

As part of their inquiry into press freedom the Foreign Affairs Committee invited journalists from around the world to submit their views and share their stories through filmed clips using #PressFreedom. These were shared on the Committee's Twitter page and used to inform the questions the Committee asked Ministers. (Inquiry – The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Global Media Freedom, launched January 2019).

The success of these initiatives suggests that there is public interest in shaping committee scrutiny and agendas. In order to give the public ownership over this work, a further area of exploration would be to ask for contributions to inquiries' terms of reference.

Fact check forums

Crowdsourcing has also been used to directly support the scrutiny role of committees, by means of fact check forums – inviting the public to fact check (against their own experiences) evidence submitted to a committee, as illustrated in Box 3.

Box 3: Case study - Women and Equalities Committee

The Women and Equalities Committee's #SexualHarrassmentinSchools Fact Check in 2016, on the Government's evidence on sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools, aimed to utilise the public's expertise and experience to enhance the scrutiny of government. The Department for Education had sent their assessment of various aspects of this problem and the Committee was interested in three key parts:

- The current status of Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education
- The scale of sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools
- The Government's actions on sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools

The Fact Check initiative was conducted via Twitter and produced 24 quality responses. The Government subsequently amended a key piece of its evidence following challenges by participants to the Governments statistics on the scale of the issue.

The Fact Check provided the Committee with a range of well-researched and referenced critiques of the Government's evidence. The Committee members used this information in conjunction with their other research and evidence when questioning Ministers. They also used some of the responses in their final report (Third report of session 2016-17, HC 91).

Surveys and polling

Committees are increasingly gathering views and data by going out and engaging with the public in their localities, such as high streets and cultural spaces. However, time constraints exist for both committees and participants, and not all members of the public are interested or able to commit two or three hours to discuss a topic, even if they have a strong interest in it. By providing drop-in spaces, committees might be able to gather further insights into an issue that might not always come to light from an event or evidence. And by conducting surveys and polls, relevant data can inform the committee's deliberations while also acting as an engagement method in itself. This was well exemplified through the #MyParkMatters inquiry of the Housing, Communities and Local Government inquiry into public parks' usage, as explained in Box 4.

Box 4: Case study – Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

As part of its inquiry into parks, the Communities and Local Government Committee conducted a survey among local park users in which over 13,000 citizens responded. The results featured in the committee's report in 2017 (Seventh report of session 2016-17, HC 45), a summary of which was also produced in an interactive online version, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Online interactive feature summarising views expressed by the public in a survey for a committee report
SEE ATTACHED FILE (FIGURE 1_WALKER ET AL)

Source: (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2017b)

Links with Parliament's Education and Engagement Team

Building on the use of surveys and polling, a recent development has been gathering data via school visits to the UK Parliament and via community engagement sessions in schools and with adult groups. This reflects how, increasingly, Parliament's engagement with the public is becoming more "joined up". Connections are being made between the audiences that the Education and Engagement Team at Parliament already engage with, and existing contact is being built upon, bringing these audiences into contact with committees. This method has proved successful in the past year, with 3,500 young people polled on inquiries from April to December 2018. The relationship works well: committees can consult with target audiences for their inquiries; and the school or community groups not only learn about Parliament but have the opportunity to contribute directly to its work. Transforming a visit to Parliament into a contribution to a parliamentary activity makes the interaction particularly valuable, moving from information/education to active citizenship. Box 5 illustrates this through an example from the Science and Technology Committee, which thanks to this engagement, was able to involve over 4,000 young people in its inquiry into the impact of social media and screen use on young people's health.

Box 5: Case study - Science and Technology Committee
As part of its inquiry into Impact of social media and screen use on young people's health committee staff met with a visiting school to Parliament (the school were already booked in for a visit to Parliament's Education Centre) and consulted directly with 25 students from year 9 and year 11.

These connections were further utilised during this inquiry to trial two innovative methods of engagement:

- 942 young people (aged 8-16) from 31 different schools visiting the Education Centre at Parliament and those being visited by Education and Engagement Outreach Officers across the UK, were anonymously polled using hand held voting pods, where they picked responses to closed questions written by the engagement team and committee staff.
- The Committee teamed up with the Select Committee Engagement Team to create and publicise a distributed dialogue pack, a lesson plan designed to capture the views of young people on the impact of social media. The distributed dialogue packs were publicised through the Education and Engagement newsletter, Teacher Ambassadors, Twitter feeds and visiting groups to the Education Centre. The Committee shared the pack with all MPs and encouraged them to share it with schools in their constituencies. Some schools were inspired to use the pack as the basis of assemblies and debates exploring the issue further. The pack was completed by 21 schools, providing the Committee with the views of over 3,000 young people demonstrating there is an appetite within schools for this type of engagement that fits into the school day.

The results of the polling activity were included in the Committee's final report (Fourteenth report of session 2017-19, HC 822) and helped to strengthen the recommendations.

Deliberative workshops

Outreach and engagement staff regularly set up deliberative workshops to help widen access and inclusiveness, providing committees with considered and informed views, usually as part of the evidence gathering stage. A good example of this use of deliberative workshops can be found in the Petitions Committee (not a departmental select committee, but one with a strong public focus), which, rather unusually, decided to consult on its draft recommendations in its inquiry onto "*Online abuse and disabled people*", as explained in Box 6.

Box 6: Case study - Petitions Committee

In February 2018, 23 disabled people and their carers were invited to Westminster to take part in a deliberative workshop consultation with members of the Committee, the first of a series of events with the public that took place throughout the inquiry. In order to be as inclusive as possible, the committee decided that disabled people from all four nations of the UK should be provided with an opportunity to give their views on the proposed recommendations and that the committee, together with the select committee engagement team, would go to where these audiences were, ensuring that travel and distance would not be a barrier to people being able to participate.

Partnerships were established with disability networks/organisations in Glasgow, Belfast, Newcastle and Cardiff. Events were publicised to the target audience through the partners' existing networks, allowing the committee to hear from a group with a wide range of disabilities (both learning and physical) and ensuring that different perspectives were included. Using venues provided by the partner organisations meant that a safe and familiar space was created, fully accessible for all participants. It also meant that the event was carefully planned and tailored to the needs of the participants using staff knowledge to guarantee that all the participants would be able to access and deliberate the information being presented to them and that support was readily available from experienced and trained staff, should any of the participants need it. Easy read and large print versions of the draft recommendations were provided. Following the four consultation events across the UK, participants were asked to complete feedback; 89% of respondents rated the event as good or excellent and 83% felt that their views would shape the committee's inquiry.

The final engagement event was held in Westminster in October 2018 and those who had previously been consulted during the evidence gathering stage in February were invited back to give their views on the proposed recommendations. Bringing these people back gave a strong signal that their views mattered, as they were asked to give their perceptions at different points in the inquiry and to see how their original ideas had fed into the draft recommendations.

The importance of the inclusive and nationwide public engagement that had taken place to inform the inquiry was demonstrated by a whole section of the report (2019) being dedicated to outlining the key findings from the public engagement that took place. The report would then be published in eight different formats, to cater for multiple types of accessibility difficulties.

Promoting reports and recommendations

Not that long ago, little else would follow the publication of a report. Committees now increasingly utilize a range of methods and communication means to publicize their reports and promote individual recommendations, continuing to engage with the public after inquiries have concluded and reaching out to more diverse types of audience, as explained above. A good example is the Environmental Audit

Committee's sharing of visual stories using the web based publishing tool Social Shorthand, with accompanying Tweets, as Figure 2 illustrates:

Figure 2: Twitter with Social Shorthand example to disseminate committee report

SEE ATTACHED FILE (FIGURE 2_WALKER ET AL)

Source: (House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, 2018)

Being more pro-active in disseminating their reports and recommendations through different means, helps in some ways to address one of the core challenges faced by committees in public engagement: closing the feedback loop, that is letting the public know how their input was used by the committee.

Challenges

Committees' public engagement activity has therefore changed considerably over the past 40 years, having become now a core part of their activity. However, this development is not consistent across all committees, often being dependent on specific Chairs and Clerks. In addition, several other challenges persist, as we discuss next.

Managing expectations

One of the fundamental challenges is the need to manage expectations, so that the public are clear in advance of engaging what their participation can achieve. For example, the fact that committees can make recommendations, but that they cannot compel government to do anything may not always be understood. Committees can nevertheless illustrate how this engagement has value, and the different types of outcomes and 'success' for the public (Bochel, 2019, 2016). Success might be evaluated in terms of the contribution made to scrutiny, by persuading government about the value of different courses of action, and by the public considering their own experience of the engagement process, perhaps having the opportunity to engage with Members or to receive feedback. This is not always easy to put into practice, however, given both general public perceptions of politics and the need to fit into political timings.

Accessibility and diversity – beyond 'the usual suspects'

One of the most significant challenges for committees is getting beyond the already 'engaged' public, who have knowledge of the political system and how it works, to those who have little understanding of Parliament, its functions and structures, such as select committees, through which they might engage. Committees are therefore finding ways of expanding their evidence base beyond formal evidence sessions, by going to where people are, through for instance field visits, as explained above. These can help bring lived experiences into committee inquiries and create a deeper understanding and appreciation of the topic under investigation. However, whilst some committees are reaching out to new publics, this is not yet extensive or consistent and there are ongoing pressures to engage with people beyond Westminster. Committees now have a target of 70% of engagement events and activity to be held outside Parliament, with committees holding 69% of engagement activities beyond Westminster between April 2018 and March 2019 (House of Commons Select Committee Engagement Team 2019). In many of these cases, the audiences could be described as hard to reach. Committees go out to spaces that they use - both online, like Facebook or Twitter groups, but also physical spaces, like community centres and hubs. These spaces have proven invaluable in reaching audiences that

would not normally follow the UK Parliament on social media channels for example, but who might be more likely to follow groups dedicated to a cause or issue.

Another core challenge within accessibility is the diversity in witnesses providing evidence to committees. In 2018, the Liaison Committee set itself the aim that by the end of the Parliament 'at least 40% of discretionary witnesses should be female' (House of Commons Liaison Committee 2018a, p.3). Figures for the 2017-18 Session to the end of November 2018 show that 37% of discretionary witnesses were female (House of Commons Liaison Committee 2018b).

Accessibility – language and practices

The language used by Parliament contributes to its inaccessibility for some, as recognised by the Digital Democracy Commission (2015) which recommended 'the House of Commons should take action … to make parliamentary language and communications easier to understand.' (p. 21). There is still a long way to go on this, although as we saw above, committees now regularly communicate through social media and have started to experiment with presenting their reports in a range of formats and summaries. On the other hand, committees are increasingly enabling people to submit evidence in a range of different formats beyond the standard oral and written evidence (for example, @GeorgeThePoet's evidence – a transcript from his podcast - to the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry on European Responses to Irregular Migration). Through public engagement work, information has been gathered in various formats including film, voice recordings, feedback from distributed dialogue packs and summation notes from group discussions. This raises questions around the distinction between formal and informal evidence, with clear marked differences such as different value placed on these by committees and the different protections afforded to those who submit different types of evidence, such as parliamentary privilege.

Media

Clearly, some committees attract more media coverage than others (D'Arcy 2018). This may relate to the subject matter of an inquiry and/or reflect the ability of particular chairs to engage with the media (see White, 2015, pp. 15-18). For example, the inquiry by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport committee into disinformation and 'fake news', which reported in February 2019, received considerable coverage in *The Guardian* newspaper (Cadwalladr 2019; Pegg 2019).

Committees also invite celebrities to take part in inquiries as a way of raising the profile of their work. The Health and Social Care Committee took evidence from Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall for its inquiry into childhood obesity (House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee, 2018), whilst the Home Affairs Committee (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2012), for its inquiry into drugs policy, invited Russell Brand to give evidence. Media coverage can bring more visibility to committees' work and enhance their impact, but can also distract from their core scrutiny functions. For example, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee inquiry into the phone hacking scandal in 2011 resulted in considerable media attention, but because a protestor threw shaving foam at Rupert Murdoch, much attention focused on the incident rather than the inquiry.

Role of committee chairs

Whilst the election of committee chairs, following the Wright reforms, has arguably helped empower select committees (White, 2015), they can also constitute a challenge in the context of public engagement. The chair has a key role in shaping inquiries, including in deciding the extent to which

engaging different publics is important, and their leadership style is crucial in managing the different personalities on the committee, getting members to work together, and bringing together the different ideas and perspectives of a diverse group of members. For example, they may act as a 'chieftain' by 'instilling' their 'own interests, expertise and priorities onto the committee agenda', or as a 'catalyst', 'by building on the work of individual committee members and nestle their ideas together' (Geddes 2016). Chairing a committee is a complex and challenging role which can be crucial in relation to engagement with the public. As public engagement activity still varies considerably between committees, and chairs are an important factor in determining the extent of public engagement undertaken, they can sometimes be a difficult challenge to overcome. On the other hand, chairs can be the main instigator of public engagement, which can sometimes result in activities being developed for the sake of it, rather than to inform committees' actual activity.

Making connections between parliamentary services

The development and professionalization of committees has led to an increase in the resources and staff available to these, including in terms of public engagement. However, connections between different services and lesson learning between committees is not always straightforward, due to the size of the institution and the natural tendency for different silos to develop, as staff become accustomed to work within their own teams. The National Assembly for Wales has tried to avoid this by adopting integrated committee teams, which include public engagement officers. Seeking to underpin a strategic approach to committee engagement, the Scottish Parliament has recently introduced a dedicated Committee Engagement Unit. The House of Commons' approach has followed a similar path, with central services supporting committees in their work, such as media officers who are responsible for different committees, the Web and Publications Unit, which undertakes digital engagement, and the Select Committee Engagement Team, which has a remit to undertake face-to-face engagement with citizens. Whilst this is a model that has facilitated the extension of a wide range of new types of activity and considerable innovation, it does mean that connections between services can sometimes be dependent on specific committees. Within an institution of the size of the House of Commons, it is not always possible for central services to develop the know-how of all committees, nor the ability to act with enough flexibility. Committees also tend to like to work in their own way, which can be a strength and can encourage experimentation, but can also make sharing knowledge and best practice a challenge.

Measuring the impact of engagement activities

At some points in an inquiry the direct impact that public engagement has had is more tangible because the intended output/outcome from the public engagement was clear from the outset. At other times, a committee may undertake public engagement with a less clear idea about what the information from the public engagement will be used for and it is only after hearing from the public that it becomes apparent how the information fits into the wider inquiry. In any case, measuring its impact can be a challenge.

It is also important to note the public's perception of how their involvement will impact the committee's work. When working with committees to deliver consultation events with the public, the select committee engagement team surveys attendees after each event to ask to rate how strongly they feel that, 'as a result of attending this event I feel my views will shape the committee's inquiry'. As we saw above, the majority of the public consulted perceive that they will have an impact on the committee's work: for events run from April 2018 to March 2019, 85% strongly agree or tend to agree

that this is the case. However, it is more difficult to pinpoint exactly how public engagement activity, actually influences and shapes committee conclusions and recommendations. It would also be useful to go back to attendees after the publication of the committee's report, to obtain a more rounded perspective of their perceptions.

Conclusion

The role and extent of public engagement within select committee's activity has been transformed since 1979, and particularly within the last decade. While committees have always sought input from organizations and public, the extent of this engagement, the range of methods used, and its purposes have developed significantly, reflecting the overall push towards public engagement in the House of Commons (Leston-Bandeira and Walker 2018).

We have shown that whilst engagement used to be mainly perceived as making information about committee work more accessible, this has changed considerably. Committees now regularly employ engagement practices at the higher steps, such as participation and even intervention, whereby not only are the views of the public sought on a much wider range (and more specific) areas, but also where those views have a more direct input into committee's outputs, such as their reports. However, a number of challenges remain, namely the one of reaching out beyond usual suspects. What is more, we need systematic research about committees' daily practice in public engagement. Whilst internal methods of evaluation have developed considerably, it is not always clear what impact and effects public engagement activities have onto the public's perceptions of committee work, on one hand, and on the other, on enhancing committee's scrutiny activity. But there is no doubt as to the extent to which public engagement has become a far more important part of their regular activity.

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FIGURES CAPTIONS

Figure 1: Online interactive feature summarising views expressed by the public in a survey for a committee report

SEE ATTACHED FILE (FIGURE 1_WALKER ET AL)

Source: (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2017b)

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Figure 2: Twitter with Social Shorthand example to disseminate committee report

SEE ATTACHED FILE (FIGURE 2_WALKER ET AL)

Source: (House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, 2018)

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