

BUILDING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

OPTIONS FOR DEVELOPING SELECT COMMITTEE OUTREACH -

A REPORT FOR THE LIAISON COMMITTEE¹

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The relationship between the governors and the governed is changing. The impact of the internet and social media, the widened array of stand-alone issues on the public agenda (such as gay marriage, climate change, Europe), the changing nature of public attitudes to political institutions, processes and politicians, evidence of increasing democratic inequality and the declining reach and standing of the major parties – to mention just a few issues – have all focused attention on ‘disaffected democrats’ who, for a range of reasons, feel disconnected from traditional mainstream politics. Parliament is not ignorant about either the existence or implications of these changing social pressures and it is possible to trace a process of parliamentary reform and modernization that has attempted to ‘close the gap’ between parliament and society. In many ways it is the select committees that have evolved as the interface between the institution of Parliament and the public. They have increased levels of scrutiny, opened-up new areas of government to the public, demanded accounts from politicians and their overall impact has been significant. But the internal success of select committees in terms of scrutinizing the government has arguably not kept pace with the role of committees in terms of engaging with the public about their work.
2. In 2012 the House of Commons voted to accept a recommendation from the Liaison Committee to introduce a new ‘core task’ for all select committees that focused on public engagement as a distinctive and explicit factor of their work. Many committees had been proactive in relation to public engagement for some time, but others had not and this new core task was intended to achieve an element of systematic public engagement, just as the initial introduction of core tasks in 2010 had been designed to deliver ‘systematic scrutiny’. **But how have select committees responded to the introduction of the new core task on public engagement? This question provides the focus of this report.**
3. The research was undertaken between January and June 2015 and included three main elements: *Stage One* - involved detailed comparative case studies into the work of five select committees (Business, Innovation and Skills; Work and Pensions; Justice; Science and Technology; Political and Constitutional Reform); *Stage Two* involved the detailed analysis of a variety of select committee reports and a large scale on-line survey of all those individuals and organizations that had submitted evidence to a select committee; *Stage Three* involved a series of interviews with MPs, civil servants, ministers, parliamentary staff, social media specialists and those who had engaged with committees in order to drill down to the issues and themes revealed in the desk research, survey and case studies. In total, over fifty interviews were conducted. Three core conclusions emerge from this research:
 - (a) **There has been a significant shift within the select committee system to taking public engagement seriously and this is reflected in many examples of innovation.**
 - (b) **However, this shift has not been systematic and levels of public engagement vary significantly from committee to committee.**
 - (c) **A more vibrant and systematic approach to public engagement is urgently needed but this will require increased resources, a deeper appreciation of the distinctive contribution that select committees can make and, perhaps most important, a deeper cultural change at Westminster.**

4. This report therefore details innovations in relation to the use of social media, the structure of inquiries and innovative outreach. Some committees have engaged with the public in order to select the topics for inquiries and most have augmented inquiries by widening outreach. Survey evidence suggests high levels of confidence amongst those who have actively engaged with select committees, but this is in marked contrast to the findings of the Hansard Society's latest *Audit of Political Engagement 2015*, which found that although two-thirds of the public believe that Parliament 'is essential to our democracy', just 34 per cent (the lowest figure for five years) agreed that it 'holds government to account'. **Members of the public who have actually had contact with Parliament through engagement with a select committee are therefore far more likely to hold positive views about the institution and its work.**
5. However, the research conducted for this report also illustrates how levels of public engagement vary significantly across the select committee system. **Progress has therefore been patchy and *ad hoc*, with some committees adopting an imaginative and innovative approach but others adopting a far more restrained approach.** The reasons for this finding are complex and are examined in some detail in this report. Key issues include the focus and policy area of the committee, concerns about over-inflating the public's expectations, a lack of knowledge about how to 'do' public engagement, a lack of resources, the role of the Chair in terms of putting engagement at the heart of the committee's work and the need to focus on 'the art of translation' *vis-à-vis* committee activities so that invitations, reports and all forms of communication are accessible to a range of audiences. Developing these capabilities would mark a major step-change in current practice.
6. **Public engagement tended to be most effective where select committees adopted cross-session themes or over-arching agendas as a complement to more traditional inquiries.** Using a variety of on-line platforms, acknowledging that engagement demands the capacity to 'talk to multiple publics in multiple ways', allowing publicly initiated inquiries, holding informal evidence sessions, working outside of London and supporting engagement from non-traditional communities were all successful elements that delivered increased profile and media visibility for committees. Equally important is the manner in which public engagement was used as a positive element across all committee activities – including agenda setting, reviewing government policies, scrutinizing draft bills, holding pre-appointment hearings and examining the administration of departments. Public engagement should not therefore been seen as an 'add on' but as an underlying element of all committee activity.
7. The main research-based recommendations of this report therefore **focus attention not simply on institutional reforms, technology and resources but on the need for a deeper cultural change** on the part of MPs and officials, so that public engagement is viewed as a positive opportunity to increase both the standard and the visibility of all the outstanding agenda setting and scrutiny activity that are undertaken. Parliament matters. It matters because agenda-setting and scrutiny inquiries can contribute to wider systemic policy making capacities. It matters because the committee system offers an opportunity for MPs (both individually and collectively) to demonstrate exactly what they do and why it matters. It matters because committees exist at the nexus or interface between the governors and the governed. Inquiries thus represent an opportunity to build relationships and to promote conversations that revolve around increasing both democratic voice and democratic listening, and thus to counter citizen disaffection.

8. This report illustrates that many committees are actually adopting new methods and procedures for building engagement. But it also provides **a picture of an engagement landscape that is inconsistent across the whole committee structure. Public engagement has not yet been fully embedded into the culture of parliament but there is evidence of significant ‘cracks and wedges’ that can now be built-upon and extended during the 2015-2020 Parliament.** Clearly the focus of the committee and the topic of the inquiry will have some bearing on the approach to engagement adopted (in terms of methods and potential ‘publics’) but a more expansive and ambitious approach across the board is to be encouraged. The question is then *‘How can this be achieved’?* The research presented in this report leads to a ten-point set of inter-related recommendations (below) but they can all be connected in the sense that the existing social research demonstrates a clear desire on the part of the public to ‘do politics differently’. That is with more agility and flexibility, through non-traditional pathways that embrace a broader range of ways of expressing viewpoints and - most of all - a form of politics that is less distant.

Building Public Engagement: Ten Steps to Achieving Change

Focus	Meaning	Recommendation
Embrace	Select Committees must not see public engagement as an after-thought or ‘add-on’ to their day-to-day activities but as a core way of undertaking scrutiny and oversight while also building public confidence.	That the Liaison Committee consider how the role of public engagement might be reaffirmed. Also promote the notions of ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ in relation to public engagement.
Think Big	Committees who ‘think big’ in terms of topics, who anticipate major issues, who become multi-platform communicators or who simply adopt a positive and proactive approach to their role and activity are likely to enjoy most success.	Involve the public in topic-selection, utilise a range of off-line and on-line platforms and be willing to work with other committees.
Nurture	Building relationships takes time and this is particularly true when working with specific sections of society. Committee staff are vital in terms of relationship building and often act as crucial ambassadors.	Adopt a programme of informal committee activity and visits, utilise intermediaries or <i>rapporteurs</i> and emphasise listening-skills above talking-powers.
Piggyback	Committees facing limitations in terms of staff, expertise, time, etc. but there is no need to try and reinvent the wheel. Be willing to nurture relationships with pre-existing networks in order to maximise the ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ of engagement.	Once topics have been selected or themes identified committee staff should work with a number of intermediary organisations and existing on-line communities (like Mumsnet, Money Saving Expert, etc.) in order to promote committee activities. Facebook is a key but under-utilised resource and consideration should be given for how monthly committee reports and calls for evidence might be circulated more aggressively.
Democratise	Building public engagement is not just a challenge for select committees but also for those organisations that claim to represent sections of society. Committees must attempt to question just how legitimate any claim to talk ‘on behalf of the public’ actually are.	Committee guidance for those giving evidence to select committees, either in writing or through oral evidence, should be updated to include some discussion of consultative processes. How have members been consulted? How were they consulted? How will feedback be provided?
Professionalise	The culture and procedures of Parliament are arguably not well-equipped to take on the challenge of public engagement.	The nature of parliamentary life is changing for both MPs and staff. New social demands, new digital technologies, etc. all require adaptation in the sense of new resources and new skills.
Deliberate	The work of select committees needs to evolve from the <i>interrogation of</i> witnesses towards <i>deliberation with</i> witnesses. This is crucial in relation to forming relationships and engaging with previously disconnected elements of society.	Think more creatively about how issues are broached in committee sessions, about who can ask questions, about how social media can be used to widen and multiply engagements and possibly even about how forms of deliberative democracy might be commissioned to feed into the work of a committee.
Difference	Different communities express themselves in different ways. Therefore a fairly narrow approach to communication and engagement based around formal text-based documents and evidence sessions will inevitably exclude certain sections of society.	Doing politics differently – in the sense of understanding that citizen engagements are increasingly fluid and increasingly associated with single issues rather than aggregated party programmes; also that political expression can take many forms (dance, music, writing, art, etc.) – represents both a challenge and an opportunity for select committees. Accepting submissions of evidence in the form of short-videos or recorded conversations could complement existing methods of engagement.
Location, Layout, Language	A critical element of any engagement strategy has to be an acknowledgement of the role of place, language, dress, etc. The Palace of Westminster was not designed to foster public engagement.	Dark suits are a professional uniform that does very little to promote public engagement. Getting out of SW1 is vital, as is thinking about how the layout of a room can create hidden barriers.
Connect	Select committees need to ‘join up’ with a whole range of internal units and activities that may offer expertise and capacity in terms of engagement.	A closer relationship with the Education Department, the Outreach Department, the Parliamentary Officer for Science and Technology, etc. could all add value and new opportunities for committees.

Chapter 1.

Select Committees and the Challenge of Public Engagement

9. This chapter sets the broad historical and social foundations for this report. It is divided into three sections. The first section reviews the challenge and challenges of public engagement by setting out five of the main issues and themes that tend to set the tone and nature of the debate. The second section then focuses on history and charts the gradual opening-up of select committees and a greater more formalised emphasis on public engagement. The final section focuses on ‘making the case’ for greater public engagement by committees.

1.1 The Challenge

10. The case for prioritising public engagement draws on both *theory* and *practice*. ‘Theory’ in the sense that ideas of democracy, effectiveness, legitimacy and participation – to mention just a few key concepts – all draw upon notions of engagement as vital elements of a healthy democracy. ‘Practice’ covers both the social and institutional context in which public engagement takes place and also the specific tools and innovations through which engagement can be channelled and managed. Thinking about both the ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ of contemporary democratic politics is valuable due to the simple way in which it highlights the manner in which a theoretical commitment to democratic values and principles can actually be far more difficult when attempting to deliver them in practice. Table 1 suggests there are at least six considerations that help us tease apart this dilemma.

(a) The Idea of Democracy

11. The literature on democracy is huge and varied, rich in its promise - as well as rife with warnings about pathologies, romantic excess, prior conditions and institutional requirements. Citizen consent is the bedrock of democratic practice. But what is consent? Voting is clearly one expression. But is that sufficient? Writing in 1958, W. J. McKenzie offered a perspective whose relevance seems, if anything, to have grown: ‘In every democratic society, the voters undertake to do far more than select their elected representatives; they also insist on their right to advise, cajole and warn them regarding the policies they should adopt. This they do, for the most part, through the pressure group system’². A more ambitious conception of consent informed the work of J. S. Mill. In David Marquand’s summary: ‘For Mill, politics was essentially a form of social discovery or mutual education... This implied, among other things, that political preferences are not fixed; that they can be altered by moral persuasion and free debate; and that the task of political leaders is to do just that. In sharp contrast to market exchanges, politics is a process not of registering preferences but of changing them’.³

² McKenzie, W. J. (1958). Parties, Pressure Groups and the British Political Process. *Political Quarterly*, 29, pp 5-16.

³ Marquand, D. (2004). *Decline of the Public, The Hollowing out of Citizenship*. Cambridge: Polity. Pg. 59

Table 1. Building Public Engagement: Basic Issues

Issue	Focus	Implication
The Idea of Democracy	Mass public opinion surveys suggest that the public ‘love’ the concept of democracy, but ‘hate’ the notion of politics.	Building public engagement into all elements of select committee work provides an opportunity not just in terms of deepening and strengthening the evidence that is submitted to inquiries, but also to cultivating public understanding of democratic politics.
The Political Class	Mass public opinion surveys suggest that the public dislike ‘politicians’ as a professional class but hold far more positive views about those politicians they have actually had direct contact with.	Building public engagement therefore allows them to build public confidence and foster a new understanding in relation to how politics works, who politicians are, what they do and the challenges they face.
The Publics	A range of social trends are leading to an increasingly fragmented and diverse population in which notions of ‘the public’ needs to be complemented by an understanding of the existence of different ‘publics’.	Building public engagement demands that Parliament learns to ‘engage with multiple publics in multiple ways’ and does not rely on traditional text-heavy formal documents as the main output of committee inquiries. Put slightly differently, select committees must learn the ‘art of translation’
Increasing Effectiveness	The notion of select committees as operating not solely as internal parliamentary bodies but at the nexus or interface of a broader, complementary and equally important external relationship reminds us that building public engagement is also linked to maximising the effectiveness of public policy	Engaging with those communities (these might be professional, geographic, virtual, for example.) to discover their concerns and agendas or to establish their responses to government initiated reviews or decisions is likely to enhance not only the standard of that committee’s activity, but also its subsequent influence on Whitehall and reception from the public, media, etc.
Representative and Responsible Politics	Politics cannot please everyone all of the time and engagement is not a synonym for ‘getting what you want’. At the end of the day a decision must be taken or a recommendation made.	Select committees must somehow encourage the public to engage, while at the same time managing the public’s expectations about the nature of that engagement and the likely outcome that engagement is likely to have. Here clarity about committee roles is critical.
The British Political Tradition	British politics has traditionally been infused with a preference for ‘muddling through’, a limited view of representation and top-down approach to the public.	Public engagement through Parliamentary committees figured in various aspects of pre-democratic governance in Britain, but of course this involved far narrower conceptions of ‘the public’. And this was almost invariably secondary to notions of stability, continuity and governing capacity.

12. This is a critical point that ties into broader social trends. The whole question of ‘*engaging with whom?*’ for select committees is made more complicated by social trends that have seen ‘the public’ become more diverse, more fragmented, more mobile, less deferential and more questioning. These are the ‘critical citizens’ and ‘disaffected democrats’ whose attachments are more fluid and who are adamant that democracy is about more than a vote and therefore demand some form of engagement

between elections. Large sections of society are also increasingly dynamic when it comes to political expression and organisation, with an expanding repertoire of on-line and off-line tools at their disposal. Failing to vote or take part in conventional mainstream political activities is not necessarily a sign of apathy or disengagement, but might actually reflect a desire to engage in different ways around more specific issues. For example, the Government Digital Service petitioning site has recorded fifteen million unique visits. Even allowing for repeats, this is an astonishing number - in total representing some 25 per cent of the UK population. Or note the public support for brokerage sites like 38 Degrees or blogs like Conservative Home or Guido Fawkes; or the engagement committees have attracted from such ostensibly non-political sites as Mumsnet or Money Saving Expert.

13. The paradox here, however, is that large scale opinion polls tend to reveal that the public is deeply committed to the concept of 'democracy' but at the same time deeply suspicious and critical of the concept of 'politics'. Democracy is 'good' but 'politics', or at least overly partisan politics, is bad, and this paradox forms a key underlying dilemma for those wanting to build public engagement with politics in any form: **the public seem to want a democracy which speaks to issues of concern but without excessive partisanship**. Select committees are uniquely placed to respond to these factors. Building public engagement into all elements of select committee work provides an opportunity not just in terms of deepening and strengthening the evidence that is submitted to inquiries, but also to cultivating public understanding of democratic politics.

(b) The Political Class

14. As Bernard Crick argued in his classic *Defence of Politics*⁴ over fifty years ago, you cannot have democracy without politics, and to make the case for such a position is to misunderstand the innate basis of democratic politics in compromise, discussion and negotiation. It is – as Crick acknowledged – a messy and worldly profession, its processes grate and grind and can be hard to understand - but it is also one that must somehow squeeze collective decisions out of a myriad of conflicting social demands. This brings us to a second challenge or paradox that arguably offers great potential for the role of select committees. Opinion polls suggest that the public do not like or trust politicians. Second only to journalists, politicians are viewed as self-interested, self-serving and self-promoting rather than working in the public's interest.

15. The positive element within this rather depressing survey evidence is that **when asked about their views on politicians they had actually met, the public tends to be overwhelmingly more positive in their assessments**. Politicians are therefore 'hated' at a generic professional level but thought of in far warmer and more positive terms when an individual has had direct and personal contact with a politician or their office. One of the core arguments that runs throughout every line and paragraph of this report is that select committees occupy a significant social space at the nexus or intersection between the governors and the governed. Building public engagement therefore allows them to build public confidence and foster a new understanding in relation to how politics works, who politicians are, what they do and the challenges they face.

(c) The Publics

16. One critical insight from the broader literature on public engagement is that it is problematic to regard 'the public' as a large homogenous mass, when in fact the public is best conceived as a collection of different individuals, groups and communities that are likely to have quite different desires, demands and interests. As important for the focus of this report, the existence of different 'publics' raise distinct challenges and opportunities in terms of how to engage and communicate with them in a meaningful manner that fosters both mutual trust and mutual learning. Learning to

⁴ Crick, B. (1962) *In Defence of Politics*. London: Penguin.

‘talk to multiple publics in multiple ways’ is therefore a key challenge for parliament in general, and select committees in particular. As the case studies and survey evidence presented in this report illustrate, there is no doubt that several select committees have taken significant steps to acknowledge this diversity by adopting a number of on-line and off-line platforms through which to build engagement. Progress amongst other committees has been more limited. The challenge, however, is not simply about engaging with ‘more publics’ in ‘more ways’ – an argument that raises two issues

17. First, the evidence and data on democratic inequality is growing. As the IPPR’s research on ‘Divided Democracy’ reveals with great precision, the ‘gap’ between the young and the poor, as opposed to the older and wealthier, is growing. It is this latter social group, and their organised representatives and lobby groups, that tend to have the resources (in terms of money, personnel, education and contacts) to engage with and influence politicians and policy-makers. The former group, by contrast, are increasingly disillusioned and disengaged. The implication for select committees is that they need to consider specifically reaching-out to disconnected, marginalised or ‘harder-to-reach’ communities who may need to engage through non text-based modes of communication and may demand careful thought in terms of the use of language, setting, location, etc. if new relationships are to be formed.

18. This flows into a second issue about public engagement that challenges conventional assumptions that engagement is always a ‘good thing’. It could be argued that the vast majority of political and constitutional reforms over recent decades have been focused on increasing the ‘democratic voice’ of the public. From the introduction of Freedom of Information legislation to the creation of new watchdogs, and from a renewed emphasis on transparency and standards in public life through to the work of on-line campaign groups, there are arguably more and more ways for different sections of the public to make their arguments with increasing regularity and volume. Notwithstanding the previous point about democratic inequality, the risk in building public engagement is that it will simply contribute to the noise and clamour surrounding democratic politics unless it is somehow complemented by an emphasis on proportionality and balance. So expectations need to be appropriately calibrated. Here the architecture of engagement is critical. This needs to align with the wider dynamics of the policy making system. Committees are well placed to contribute to agenda setting and to scrutiny. But the way committees approach their publics is no less critical. One of the key roles for select committees in the future may actually exist in relation to promoting *democratic listening* in addition to *democratic voice*. This puts committees at the centre not just of a specific inquiry or hearing but at the heart of a broader process of social learning that complements all the other core tasks.

(d) The Effectiveness of Public Policy

19. The notion of select committees as operating not solely as internal parliamentary bodies but at the nexus or interface of a broader, complementary and equally important external relationship reminds us that building public engagement is also linked to maximising the effectiveness of public policy. A wealth of research literature exists that suggests that public policies tend to ‘work’ best where those individuals and communities that are most likely to be directly affected by that policy have been involved in its design. Whether in terms of promoting agendas, examining new policy announcements, reviewing departmental spending or scrutinising ministerial appointments and proposed legislation, engaging with those communities (these might be professional, geographic, virtual, for example.) who are likely to be affected by these reviews or decisions is likely to enhance not only the standard of that committee’s activity, but also its subsequent influence on Whitehall and reception from the public. Put slightly differently, good engagement simultaneously sustains public confidence and good policy and administration, which in turn leads to good governance.

20. That is not to say that the political process can please ‘everyone all of the time’, due to the simple fact that – as Bernard Crick put it – ‘politics cannot make all sad hearts glad’, but there is

something about being able to contribute to a political process in a meaningful manner that softens the blow of possibly not getting the outcome you desired (and at a deeper level enhances political understanding amongst the public).

(e) Responsible and Representative Politics

21. This focus on cultivating meaningful relationships introduces what might be termed ‘the politics of public expectations’. This is a critical challenge for select committees as they seek to build public engagement. It also relates back to broader issues about public attitudes and disaffection from mainstream politics. Simply put, select committees must encourage the public to engage, while at the same time managing the public’s expectations about the nature of that engagement and the likely outcome that engagement is likely to have. As noted above this requires not only explicit effort to calibrate expectations appropriately but also a focus for inquiries that aligns with the dynamics of the wider political system, in other words on agenda setting and scrutiny. Otherwise committees might unintentionally over-inflate the public’s expectations to the extent that dissatisfaction and frustration are the inevitable result.

22. Engagement is also an opportunity to confront what a report from Policy Network recently labelled ‘the populist challenge’. This is the manner in which populist parties tend to offer simple solutions to complex problems and claim that everything would be so much easier if we could only remove these meddling politicians and make the democratic process more efficient. Building public engagement through select committee activity is therefore one way of countering this populist challenge, by cultivating a deeper and more meaningful public conversation around specific themes and issues. Properly constructed, engagement is neither unreflective nor isolated – it is essentially a conversation: but a conversation of a special kind. First, it is serial and reciprocal. Second, it has multiple and distinctive faces – for example, the conversation involved in establishing an agenda is different from that associated with legislation or immediate policy choice. Third, it is a conversation with specific aims. One is to reach a prudent conclusion. Another is to engage influential thought-leaders and embedded interests; and ultimately, through discussion, to mobilise the power of widely-shared opinion. It is also an opportunity to ‘challenge the challenge’ by explaining the balance between *representative* and *responsible* government. The former emphasising openness, transparency and engagement, the latter underlining the need for stability, executive capacity and the simple fact that when all is said and done, somebody generally needs to make a decision.

23. From climate change to animal rights and from euthanasia to immigration the challenges facing society are increasingly complex and transnational, and in this context the potential for select committees to form the lightning rods around which public debates take place is significant. They are ideally placed to cultivate the nexus between the governors and the governed and to mediate important aspects of these debates, while at the same time focusing down on specific themes and issues. Building engagement in this manner will, however, demand new resources, new skills and a new commitment from politicians and parliamentary staff. The research conducted for this report suggests that such a commitment is building. But it is also constrained by what is arguably the biggest challenge – the British political tradition. This takes us back to the research and writing on ‘disaffected democrats’ and the emergence of a strong public appetite across the UK for ‘doing politics differently’, that is encapsulated in the emergence of the ‘flatpack democracy’ movement [<http://www.flatpackdemocracy.co.uk>].

(f) The British Political Tradition

24. This report is focused on how select committees have responded to the introduction of a new core task concerning the promotion of public engagement. It suggests that some committees have embraced this requirement, while others appear less convinced about the significance of this reform.

It is at this point critical to acknowledge the existence and influence of the British political tradition (i.e. how we have traditionally ‘done’ politics) and how public engagement has not formed a core element of this approach to governing. In terms of its core tenets the British political tradition might be summed up as referring to an emphasis on top-down governance, a preference for ‘muddling through’, a limited view of representation and even a quasi-elitist form of democracy.

25. This British political tradition has in recent years been challenged not only by social commentators and academics but also by a series of constitutional reforms that have in some ways shifted the UK from a power-hoarding to a power-sharing democracy. This has been most apparent in Scotland, where the recommendations of the Scottish Constitutional Convention and the subsequent creation of the Scottish Parliament was explicitly designed not to replicate the British political tradition that was so strongly reflected in Westminster politics. Since the referendum on independence in September 2014, and the subsequent election of 56 SNP MPs at the 2015 General Election, this process has taken a step further, with Nicola Sturgeon openly calling for a ‘new’ democracy based on mass public engagement. This approach is perfectly illustrated in the initial outreach of the 2015 Scottish Select Committee (see footnote 51).

26. The simple point being made is that building public engagement grates against the logic and principles of traditional majoritarian politics. Indeed, the long-term tension between the executive and legislature in the UK over concerns about the parliamentary decline thesis, and perceived need to ‘shift the balance’ of power – to adopt the title of the Liaison Committee’s March 2000 report - back from the executive to the legislature, may well play itself out in similar ways in relation to building public engagement. This is because increasing public engagement on the part of select committees is likely to increase their media profile, increase their legitimacy in the eyes of the public and therefore potentially augment their leverage over departments and ministers. The government may therefore be reluctant to encourage select committees to build public engagement.

27. This report is, however, positive about the future prospects for building public engagement for select committee. It highlights several areas of good practice and success and this flows into a set of recommendations that taken together might transform the impact of select committees and through that the standing of Parliament in the eyes of the public. This optimism is based on a refined grasp of how reform tends to take place at Westminster which is itself an outcome of the British political tradition’s emphasis on gradual evolutionary change. Parliament is an institution that rarely erupts but where a huge amount of activity and conflict can take place beneath the veneer of a pliant and well-managed institution. Reforms are rarely therefore explosive or revolutionary and generally occur through the creation of ‘cracks and wedges’ – to use Tony Wright’s metaphor - in the form of what at first glance may appear relatively minor reforms but which can subsequently be expanded and built-upon over time. In many ways the whole history of the select committee system since 1979 can be seen as rotating around the very gradual introduction of measures that would over time become far more significant.

26. The introduction of a formal expectation that all select committees should ‘assist the House of Commons in better engaging with the public by ensuring that the work of the committee is accessible to the public’ [Core Task 10, as revised November 2012] inserted ‘a crack or a wedge’ into the traditional way of viewing the role of select committees. Some committees have interpreted the task in more expansive ways than others but at a more basic level the introduction of the core task recognised the decline in public attitudes to politics, in general, and Parliament, in particular. It also recognised the potential of select committees to play a role in closing the gap that appears to have emerged between politics and large sections of the public. The next sub-section focuses on this potential in more detail.

1.2 The Opportunities

27. The previous section outlined six inter-related challenges facing committees who seek to build engagement with the public as a core element of all of their activities. It argued that the public is overwhelmingly committed to the concept of democracy but less committed to traditional ways of ‘doing democracy’. This helps explain the role of anti-political sentiment within the 2015 General Election campaign, and also the rise of the insurgent parties, but the challenges can also be interpreted as opportunities. Opportunities in the sense that the public’s attitude tends to be far more positive when they have actually had direct contact with a politician, positive in the sense that public engagement is likely to increase the effectiveness and credibility of select committee scrutiny, and positive in the sense that recent reforms have created ‘cracks and wedges’ that can now be expanded and built upon. The aim of this sub-section is to very briefly focus on *why* select committees offer such potential in terms of responding to broad public concerns without having to give-up their focus and specialism. The reasons are summarised in Table 2 and form the focus of the proceeding paragraphs.

Table 2. Building Public Engagement: Basic Opportunities

Issue	Focus	Implication
Precision	Political behaviour suggests a public shift away from broad policy platforms or strong ideological positions towards a focus on concrete and specific issues or concerns.	The focus of select committees on defined areas of policy and on specific themes and emerging issues makes them attractive in terms of public engagement, especially where the public can actively engage and suggest emerging concerns and topics.
Flexibility	The traditional institutions of representative politics are viewed by large sections of the public as out-dated, cumbersome and unresponsive.	Select committees enjoy a flexibility and capacity to respond to events that is quite unique within the broader architecture of politics.
Spill-over	Public engagement facilitates the creation of high-trust, low-cost communities that can then work together in other forums.	Select committee engagement will very often lead to other governmental, media or policy-relevant opportunities for those who participate.
Moderation	Democratic politics is essentially an institutionalised form of conflict resolution that hinges on the existence of compromises. It will therefore often be a little messy and imperfect.	Select committees can bring a broad range of social actors together around a key issue, challenge of dilemma. They therefore promote both ‘democratic voice’ and ‘democratic listening’. On contested issues, reports can also propose framings that deepen and broaden understanding of significance and which encourage the subsequent political conversation to develop around specific potential points of compromise.
Redress	Select committees exert a degree of ‘selective influence’ over the Government that should not be under-estimated.	Committee can provide a mechanism through which individuals, organisations or communities can challenge the Government.
Agenda-setting	Britain remains a parliamentary state and therefore the business of the House will always play a role in setting the political agenda.	The role of set piece debates in the chamber has declined as the role and capacity of select committees to set and frame the political agenda has increased.

28. The focus on precision is critical in terms of understanding broader social trends and public attitudes. The survey evidence suggests that ‘disaffected democrats’ do not necessarily ‘hate’ politics more than they are simply less inclined to support broad multi-issue forms of engagement (such as voting or joining a political party), but are likely to focus their energy and resources in specific areas. Indeed, the available research reveals a loosening of partisan alignment, a strong dislike of

adversarial ‘attack’ politics, a demand for genuine dialogue, and the segmentation of the public into multiple ‘publics’ who may or may not have overlapping identities and a potential misalignment between the formal political architecture and the demands of the twenty-first century citizen. Put very simply, the political landscape has become more complex and fluid and in response more and more members of the public prefer to focus on single-issue campaigns.

29. In this context the specific remit of select committees and the focus on discrete inquiries provides an attractive point of inter-connection. (The challenge is making the public aware of select committee activity and the committees capable of ‘talking to multiple publics in multiple ways’.) Moreover, committee deliberations are closely aligned to the substance of issues and are thus wholly congruent with actual policy choices or specific policy decisions. There is also a strong solution-focus to committee activity that prioritises the identification of potential solutions above simply exploring problems or dilemmas. Committees can cover all the phases in the policy-making process from the initial proposal right through to the post-implementation evaluation or the termination of a policy, and although committees’ formal powers are limited, there is ample evidence of policy influence (of which the recent research by Meg Russell and Phil Cowley is arguably the most comprehensive).⁵ No government can afford to ignore the select committee system: the resources of committees have grown significantly in recent years, the election of committee chairs has increased independence, the Wright Reforms have aided the committees in some areas, and the current Government’s relatively small majority will ensure it pays close attention to the House of Commons.

30. In addition to focusing on specific issues the second advantage of select committees is their flexibility. They can engage with a vast range of individuals, organisations, companies, charities and communities. Political parties tend to be relatively large, unapproachable, and strangely remote – as captured in Douglas Carswell’s argument about ‘Kodak political parties’. Government departments reflect many of the same challenges apart from the fact that access is more restricted and interactions are almost always ‘off the record’. Set in this context, the select committee room provides something of a safe and flexible space in which issues can be put on the agenda, dominant voices can be challenged and less dominant or marginalised voices can be heard. Nearly everything is recorded for public record and in recent years the accessibility of committee members and staff has increased with the development of the parliamentary website. What’s more interesting – and as the research conducted for this report reveals – is that committees are often far more adventurous than they are given credit for in terms of who they invite to give evidence. It is not just ‘the usual suspects’ and although issues exist in relation to publicising inquiries, managing members, supporting witnesses and adopting more innovative approaches or locations when it comes to inquiries, there is no doubt that many of the long-standing ‘self-evident truths’ about what happens on the committee corridor are in fact mistaken.

31. The third element that makes select committees so potentially fertile in terms of building engagement relates to the fact that committee activity frequently generates positive spill-over affects for witnesses and participants. These can take the form of more formal benefits, such as when a ministerial department or public body suddenly announces a reform agenda in anticipation of a critical forthcoming report, or informal benefits where a submission of evidence leads to either a debate in the media or an invitation to join a related campaign. Contributing to a select committee can also increase individual and organisational knowledge, confidence and skills, while at the same time establishing broader social networks and challenging viewpoints. These are key dynamics of social or political ‘learning’. By such means, engagement serves to constrain argument and promote moderation while marginalised perspectives can be brought to the fore. These are among the varied ways that the *snowball* of public opinion gains shape, depth and momentum.

⁵ See Cowley, P and Russell, M. 2015. ‘The Policy Power of the Westminster Parliament’, *Governance* <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gove.12149/abstract>

32. In line with this focus on moderation, committees generally seek consensus and the production of unanimous reports. While this can sometimes be problematic in the sense of deadening innovation or the scope of recommendations, it does at least dovetail with the existence of data that suggests large sections of the public hanker after a less aggressive and more compromise-orientated model of politics. The atmosphere of select committee hearings is generally very different to the bear pit of the chamber of the House of Commons, and members will frequently engage in cross-party discussions and agreements in a manner that is rarely captured in media coverage. In terms of ‘doing politics differently’, it might therefore be argued that select committees have been attempting to do this for some time – not always successfully – but certainly far more than many observers seem to realise. Moreover, as the research presented in this report demonstrates, the capacity of committees to decide upon their own agenda and how and where they take evidence has further potential in terms of building engagement.

33. The fifth issue highlighted in Table 2 focuses on the theme of redress and, once again, this is an argument that needs to be teased apart. At one end there is no doubt that the parliamentary decline thesis has been overstated. Parliament matters. It matters because a government that cannot control Parliament is powerless and because even party loyalty has limits. No government can afford to take its majority in the House for granted, just as no minister can afford to be seen as treating the chamber or their respective select committee with contempt.⁶ The Government must issue a formal response to every select committee report, and if dissatisfied with the length or quality of this response the committee may attempt to take the issue to the floor of the House. Whether the Government accepts a committee’s recommendations is dependent on a multiplicity of factors, and there is little doubt that a Government can usually rely on its legislative majority for support. But committees have what the Constitution Unit has termed undoubted ‘selective influence’ over Whitehall that should not be under-estimated.⁷ Moreover, even when recommendations are rejected the select committees can offer a valuable barometer of the mood of the House that can force the government to concede significant changes (sometimes quietly and without direct reference to the relevant committee report). But there is also a subtle but no less important form of influence at play, and that is the redress offered by allowing an individual or group to register their disagreement with the position or view of the Government of the day on an issue. This is a critical point.

34. While select committees cannot and do not seek to form an ombudsman role or to seek to take on specific grievances or complaints on behalf of members of the public, they do provide a public space in which citizens can register their position. Moreover, all submissions of evidence will generally be recorded for the public record, as will those contributions made by individuals called to give oral evidence. Committees therefore offer a form of redress in the sense that an argument has been formally made and recorded, frustration has been channelled and vented and a democratic conversation has taken place.

35. The previous focus on redress in the form of contributing to the public record might be dismissed as a peculiarly weak form of redress. But this would overlook the sixth and final opportunity offered by select committees in the sense that it is to the committee rooms, rather than to the chamber, that the media now turns for newsworthy stories. Committees therefore offer an agenda-setting capacity via media interest that arguably acts as a counterweight to the executive’s legislative majority in the House. Select committees provide a political stage on which a range of salient political issues are examined, often with both drama and emotion. From the Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s demand that Rupert Murdoch appear before the committee, through to Margaret Hodge on the Public Accounts Committee and Russell Brand’s appearance in front of the Home Affairs Committee (and setting the debate about grandstanding and celebrity expert witnesses to one side) select committees have in recent years demonstrated a real capacity to set (or at the very least contribute to) the political agenda, both on-line and off-line, in ways that arguably resonate with a focus on building

⁶ See White, H. 2015. *Select Committees Under Scrutiny*, London: Institute for Government
<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Under%20scrutiny%20final.pdf>

⁷ Meg Russell and Meghan Benton 2011. *Selective Influence: The Policy Impact of House of Commons Select Committees*, Constitution Unit, UCL.

engagement. In this sense, select committees have some capacity to frame debates and influence public opinion.

36. This is critical when placed in the broader context of democratic dissatisfaction and political disengagement. As the surveys and audits of both the Hansard Society and Ipsos-MORI repeatedly illustrate, there is a significant enthusiasm amongst the public to play a more active and engaged role in politics. ‘One issue unites the public regardless of levels of interest, knowledge, and satisfaction with the system’ the Hansard Society note ‘and of differences in age, gender and social class: the degree to which people feel that getting involved in the political system is effective’⁸. The question is therefore one of finding effective ways to channel that engagement in a meaningful manner that does not stimulate unrealistic expectations amongst the public, but at the same does not leave the public feeling that their contribution was a tokenistic nod towards public engagement. Building public engagement cannot obviously be the sole domain of select committees and therefore it is necessary to think about building public engagement across the public sector and how the role of committees might fit within that broader tapestry. This focus on the broader architecture of politics and government and the need to build engagement at a more systemic level highlights the manner in which the reform of the select committee system does not and should not occur in isolation. In fact the current emphasis on building engagement represents the latest stage in a historical process that has seen the role of select committee gradually evolve to their current position. It is to a brief account of this history that we now turn.

1.3. The History of Select Committees and Public Engagement

37. Present developments can be ‘placed’ in the wider flow of political and parliamentary activity in the modern period – that is roughly from the *1832 Reform Act* to now. As political parties assumed wider integrating roles, committee influence also changed. In the early modern period, roughly from early to the late nineteenth century, committees helped set the public policy agenda and thus turned to public engagement. The historian Oliver MacDonagh describes their role in the period up to roughly the 1860s as follows:

‘... Select Committees were used with a regularity and purpose quite without precedent. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this development. Through session after session, through hundreds of inquiries and the examination of many thousands of witnesses a vast mass of information and statistics was being assembled. Even where (as was uncommonly the case) the official enquiry was in the hands of unscrupulous partisans, a sort of informal adversary system usually led to the enlargement of true knowledge in the end. A session or two later the counter-partisans would secure a counter exposition of their own. All this enabled the administration to act with a confidence, a perspective and a breadth of vision which had never hitherto existed. It had also a profound secular effect on public opinion generally and upon parliamentary public opinion in particular. For the exposure of the actual state of things in particular fields was in the long run probably the most fruitful source of reform in nineteenth century England’⁹.

38. This continued through the nineteenth century, although as political participation developed and the scope of public administration expanded, Royal Commissions also assumed increasing roles. These were often constituted as a spin-off from Parliament and their membership included MPs. In 1861, committee influence was extended when the Committee on Public Accounts was established. In his study *The Reform of Parliament*, Bernard Crick described these later parliamentary developments: ‘In the nineteenth century much important legislation was the direct result of the reports of select committees; they were major institutions of reform’. He notes that from 1867 until

⁸ Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement 9, The 2012 Report: Part One, p. 21

⁹ MacDonagh, O. (1977). *Early Victorian government: 1830-1870*. New York: Holmes and Meir. p. 77

the end of the century on average thirty-three committees were established each year, three-fifths of which concerned matters of general public interest.¹⁰

39. In his study of Victorian Britain, T. A. Jenkins (1996) notes a number of developments in the late nineteenth century that tended to offer connection points between Parliament and the public¹¹. These included the proliferation of debating societies, the growth of pressure groups and a significant surge in the number of mass public petitions presented to the House of Commons, as well as the number of local and national newspapers increasing rapidly, thereby creating new intermediary channels for debate and opinion. There may be an analogue between these developments and contemporary pluralisation. These nineteenth century developments also dovetailed with a Victorian ideology that Parliament was a forum for national debate and rational discussion. Walter Bagehot captured Parliament's wider duties as 'the expression of the considered opinion of the people, the political education of the nation' and in doing so Bagehot captured the spirit of public engagement as very much a two-way conversation or learning process. The role of Parliament was to listen, debate and come to a decision; the role of the public was to engage, challenge and learn.¹²

40. Returning to the social trends and social changes noted above, there does seem to be at least one critical difference between late nineteenth and early twentieth century developments and the contemporary social dynamics faced by select committees today. In the former case the underlying dynamic was consolidating¹³, the pressures to some extent centripetal, the flow of information and deliberation far slower, and debate took place within a broader context shaped by social deference to the political class. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, as already noted, the social and political context in which Parliament operates and public engagement takes place is very different. The pace of politics is faster, the political demands louder and more immediate, the deferential society has been replaced by 'critical citizens' and political issues do not so easily fit into coherent ideological packages. In other words, at the outset of the twenty-first century – and at the level of both the broader society and the formal political system – the underlying dynamic would seem to be pluralising.

41. But there is some point in reflecting on this theme of consolidation in order to understand the evolution of the executive-legislature relationship and how this would subsequently come to shape

¹⁰ In his study of nineteenth century parliamentary practice, Josef Redlich described the role of nineteenth century committees: 'The dividing lines in a select committee are drawn with reference to the particular matters in hand: mere political party fights seldom occur there. They are not intended to serve the ends of party tactics but to be of real assistance to the work of the House.....The main connection between the work of select committees and legislation is that bills are often framed by the government or by private members in accordance with the recommendations of a report, or upon some line indicated in the course of such a document. *The Procedure of the House of Commons*, Vol. II, Pp.189 and 191, London: Archibald Constable, 1908.

¹¹ Jenkins T A. 1996, *Parliament, Party and Politics in Victorian Britain*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

¹² Andrew Tyrie (2015, *The Poodle Bites Back*, CPS) cites this 1936 assessment by the historian R C K Ensor but adds 'Believe this if you will':

'In the seventies of the last century, there were no film stars, no football stars, no speed supermen, no male or female aviators, no tennis heroes or heroines... The people's daily fluctuations of excitement, of expectancy, of hero-worship, which are dissipated now over these and many other fields, were concentrated then upon the House of Commons... Parliamentary speeches were reported prominently and at length in all the newspapers; they were read aloud and discussed in homes and public houses. Points scored or lost in debate across the floor of the House of Commons were not merely noted by members present, but followed with rapt attention throughout the country. Working men canvassed the form and prospects of parliamentary leaders much as they do now of dirt track racers.' *England 1870-1914*,

¹³ This was captured in the title of Samuel Beer's classic study of this period: *British Politics in the Collectivist Age*. New York: A.A. Knopf. 1969.

and constrain the role of select committees. Consolidation in this sense relates to the development of professional political parties towards the end of the nineteenth century, the gradual growth of the dominance of the executive through tight party management over the House of Commons and to the emergence of a longstanding concern about an ‘over-mighty executive’ and the parliamentary decline thesis. As party organisations became primary sites for agenda setting and as political parties controlled the parliamentary timetable, and the role of the state grew, so Parliament’s capacity to act as the buckle between the governors and the governed waned. Moreover as political parties themselves became more professional and focused on controlling Parliament and winning elections, so their ‘linkage’ role also diminished.

42. It could therefore be argued that during the twentieth century Parliament became not only more tightly controlled by the executive, but also more insulated from the broader general public. The link between the decline of parliament, on the one hand, and the broader social decline in confidence in democratic politics, on the other, was captured by Bernard Crick in two of his most influential works. His *Defence of Politics* (1962) was one of the first books to identify and analyse a social trend of anti-politics and disengagement, and his *The Reform of Parliament* (1964) set about outlining how the House of Commons might change in order to counter some of these worrying social changes. At the heart of this reform proposal was the notion of a more socially engaged and visible Parliament and the creation of a new set of select committees as part of a set of measures that would shift the balance of power back towards the legislature. A debate was triggered as to the desirability of select committees and under Richard Crossman (as Leader of the House) six new subject committees were created, followed in the 1970s by sub-committees under a new Executive Committee. Concern about the ad hoc nature of the committee system combined with further anxiety about the balance of power within the House created the impetus for further reform in the late 1970s. The incoming Conservative Government had signalled its support for reform and, under Norman St John Stevas as Leader of the House, a new and expanded departmental select committee system was established from June 1979.

43. The select committee system has since this point evolved through a gradual process of accretion and modernisation. Cracks have been chipped-away at and new wedges inserted with the Cook Reforms (2001-2003) and Wright Reforms (2009-2010) providing particularly important periods of reform. A detailed history of this process has been provided elsewhere and it is sufficient here to note two core issues.¹⁴ First, select committees are professional and highly respected elements of the parliamentary landscape. The standard of their work is generally very high, their members committed, their reports authoritative and their *modus operandi* is generally one of constructive cross-party endeavour. But (secondly) it is also true that to date debates about the reform and modernisation of select committees have generally focused on internal issues rather than on external relationships. This is a critical point. Until 2012 building public engagement was more of a positive side-effect of the work of committees rather than as a core function, but with the introduction of the new core task in 2012 the issue of public engagement moved from the periphery to the core. There was a formal recognition that public engagement could not only improve the standard of all areas of committee activity but that it could also play a vital role in enhancing the public standing of Parliament.

44. In this context the Liaison Committee’s report of November 2012 – *Select Committee Effectiveness, Resources and Powers* – is likely to be interpreted by future historians as a critical step in the history of parliamentary politics. The report was stimulated in part by a Hansard Committee article that had called for ‘greater definition of the core tasks...ensuring that they are making the best choices possible about what policy areas and bodies to scrutinise, *and providing some form of accountability and transparency for those choices*’ [emphasis added].¹⁵ The Hansard

¹⁴ Matthew Flinders, 2002. ‘Shifting the Balance? Parliament, the Executive and the British Constitution’, *Political Studies*, 50 (2), 23-42; Matthew Flinders 2007. ‘Analysing Reform: The House of Commons 2001-2005’ *Political Studies*, 55 (1), 174-200.

¹⁵ Alex Brazier and Ruth Fox, 2011. ‘Reviewing Select Committee Tasks and Modes of Operation’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 64 (2), p.361.

Society therefore seemed to be promoting a mode of committee work that was more visible and accessible to the public and this point was made in evidence to the Liaison Committee.

45. The result was a set of core tasks that culminated in the duty ‘PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: 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’. Later in this report, the agenda setting potential of committees was also highlighted: ‘Select Committees have an active role to play themselves in putting issues on the agenda and acting as a forum for public debate’ (para. 14). The suggested means included thinking strategically about committee objectives over the life of a Parliament, reviewing these annually and undertaking these reflections informally, in conjunction with ‘key players’ in their area of interest (para. 65 and 69). The Liaison Committee also carried this emphasis into its own work by accepting a set of objectives with ‘To increase the effectiveness of select committees in scrutinising Government and the public awareness of its work’ as its overall aim. But how have select committees responded to the addition of a core task concerning public engagement? How do committees approach this task and how do members of the public or interest groups prepare for engagement? How is public engagement mediated in terms of the ‘rules of the game’ and how are outputs framed or made accessible to a diverse audience? These questions form the focus of the next chapter.

1.4. Summary

46. The simple argument of this chapter has been that select committees offer significant potential in terms of building engagement due to their position at the nexus *between* the formal political and policy-making system and the broader public. Committees can set the agenda, deliver redress, promote political understanding and literacy, act as a forum in which to air competing perspectives and cultivate compromise and their capacity for flexibility, innovation and focus makes them well placed for playing a role in democratic renewal. Building engagement must obviously be weighed against the other demands on committees and its members, but research suggests there is a virtuous circle between public engagement and the other core tasks. Effective public engagement facilitates effective scrutiny that, in turn, supports good governance. As the research presented in this report will illustrate, select committees are already engaging with a much broader array of groups and individuals than is commonly recognised. The requirement is really to spread a culture of building public engagement across all committees and to think more creatively about how to reach out to specific sections of the public. It has also been argued that there is an appetite amongst the public for greater engagement in political affairs but that this democratic energy will need to be carefully managed so as not to over-inflate public expectations to the extent that public confidence in the responsiveness of the system is further eroded. In this context, a committee focus on agenda setting may be especially attractive. Proponents will understand that this is only the start of a more contested and protracted process. But for that reason this activity is especially congruent both with committee capacities and with public expectations. Whether and to what extent committees have embraced this and their more familiar scrutiny roles is the issue to which we now turn.

Chapter 2.

Public Engagement and Types of Inquiry

47. The previous chapter examined the evolution of the select committee system and offered an argument about the social need and institutional potential of committees developing their role *vis-à-vis* public engagement. This chapter focuses on the operation of select committees during 2010-2015 with a specific focus on our five case study committees (Business, Innovation and Skills; Work and Pensions; Justice; Science and Technology; Political and Constitutional Reform). These were selected to offer an illustrative sample of wider committee landscape as three of the case studies shadow departments and two follow particular themes or issues. The case study analysis covered each of the sessions and inquiries were categorised into six broad categories in order to understand the relationship between public engagement and the differing functions of committees. These categories are set out in Table 3, below.

48. The reports of the five case study committees from across the Parliamentary term were then classified according to the categories outlined in Table 3. The results are reported in Table 4 (below). These classifications are obviously not watertight and some inquiries may involve elements of several types, and as a result the results are broadly indicative of general patterns of select committee activity rather than specific. However, the value of this approach is the manner in which it provides a broad over-view of how committees prioritise their time and (critically) their resources.

49. A closer examination of agenda setting inquiries suggested there are at least two main sub-categories. One involves enquiries that focused on a *specific issue*; and another that sought to *foster and build public support for a larger agenda*. For example, two of the three agenda setting enquiries undertaken by Business, Innovation and Skills Committee (BIS) involved a relatively narrow focus (i.e. the inquiry into *pub company leases*) and concern for a particularly vulnerable section of the public (*pay day loans*).¹⁶ By contrast, a third enquiry, *Women in the Workplace*, involved a much wider array of interests and a much broader issue.¹⁷ For their part, the Science and Technology (S&T) and Political and Constitutional Reform (P&CR) committees selected themes or issues that created agendas for the whole four sessions. In the case of the latter, these involved aspects of a single large theme – the desirability of a written constitution for the UK.¹⁸

¹⁶ Consultation on a Statutory Code for Pub Companies, Fourth Report of Session 2013-2014. Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. House of Commons, HC 314.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmbis/314/314.pdf>

Payday Loan, Seventh Report of Session 2013-2014. Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. House of Commons, HC 789 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmbis/789/789.pdf>

¹⁷ Women in the Workplace, First Report of Session 2013-2014, Volume 1. Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. House of Commons, HC 342.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmbis/342/342.pdf>

¹⁸ A New Magna Carta? Second Report of Session 2014-15. House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee. HC 463.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpolcon/463/463.pdf>

Table 3. Inquiry Categorisations

Type of Inquiry	Description	Example
Agenda setting	These inquiries involved issues that committees were seeking to place on the public agenda. They were initiated from one or more of these sources: representations from committee publics; representations from particular organised interests; subjects that were selected by committees themselves. Some committees also chose agenda setting themes that guided their work across the entire parliament. In general, agenda setting or strategic inquiries were distinguished by their substantive focus and by their location at the beginning of – or at least an early stage in – the electoral cycle. Typically, inquiries focus on issues that have yet to be defined in partisan terms and on which the scope for common ground remains open.	Women in the Workforce (BIS) Women Offenders (Justice) Improving Governance and Best Practice in Workplace Pensions (W&P) Parliaments Role in Conflict Resolution (P&CR) Communicating Climate Science (S&T)
Responses to the Government's medium term programme	Enquiries in this category responded to government policy announcements or to reports from official enquiries. Here parliamentary committees provide a platform for interest group and expert responses and assessments. Moreover, where governments have constituted public inquiries from people of known sympathies, committee inquiries can offer redress.	Forensic Science (S&T) Government's Proposes Reforms of Legal Aid (Justice) Kay Review of Equity Markets (BIS) New Role of JCP (W&P) Political Party Finance (P&CR)
Oversight of administration and expenditure	These inquiries involved investigation of some aspect of public administration from the perspective of departmental organisation and efficiency or from the perspective of a budgetary item. This is a long-standing role of parliamentary committees.	Fraud and Error in the Benefits System (W&P) Arms Exports and Arms Control (BIS) Budget and Structure of the MoJ (Justice)
Pre/ Post Legislative Scrutiny	These reviews were suggested as a routine part of committee work by the Liaison Committee and represent a significant element of most committees work. ¹⁹	Children and Families Bill (Justice) Draft Consumer Rights Bill (BIS)
Appointments	In recent years select committees have gained the capacity to hold pre-appointment hearings in relation to some senior ministerial appointments. Committees generally have a 'voice' rather than 'choice' capacity but in a limited number of cases can formally reject a minister's preferred candidate. ²⁰	Chair, Social Security Advisory tribunal (W&P) Chair, Technology Strategy Board (S&T)
Current Events	Committees are able to stage short inquiries or evidence sessions or seek official evidence about unforeseen events. These inquiries are relatively rare.	Voting by Convicted Prisoners (P&CR) British Antarctic Survey (S&T)

¹⁹ In its inquiry on public engagement, the Public Administration Select Committee drew attention to the more elaborated practices of the New Zealand Parliament: 'Bills are directed to the relevant Select Committee after first reading, which then calls for the public to make submissions on the bill, hears evidence and recommends amendments to the House. The Committee reprints a copy of the bill alongside a report explaining the reasons for any recommended amendments based on the evidence gathered.'

²⁰ See Flinders, M and Matthews, F. 2014. 'The Watchdogs of 'Washminster': Parliamentary Scrutiny of Executive Patronage in the United Kingdom', *Comparative & Commonwealth Politics*, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14662043.2015.1013295>

Table 4. Inquiry Patterns across Case Study Committees (2010 to 2014)

Committee	Agenda Setting	Government's Mediums Term Programme	Admin and Expenditure	Pre/Post Legislative Scrutiny	Appointments	Current Events	Total (%)
Business, Innovation and Skills	3 (10%)	1 (45%)	7	3	2	1	29 (20%)
Science and Technology	9 (30%)	7	10 (33%)		4		30 (21%)
Work and Pensions	2 (10%)	11 (55%)	4	2	1		20 (14%)
Justice	8 (20%)	8 (20%)	7 (18%)	11* (28%)	5 (13%)		39 (28%)
Political and Constitutional Reform	11 (48%)	2	4	5 (22%)		1	23 (16%)
Total (%)	33 (23%)	41 (29%)	32 (23%)	21 (15%)	12 (8%)	2 (1.4%)	141

Note: Number of inquiries shown in each column: % refers to the number of inquiries by this committee in this category as a proportion of the total for the five committees; % in the Total column refers to the total number of inquiries by this committee as a proportion of the total for the five committees.

50. Individual committees also varied in the attention given to government programmes. Most of the inquiries conducted by the Work and Pensions Committee involved reviews of government policy announcements. For example, *The Government's Proposed Child Maintenance Reforms Report*.²¹ The Committee particularly focused on the detailed impacts of the new benefits measures on eligibility and exclusions rather than on challenging the complete reform programme as a whole. The Business Committee inquiries assessing the Kay Review of Equity Markets and the Browne Review of Higher Education were, however, examples of evaluations of government sponsored reports.²² As discussed later, the Education Committee combined both approaches by selecting an overarching theme to guide both its agenda setting and its oversight activity – and thus realised the synergies and impacts that were available through a proactive approach.²³ Another example of a step-change in the agenda setting role and capacity of committees involved establishment of the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards (PCBS) which was a joint committee of both Houses.²⁴ Andrew Tyrie, Chair of the PBCS and the Treasury Select Committee in the House of Commons noted:

²¹ Government's Proposed Child Maintenance Reforms. Fifth Report of Session 2010-2012. HC 1047-1. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmworpen/1047/1047i.pdf>

²² The Kay Review of UK Equality Market and Long-term Decision Making, Third Report of Session 2013-2014. Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. House of Commons, HC 603. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmbis/603/603.pdf>

Government Reform of Higher Education, Twelfth Report of Session 2010-12, Volume 1. Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. House of Commons, HC 885. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmbis/885/885.pdf>

²³ Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children. First Report of Session 2010-15. House of Commons Education Committee. HC 142.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/142/142.pdf>

²⁴ White, H. (2015) Select Committees Under Scrutiny, The Impact of Parliamentary Committee Inquiries. Institute for Government Report.

The creation of the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards is an important institutional step forward for Parliament. The select committee on the Marconi affair in 1913 split on party lines and discredited the idea of parliamentary commissions of inquiry into major policy questions or failures for a century. Since then extra-parliamentary inquiries have been the rule, supported by the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act 1921. Some have been successful. There are, however, many recent examples of ineffective, over-long or expensive inquiries, suggesting that parliamentary commissions may sometimes offer a better route...

...The Banking Commission comprises experienced members of both Houses. It has taken a vast amount of oral and written evidence in a comparatively short time. It has worked in innovative ways. For example, it has used legal counsel to examine witnesses; it has gathered much of its evidence through panels led by individual members. The Banking Commission will issue its final report before the summer. It has already examined the draft legislation on banking reform and agreed a report on the collapse of HBOS. It will conclude its work within 10 months of our creation. It will have cost a fraction of the cost of a judge-led inquiry. When there is a need for an inquiry into a major matter in future, the option of a parliamentary commission is now on the table.²⁵

51. Two issues are immediately obvious in relation to the establishment and role of the PCBS. First, it took an exceptional crisis of banking policy to create the window of opportunity in which the parliamentary commission could be established. Indeed, the scale of the crisis was arguably so great that it would have been very difficult for any Government to argue that a scrutiny mechanism of this scale and standing had not been necessary. The inverse, however, is also true (i.e. that the creation of a parliamentary commission of inquiry is – in all but the most exceptional circumstances – heavily dependent on the support of the Government). In September 2013, for example, the Public Administration Select Committee published a report on the future of the civil service that uniquely contained just one recommendation: that Parliament should constitute a joint committee of both Houses to sit as a commission to examine the prospects for the civil service in the twenty-first century and based on the PCBS.²⁶ The Government rejected this recommendation.²⁷

52. With the broad contours of activity for each of the five case studies mapped out, the next step was to evaluate the formal outreach or engagement patterns associated with these inquiries. This involved the analysis of those giving oral evidence to inquiries and those lodging a formal written submission. A focus on formal outreach reflected a long-standing hallmark of committee operations: their capacity to provide access and voice for organised interests, experts and individual citizens in an open and transparent manner. The data is presented in Table 5 (below) and reveals a clear relationship between (i) broad public engagement and (ii) agenda setting or medium term enquiries (78 per cent of formal outreach was associated with these two categories). The bracketed numbers reflect the number of relevant inquiries. The data, however, reflects only the more formal modes of public engagement with select committees (i.e. through the long-established oral and written evidence procedures) and does not capture the impact of less traditional in-person and on-line

²⁵ Written evidence submitted by Mr Andrew Tyrie MP, Chair of the Treasury Select Committee, 25th March 2013 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpolcon/82/82vw23.htm>

²⁶ HC 74 *Truth to Power*, Eighth Report of the Public Administration Select Committee, Session 2013-2014. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpubadm/74/74.pdf>

²⁷ *Truth to Power: How Civil Service Reform can Succeed* – Public Administration Committee. Appendix 1: Government Response <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpubadm/955/95504.htm>

experiments with engagement that several committees have deployed (these are examined in more detail in the next chapter).

Table 5. Oral Witnesses and Formal Written Submissions: Case Study Committees (2010 to 2014)

Committee	Agenda Setting	Government's Medium Term Agenda	Admin And Expenditure	Pre/Post Legislative Scrutiny	Appointments	Other	Totals
Business Innovation & Skills	233 (3)	804 (12)	165 (7)	101 (3)	(2)		1,303
Science and Technology	511 (8)	363 (7)	69 (6)	40 (2)		121 (1)	1,104
Political and Constitutional Reform	587 (11)	72 (2)	126 (3)				785
Justice	350 (7)	351 (5)	68 (7)	323 (6)	(5)		1,092
Work and Pensions	73 (1)	678 (11)	41 (4)	125 (2)	(1)		917
Total (%)	1,754 (34%)	2,268 (44%)	469 (9%)	589 (11%)			5,201

*All the following committees supplemented the more conventional means of acquiring evidence with a variety of novel experiments. BIS, S&T and P&CR all experimented with web-based outreach. W&P used BSR and Easy read formats to open up its inquiries. P&CR maintained a programme of extensive direct public engagement that is not reflected in its numbers of formal witnesses.

53. In broad terms Table 5 suggests that each committee mobilised around 1,000 formal participants – that is on average 250 per session – throughout the course of the Parliament. Of course these figures do not include the many individuals who may have tweeted questions, responded via secondary platforms, participated in informal seminars, watched or submitted YouTube videos, etc. These fluid forms of public engagement remain to be tracked and analysed - the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee attracted some 16,000 respondents to its voter survey – but at the broadest level the statistics on ‘direct’ or ‘formal’ engagement do not look high. The question then becomes one not so much of quantity but of quality and when framed within the debate on public engagement this is generally interpreted in terms of either a preference for the ‘the usual suspects’ or for ‘fresh blood’. As we will see later, social media changes the terms of this issue. It multiplies opportunities both for direct engagement and for seeding interest and understanding of committee activity amongst much wider publics.²⁸

54. The challenge of identifying new witnesses to appear before select committees opens-up a broader set of debates concerning outreach, witness support, non-traditional forms of evidence giving and possibly even a debate about the meaning of ‘evidence’ in a parliamentary context and

²⁸ Allan, R *et al.* 2013. *#futurenews, The Communication of Parliamentary Democracy in a Digital World*, The Hansard Society.

how this might be communicated with particular groups.²⁹ It also raises questions about the number of inquiries that select committees tend to launch and whether they might not be better to focus on a small number of far deeper and more socially engaged inquiries. But it might also be that the formal statistics in terms of witnesses represents the tip of a far larger engagement iceberg that facilitates public participation through a range of less formal channels. This is the focus of the next chapter.

²⁹ An issue that is currently the focus of a two-year research project led by the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology.

Chapter 3.**How Committees Approach Public Engagement**

56. The previous chapter reviewed levels of engagement by category of inquiry for each of the five case study committees for the period 2010-2015. This led to the emergence of three main conclusions: (i) the ‘breadth’ of engagement was arguably limited in terms of the number of individuals or organisations contributing views or information; (ii) when viewed through the lens of written and oral submissions of evidence the ‘depth’ of that engagement was also relatively thin and this led to a concern regarding ‘the usual suspects’; (iii) finally, the introduction of the core task regarding public engagement in 2012 did not apparently lead to a sudden jump or spike in engagement when measured through formal parliamentary processes. This may not in itself be surprising as those sections of society who are well-known to be disengaged from mainstream traditional politics are arguably unlikely for a number of reasons to engage through formal traditional channels. It was for exactly this reason that the Liaison Committee invited committees to be more ambitious and exploratory in their approach to public engagement and in particular to experimenting with social media.³⁰ The aim was to complement the more traditional ‘formal’ modes of committee activity, and through this to reach-out to a far broader range of individuals, groups and communities. Thereby increasing both the ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ of public engagement. But how successful have committees been in achieving this more creative outreach?

57. In order to answer this question data has been harvested from a vast range of sources. These include the annual committee reports, the annual overview reports from the Liaison Committees, the end-of-Parliament ‘legacy reports’ plus the findings of around fifty semi-structured interviews with individual committee members and staff.³¹ This research reveals a quite different and far more dynamic approach to non-traditional forms of engagement on the part of some committees – what might be termed ‘pools of innovation’ that could spill-over through training, lesson-learning and shared learning into a broader shift for the committee system as a whole. One way of beginning this process is to examine the existence of innovations in relation to discrete areas of committee activity.

Selecting Inquiry Topics and Gathering Evidence

58. One of the most important elements of select committee activity relates to the selection of topics of inquiries. This is an area of activity where very little research exists, but where the capacity of committees to either set the agenda (through decision making) or to take issues off the agenda (through non-decision making) is arguably clearest. Moreover, once a topic or theme has been agreed it will generally be up to committee clerks to promote a ‘call for evidence’, to filter submissions and then to recommend suitable witnesses to give oral evidence. This process can therefore be sub-divided into five phases or stages that all have their own implications and opportunities in terms of building public engagement: (i) setting cross sessional/whole parliament agendas; (ii) disseminating terms of reference; (iii) selecting and engaging oral witnesses; (iv) gathering evidence; and (v) engaging special or excluded constituencies. Illustrative examples of committee activity in each of these sub-phases are detailed in Tables 6 and Table 7 (below), which

³⁰ Legacy Report, First Report of Session 2014-2015. House of Commons Liaison Committee. HC 954.

³¹ Individual committees were encouraged, but not required, to log legacy reports. These are available on the Liaison Committee web site. At time of writing sixteen of the twenty-four subject-matter select committees had logged such reports. A further four committees subsequently added their accounts of the past parliament.

cover on-line and off-line engagement. Committee responses are illustrated in the cells of the tables. The examples immediately suggest the variety of ways in which public engagement can be extended. Opportunities would seem to be constrained only by imagination and resources.

Table 6: On-line Engagement

Activity/ Setting	Twitter	You Tube / Video	Web based engagement
Setting enquiry agendas and scoping enquiries		Public twice invited to suggest topics for inquiry. In 2014, 119 received and 3 selected (Transport)	Asked DfE to set out evidence base for selected policies. Invited public responses. Results informed evidence sessions (Education).
Disseminating terms of reference/ background paper	Twitter to publicise inquiries, evidence sessions, and reports: attracted 2,500 followers (Education); now 7,070 followers (Communities); from 800 to 85,200 followers (Int Dev.); 2,100 followers PASC ; 1000 (2013) to 4800 (2015) (Transport)		NGO blogs provided secondary platforms for generating interest in inquiries. (International Dev.)
Gathering evidence	<p>Twitter account used to solicit questions for the Big Six energy companies on energy price rises (Energy)</p> <p>Twitter account used to solicit questions for Mary Portas; also 2x #AskPickles (Communities)</p> <p>Twitter account used to solicit questions 2x #AskGove. 5000 responses (Education)</p> <p>Live tweeting of evidence sessions. Followers directed to audio feed. (International Development)</p> <p>#AskCycle Minister. 4/2012. 744 questions collected. 5 groups. Selected results on YouTube. (Transport)</p>	<p>Meetings away from Westminster recorded for TV broadcast (Scottish Affairs)</p> <p>Selective use of video conferencing to take evidence (Foreign Affairs, Environmental Audit, Energy)</p>	<p>Setting up web forum hosted by NAO to get view of service personnel (Defence); also on consular service enquiry (Foreign Affairs).</p> <p>Thread on Money Saving Expert about complaints handling (Public Administration).</p> <p>E-consultation to seek views of court interpreters (Justice)</p> <p>Web forum on transport for disabled people. Followed by committee members taking journeys with individuals to experience transport difficulties (Transport)</p> <p><i>Mumsnet</i> provided platform for projecting enquiry on Women in workforce BIS; also <i>The Student Room</i> (Education, Science and Technology)</p> <p>Voter Engagement interim report in November 2014 set out proposals – such as online voting, making voting compulsory and making it easier to register to vote. Public consultation attracted 16,000 responses. (P&CR)</p> <p>Inquiry on PIP breast implants received 279 posts. (Health)</p> <p>On-line forum for public to comment on the Children and Families Bill and received around 1400 comments. The web forum allowed users to comment on particular Parts of the Bill and specific Clauses. Links to the Bill itself and to the Explanatory Notes were provided. (Justice)</p>
Special promotional publication		Work over current parliament summarised in video <i>Closing the Gap</i> on cttee. Website. (Education)	

		<p><i>Storify</i> used for wider dissemination and feedback from #AskGove sessions. (<u>Education</u>)</p> <p><i>Storify</i> used to tell the story of inquiries—from the call for evidence through to publication of report (<u>Transport</u>)</p> <p>Posted 16 min. video on tax hearings. Chair attracted profile interviews. Followed through with speaking opportunities (<u>Public Accounts</u>)</p>	
Selecting / engaging witnesses (including witnesses not called)		Workshops videoed and disseminated to participants (<u>Science and Technology</u>)	
Launching report		<p>Video on Early Marriage in Ethiopia followed enquiry on violence against women. (<u>International Development</u>)</p> <p>Report took form of video letter to Ed Minister (<u>Science and Technology</u>)</p>	
Disseminating report		Short film launching Primates as Pets: a first of its kind (<u>Environment/ Rural Affairs</u>)	
Engaging stakeholders		<p><i>Storify</i> used to report back on its two #AskPickles evidence sessions. Brought together a number of tweets, video clips and examples of media coverage, to demonstrate impact. (<u>Communities</u>)</p>	<p>Web page attracted 38,000 hits in 2014,' exceeded only by Health and PAC' (<u>Environmental Audit</u>)</p> <p>'We are one of the most watched parliamentary committees.' 225 000 online views over parliament. (<u>PASC</u>)</p>

Table 7: Examples of Off-line Engagement

Activity/ Setting	Internal Committee Approach	Workshops/Seminars with Publics and Site Visits	Direct Public Engagement	Independent Committee Research
Setting sessional / parliament agenda	Formal planning meetings prior to commencement of inquiry (Defence) Half-time reviews of current inquiries to check they are meeting objectives (Communities)	Seminar held at think tank to discuss future programme. Supported by press release seeking comment and engagement (Defence)	Seminar held at think tank to discuss future programme. Supported by press release seeking comment and engagement (Defence)	
Gathering evidence	Putting witnesses at ease by inviting them into committee room in private to meet Members before session starts (Science & Technology) Informally monitoring statistics of gender of witnesses giving evidence to the committee (Public Administration)	Circulate draft code on central-local relations for Council comment (Political and Constitutional Reform) Oral evidence session in Sheffield on carbon capture and storage to coincide with Committee visit to a local CCS pilot facility (Energy)	Meeting benefit recipients in familiar, non-threatening settings (Work & Pensions) Oral evidence session held at Greenwich on maritime strategy to coincide with London International Shipping week (Transport)	Review of academic work on traffic growth commissioned from Parliamentary office of Science & Technology (Transport) Research commissioned from Oxera on new hub airport for SE England (Transport)
Working across committees	<u>European scrutiny Committee</u> sought opinions from other committees on EU documents Giving formal opinion to European Scrutiny Committee on EU Commission communication <i>Towards a more competitive and efficient defence and security sector</i> (Defence)			
Assessing/ evaluating evidence	Large screen used to display amendments as committee considered draft report (Energy and Climate Change) Producing fewer, more tightly-focussed recommendations (Environmental Audit, Welsh Affairs)			Independent specialist advisers appointed by the TSC, working within the regulator, to ensure reports fair and balanced account of evidence (Treasury)
Assessing findings / drafting report	Including info graphics in reports (Environmental Audit, Energy and) Reduce length of reports, prioritise recommendations in some reports and less legalistic language (Justice)	Easy Read report for disability enquiry (Work and Pensions) Circulate draft code on central-local relations for Council comment (Political and Constitutional Reform)		Review of academic work on traffic growth commissioned from Parliamentary office of Science & Technology (Transport)
Engaging media	Communications plans/ media strategies for each inquiry (Communities; Education; Political and Constitutional Reform) Disinterest of mainstream media countered by deliberate outreach to specialist/secondary media; also successfully countered by focusing on newsworthiness – <i>Violence against Women, Global Food Security, Ebola</i> . (International Development)			Issue of FMG championed by committee. Early efforts to attract media failed. Then taken up and snow-balled. (International Development) Worked with BBC Schools Report on feature covering activity of committee (Education)
Engaging Parliament	Statements made on floor of the House on publication of reports (International Development,		Petitions referred by the House considered by committee. Led to	

Building Public Engagement

	<u>Culture, Transport</u> Publishing reports in time to inform debates in the House (<u>Political & Constitutional Reform, Environmental Audit, Energy</u>)		oral evidence sessions with Sec. (<u>Communities, Justice</u>)	
Sustaining impact for this report	Monitoring implementation of recommendations by regular rating or traffic lights (<u>Public Administration, Home Affairs, Transport, Political and Constitutional Reform</u>) Six-month follow up on implementation of reports (<u>Defence</u>); 12-month follow-up (<u>Education; Justice</u>).			
Establishing formal engagement plan	Communications plan and media strategy for each enquiry (<u>Education, Communities</u>) Overarching theme(s) guided work of committee throughout parliament (<u>Education, Energy and Climate Change, Political and Constitutional Reform; International Development; Environmental Audit</u>)			
Follow up/ 'Staged' event/ Projecting longer term agenda		Inquiry on future development strategy followed by Wilton Park conference and Labour adoption of <i>Beyond Aid</i> report title. (<u>International Development</u>)	Seminar on longer term energy issues for the next parliament – Bloomborgs host – 200 attendees and video comments (<u>Energy</u>)	
Special promotional publication/ activity				NAO provided monthly bulletin on progress on sustainable development. Led to development of Environmental Scorecard (<u>Environmental Audit</u>)
Other stakeholder outreach			Meeting of 5 youth leaders/orgs. Convened to consider sustainability agenda (<u>Environmental Audit</u>) <i>4 Voice of the Future</i> events hosted Speakers House. Young scientists question committee, Ministers and Chief Scientific Adviser (<u>Science and Technology</u>)	

Note: A full audit of case study off-line engagement is presented in Appendix A

59. The importance of agenda setting as an approach that advances public engagement was noted earlier in this report. Setting an agenda, particularly a cross-sessional or strategic agenda, gives a committee a proactive orientation and a framework that can then underpin its day-to-day activities in terms of informal discussion groups, away days and seminars, one-off evidence sessions to explore an issue further before deciding to launch a full inquiry or liaising with other committees to identify

links. More importantly, once a strategic theme or topic has been selected a new set of questions emerges: *Engagement with whom? Who are the relevant publics? Do the well-known interest groups or professional lobby groups really speak for 'the public' or their members? Who does the committee have to be seen to be engaging with in order to be credible? What tools or processes of engagement are best suited to the different sections of society we want to hear from?*

60. Agenda-setting ambitions varied widely amongst committees in relation to factors including scope, political salience, timing issues and the approach to scrutiny adopted by the Chair and members of the committee. For example, the Education Committee, which shadowed a major Department in a period involving a range of new government initiatives, set an overarching agenda covering investigation of *the factors influencing under-achievement*.³² This guided both its agenda setting and its oversight work. This agenda was not established until 2012 – thus also giving the committee time to establish a strong identity and culture. Other committees whose work was framed by longer term strategies included the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's focus on the establishment of a written Constitution for the UK and whether a constitutional convention was needed; the *Energy and Climate Change Committee's* focus on the energy 'trilemma', the *Public Accounts Committee's* work on tax avoidance by multi-national companies, the International Development Committee held an away day in Autumn 2012 in which it agreed its inquiry topics right through to the end of the Parliament (and reviewed and re-confirmed these selections at a second away day twelve months later), and the Environmental Audit Committee's work on climate change and sustainability.³³ The ambitious and longer-term nature of these agendas not only attracted media attention that, in turn, stimulated public engagement but at a deeper level it also promoted a view of committee's as being willing to take on the 'big issues' that concern the public. Several committees commented on the value of this more thematic long-term approach:

Political and Constitutional Reform: 'Our experience is that effectively planning a Committee's programme over the course of a Parliament—whilst allowing for the flexibility which is necessary to scrutinise emerging issues—has substantially increased our ability to both influence the Government's programme of political and constitutional reform, and also undertake substantial projects of our own.'³⁴

The *Education Committee* noted that the variety of important issues in education and children's services 'created the temptation to move randomly from one inquiry to another'. The adoption of an overarching

³² Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children. First Report of Session 2010-15. House of Commons Education Committee. HC 142.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/142/142.pdf>

³³ A New Magna Carta? Second Report of Session 2014-15. House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee. HC 463.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpolcon/463/463.pdf>

The Green Deal: watching brief. First Report of Session 2013-14. Volume 1. House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee. HC 142.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmenergy/142/142.pdf>

Tax avoidance: the role of large accountancy firms. Forty-fourth Report of Session 2012-13. House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts. HC 870.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmpubacc/870/870.pdf>

Climate Change Adaptation. Tenth Report of Session 2014-15. House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee. HC 453. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmenvaud/453/453.pdf>

³⁴ The Work of the Committee in the 2010 Parliament. Twelfth Report of Session 2014-15. House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee. HC 1128.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpolcon/1128/1128.pdf>

agenda transcended this temptation. It both added an extra dimension to assessments of government policy proposals and established a logic for committee-initiated work.³⁵

International Development Committee: ‘Setting a programme in advance ensured balance, allowed proper scoping, more lead time for interested parties and experts, created more scope for visits to relevant locations.’³⁶

61. What research did reveal was the value of opening-up the agenda for initial ideas about inquiry topics beyond the committee itself. The more visible or salient inquiries had frequently been initially identified through non-parliamentary channels. Notable examples include the Transport Committee’s experiment with asking the public for ideas through its website. In 2013-14, 119 suggestions were received, three were taken forward but everyone who submitted ideas was told about the committee’s decision and the reasons why those topics had been selected.³⁷ The Education Committee followed the advice of the 2012 Liaison report by holding an Away day to discuss strategy that allowed a broad range of interest groups, professional associations and experts to engage in an open and informal discussion with the committee (a focus on ‘under achievement in education’ followed).³⁸ The Environmental Audit Committee similarly held annual seminars with academics and researchers hosted by the British Academy and the Sustainability Knowledge Alliance.³⁹ What these examples reveal is the value of injecting fresh thinking into the initial topic selection at the beginning of each parliament. Taking MPs outside of the Palace of Westminster – even outside of London – can reap significant rewards in terms of highlighting new issues or new ways of examining perennial themes. The Communities and Local Government Committee, for example, undertook a range of site visits as part of every main inquiry with visits to the Olympic Park in East London as part of the inquiry into the legacy of the 2012 Olympic Games, to Exeter, Torbay and Croydon in relation to the localism inquiry, and to Greater Manchester to explore regeneration and fiscal devolution.⁴⁰ The Political and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee took part in a public debate at the University of Sheffield as part of their Magna Carta inquiry, and combined this with a formal evidence session in the afternoon in front of a large public audience. Clerks suggest these visits can also be vital in terms of building inter-personal relationships – especially with non-traditional groups – that can subsequently be used in the formal engagement processes. Once a topic is selected, however, the major challenge is promoting the topic in order to solicit a broad range of responses.

Disseminating Terms of Reference

62. The traditional procedure for promoting a committee inquiry has been to publish a fairly standard ‘call for evidence’, with a broad statement about the terms of reference for the inquiry followed by a set of suggested questions that respondents might like to engage with. This is one area of committee activity that has recently been arguably transformed due to the low-cost high-distribution potential of the internet and particularly platforms such as Twitter. The vast majority of committees now use Twitter as a central dissemination tool, and their number of twitter followers has increased significantly. The Transport Committee, for example, had 1,000 followers in 2013, rising to 4,800 in 2015, the International Development Committee 800 to 1,350 over the same time period. These

³⁵ Eighth Report, [Closing the gap: the work of the Education Committee in the 2010–15 Parliament](#), HC 1120

³⁶ Tenth Report, [The work of the Committee in the 2010–2015 Parliament](#), HC 1123

³⁷ Transport Committee, Future Work programme, HC1143, March 2014

³⁸ Eighth Report, [Closing the gap: the work of the Education Committee in the 2010–15 Parliament](#), HC 1120

³⁹ Eleventh Report, [A 2010–15 progress report](#), HC 885

⁴⁰ Tenth Report, [The work of the Communities and Local Government Committee since 2010](#), HC 821

statistics are, however, low when compared to those generated by other organisations. This is not to suggest that committees should attempt to rival the ten million Twitter followers of celebrities like Russell Brand (indeed, over-engagement and engagement fatigue can be as problematic as too little engagement) but it is to suggest that committees might be slightly more ambitious, bolder and innovative in relation to their on-line visibility and outreach. Greater innovation was, however, demonstrated at the stage of gathering evidence.

Gathering Evidence

63. Since 2012 building public engagement, particularly through non-traditional processes, has increased most significantly in relation to the evidence gathering stage after the initial terms of reference have been disseminated. Four committees, for example, have used Twitter in order to generate ideas for questions that can then be put to the minister. #AskGove generated 3,411 questions in advance of the minister's appearance before the committee and then 8,101 questions during the course of his actual oral evidence session (the data for #AskPickles was 2,590 and 3,012 respectively).⁴¹ The committees that adopted this approach (Communities, Education, Energy, Transport) subsequently used Storify or Vine platforms to create unified accounts of proceedings which were then broadcast more widely on YouTube.⁴² These are clearly early first steps into a new world of digital communication and engagement, but the evidence does suggest that these conduits can extend engagement to more fluid, segmented and issue-specific sections of the public. Other committees achieved this by working across secondary platforms in order to increase both the breadth and depth of their engagement with the public. The Education Committee, for example, used The Student Room and the Business Committee used Mumsnet.⁴³ The Political and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PCAC), by contrast, used a variety of platforms to attract over 16,000 responses to its enquiry on voter engagement. Such secondary platforms are a major resource in terms of building extending outreach⁴⁴ but, as the experience of the PCAC demonstrates, committees need to carefully consider how they might cope with 'an engagement explosion'.

64. A related area of innovation involves committees and their respective departments of state working together in order to stimulate and benefit from public engagement. One notable example involved the Education Committee working with the Department for Education to provide policy statements in six key areas affecting underachievement and then sought web-based reactions from members of the educational community. As a result two policies were selected for specific attention – the National College of Teaching and Leadership and the school starting age – and the committee held two one-off evidence sessions to further explore the Department's evidence base for these policies. The Communities and Local Government Committee have taken on-line participation further by inviting all those individuals and groups who submitted evidence to the National Planning Policy Framework to then participate in an on-line discussion forums (i.e. initial engagement flowed

⁴¹ Others include: #AskGreening, #AskEnergyFirms

⁴² UKParliament YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/UKParliament/videos>

⁴³ Parliament Wants Your View, Education Select Committee Inquiry into Services for Young People: http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/Parliament_wants_your_view
Mumsnet. Parliamentary Committee Wants your Views on Issues Faced by Working Women http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/site_stuff/a1633298-Parliamentary-committee-wants-your-views-on-issues-faced-by-working-women

⁴⁴ The following list covers the thirteen secondary platforms used in the 2014-15 session to extend committee engagement: Money Saving Expert, Mumsnet, NetMums, Gransnet, Army Rumour Service, The Student Room, Science Museum, Royal Observatory, National Maritime Museum, Heropreneurs, WeNurses, Our Diabetes, WeNurses. There are many other possibilities.

into a deeper more dynamic form of engagement).⁴⁵ Other innovations by this committee included the adoption of ‘speed dating’ interactions between committee members and those wanting to engage with the committee, ‘Question Time’ format public events themed around inquiries and a willingness to hold evidence sessions in novel locations (including a pub). The Communities and Local Government Committee also undertook joint initiatives with, for example, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (on prospects for a constitutional settlement for local government) and with the Environmental Audit Committee (on a draft National Planning Policy Framework). Once a broad array of evidence has been collected, the usual process is to select witnesses to appear to give oral evidence, but this is also an area where research suggests more thought and support needs to be given.

Selecting Witnesses

65. The issue of how witnesses were selected, let alone supported, was not an issue that was mentioned often during interviews. The general process is for committee clerks or specialist advisors to undertake an initial filter of the submissions of evidence and then recommend a set of individuals for the committee to consider inviting to give oral evidence. In making this selection, the clerks will focus on achieving a range of viewpoints, inviting representatives from major organisations or pressure groups and in identifying those individuals whose submissions suggest they have something particularly original or distinctive to contribute to the inquiry. Most inquiries will involve from three to six oral evidence sessions, and three or four witnesses might appear at each session with a ministerial appearance generally providing the focus of the final hearing. Appearing before a select committee can be an intimidating experience and committee members, chairs and staff have a great responsibility to put witnesses at ease or to engage with them through non-traditional channels.

66. This is particularly significant when seeking to engage with sections of the public who may not have ever set foot in Parliament, let alone ever spoken to a politician. The building, language and even the costumes of the House – suits and traditional dress included – can be incredibly intimidating for many individuals and communities. The existence of guidance for individuals called to appear before select committees is unlikely to offer much support, whereas liaising with witnesses well in advance of the evidence session and offering as much support as possible as to the likely areas of questioning is likely to be critical. The simple act of allowing witnesses into the committee room to meet members and to see the layout of the room can make a huge difference in terms of promoting engagement. Even the term ‘witness’ and ‘memorandums of evidence’ bring with them a set of legal connotations that might be off-putting to large sections of the public and therefore the use of language is critical. More broadly, research suggests that undertaking evidence sessions ‘in the community’ rather than in the Palace of Westminster could play a critical role in removing perceived barriers and building bridges. The use of ‘committee community rapporteurs’ with the role of feeding back the insights and information garnered from events held beyond the Palace of Westminster might also be explored.

67. What the research presented so far really reveals is the emerging repertoire of engagement tools that committees can use to build engagement – in terms of both reach and depth – and how this can

⁴⁵The Work of the Communities and Local Government Committee since 2010, House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee. Tenth Report, session 2014-15. HC 821 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmcomloc/821/821.pdf>

improve the standard of all areas of committee activity. But the evidence of innovative engagement activity remains arguably patchy. With notable exceptions, most committees focussed more on broadcasting-out than on seeking input and views. None used social media to establish a serial and reciprocal relationship. Moreover, with the increased evidence of democratic inequality growing between certain sections of society, there have been only limited efforts to engage with those sections of society that appear increasingly disengaged from and disenchanted with conventional mainstream processes. That is not to say that there have not been attempts to reach-out to these communities (i.e. the young, those in low pay and flexible employment, those in rented accommodation and members of black and ethnic minority groups) but the level of this activity seems out of kilter with the scale of the challenge.⁴⁶ The possibility of proactively requesting assistance from intermediary bodies – such as Shout Out UK, Involve or a range of specialist platforms - in providing evidence from such groups is substantial.

Preparing and Disseminating Reports

68. Once an inquiry has been completed and a set of recommendations agreed, the challenge in terms of building engagement is quite different from the earlier stages of topic-selection, evidence gathering and selecting witnesses. One of the perennial debates about the work of select committees is not so much how to improve the standard of their reports but how to maximise the public visibility and impact of those reports. This research suggests this challenges remains unresolved. More specifically, the traditional focus on the production of a large and text-heavy report is unlikely to be accessible for a broad public audience. But the opportunities in this area are significant. Developments in relation to social media have allowed the costs involved in translating reports into a variety of mediums to drop dramatically at the same time as the potential reach of a broader array of outputs has increased.⁴⁷ Put slightly differently, the only issues stopping committees from engaging with a far bigger public audience is a lack of imagination, a lack of resources and arguably the shadow of a political tradition that remains suspicious of innovation (at a time when innovation is needed).

69. There is also a certain positive momentum that carefully managed engagement tends to set in train. Site visits, public events, open sessions and on-line forums all help generate a broader political community around a committee. This community helps ensure that the committee operates very much at the forefront of their respective field of inquiry and are aware of relevant themes and issues (and have access to sources of information with which to challenge the government). The dissemination of final reports is therefore an opportunity to re-engage with those who have submitted evidence and with those who may engage in the future. In this sense, committee engagement is an ongoing process rather than simply existing solely around one discrete inquiry, and therefore committees might benefit from thinking about how they ‘talk to multiple publics in

⁴⁶ For example, the Science and Technology Committee brought young scientists to Speakers House for forums it titled *Voice of the Future*. The Justice Committee sought to meet with young offenders at one event. And the Environmental Audit Committee convened a meeting of youth leaders on climate challenges. Similarly, in its enquiry of voter engagement the Political and Constitutional Affairs Committee sought to reach out to representative organisations from black, South Asian and Islamic communities.

⁴⁷ The Hansard Society Report #futurenews comments: ‘The new media landscape will increasingly be a networked sea of communities or hubs around which a specific audience interest can be built. Each of these entities will have connections to others through social networks: the more connective capacity they possess, the greater their ‘amplifying power’ and influence. Developing an understanding of the ‘connectivity’ of one audience hub compared to another and therefore the multiplier effect that seeding material to it can have will be an area where Parliament must prioritise its activity.’

multiple ways’ in the sense of producing a variety of formats. Put slightly differently, the art of being a successful clerk might increasingly include ‘the art of translation’. To some extent this has always been the case, and there are numerous examples of good practice and innovation revealed by this research project. The International Development Committee, for example, produced a film to support its inquiry into violence against women and girls that highlighted the issue of female genital mutilation that was featured in a number of national newspapers and was promoted by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon.⁴⁸

70. Innovations in terms of promoting an inquiry can also be significant in terms of building engagement at the report stage. The Public Accounts Committee highlighted the issue of multinational companies and tax avoidance by organising a major international conference on the issue at the Guildhall in 2014 with over 200 delegates from all over the world.⁴⁹ The Energy and Climate Change Committee launched its report on decarbonisation and climate change at a major seminar that was sponsored by Bloomberg and linked to a number of on-line posts and videos,⁵⁰ while the Education Committee linked its legacy report on the 2010-2015 Parliament to a short film in which it summarises its work, and invites viewers to submit ideas for topics that the committee might examine during the next parliament.⁵¹

71. So what does this research suggest about the way committees approach building public engagement? This question is difficult to answer due to the *ad hoc* and patchy range of engagement activities that have emerged but looking back over the 2010-2015 Parliament it would appear that three basic patterns or approaches have developed (see Table 8, below).

Table 8. Select Committees and Public Engagement

Model	Meaning	Example, 2010-2015
The Traditional	At the most basic level, committees can use new digital technologies and other tactics of direct engagement to enhance public engagement whilst maintaining a primary focus on government initiatives – the traditional scrutiny and oversight role.	The regional committees covering Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.
The Careful	At an intermediate level, committees can stage specific enquiries and other activities that engage with the public through innovative channels while also undertaking conventional scrutiny and oversight activity.	Business, Innovation and Skills; Justice Committee; Public Administration.
The Innovator	At the most ambitious level, a committee can adopt an ambitious approach to building engagement that seeks to build this activity into all elements of the committee’s work and also utilises a broad variety of traditional and non-traditional outreach methods.	Work and Pensions; Education; Science and Technology; International Development; Energy Committee, Political and Constitutional Reform Committee; Environmental Audit Committee.

72. What Table 8 suggests is a hierarchy of engagement activities within the committee system emerged during 2010-2015. More specifically, the introduction of a new core task on public

⁴⁸Reference to video at:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmintdev/1138/113803.htm>

⁴⁹<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpubacc/974/97411.htm>

⁵⁰<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/energy-and-climate-change-committee/news/conference-round-up/>

⁵¹ ‘Closing the Gap: The Education Committee in 2010-2015’

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJcDtkY_RH8

engagement did have an impact and not surprisingly this was more extensive in relation to non-traditional forms of parliamentary engagement and contact than more formal or traditional forms. Some committees have responded with more vigour than others but understanding why this is and ‘what works?’ in relation to building engagement requires that we explore not simply the work of committees but the views and attitudes of those who have engaged with committees.

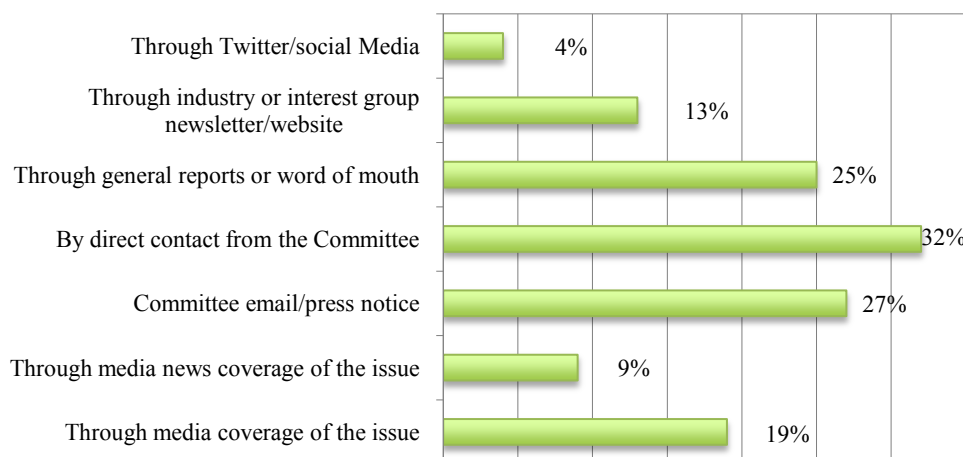
Chapter 4.

Engagement Experiences

73. In order to explore the challenges of building public engagement through the eyes of those who had actually experienced engaging committee, a survey was undertaken of all those individuals and organisations that had provided evidence to any of the five case study committees during the 2014-2015 session (1,257 surveys were distributed and a response rate of 32 per cent was achieved)⁵². (Methodologically the survey only captured those who submitted formal written evidence and, as a result, those groups, individuals and communities who engaged using the innovative and informal forms of outreach reviewed in the previous chapter were not included in this specific part of the research.) The survey was carefully designed to collect data in relation to four main issues: (i) preparation for the inquiry; (ii) the experience of the inquiry itself; (iii) their reaction to the subsequent committee report; and (iv) their overall evaluation of the engagement process. Respondents were also invited to respond to open-ended questions in order to raise issues and themes that they felt were significant to this research.

74. The survey firstly sought to establish how respondents became aware of the inquiry. The highest proportion of respondents reported that they received direct contact from the respective committee, this stood at 32 per cent. The number of individuals that were made aware as a result of a social media platform, such as Twitter, was relatively low, standing at only 4 per cent (See Figures 1, below). It should also be noted that although not included in the question possible options, a number of (17 per cent) organisations noted in the comments section that they used political monitoring services.

Figure 1. Establishing Respondents First Awareness of Inquiry, percentage



⁵² The percentages used refer to those who have responded to a specific question rather than the total number of respondents to the survey in general. This is because some respondents deemed it not applicable. For example, those who submitted evidence as an individual and the question referred to an organisational response.

75. The survey went on to invite further comments regarding the dissemination and advertisement of inquiries. The vast majority of respondents suggested that there was insufficient advertisement of inquiries and even suggested a lack of enthusiasm to engage the public. When asked how they were made aware, some replies included:

'I just happened to have Radio 4 on at the time. Consultations need more advertising.'

'The publicity was poor'

'Chance discovery, more publicity needed'

'I was concerned that I rather stumbled upon it and might not have done.'

'... By chance.'

'More should be done to let the public know.... I take every opportunity to tell colleagues, fellow bus passengers, and other acquaintances they can contribute to parliamentary inquiries... sometimes I put a notice in our village bus shelter.'

'I strongly resent the fact that ordinary members of the public are unlikely to know that these inquiries are going on until it is too late and the results are being reported in the media. I suggest that there is a requirement for Local Authorities to publicise open inquiries on their website and in public buildings. It could be easily done by having a regularly updated PDF on their website which could be printed off by their officers and even by members of the public who want to keep other people informed. It would also be good if BBC Radio4 programmes such as Today, The World Tonight, and especially Today in Parliament could be persuaded to have a regular update on new or open inquiries for the EU as well as the UK Parliament. It might help their reporters and editors to keep up to date too, since they only seem to start to report the issues after the report has been published and it is being brought to the attention of Parliament. It would only take a minute or two to read out a regular list, and the broad range of subjects for inquiry would probably be of real interest to people. I also strongly resent the fact that self-appointed bodies are giving evidence, often supposedly as a voice for members of the public, when members of the public do not even know that they exist, let alone they are supposedly speaking on their behalf... Open inquiries should be publicised as widely as possible, so that they can access the widest range of knowledgeable contributors and accurately take into account the needs of voters instead of being biased towards large organisation and well-resourced lobbyists.'

76. These comments highlight at least two key challenges of the engagement agenda. First, that at the moment select committees are generally disseminating information about their plans for inquiries to a pre-existing set of self-selected individuals and groups that possess both the resources and skills (discussed below) to allow them to both monitor and respond to inquiries. The need to promote the existence of committee inquiries beyond 'the usual suspects' is therefore an issue that came up strongly in the survey responses. Although the vast majority of respondents (92.5 per cent) were satisfied with the formal 'terms of reference' for the inquiry, several highlighted the manner in which committee questioning in evidence sessions sometimes departs from the formal terms of

reference, while other comments suggested a need for greater clarity in relation to the parameters of the inquiry. For example,

‘The line of questioning by the Committee Members was much broader – and at times unrelated – to the guidance I was originally given by the Clerk.’

‘There was significant divergence between what the Clerk told me the Committee was interested in, and the questions the Committee asked on the day.’

‘Guidelines were far too broad and open, clearer statements needed’.

‘Include what was ‘in-scope’ (and why), and what was not ‘in-scope’ (and why not).’

‘More specific information, guidelines too general.’

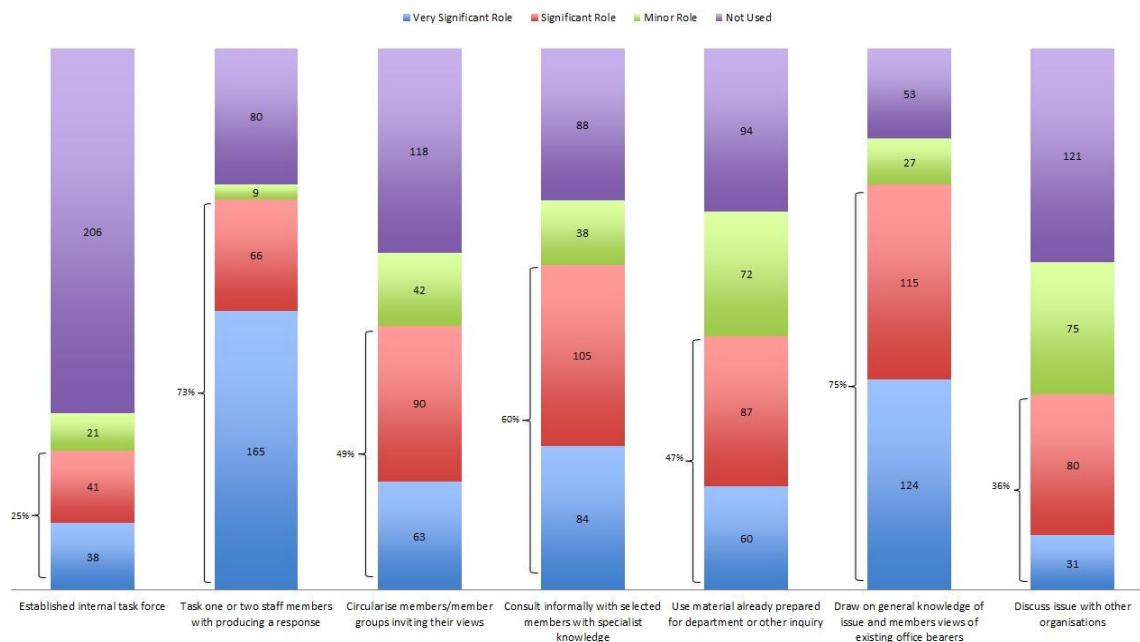
‘The scope of the inquiry was not very clear.’

‘Guidelines opaque and overlapping, more information needed, shorter parameters would lead to more useful submission’.

77. The survey also sought to establish whether preparing for the inquiry required either additional research or some form of further consultation. Over 60 per cent of the respondents said that they gathered information especially for the inquiry and of those 48 per cent had gathered information on the specific inquiry topic and, 6 per cent had canvassed the views of members of an organisation and 46 per had undertaken both tasks.

78. For those submitting evidence on behalf of an organisation, 46 per cent of respondents stated that they undertook some special non-routine consultation process with all or some segment of its membership (therefore the majority did not engage in a consultation process with its members in preparation for the submission).

79. The survey went on to establish how respondents prepared for their submission of oral or written evidence. The results are displayed in Figure 2 (below) and provides a detailed account of the internal work and resources that can be exhausted in engaging with a select committee. Clearly the nature of any preparation depends significantly on the inquiry topic, the experience and knowledge of the person leading the engagement and the resources available to the individual, community or organisation. It does, however, underline the simple fact that engagement generally requires at least some form of organisational capacity and that this may be problematic when dealing with certain sections of society who lack institutionalised representation, may operate through informal non-leadership based organisations, who may be illiterate or for whom English may be a second language, or whose cultural or religious preferences do not easily align with a formalised top-down model of engagement. Over a quarter of those surveyed responded that they had undertaken at least one of the pre-engagement activities include in Figure 2 and in over half of all cases ‘tasking one or two staff members with producing a response’ was deemed to play ‘a very significant role’.

Figure 2. Activity Undertaken in Preparation for both Oral and Written Evidence Submissions

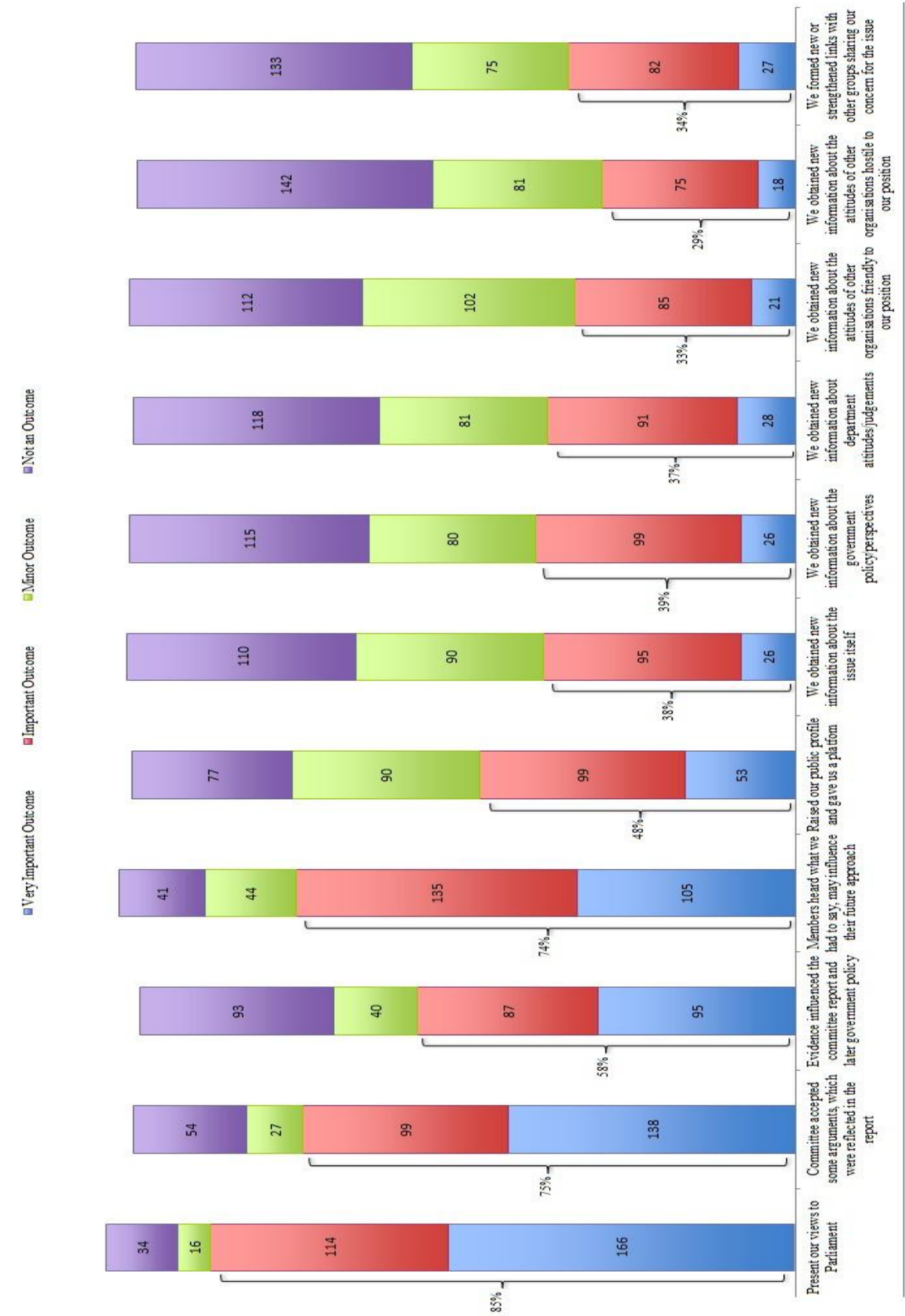
80. The organisational emphasis contained within Figure 2 dovetails with one of the core criticisms of the current model of committee engagement: that it is overwhelmingly tailored towards interested organisations rather than individuals. The below comments, taken from the survey, demonstrate this perception.

'I feel that an individual member of the public may not get his ideas considered by the committee.'

'As an individual and not an organisation, I learn about committees too late and then my influence limited.'

81. A final focus for the survey was on what those involved in engagement believed they had achieved through their interaction with committees, and how they valued those outcomes. As Figure 3 (below) demonstrates, over eight-out-of-ten respondents suggested that having an opportunity to present their views to Parliament was a 'very important' or 'important outcome' of the engagement process, and while most understandably wanted their arguments to be accepted and reflected in the final report, the data actually suggests a far more sophisticated relationship. That is, a relationship where respondents felt they had actually been listened to in a meaningful manner rather than necessarily achieving any specific goal or ambition. The act of being able to present a viewpoint to Parliament and feeling that MPs had heard what an individual, group or organisation had to say was by some way the most important outcome. The research also demonstrated the importance of a social learning process for those involved in engagement processes. In the majority of cases some sense of learning, and a new sense of perspective vis-à-vis other viewpoints, was an outcome of the engagement process. As was the creation of strengthened links with other parties that shared a concern for an issue or specific policy.

Figure 3. The Importance of Outcome



82. The survey also asked about the experience of those who had given oral evidence in front of a select committee (170 respondents, 42 per cent answered this question). As Figure 4 illustrates, one of the core findings of this research is that respondents were generally very positive about the experience of appearing in front of a committee. This may reflect more about the type of background of those individuals or organisations who are predominantly invited to give oral evidence, but it does at least suggest that although giving oral evidence can be a nerve-wracking experience, it can also be an incredibly positive and valuable one. Although the majority of respondents viewed giving oral evidence in front of a select committee as a positive experience, comments from other respondents raised negative issues.

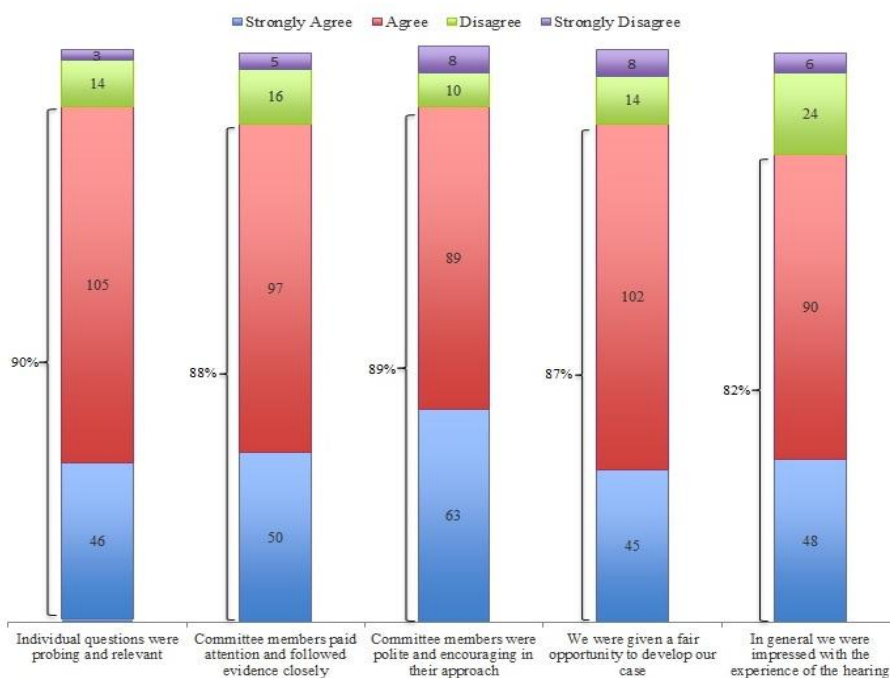
'The oral evidence sessions were not always well attended by members who did not appear to have read the written evidence from witnesses and did not probe the evidence presented to them, rather they accepted it unchallenged. The Committee clerks appeared to be better informed and open to new information.'

'Too often in oral sessions Committee members are seeking to make a point or secure headlines rather than secure useful evidence or develop public understanding.'

'Parliamentary committees have real potential but can, too often, degenerate into public theatre in which MPs try to score points rather than get at the real truth of an issue. They can also be overly aggressive, which in turn can lead witnesses to be defensive. A more open approach, might actually be more illuminating.'

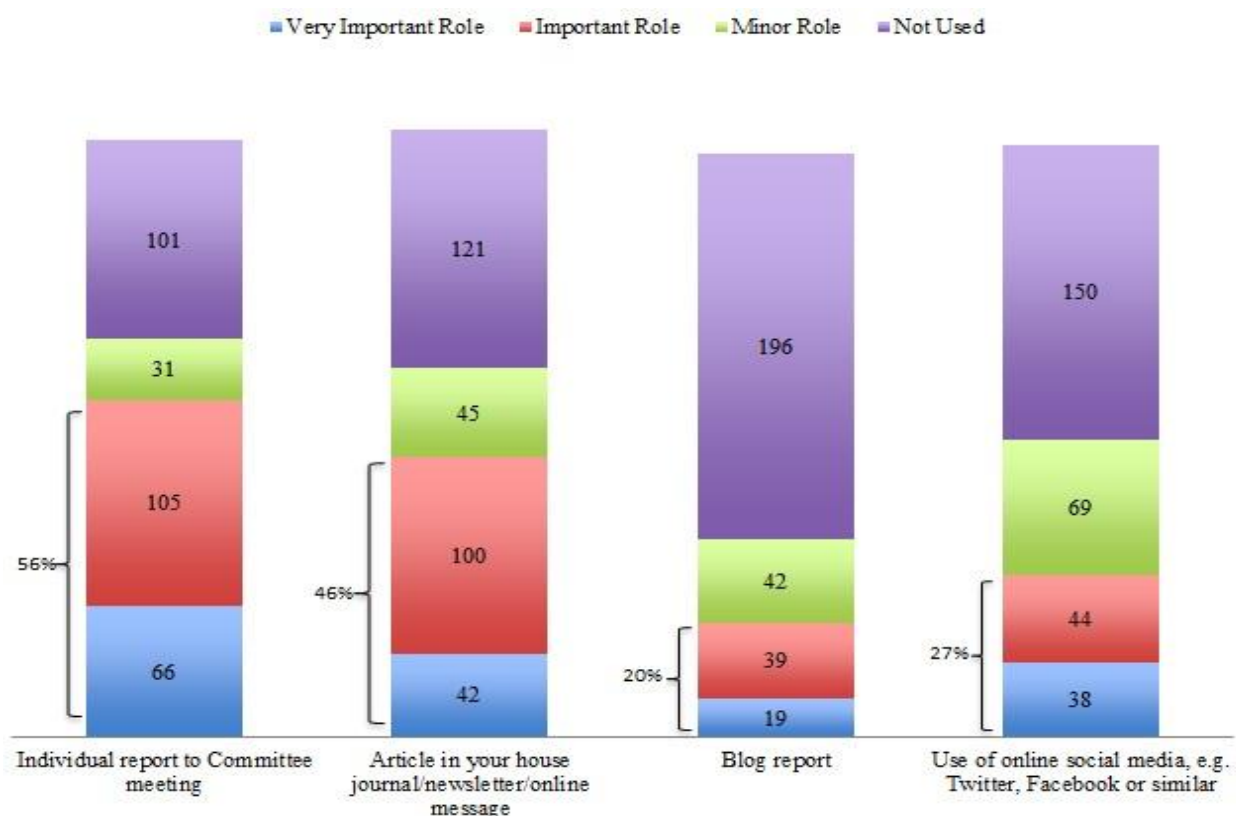
'I see some MPs being rude to get attention, or rambling. I think witnesses should not put-up with that.'

Figure 4. Experience of Submitting Oral Evidence



83. One of the core findings of the research presented in this report is that engagement should be seen more as an ongoing relationship than a one-off process or interaction. It revolves around building high-trust, low-cost relationships with a range of individuals and social groups in an accessible and balanced manner. With this in mind, the survey examined how organisations that had consulted with its members in order to make a submission of evidence to a committee subsequently reported back to its members about either the impact of that engagement or the outcome of the inquiry. The results are set out in Figure 5 (below) and show that of the 314 respondents who answered this question, the most common feedback mechanism was a report to a committee meeting (56 per cent) with the production of an article in an in-house journal, magazine or newsletter also being a popular feedback method (46 per cent). One of the most surprising findings is that digital modes of engagement and on-line platforms were not a more central element of the feedback system, with very few respondents using blogs, Twitter, Facebook or similar tools within their reporting processes. This may, to some extent, reflect long-standing accessibility issues as although 94 per cent of respondents who submitted evidence said that they read the final committee report, over half of them also noted that they would have benefitted from having a shorter and more accessible version of the report.

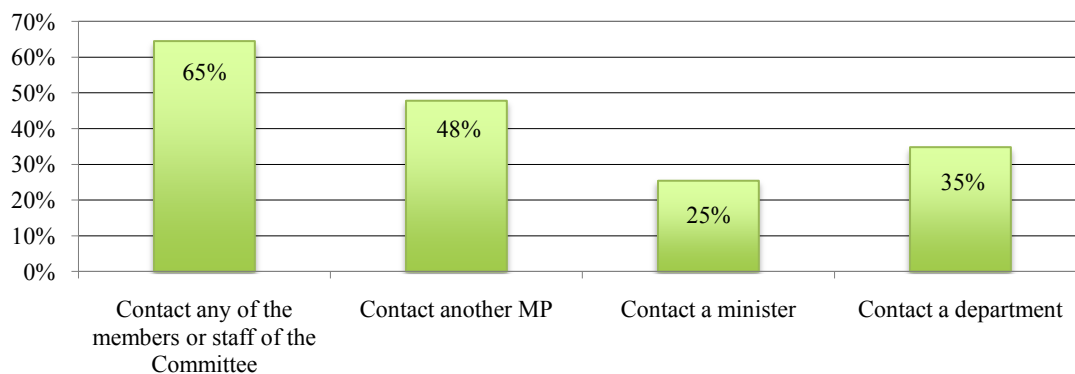
Figure 5. Reporting Participation to Members



84. With the notion of engagement as an ongoing process in mind, the survey then focused on post-report engagement. Did the engagement process end when the final hard copy of the committee report was delivered, or did this in itself stimulate some further form of parliamentary or political engagement? As Figure 6 illustrates, one of the most interesting findings of this research is that a significant amount of post-inquiry engagement is stimulated by the publication of the final report, with two-thirds of respondents indicating that they went on to contact members of the Committee.

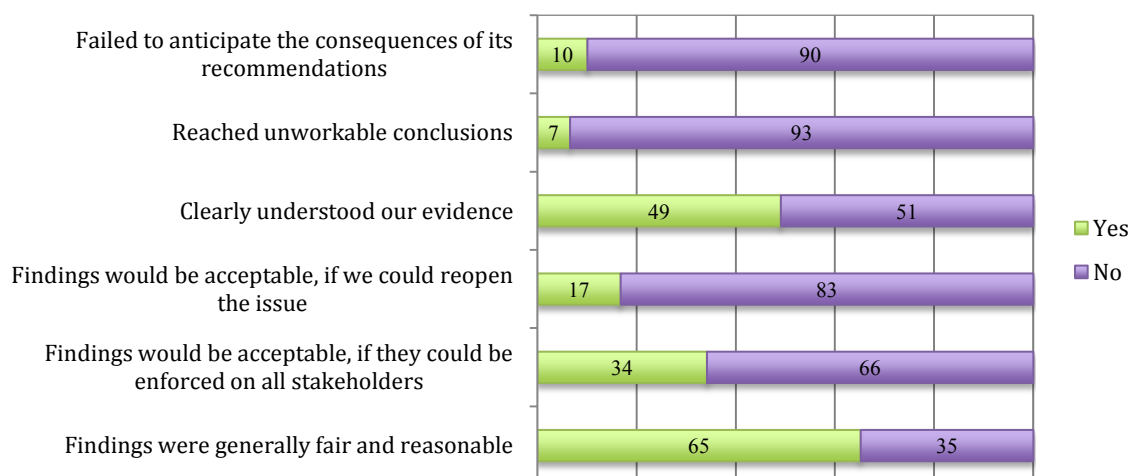
Nearly half of respondents contacted an MP who did not sit on the committee, a quarter contacted a minister and over a third contacted the relevant department. These statistics are very blunt in the sense that they provide no indication of the specific type of individuals, groups or organisations that go on to try and re-engage with the committee or to engage with other elements of the political system. But it does at least demonstrate the existence of numerous pathways to engagement that may have been stimulated by initial committee activity, but have not yet been the topic of sustained research.

Figure 6. Action Taken as Result of Committee Report



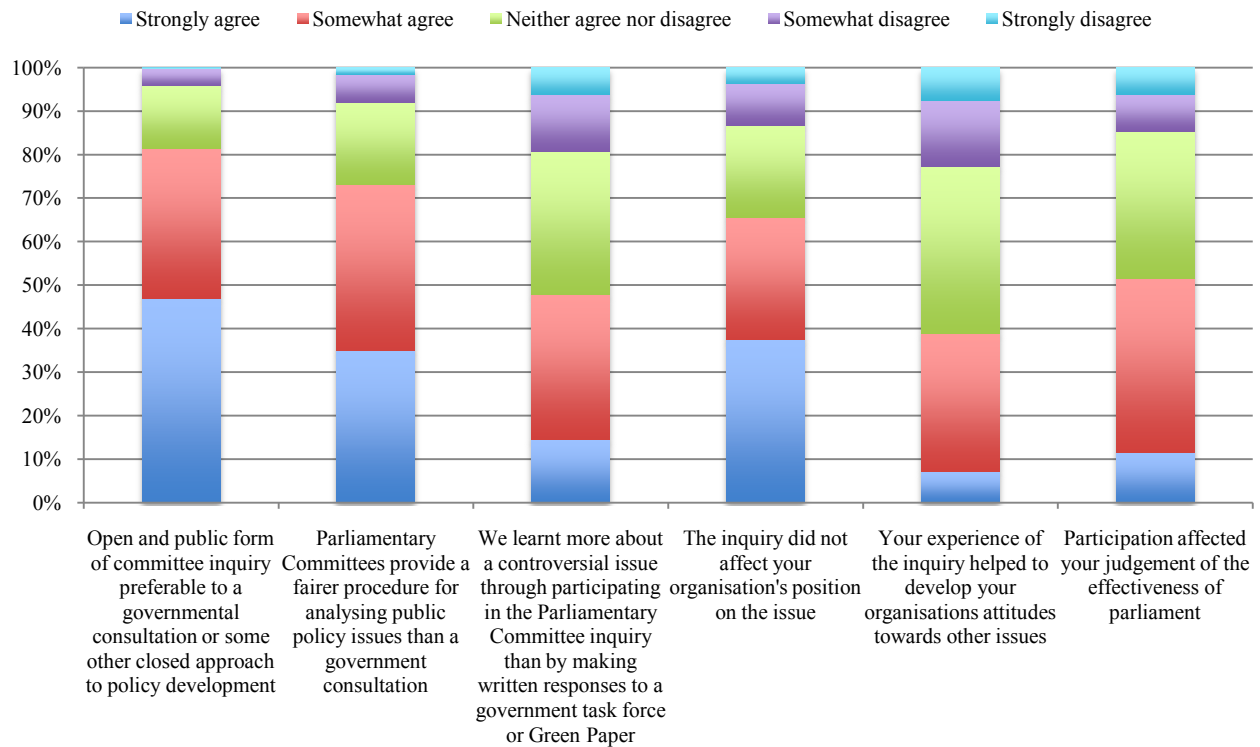
85. These relatively high levels of post-inquiry activity could be interpreted as reflecting some general disagreement or frustration with the approach or findings of the committee that had made attempts to influence either the committee (again) or other MPs, ministers and departments in order to rectify any perceived errors or failures on the part of the committee. However, there is little evidence from the survey for such an interpretation of the data set out in Figure 6 (above). In reality the general views of those who engaged with committees during the 2014-2015 were surprisingly positive (see Figure 7, below).

Figure 7. Respondents Views on Committee Findings, percentage



86. Over two-thirds of respondents considered committee findings to be generally fair and reasonable, and half believed that the committee they had engaged with had clearly understood the evidence submitted. Against this, only 7 per cent regarded the committee's conclusions as being unworkable, and only 10 per cent felt that the committee had failed to anticipate the full consequences of its recommendations. Once again such positive findings need to be treated with caution. It may be that there is a certain implicit process of self-selection occurring so that social groups who are likely to hold views beyond what is deemed to be either politically realistic or acceptable are excluded from the engagement process. This might occur due to self-censorship on the part of individuals or groups who have no confidence in the parliamentary process, it might reflect a more fundamental disconnection in the sense that some social groups may lack the resources necessary for engagement or it might be that clerks fulfil a powerful role as 'political gatekeepers' at the filtering stage of the evidence collection process. And yet – once again – at a broad level the simple fact that the vast majority of respondents had confidence in the committee system is an interesting research finding.

87. This level of confidence led the research to explore exactly why engagement attitudes appeared so positive and it is possible to suggest that one explanation takes us back to the democracy-politics paradox discussed in Chapter 1 (above). This is basically the conclusion of large scale public survey research that suggests that the public are overwhelmingly in favour of the concept of 'democracy', but generally overwhelmingly negative about the concept of 'politics'. Why did respondents feel engaging with Parliament was so worthwhile? The answers here – as set out in Figure 8, below – suggest a simple conclusion that not only is Parliament trusted more by 'the public' than the government but that also engaging with Parliament promoted confidence in the institution. Therefore just as those members of the public who have actually had direct contact with a politician tend to hold far more positive views about politicians, so it seems that those organisations who have had some form of direct engagement with Parliament also felt far more positive about the effectiveness and influence of the institution. Put slightly differently, actual engagement provided insights that allowed individuals or groups to question the parliament impotence or decline thesis that is so prevalent in the media.

Figure 8. Worthwhile Features of Parliamentary Inquiry

88. The survey demonstrated that there remains a plurality of reasons for submitting evidence, as well as a plethora of views regarding the importance of various outcomes. The research provided insight into the preparation of those submitting evidence, as well as their experience of engaging with the process. In large, respondents were positive about both their experience and the role of select committees. However the survey research highlighted that there are challenges for select committees' public engagement. It stressed the need for further progress to be made to promote engagement with inquires beyond its current limited pool of a pre-existing self-selected individuals and groups.

Chapter 5.**Strategies to Consolidate and Extend Public Engagement**

89. Public engagement has long figured in committee work, but for many years this has been a secondary activity to a more internal focus on the scrutiny and oversight of government. This internal focus remains central, but there is a growing realisation that in order to undertake this internal role, committees must be externally engaged with a broad range of individuals, groups and organisations. The two-way nature of this relationship – as this report has revealed – delivers a range of both internal and external benefits. Internally it ensures committees are as informed as possible about the nature of a policy or problem; externally engagement helps build confidence in the political system and can re-engage sections of society that may have become disillusioned with traditional representative politics. Put slightly differently, their position at the nexus or interface between parliament and the public brings with it huge opportunities in terms of promoting political engagement, literacy and understanding. It was for exactly this reason that the Liaison Committee recommended the inclusion of a new core task on public engagement in their 2012 report.

90. Scrutiny and oversight have been taken to imply that the primary orientation of Committees is to the House, not to wider publics. The 2012 Liaison Committee report suggested a recalibration. It prioritised public engagement and encouraged individual Chairs and Committees to build this activity. It also directed attention to the specific opportunities associated with agenda setting activity. Many innovations both in outreach and in internal committee approaches were introduced. The case for public engagement can therefore be set out as follows,

- (a) Public disaffection threatens the underlying legitimacy and effectiveness of any government whereas meaningful public engagement can increase the efficiency and effectiveness of both public policy and scrutiny.
- (b) There are particular sections of society, such as young people and ethnic minorities, where levels of political disaffection are so pronounced that deliberate and targeted efforts to overcome their sense of disengagement are required.
- (c) Levels of public knowledge about what MPs actually do, how parliament works or how to engage with committees are very low, and this calls for a quite radical shift in how MPs and parliamentary staff undertake their various roles.
- (d) The civic culture has changed. Political attachments are increasingly fluid and the public is less deferential and more issue-focused, there is a strong public appetite for engagement.
- (e) Public engagement can underpin and deepen all elements of committee activity (from agenda setting to scrutiny and oversight) and is particularly important in terms of strengthening the position of committees vis-à-vis the government of the day.

91. This report has illustrated that many committees are actually adopting new methods and procedures for building engagement, but it has also provided a picture of an engagement landscape that is uneven across the whole committee structure. Public engagement has not yet been fully embedded into the culture of parliament, although there is evidence of significant ‘cracks and wedges’ that can now be built-upon and extended during the 2015-2020 Parliament. The aim of this chapter is to review the options and tools that committees might adopt as part of a broader process of building engagement into the standard working procedures of everything they do. Clearly the focus of the committee and the topic of the inquiry will have some bearing on the approach to engagement adopted (in terms of methods and potential ‘publics’) but a more expansive and ambitious approach across the board is to be encouraged. The question is then ‘How can this be achieved?’ The research presented in this report leads to a ten-point set of inter-related findings (Table 9, below) which

translate into twelve specific recommendations, but they can all be connected in the sense that the existing social research demonstrates a clear desire on the part of the public to ‘do politics differently’. That is with more agility and flexibility, through non-traditional pathways that embrace a broader range of ways of expressing viewpoints and most of all a form of politics that is less distant.

Table 9. Building Public Engagement: Achieving Change

Focus	Meaning	Recommendation
Embrace	Select Committees must not see public engagement as an after-thought or ‘add-on’ to their day-to-day activities but as a core way of undertaking scrutiny and oversight while also building public confidence.	That the Liaison Committee consider how the role of public engagement might be reaffirmed. Also promote the notions of ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ in relation to public engagement.
Think Big	Committees who ‘think big’ in terms of topics, who anticipate major issues, who become multi-platform communicators or who simply adopt a positive and proactive approach to their role and activity are likely to enjoy most success.	Involve the public in topic-selection, utilise a range of off-line and on-line platforms and be willing to work with other committees.
Nurture	Building relationships take time and this is particularly true when working with specific sections of society. Committee staff are vital in terms of relationship building and often act as crucial ambassadors.	Be proactive in building committee profiles, followers and supporters. Reinforce through a programme of informal committee visits, utilise intermediaries or rapporteurs and emphasise listening-skills above talking-powers. Also deliberately cultivate engagement via national and local media.
Piggyback	Committees face limitations in terms of staff, expertise, time, etc. but there is no need to try and reinvent the wheel. Be willing to nurture relationships with pre-existing networks in order to maximise the ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ of engagement.	Once topics have been selected or themes identified, committee staff should work with a number of organisations, including particularly secondary social media platforms, in order to promote committee activities. Facebook is a key but under-utilised resource and consideration should be given for how monthly committee reports and calls for evidence might be circulated more aggressively.
Democratise	Building public engagement is not just a challenge for select committees but also for those organisations that claim to represent sections of society. Committees must attempt to question just how legitimate any claim to talk ‘on behalf of the public’ actually are.	Committee guidance for those giving evidence to select committees, either in writing or through oral evidence, should be updated to include some discussion of consultative processes. How have members been consulted? How were they consulted? How will feedback be provided?
Professionalise	The culture and procedures of Parliament are arguably not well-equipped to take on the challenge of public engagement.	The nature of parliamentary life is changing for both MPs and staff. New social demands, new digital technologies, etc. all require adaptation in the sense of new resources and new professional skills.
Deliberate	The work of select committees needs to evolve from the <i>interrogation of</i> witnesses towards <i>deliberation with</i> witnesses. This is crucial in relation to forming relationships and engaging with previously disconnected elements of society.	Think more creatively about how issues are broached in committee sessions, about who can ask questions, possibly even about how forms of deliberative democracy might be commissioned to feed into the work of a committee.
Difference	Different communities express themselves in different ways. Therefore a fairly narrow approach to communication and engagement based around formal text-based documents and evidence sessions will inevitably exclude certain sections of society.	Doing politics differently – in the sense of understanding how social media can transfigure many aspects of committee work; also how political expression can take many forms (dance, music, writing, art, etc.) – represents both a challenge and an opportunity for select committees.
Location, Layout, Language	A critical element of any engagement strategy has to be an acknowledgement of the role of place, language, dress, etc. The Palace of Westminster was not designed to foster public engagement.	Dark suits are a professional uniform that does very little to promote public engagement. Getting out of SW1 is vital, as is thinking about how the layout of a room can create hidden barriers.
Connect	Select committees need to ‘join up’ with a whole range of internal units and activities that may offer expertise and capacity in terms of engagement.	A closer relationship with the Education Department, the Outreach Department, the Parliamentary Officer for Science and Technology, etc. could all add value and new opportunities for committees.

The following paragraphs discuss these points in more detail.

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

92. The first and arguably central element of building engagement is that committee members, and notably the Chair, must **embrace** the notion of public engagement 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 capacity to deliver a range of benefits. Building engagement is therefore about putting a committee and its members at the heart of a diverse and dynamic community in which information and viewpoints can be shared in a 'safe space'. The creation of additional resources in the form of additional staff or digital capacities will have little impact unless the committee itself promotes a clear design to drive the engagement agenda forward. Member buy-in must be at the heart of any select committee initiative, if it is to be successful.

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

93. The research suggests that 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 send out a signal of the committee's ambition. Moreover, selecting the central theme or issue is itself an opportunity for engagement and community building, with away-days, informal seminars, committee visits, on-line consultations and other forms of 'engaged thinking' being increasingly used by committees to generate new and fresh ideas. Committees can use social media to invite members of the public to suggest ideas for inquiries (see Recommendation 9). Non-traditional forms of committee notification, such as blogs, podcasts and videos, can also be distributed and some element of public selection from a range of options.⁵³ This is also incredibly simple to administrate - using on-line tools such as Survey Monkey – and sends a strong signal that engagement has really been embraced. However, with engagement comes responsibilities and it should become expected procedure for select committees to include a short (and accessible) explanation as part of the announcement of the selected topics or themes.

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

94. This focus on embracing public engagement and 'thinking big' in terms of the broad focus of committee agendas all point to the fact that building public engagement revolves around the establishment of relationships and the creation of active 'communities' of committee followers. As this report has shown, all select committees are surrounded by networks of individuals and organisations with whom they might have fairly frequent contact, but the thrust of the post-2012 core

⁵³ This is perfectly reflected in the initial outreach by the Scottish Affairs Committee in the 2015 Parliament. The committee framed its initial request for public suggestions by asking a number of questions including, What are the best ways for the Committee to engage with organisations in Scotland and the Scottish public? How should the committee engage with organisations across the United Kingdom and on what issues? Where should the Committee meet and what type of meetings (e.g. formal evidence sessions, informal discussion panels, etc) would be useful? How can the Committee make sure it engages effectively with the work of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Parliament Committees? What issues should the Committee be examining during this Parliament and why? What aspects of UK Government policy are not working, or could be made to work better, in and for Scotland?

task was to develop both the ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ of these communities and to forge new two-way relationships so that the work of committees was not only more effective but also so that the work of parliament was more visible within society. As Table 6 (above) illustrates, several committees have embraced this agenda and have innovated in a variety of ways. But there is less evidence of a broad cultural shift within the committee system. There is, however, evidence that committee-public relationships need to be *nurtured and sustained* (just like any relationship). Set against a broader context in which public attitudes to political processes, political institutions and politicians are generally very poor, the need for committee members and staff to proactively approach and nurture relationships is great. It is also more important in relation to fostering relationships with those groups that may have something important to contribute to the work of the committee but are currently – for one reason or another – either unwilling or unable to contribute. This is exactly why getting committees out of the Palace of Westminster and into communities (both physically and virtually), and also thinking about issues of dress, language and accessibility is so vital.

95. The profiles or ‘brands’ of committees also 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 they have, and by improving committees’ own recognition and standing. These three sources of influence are interconnected. Committees have not developed this dimension of outreach. Take the Defence Committee. One interviewee remarked that its outreach is limited to a relatively narrow specialist community. The participant record endorses that judgment. But the potential community of interest is surely much broader? Think of the numbers of Regimental Clubs and societies, ex-services societies, war widows, injured service people etc. associations and groups. Analogous considerations apply to each committee.

96. The accessibility and format of reports and other documents is inextricably associated with the development of committee profiles and followers. This was underlined by the #futurenews report of March 2013 and its recommendations for communicating parliamentary democracy: ‘The official record (in the Chambers, committees, Westminster Hall or Grand Committee) could be live-logged rather than reported after the event and the XML (eXtensible Markup Language) should be time-coded, tagged and key-worded to enable people to access relevant material more quickly..... Future business information datasets – including for written questions and deposited papers – could be released in XML or CSV (Comma-Separated Values) format, with automated feeds and APIs (Application Programming Interface)....Improving the ‘findability’ and ‘search’ functions of the parliamentary website must be a priority through search engine optimisation and tagging of material.’

Recommendation 4: *Extend outreach through intermediary platforms and existing online communities*

97. Committees should not feel isolated, but should in fact consider adopting informal partnerships with those existing on-line communities or off-line public groups that can give them advice in relation to language and layout, while also offering them large pre-existing public audiences. Developing an active, diverse, engaged on-line community from scratch is a significant challenge which, regardless of the level of resources dedicated to it, takes time. Committees should therefore consider ‘piggybacking’ on the existing capacities of other organisations as a conduit for their own engagement and community building. Once again, several committees have already experimented with this approach (using platforms provided by, for example, *Mumsnet* and *The Student Room*) but there is arguably far more that could be done in relation to working with and learning from external organisations. According to the Hansard Society (*#future news*): ‘Increasingly the media landscape needs to be seen not as a pyramidal ranking of outlets according to perceived influence, whose foundational base is television, radio and newspapers, but as a flat, networked sea in which are interspersed a series of ‘hubs’ which represent a particular brand or community around which a specific audience interest can be built. Each of these entities will have connections to others through social networks, meaningful connections between them being drawn through a series of ‘likes’, ‘recommends’, ‘+1s’, ‘follows’ and re-tweets. Audience ‘reach’ still matters but rather than being based on viewing or sales figures what matters is the inter-connectedness of each entity; where they

sit in the networked sea. The more connective capacity they possess, the greater their ‘amplifying’ power and influence. The landscape is unstructured and in a state of permanent evolution. As such it represents a significant communications challenge but may also afford many new opportunities for innovation and experimentation. Parliament needs to find creative, imaginative and topical ways to weave its news and content into the topics, websites and programmes that do interest people.’

Recommendation 5: Enhance the democratic quality of committee processes

98. This focus on ‘piggybacking’ introduces the sixth recommendation and a focus on the **democratisation** of the committee system. In many ways this process has started with the introduction of elections for committee chairmen and members but could it be taken one-step further in terms of how the committee then engaged with its 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. To engage with those where pre-existing relationships already exist and where the capacity to engage has already been demonstrated is a completely rational way of operating but there is an opportunity to develop the democratic or representative character of the process. In addition to reaching-out to more diverse range of individuals, communities and organisations, committees might think about encouraging those actors to: consider what consultative processes were involved, to reflect upon how members of the community or organisation were consulted and how they might be kept in touch with the progress of the inquiry.

99. Democratisation in this sense is calling for a deeper form of engagement that infuses both the work of committees and the approach of individuals, communities and organisations to the public. This has significant implications for the **professional** skills of MPs and those members of staff who support committees. This has resource implications in the sense of digital capacities and staff capacities but it also has implications in terms of learning new skills in terms of data filtering and management, in terms of running and organising public events, in terms of media skills and media management and also possibly a greater cultural sensitivity to the perspectives of specific social groups. Most specifically in thinking about the existing professional processes and outputs and whether they remain ‘fit for purpose’ in a rapidly changing and increasingly disaffected society.

Recommendation 6: Individual chairs and members have many opportunities to build committee media profiles and impacts.

100. 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. Democratic Audit data from 2012 indicated very substantial variance between coverage of the top four committees and the remaining twenty-one. Of course might have developed beyond this year. The data has not been collected.

101. 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. As independently elected incumbents, chairs have a special opportunity to build their own and their committee profiles. The presence of part time media staff on several of these committees no doubt contributed to these outcomes as did the media skills of the chairs. Opportunities to develop the media judgment and skills of chairs could be extended.

Recommendation 7: Resources are critical

102. In many ways the introduction of the core tasks placed more responsibilities on select committees and located those responsibilities within a formalised annual reporting process. The debate about the resources of select committees is a perennial theme of debate 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. Opponents will surely recite the well-known arguments about the risks of creating ‘officer led’ rather than ‘member led’ committees and there is something to be said for this viewpoint. But there is also something to be said about the scale of public disengagement and the internal and external benefits of taking public engagement seriously. Although increasing public engagement is not cost neutral the potential gains are significant when compared to the marginal increases in resources that are required. The main demand identified by this research is less about additional staff and more about the need for training resources in relation to the options for public engagement and more support in relation to web design and publications.

Recommendation 8: Use social media experimentally to deliberate and extend engagement

103. 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 provides a clear procedural framework for this to happen. 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 was regarded as legitimate. Further, there would always be later opportunities to renew the effort. The literature on how this worked, albeit differentially, in the Conservative and Labour parties is clear. The challenge is to create a functionally equivalent outcome in digital space and via other media. Select committees will never have the resources to conduct substantive inquiries into every subject that is suggested to them. Some kind of ‘filtering’ or ‘sifting’ mechanism is therefore necessary. At the moment, this happens either in private meetings of the committee or is carried out informally by the chair and clerk.

104. But digital tools do allow committees to gauge the public temperature around either a broad issue or a set of competing issues. In the last parliament some committees selected overarching themes or strategic topics. Thus the Energy and Climate Change committee focused on the ‘Energy Trilemma’, the Education Committee on ‘Underachievement’ and the International Development Committee on a limited number of selected issues. Public comments could have been invited on these matters through a deliberate programme of outreach via established blogs, web sites etc. Committees could thus put in place a parallel but cross-sessional outreach processes to complement their routine inquiries. Outreach could take the form of a general invitation to identify priority

concerns. To avoid being overwhelmed with individual ideas, and to enhance the democratic quality of engagement, proponents could be asked to satisfy both substantive and representational criteria. Substantively, proponents could be invited to define the issue with sufficient precision to indicate its policy implications and to indicate economic, social or other reasons for seeing the issue not only as significant but also for according it priority. They could also be asked to indicate budgetary implications if appropriate and perhaps also to indicate preferred remedies. Representationally, proponents could be invited to establish an appropriate level of support. What this might be needs more thought. The Petitions process suggests one methodology, but this may not sufficiently capture intensity of concern or the circumstances of existing organised interests or marginalised citizens. In the case of individual citizens, the call for submissions might suggest that proponents establish Facebook communities of interest or other media (e.g. LinkedIn, secondary platforms) for joining-up like-minded people – and also (or alternatively) look for local clubs or societies that might be enlisted to reflect a base of support. As well as original proponents, other platforms and blog sites could be enrolled to curate outreach. Platforms such as *The Student Room*, *Mumsnet*, have already aided enquiries. Both parties gain in standing from such collaboration. Proposals could be summarised and a decision taken by the committee on further action with the rationale for this decision communicated to participants (i.e. the process followed by the Transport Committee in the past parliament).

Recommendation 9: Explore opportunities to enhance two-way learning

105. Several committees have demonstrated that engaging with large and public audiences demands a quite different skill-set to the one that has traditionally been acceptable within committees. This 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? Committee clerks are usually very grateful for responses that highlight issues that may have been overlooked in the research process that underpinned the ‘questions and answers’ document but this is where a richer and more interactive sense of community engagement could play a role.

Recommendation 10: Involve committee publics in setting agendas.

106. 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. This is not a replacement for representative democracy but a valuable adjunct that can either dovetail with parliamentary process by involving MPs or can feed their conclusions and recommendations into parliament. The Political

and Constitutional Reform Select Committee's proposal for a Citizens Convention on the constitution of the UK, modelled on similar deliberative projects around the world, was one example of this approach but there are many others that offer new opportunities for committees to 'do politics **differently**'. 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 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.

Recommendation 11: Adapt the theatre of engagement to specific publics.

107. 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. Getting out of the Palace of Westminster and into communities as a committee is therefore a vital element of building outreach. Put slightly differently, if MPs expect the public to come to the Palace of Westminster to engage with the committee, they cannot be surprised when a relatively narrow range of individuals or organisations take-up this invitation.

108. In this context a focus on layout and what might be called 'designing for democracy' is one of the insights offered by the literature on deliberative democracy. The standard select committee room layout is something of an extreme option in terms of how a process of engagement might take place. You have the committee at one end of the room and the witnesses very much at the other; it assumes a fairly high level of personal confidence, it is a very formal environment, the parliamentary dress code is formal, as is the procedure for allocating questions between members, as are the rules for even entering and leaving committee rooms. The 'rules of the game' are steeped in a parliamentary culture that tends to be slightly remote, somewhat intimidating and slightly masculine. And yet it is possible to imagine a quite different way of engaging with individuals, community groups and organisations in a far less remote and formal manner. The advantage of holding some evidence sessions and events beyond the Palace of Westminster is that it immediately creates new options in terms of seating, interaction and dialogue. Recordings can still be taken and transcripts published but the nature and subtly of that engagement are quite different while also being far more attractive for under-represented social groups. In the longer term, the proposed programme for the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster presents a potential opportunity to re-think the setting within which select committee meetings at Westminster take place, and to consider ways in which the whole process might be made more accessible both to witnesses and to members of the public attending meetings (another form of engagement). That might involve measures such as, for example, re-configuring the layout of committee rooms, providing better visitor access, providing better

audio-visual reinforcement for the public gallery, or providing safe, private waiting areas for witnesses.

Recommendation 12: Make Connections

109. 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 and the next and concluding chapter reflects upon some of the broader issues that need to be examined if significant advances are to be made but there is one final issue that deserves brief comment – ***connections***. 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 research suggests that 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 and to some extent certain committees are building these internal relationships. But the bigger picture suggests that committees tend to work predominantly in isolation from each other and from these other parts of the parliamentary structure.

Chapter 6.

The Role of Committees in Democratic Renewal

108. This report was commissioned with two objectives: first, to evaluate how and to what extent the select committee system had embraced public engagement, a role which the Liaison Committee had especially nominated in its 2012 report; and second, to suggest how this activity might develop in the future.

109. In responding to this brief the report has ranged widely across the activity of committees in the 2010-2015 parliament. It has explored the incidence of public engagement and it has demonstrated the varied way this has informed committee work. It has also pointed to the varied incidence of this activity across particular committees. Finally, it has pointed to the particular links between public engagement and specific categories of inquiry. Public engagement is most associated with inquiries that are concerned with emerging issues or agenda setting and with reviews of medium term policy and/or executive policy announcements. Most of all, however, it figured amongst those committees that framed their approach in the context of cross-session themes or topics, which were selected to address a longer term strategic concern.

110. We have also seen that, again responding to the 2012 Liaison Committee report, public engagement has taken many new forms. Social media in particular has been used to broaden channels of engagement. This is evident in all aspects of the inquiry process: for example topic selection, communication of agendas, gathering evidence, and projecting reports and findings. Social media has also been used to make committee processes and findings more accessible: for example edited hearings on *Vine*, videos for *YouTube*, public engagement via intermediary sites etc. The selection of cross-session themes or issues has also been based on informal outreach to stakeholders and experts. Several committees have also invited their publics to suggest topics or agendas.

111. How is the significance of these developments to be assessed? One way is to site them in a wider institutional and social context. In this perspective, attention to public engagement on the part of committees represents a response to slow-burn and significant changes in their social and political context. These changes include a general rise of public disaffection and of insurgency politics, the baleful affects of the news cycle, significantly loosened citizen loyalty to the major parties, the development of celebrity politics or personalisation, 'short-termism', the emergence of cross cutting pressures within major parties, the rise of third, nationalist and single issue parties and a proliferation of cause and campaigning groups alongside more established interest associations.

112. More deeply, these developments reflect two structural developments affecting respectively citizen identities and the wider systemic role and standing of the major parties. First, citizen identities have pluralised and differentiated. This change originated in the advocacy of the social movements of the 1970s. Think of the women's, gay, ethnic, animal rights, consumer, environment, consumer, neo-liberal (or free market) and nationalist movements, the specific causes they have

promoted, the opposition which this has generated and the differential responses which have arisen amongst members of the major parties. In turn, these movements have often stimulated counter-movements to defend other or more traditional loyalties or behaviours. These varied causes have since crossed over into broader public orientations and this has been associated with a significant change in citizen political attitudes. Class-based orientations remain important but these have been joined by an array of new commitments. Community attitudes have pluralised and differentiated in ways that often do not fit easily within nominal party alignments. Moreover wider global and regional issues, which seem to compromise national political sovereignty, create an additional cross-cutting fault line.

113. A second institutional development concerns the weakened systemic role of the major parties. Major party organisations once provided much of the tissue that linked citizens to the formal political and policy making system. This covered ‘strong’ identification on the part of most citizens with one or other of the major parties, a level of loyalty and attachment which has (as already noted) hugely diminished. It also involved the power of party brands to cue wider public opinion. It involved the wider legitimacy which derived from mass party memberships. Moreover, it involved substantially different ‘directional’ party platforms and agendas. And it involved organisational infrastructure through which activists and interest groups not only aligned with one or other of the major parties, but also gained opportunities for expression and voice. This was particularly associated with the establishment of strategic agendas.

114. These varied processes created much of the tissue which once linked citizens to the broader political system. Activists gained a voice in the establishment of agendas and party memberships and party brands added legitimacy and authority to these outcomes. The weakening of party organisations has diminished this connective tissue without any substantial new infrastructure emerging in their place. It has diminished the overall legitimacy of party politics and contributed to political disaffection amongst citizens more generally. This has been compounded by the broadening of citizen identities referred to in the preceding paragraph.

115. The consequences of these developments include first, a representation gap – citizen opinion has pluralised but systemic capacities to listen and respond have diminished; and second, a strategy gap – the key role of party conferences as tantamount to agenda setting forums is if not negated at least much diminished. These outcomes might be seen as alternative faces of one inter-dependent social transformation.

116. As our report also makes clear, in seeking to narrow these gaps, select committees begin with some singular advantages.

- First, they focus on single issues which, in an era of pluralised citizen identities and loosened partisan attachments, seems to align with the way increasing numbers of citizens relate to politics.
- Second, formal committee inquiries and other activities can cover the policy process through all its phases – from the moment an issue emerges and seeks a place on the public agenda through to its definition, assessment of its significance, an enumeration of possible remedies, and (much later) legislative, executive and administrative action.
- Third, although reports and other documentation need to be made much more accessible, these processes occur in transparent settings. Transparency is a critical asset.

- And finally, findings usually involve a search for common ground that can cross partisan lines – but without succumbing to anodyne fudges. This is particularly evident in inquiries on issues that are seeking a place on the political agenda; or that are longer term in nature; or that are not yet the subject of explicit partisan contention; or in inquiries on the detail of proposed legislative or administrative measures.

117. But whilst much has been accomplished much more remains possible. The orientation to public engagement across committees has varied - as has the depth of its embrace. The challenges to chairs, members and committee staff are considerable and our report lists twelve specific recommendations that seek to crystallise them into particular actions. More broadly, the emergence of social media creates many opportunities which go far beyond augmenting the way inquiries are communicated. Social media involves a technology that can transform two-way communication and engagement. Whilst in no way a substitute for public hearings and face-to-face encounter, they can buttress, augment and enrich this activity. Social media offer many opportunities to broaden engagement and thus significantly enhance the standing of parliament amongst its publics. But political engagement represents a special form of encounter – it is not one-off like a piece of advertising copy – its proper realisation involves serial and reciprocal connection. The ecology of engagement must ultimately turn on deliberative exchanges, either directly or through their near simulation. These approaches are in their infancy and citizen disaffection remains a paramount political challenge. Thus the 2015-2020 parliament has the opportunity to initiate pioneering experiments or pilots that could have far wider and far reaching democratic implications.

Appendix A. Off-Line Engagement (full case study audit)

Activity/ Setting	Internal Committee Approach	Workshops/Seminars with Publics and Site Visits	Direct Public Engagement	Independent Committee Research
Setting sessional / parliament agenda	<p>Formal planning meetings prior to commencement of inquiry (Defence)</p> <p>Half-time reviews of current inquiries to check they are meeting objectives (Communities)</p> <p>Quarterly reviews of committee programme—ensuring a mix of reactive and pro-active enquires (Justice)</p>	<p>Seminar held at think tank to discuss future programme. Supported by press release seeking comment and engagement (Defence)</p> <p>Away day with stakeholders (Education)</p>	<p>Seminar held at think tank to discuss future programme. Supported by press release seeking comment and engagement (Defence)</p>	
Gathering evidence	<p>Putting witnesses at ease by inviting them into committee room in private to meet Members before session starts (Science & Technology)</p> <p>Informally monitoring statistics of gender of witnesses giving evidence to the committee (Public Administration)</p> <p>Informal arrangement by which one member takes a lead on particular subject throughout inquiry (Education)</p> <p>Looking at impact of savings programme across all inquiries not just annual report (Foreign Affairs)</p>	<p>Circulate draft code on central-local relations for Council comment (Political and Constitutional Reform)</p> <p>Oral evidence session in Sheffield on carbon capture and storage to coincide with Committee visit to a local CCS pilot facility (Energy)</p> <p>At least one public evidence session in Northern Ireland on all inquiries. (Northern Ireland)</p>	<p>Meeting benefit recipients in familiar, non-threatening settings (Work & Pensions)</p> <p>Oral evidence session held at Greenwich on maritime strategy to coincide with London International Shipping week (Transport)</p> <p>Providing British Sign Language for oral evidence session on Access to Work for disabled people (Work & Pensions)</p> <p>Pursuing four strands of Strategic Defence and Security Review with inquiries led by individual rapporteurs (Defence)</p> <p>Experimenting with rapporteurs on financial scrutiny (Public Administration)</p> <p>Oral evidence session in Sheffield on carbon capture and storage to coincide with Committee visit to a local CCS pilot facility (Energy)</p> <p>At least one public evidence session in Northern Ireland on all inquiries. (North Ireland)</p> <p>Pursuing four strands of Strategic Defence and Security Review with paper-based inquiries led by individual rapporteurs (Defence)</p> <p>Experimenting with</p>	<p>Review of academic work on traffic growth commissioned from Parliamentary office of Science & Technology (Transport)</p> <p>Research commissioned from Oxera on new hub airport for SE England (Transport)</p> <p>Scrutiny Unit advice on departmental estimates; follow up with written request to department (Education) (Energy and Climate Change)</p> <p>Independent specialist advisers appointed by the TSC, working within the regulator, to ensure reports fair and balanced account of evidence (Treasury)</p>

Building Public Engagement

			rapporteurs on financial scrutiny (<u>Public Administration</u>)	
Working across committees	<p><u>European scrutiny Committee</u> sought opinions from other committees on EU documents</p> <p>Giving formal opinion to European Scrutiny Committee on EU Commission communication <i>Towards a more competitive and efficient defence and security sector</i> (<u>Defence</u>)</p>			
Assessing/evaluating evidence	<p>Large screen used to display amendments as committee considered draft report (<u>Energy and Climate Change</u>)</p> <p>Producing fewer, more tightly-focussed recommendations (<u>Environmental Audit, Welsh Affairs</u>)</p> <p>Reduce length of reports, prioritise recommendations in some reports and less legalistic language (<u>Justice</u>)</p>			<p>Scrutiny Unit advice on departmental estimates; follow up with written request to department (<u>Education</u>) (<u>Energy and Climate Change</u>)</p> <p>Independent specialist advisers appointed by the TSC, working within the regulator, to ensure reports fair and balanced account of evidence (<u>Treasury</u>)</p>
Assessing findings / drafting report	<p>Including info graphics in reports (<u>Environmental Audit, Energy and</u></p> <p>Large screen used to display amendments as committee considered draft report (<u>Energy and Climate Change</u>)</p> <p>Producing fewer, more tightly-focussed recommendations (<u>Environmental Audit Welsh Affairs</u>)</p> <p>Reduce length of reports, prioritise recommendations in some reports and less legalistic language (<u>Justice</u>)</p>	<p>Easy Read report for disability enquiry (<u>Work and Pensions</u>)</p> <p>Circulate draft code on central-local relations for Council comment (<u>Political and Constitutional Reform</u>)</p>		<p>Review of academic work on traffic growth commissioned from Parliamentary office of Science & Technology (<u>Transport</u>)</p> <p>Research commissioned from Oxera on new hub airport for SE England (<u>Transport</u>)</p>
Engaging media	<p>Communications plans/ media strategies for each inquiry (<u>Communities; Education; Political and Constitutional Reform</u>)</p> <p>Disinterest of mainstream media countered by deliberate outreach to specialist/secondary media; also successfully countered by focusing on newsworthiness – <i>Violence against Women, Global Food Security, Ebola</i>. (<u>International Development</u>)</p>			<p>Issue of FMG championed by committee. Early efforts to attract media failed. Then taken up and snow-balled. (<u>International Development</u>)</p> <p>Worked with BBC Schools Report on feature covering activity of committee (<u>Education</u>)</p>
Engaging Parliament	<p>Statements made on floor of the House on publication of reports (<u>International Development, Culture, Transport</u>)</p> <p>Publishing reports in time to inform debates in the House</p>		Petitions referred by the House considered by committee. Led to oral evidence sessions with Sec. (<u>Communities, Justice</u>)	

Building Public Engagement

	<p>(<u>Political & Constitutional Reform</u>, <u>Environmental Audit</u>, <u>Energy</u>)</p> <p>Debates on reports in main chamber and Westminster Hall staged; also reports ‘tagged’ to parl. Business. Chair also uses statement procedure (<u>Justice</u>)</p>			
Sustaining impact for this report	<p>Monitoring implementation of recommendations by regular rating or traffic lights (<u>Public Administration</u>, <u>Home Affairs</u>, <u>Transport</u>, <u>Political and Constitutional Reform</u>)</p> <p>Six-month follow up on implementation of reports (<u>Defence</u>); 12-month follow-up (<u>Education</u>; <u>Justice</u>).</p> <p>Survey of previous oral witnesses to gather views on performance of committees in public evidence session (<u>Education</u>)</p> <p>Debate in Westminster Hall to follow up on perfunctory government response on Work programme (<u>Work & Pensions</u>)</p> <p>Appointing a Member to lead on the follow-up to each inquiry (<u>Education</u>).</p>			
Establishing formal engagement plan	<p>Communications plan and media strategy for each enquiry (<u>Education</u>, <u>Communities</u>)</p> <p>Overarching theme(s) guided work of committee throughout parliament (<u>Education</u>, <u>Energy and Climate Change</u>, <u>Political and Constitutional Reform</u>; <u>International Development</u>; <u>Environmental Audit</u>)</p>			
Follow up/ ‘Staged’ event/ Projecting longer term agenda	<p>Legacy report identified issues for next parliament. Included feedback from external stakeholders and informal workshop (<u>Communities</u>, <u>Education</u>)</p> <p>Inquiry on future development strategy followed by Wilton Park conference and Labour adoption of <i>Beyond Aid</i> report title. (<u>International Development</u>)</p> <p>9 seminars/conferences staged over parliament (<u>Education</u>)</p>	<p>Seminar on longer term energy issues for the next parliament – Bloomberg’s host – 200 attendees and video comments (<u>Energy</u>)</p> <p>Also Speakers House legacy event and video (<u>Environmental Audit</u>); also <u>Education</u>.</p> <p>Enquiry on Green Finance began and ended with more informal Guildhall conference (<u>Environmental Audit</u>)</p> <p>Sponsored international conference on tax avoidance at Guildhall launched enquiry (<u>Public Accounts</u>)</p>		

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			Wilton Park conference on 'beyond aid' built on eponymous report. (<u>International Development</u>)	
Special promotional publication/ activity				NAO provided monthly bulletin on progress on sustainable development. Led to development of Environmental Scorecard (<u>Environmental Audit</u>)
Other stakeholder outreach			Meeting of 5 youth leaders/orgs. Convened to consider sustainability agenda (<u>Environmental Audit</u>) 4 <i>Voice of the Future</i> events hosted Speakers House. Young scientists question committee, Ministers and Chief Scientific Adviser (<u>Science and Technology</u>)	