CONNECTING CITIZENS TO PARLIAMENT

How Parliament can engage more effectively with hard to reach groups

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Democratic drift and a decline in democratic participation are well documented and not new. Despite considerable debate and extensive research being conducted into why the public are not engaging with politics in general and Parliament in particular, it remains a problem. Parliament has clearly done a great deal over recent years to improve its reach and accessibility through web, public education and outreach activities. However, as Parliament's own assessments and our previous research shows, those who are engaged with Parliament are a small group, not representative of society as a whole and likely to be more highly educated, part of a higher socio-economic group, male and older. There remains a large group of citizens that Parliament does not talk to, who are not aware of how Parliament works and how it relates to their daily lives. These 'democratic outsiders' are in fact a majority of the population. Some of them might be relatively easy to engage with, others, however, are significantly disenfranchised not just from Parliament and politics but from many other aspects of British life, often by way of factors of multiple deprivation that leave them unaware, unable or unwilling to engage. Parliament sees 'democratic outsiders' as those 'people not yet interested in politics, policy and current affairs' yet in reality some individuals might have a latent or perceived interest but lack the skills, resources or knowledge to be able to engage.

This research sets out to describe barriers to engagement amongst those who are currently disengaged from Parliament and identifies places where Parliament touches the public, either directly or indirectly. The second stage of the project was a mixed methods study in two sequential phases. The first phase consisted of qualitative semi-structured focus groups held in five locations around Great Britain, the second phase, a quantitative survey based on a random sample of 2,005 adults from across Great Britain. From this we developed a framework and key supporting recommendations that can be used to enhance public inclusion by increasing the opportunities available to disengaged and, in particular, hard to reach groups. This in turn will drive opportunities for them to become more aware of and involved in the life and activities of Parliament. It augments previous research undertaken by the Hansard Society in relation to parliamentary process and procedure, regulation and scrutiny, outreach and digital engagement, drawing as it does on the Society's core research, engagement and education expertise.

The findings show that engaging more effectively with hard to reach groups will not be achieved through a single 'big bang' change, nor can it be achieved in the short term, rather it requires a number of smaller cumulative step-changes. Parliament could initiate or suggest some of these but cannot necessarily lead itself, others will to a large extent rely on the work of others if they are to succeed. Parliament is already working towards

implementing some of the changes suggested as part of this framework, increasing the availability of information about Parliament in local areas and providing a strong online resource for citizens to learn more about its work and the way it functions. Our recommendations suggest it must go further and are grouped around the following thematic areas:

- Within Parliament
- Media Engagement
- Digital Engagement
- Local Engagement

The recommendations focus on a combination of formal and informal education combined with traditional and new, primarily localised forms of participation. It is clear from this research that it is vital for Parliament to provide information in a variety of different formats, for different audiences, through different touch points that people come into contact in their day-to-day lives. We identify the power of social networks and the effectiveness of 'weak ties' – networks of association, particularly within our communities – as important factors for awareness building and knowledge transfer: we learn best from those we know and trust. We recognise too that engagement is a multi-stage, cyclical and self-re-enforcing process but that this is a double-edged sword; the fractures that arise in this are as much the cause of the democratic deficit as the well connected process could be its saviour:
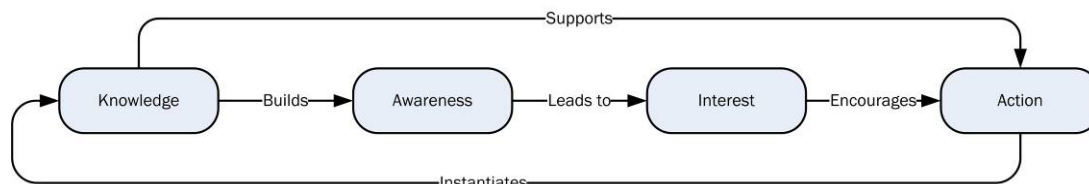
Figure 1: Multi-stage engagement lifecycle

With this in mind, we provide some examples of placing relevant, easy to understand information about Parliament in popular newspapers and magazines, using accessible, engaging online videos and the potential for daytime television and soap operas to be used to convey information and build awareness about Parliament. These strategies are designed to build greater awareness of Parliament, what it does and how it works, in people's lives and help reduce barriers to engagement caused by lack of awareness and lack of knowledge. We also consider how young people from hard to reach groups might be given opportunities to experience life in Parliament and how this knowledge can be shared through their own local community networks.

We consider too the role of education in the form of ensuring that political literacy is enshrined in our compulsory curricula but also that tertiary and vocational study considers how the work of Parliament can be related to the subject area in innovative and practical ways. It is not simply formal education that can drive an uptake in awareness and, ultimately, engagement; community-based, informal and social learning are also important.

Whilst existing forms of engagement, such as contacting MPs, signing petitions and making submissions to select committees, play a key part in this framework, we strongly promote new processes of engagement as equally important, including ePetitions. Allowing citizens to communicate their views through local meetings or Citizen Juries, where they can discuss issues that are important to them with their peers and have this information fed back to Parliament will make the process of participation more attractive to those in hard to reach groups, as they would feel more comfortable amongst their peers and less like the 'democratic outsiders' identified in Parliament's target audience.

> What exists is demonstrably insufficient to engage the public; social media and changing attitudes mean that new methods of engagement are not optional extras but core parts of a public engagement strategy. They do not replace what is being done; they extend and enhance it.

1 INTRODUCTION

There has been much debate and considerable research conducted as to why the public are not engaging with politics in general and Parliament in particular. Much has been done over recent years by Parliament to improve public awareness, its reach and accessibility; however, Parliament is only able to reach a fraction of the public. There remains a large group of citizens that Parliament does not talk to, who are largely not aware of how Parliament works and how it relates to their daily lives and who do not feel particularly motivated to become involved or engaged. It is, therefore, timely to conduct a study exploring in detail which communities and social groups are not engaging with Parliament, why and how this might be redressed.

This research set out to develop an engagement framework that could be used to enhance public inclusion by increasing the opportunities available to disengaged, and in particular 'hard to reach', groups such that they become more aware of and involved in the life and activities of Parliament by identifying:

- which groups remain disengaged from or poorly served by Parliament and why this is the case;
- key processes and practical points of engagement within and beyond Parliament where greater involvement of these groups could occur; and
- the current barriers to participation by these groups and the strategic measures necessary to help overcome them (including education and outreach but also going further and looking at other areas such as procedural issues and the use of digital technologies).

The primary objective of this research was to document barriers to engagement amongst those who are currently disengaged from Parliament in order to develop a framework containing pragmatic recommendations that are designed to mitigate and eventually overcome this disengagement.

This report is divided into three parts. In Part 1, we explore the findings of the two research components of the project. First, we discuss the findings of the national survey and then, in the chapter that follows, the results of the five focus groups. The research findings are summarised into key themes and practical suggestions that emerge. Part 2 builds on this primary research to develop the findings into a set of practical components that can form an emergent framework for engagement, focusing on the process of engagement, the need for appropriate and timely education and how participation in these processes can be

encouraged and sustained. Following on from the framework we present a series of practical recommendations that Parliament and others can instigate in order to improve engagement with 'hard to reach' groups. Part 3 describes the background to public engagement, public attitudes to Parliament and politics and definitions of what constitute 'hard to reach' groups. It goes on to identify institutional barriers to engagement. The report then looks at 'touch points'; those places where Parliament directly or indirectly comes into contact with citizens and concludes by looking at the gaps that exist in terms of citizen contact. The appendices contain details about the survey and focus groups.

PART 1 – ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

2 SURVEY

We carried out a national survey designed to provide a greater understanding of the broader attitudes to and knowledge of Parliament and how the public obtains information (and would prefer to obtain it in the future) about Parliament and politics. This analysis is based on a random sample of 2,005 adults (aged 18 or over) conducted online by ICM between 25 and 26 August 2010. Surveys were conducted across Great Britain[1] and the results have been weighted to the national adult profile and, with a confidence interval of 95%, have a margin of error of 2.2% (see 'Appendix 2: Survey Methodology' for more information).

Identifying 'hard to reach' groups is not straightforward and isolating them within a survey of this form is necessarily restricted to broad definitions of those in lower social classes (typically C2DE), below average incomes, low levels of educational attainment, ethnic minorities and, in certain circumstances, the youngest and oldest citizens. It is self-evident that in conducting an online survey the respondents will be skewed somewhat away from 'hard to reach' groups who do not have internet access and are unlikely to include those with low levels of literacy. A slightly larger number of the respondents are from the AB social classes (27%) and C1 (29%) than social classes C2 (21%) and DE (23%). Seventy-two per cent of the sample reported a combined household income of £41,000 or less. For over half of the respondents (53%) their highest level of education is secondary school or equivalent (NVQ levels 1 to 3), while 41% have a university degree, professional qualification or higher.

This chapter will analyse how attitudes towards politics and Parliament vary, with particular attention to combinations of social class, education and age, as well as cross-cutting with the responses to other questions asked in the survey.

Interest in Politics

Sixty-four per cent of respondents say they are either 'very interested' or 'fairly interested' in politics. This is more than the 58% that said the same in the latest Audit of Political Engagement, conducted in December 2010.[2] This disparity might in part be due to the differing survey methodologies (online compared to the Audit's face-to-face study) or due to the proximity of the general election (held just three months before the online survey was conducted) and the significant attention on political issues in the intervening period with the formation and early operation of the new coalition government. There is evidence that

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1   That is, England, Scotland and Wales.
2   Hansard Society (2011), *Audit of Political Engagement 8* (London: Hansard Society). p.64.

interest in politics peaks after a general election and the findings of this survey could reflect this trend.[3]

There are clear disparities in interest in politics between the social classes, with 75% of ABs saying they are interested in politics, compared to 52% of DEs. While the figures for interest in politics for ABs and C1s are broadly similar to the trends in the Audit of Political Engagement surveys, there are higher proportions of C2 and DE respondents who say they are interested in politics in this survey.[4] This difference might be the result, as discussed earlier, of the methodology and/or the timing of the survey but it is worth noting in relation to the other responses given throughout the survey by those likely to be in 'hard to reach' groups. Those with higher qualifications are more likely to say they are interested in politics – 72% of those with at least a university degree say they are interested in politics, compared to 57% of those for whom secondary school (GCSE or A-level equivalents) is their highest level of qualification.
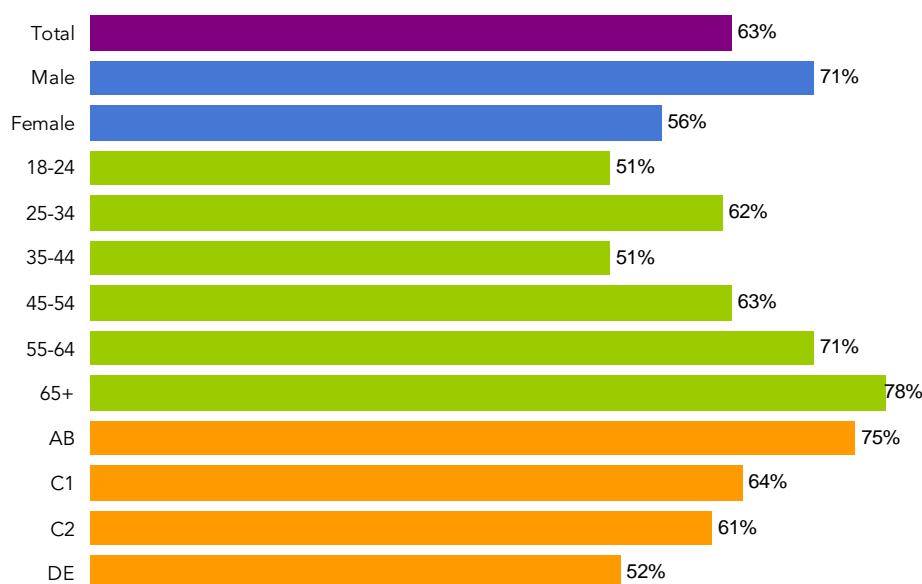
Figure 2: Interest in politics by gender, age and social class

While interest in politics clearly varies by age and by social class, further analysis of the data suggests that the significance of social class as a defining factor for interest in politics is much reduced for the higher age groups. Figure 3 shows that there is a fairly consistent gap between the reported interest in politics for ABC1s and C2DEs for younger age groups but there is a marked convergence in the figures for the 55-64 and 65+ age groups.

3   Hansard Society (2011), *Audit of Political Engagement 8* (London: Hansard Society), p.64.
4   Hansard Society (2011), *Audit of Political Engagement 8* (London: Hansard Society). p.65.
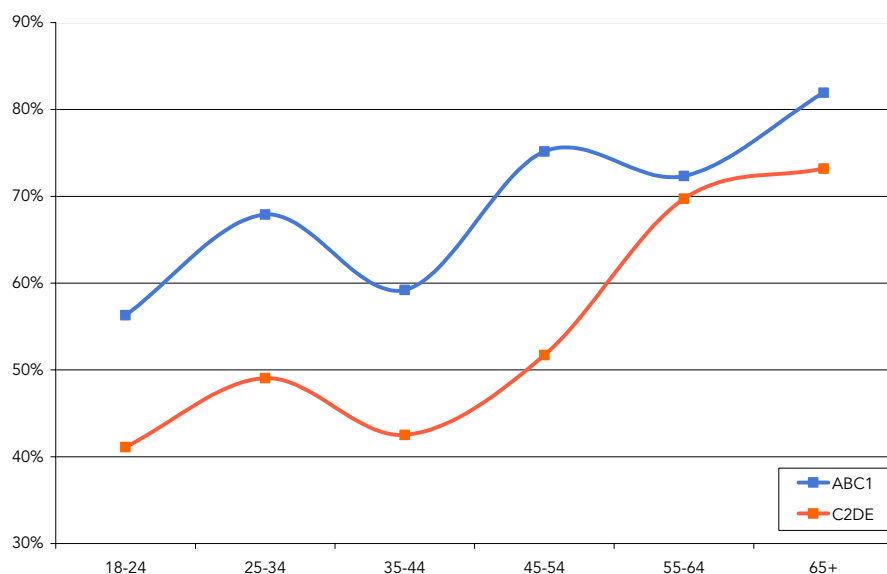
Figure 3: Interest in politics by age and social class

Knowledge of Parliament

Over half of respondents (54%) say they know 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about the Westminster Parliament. Men rate their knowledge more highly (57% say they know a 'great deal' or a 'fair amount') than women (33%), although as previous research has demonstrated there is a much smaller difference between men and women in terms of actual knowledge compared to claimed knowledge.[5] Unlike the most recent Audit of Political Engagement findings there is no difference on perceived knowledge of Parliament between white respondents and BMEs (45% and 44% respectively claiming to know at least 'a fair amount'). Respondents closest to Parliament, in London (55%) and the South East (54%), are more likely to say they have knowledge of it, with those in Wales (35%) and the North East (24%) much less likely to say they are knowledgeable.

Similarly to interest in politics, perceived knowledge rises with age, with 61% of those aged 65 and over saying they know at least a 'fair amount' about Parliament; almost twice as many as in the 18-24 age bracket (31%). Knowledge also varies significantly by social class, with 60% of ABs saying they know at least a 'fair amount' about Parliament compared to 34% of C2s and 35% of DEs. Eleven per cent of C2s and 16% of DEs say they know 'nothing at all' compared to only 4% of ABs, even allowing for some social desirability bias this variation is significant.

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5   Hansard Society (2010), *Audit of Political Engagement 7* (London: Hansard Society). pp.66-67.
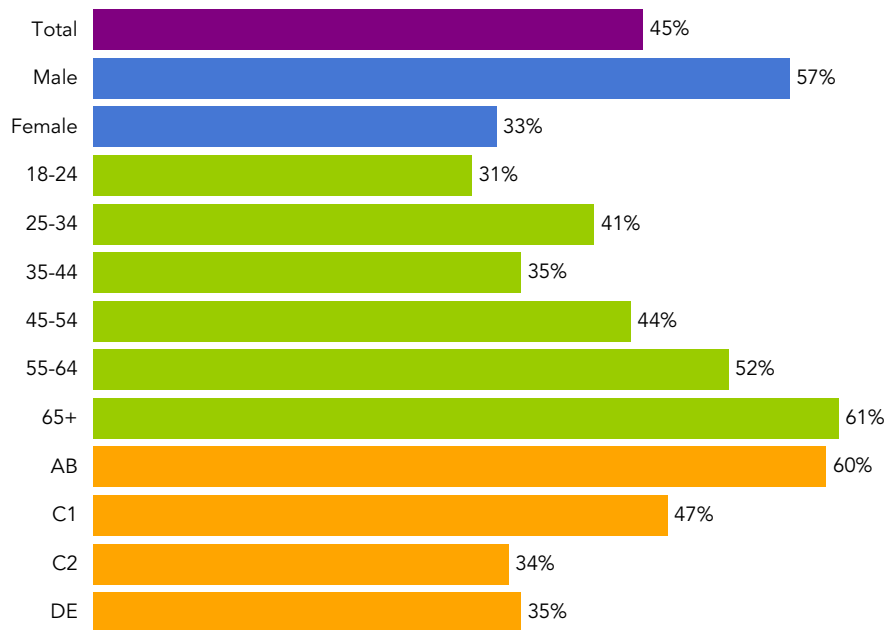
Figure 4: Perceived knowledge of the Westminster Parliament by gender, age and social class

Perceived knowledge of Parliament also varies by education, with 60% of those with a university degree, equivalent or higher qualification saying they know at least 'a fair amount' about the Westminster Parliament, compared to 35% of those with secondary school qualifications. However, Figure 5 demonstrates that social class is a more significant determining factor, with a similarly sized gap between ABC1s and C2DEs no matter what their educational level.
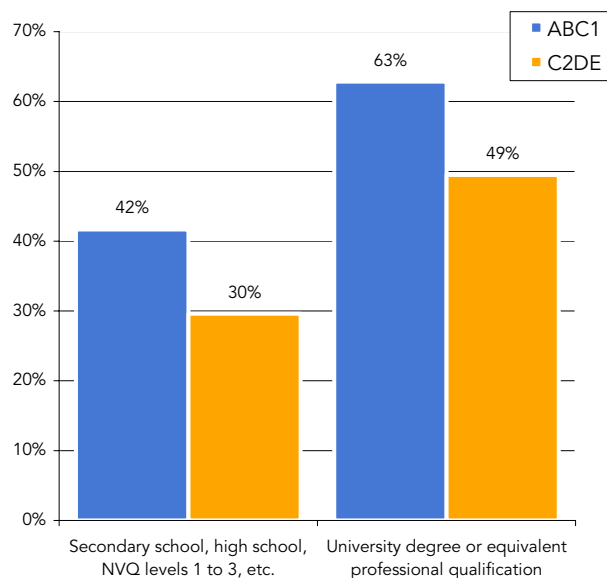
Figure 5: Perceived knowledge of the Westminster Parliament by education and social class

Attitudes towards Parliament

Half of the public (52%) do not want to be involved in what Parliament does or are not really interested in it. Six per cent of respondents already feel involved in what Parliament does and a further 32% would like to be more involved.
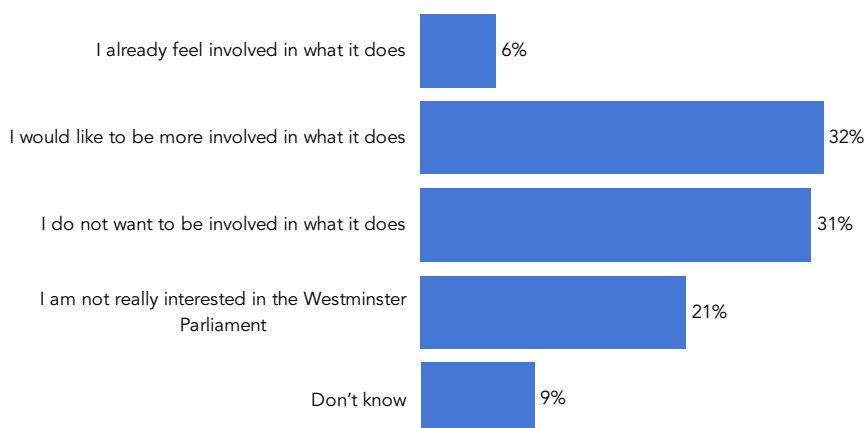
Figure 6: Attitudes to Parliament

There are noticeable variations in the responses according to social class. As Table 1 shows, twice as many ABs as DEs already feel involved in what Parliament does (10% compared to 5%) and almost twice as many would like to be more involved (40% compared to 23%).

> This re-enforces the suggestion that social class is a strong predictor of political capital and propensity to engage with democratic processes.

Table 1: Attitudes to Parliament by social class

	AB	C1	C2	DE
I already feel involved in what it does	10%	4%	5%	5%
I would like to be more involved in what it does	**40%**	**36%**	28%	23%
I do not want to be involved in what it does	33%	30%	**31%**	31%
I am not really interested in the Westminster Parliament	10%	19%	26%	**32%**
Don't know	7%	**11%**	9%	9%

Roughly a third of respondents, irrespective of gender, social class or region, claim that they want to be more involved in what Parliament does. Age is a moderate factor, with 39% of those aged 65 or older wanting to be more involved, compared to 25% of those aged 18-34. Almost one third (32%) of those who were 'very' or 'fairly interested' in politics say that they 'do not want to be involved in what [Parliament] does', as do 30% of those who say they know 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' about Parliament. Further research into the reasons behind those who are interested and/or knowledgeable but do not want to be involved is certainly warranted to better understand this correlation.

Information About What Happens in Parliament

Over half of respondents (53%) would like to be better informed about what happens in the UK Parliament. Of those who said they would not like to be more informed, more people (24%) indicated that this was because they were sufficiently well-informed already about Parliament itself, with only 18% saying they were not interested in being more informed about it.

Table 2: Information about Parliament

	%age
Yes – I want to be a lot more informed	14%
Yes – I want to be a little more informed	39%
No – I am well enough informed already	24%
No – I am not interested in being more informed	18%

Clear trends exist across the social classes, with ABs more likely to say they would like to be more informed (60%) than DEs (40%). Given DEs' lower levels of knowledge of Parliament identified earlier, the fact that 25% say they are 'well enough informed already' highlights the challenge of engaging with some of those in 'hard to reach' groups.
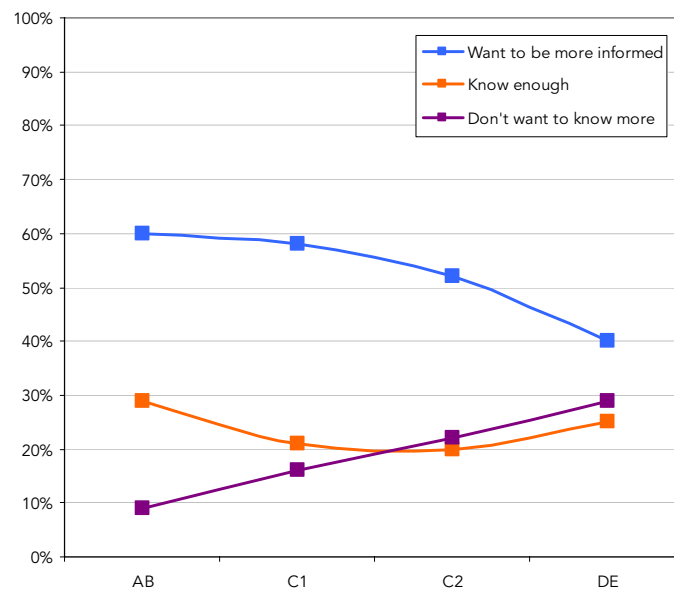
Figure 7: Information about Parliament by social class

By examining age and social class together the results highlight that there is a notable gap between ABC1s and C2DEs across the younger age groups in terms of their wanting more information.

> Although young people are more likely to say they would like to be more informed about Parliament, those in lower social classes and potentially 'hard to reach' are noticeably less enthusiastic.
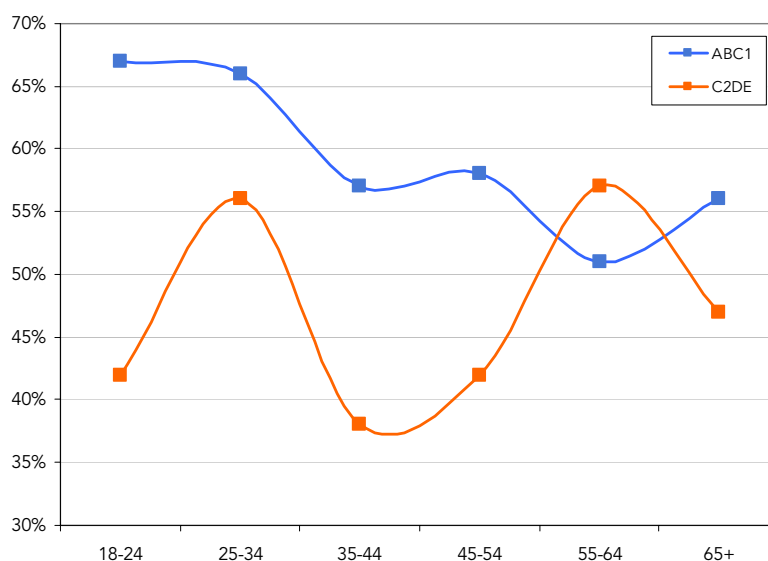
Figure 8: Desire for more information about Parliament by age and social class

Reasons for Wanting to Find Out More

Those respondents who said they wished to be more informed about what happens in the UK Parliament (n=1,078) were asked a follow-up question:

> Which, if any, of the following explain why you would like to be more informed than you currently are?

As can be seen from the responses shown in Table 3 below, 'following issues I care about' (68%) and to 'find out what my MP is doing' (63%) emerge as the top reasons, however, better understanding of how the system works and having a say are also important to respondents. Far fewer (31%) consider that finding out more about Parliament is part of their role as a 'good citizen' and only 16% wish to know more about Parliament's history.

Table 3: Why respondents wanted to find out more

	%age
To follow issues I care about	68%
To find out what my MP is doing	63%
To understand how the system works	56%
To have a say in the running of the country	54%
For personal interest	51%
To take action on issues I care about	48%
Because it is important in order to be a good citizen	31%
To know about the history of Parliament	16%

There were differing information needs for various age groups: whereas 18-24 year olds feel a need to gain more understanding of the system, those aged 25-54 are more interested in following issues they care about (although it is worth noting that respondents in these groups are less likely to say 'to take action on issues I care about' than those 18-24 or 65 and above). Older age groups are more likely to prioritise a more passive interest in

Parliament in terms of the activities of their MP. This suggests that Parliament must consider its outreach and engagement activity in terms of how best to target different age groups with the information that is of most interest to them. There are minor variations in terms of social class, with C2s more likely to want 'to understand how the system works' (67%), compared to ABs (55%), C1s (53%) and DEs (51%). DEs are less likely (60%) to identify following 'issues I care about' than ABs (70%), however, they are more likely to say that they are interested in knowing more about the history of Parliament (19%) compared to ABs (13%).

Finding Out About National Political Issues

We asked respondents where they go to find information about national political issues. The internet is the starting point for three-quarters of people finding out about political issues, with television, national newspapers and radio the other main sources of information.[6]

Table 4: How people find out more about national political issues

	%age
Internet or email	73%
Television	57%
National newspapers	51%
Local newspapers	32%
Radio	26%
Friends/family	21%
Public meeting in my area with my local MP	19%
Leaflets through the door	18%
Public meeting	14%
Library / education establishment	13%
Private meeting in my area with my local MP	12%
Public meeting in my area with staff from Parliament	11%
Campaign organisation	8%
Visit the Houses of Parliament	5%
Community centre	4%
Other	1%
None	4%
Don't know	4%

Younger respondents are much more likely to receive political information from their friends or family than older respondents, re-enforcing the importance of weak ties and social networks discussed earlier; 38% of 18-24 year olds and 29% of 25-34 year olds, compared to between 15% and 18% for all the age groups 35+. Older respondents are three times more likely to name 'Public meeting in my area with my local MP' as a source of information (29% for 55-64 year olds and 30% for those 65+) than younger respondents (only 9% for 18-24 and 25-34 year olds). There is very little difference in terms of using the internet as an information source by age group (74% of 18-24 year olds and 70% of those aged 65 and over), however, older age groups are more likely to use other mainstream media.

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6   Since this survey was conducted online the value placed on the internet could be statistically over-reported.
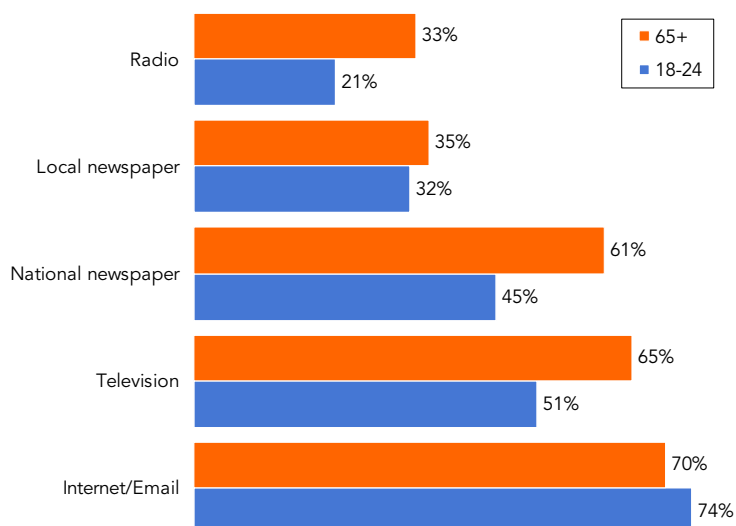
Figure 9: Source of information (online & mainstream media) by age group.

One social disparity worth noting is that DEs are slightly less likely to choose 'internet/e-mail'; 64% compared to 77% of ABs and this trend continues with television, newspapers, radio, public meetings with MPs etc.

> DEs are less likely to choose any method of gathering information relating to a political issue than ABs

A similar correlation exists in terms of those with high levels of interest in politics and high levels of knowledge of Parliament; the higher the knowledge or interest, the more likely the individual is to use media sources and the (marginally) less likely to cite 'friends/family' as a source of information.

Finding Out About Parliament

Internet and email are the major sources of information on Parliament, followed by television (46%) and national newspapers (40%). Only one fifth of respondents use local newspapers or radio. The percentage of those choosing the internet as a source of information on Parliament is the same as those looking for information on politics in general (73%) whereas the figures for almost all other media and information sources are comparatively lower (see Figure 10 below).
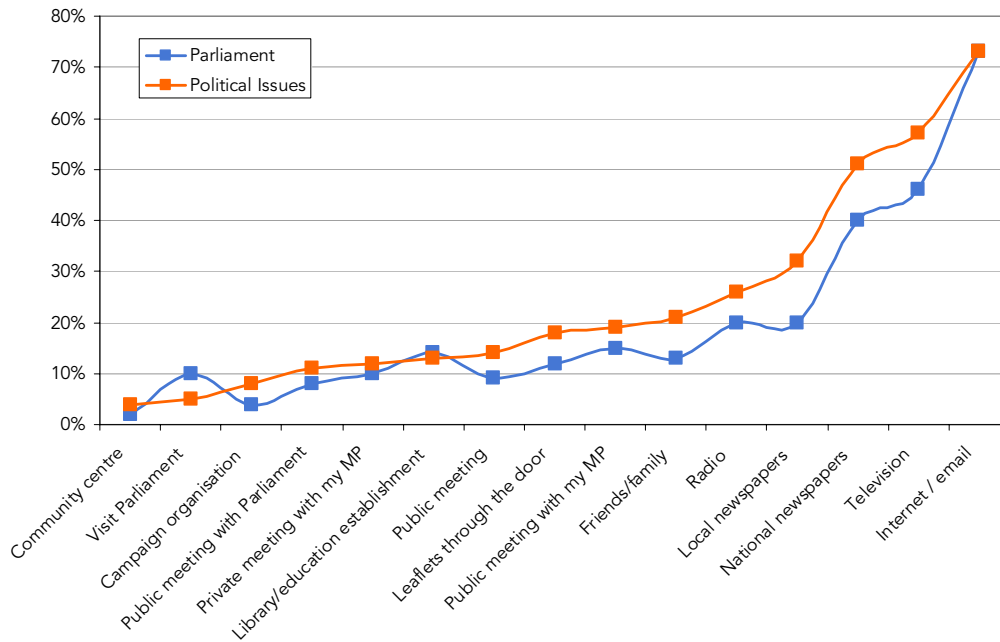
Figure 10: Sources for information about politics in general and Parliament for all respondents

There are, as might be expected, similar differences in terms of the age groups and indeed again in terms of social class, particularly, as Figure 11 suggests, in terms of internet usage, with ABs marginally more likely than DEs to use the internet.
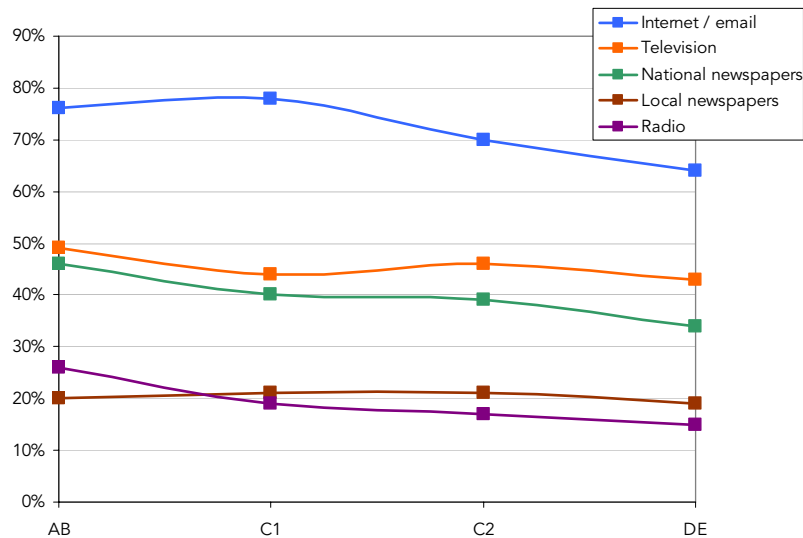
Figure 11: Sourcing information about Parliament by media and social class

In terms of age groups, there is very little difference between young and old in terms of use of the internet; it is, as Figure 12 suggests, in other media and methods that disparities are more evident.
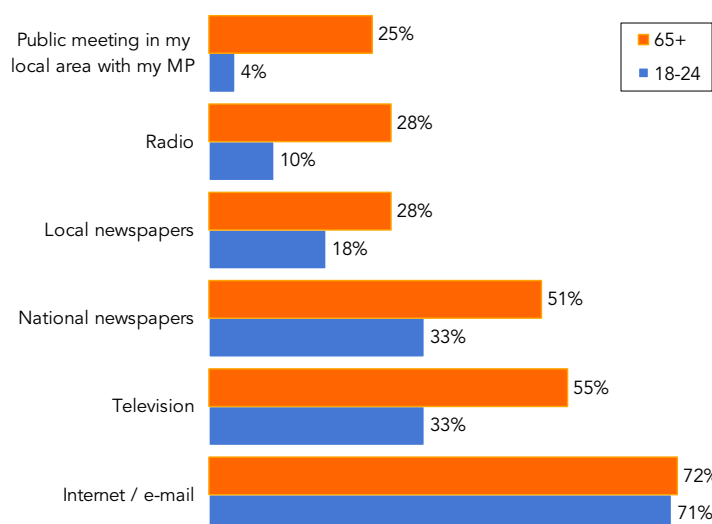
Figure 12: Information about Parliament – age breakdown

Finding Out More about Parliament and Politics

Respondents were asked what, if anything, would encourage them to get more involved with politics or find out more about Parliament. The most common reasons cited for potentially getting involved or finding out more are 'If I felt strongly about an issue' (51%) and 'If it was relevant to me' (41%). The challenge for engaging people lies in persuading them that politics is relevant to them and that Parliament engages with issues about which they feel strongly. This educative work would also address the one in five (21%) who say that understanding more about politics and Parliament would encourage them to get involved and the 23% who say 'If Parliament was more accessible'. However, there is clearly a significant issue of trust that needs addressing since more than one third (36%) of respondents say that they would be encouraged to find out more about Parliament and politics if they 'trusted MPs more'. Only one gender disparity exists across the responses; almost twice as many women as men (27% to 14%) say 'If I understood more about politics and Parliament'. There is a similar divergence on this response between 18-24 year olds (38%) and those aged 65+ (14%). In both respects these mirror the lower perceived knowledge of politics and Parliament among women and younger age groups.

Summary

There is a general public interest in Parliament and politics but it is biased in favour of higher socio-economic and older age groups.

The majority of respondents know little or nothing about Parliament but over half would like to know more. Of those who do wish to know more, the primary reason is because they are interested in an issue. There is also a significant minority group who would like to know more about what is happening in Parliament to find out what their MP is doing, however, one third of the sample feel that lack of trust in the elected representatives is a barrier to greater involvement in the work of Parliament.

A quarter of the sample said that they would be more inclined to get more involved if they understood the workings of Parliament better. As identified in previous studies, younger age groups feel they know less about politics and Parliament but express a greater desire than older age groups to be better informed.

This research shows that social class is the strongest determining factor for engagement. Those in 'hard to reach' groups, in lower social classes and with poorer educational qualifications are clearly less interested, knowledgeable and engaged with politics and Parliament. Despite this, 40% of DEs would like to be more informed about Parliament and almost a quarter (23%) would like to be more involved in what Parliament does. DEs are less likely to want information about Parliament or to follow political issues and more likely to demonstrate a passive desire for engagement than those in higher social classes. This is a predictable result of lower knowledge and interest levels.

The internet is the primary source of information on politics in general and Parliament in particular underscoring the challenge for Parliament to make people more aware of its digital estate as well as to ensure that content is 'pushed' beyond to third-party sites and social networks. The slightly lower levels of DEs choosing the internet – on an internet-based survey – suggest that it is marginally less important to those in 'hard to reach' groups and that web-based approaches would need to consider not just information for individuals but for collectives also (reinforced by the stronger desire amongst young people to become informed through peer networks).

The findings points to the new for multi-layered approach to information gathering. Television is only relevant for about half the sample and national newspapers even less. Local newspapers and radio features for less than a quarter of respondents but young people were more likely to learn about Parliament and politics from their social and family networks than those in older age brackets.

3 FOCUS GROUPS

Where the survey has provided us with broad national patterns around political understanding and interest, it was important to this research to find out more about attitudes towards Parliament and politics amongst groups we have defined as 'hard to reach' for Parliament. To do this, we conducted semi-structured focus groups to identify what motivates engagement and participation with Parliament and what tools and methods the public would prefer to use if they were to engage with Parliament in the future. Five focus groups were held. Three were in England (Poplar, Sheffield and Peterborough), one (Nairn) in Scotland and one (Usk) in Wales. The focus group locations targeted participant groups that Parliament finds 'hard to reach': for example, young people who are above school age or people living in communities that are a significant distance from Westminster.

Figure 13: Location of focus groups

The English focus groups were held in UK Online partner centres, where members of the public who are not online or have only recently started using computers and the internet are able to take courses helping them get started. The focus group in Scotland was conducted with the Nairn Access Panel, a community forum for disabled community members and their carers, and in Wales we met with trainee youth workers aged 16-24 who, as part of their training course, were studying at Usk Community College.

Focus Group Demographics

Focus groups were held in locations that the participants went to regularly and at a time of day that they were likely to be available. However, one of the difficulties of carrying out

research with 'hard to reach' communities is ensuring a good level of participation. 'Appendix 1: Focus Group Methodology' gives more information on the design, process and practicalities of the focus groups.

Table 5: Number of attendees by location

Focus group	Attendees
Nairn	9
Peterborough	13
Poplar	11
Sheffield	12
Usk	5

We asked participants to complete a voluntary demographic survey, which shows that 77% were female and 23% male. This imbalance reflects general statistical trends that indicate that women are over-represented in community or non-earning roles, such as volunteering or home-making, rather than in 'traditional' paid employment. Young people were the most represented group; 24% of the sample were aged between 16 and 24 and 46% aged under 35. As Figure 14 shows, 18% of the participants were aged 55+. Seventy-eight per cent of participants self-identified as being 'white', 7% as being of 'mixed-race', 2% 'black' and 7% 'Asian'.
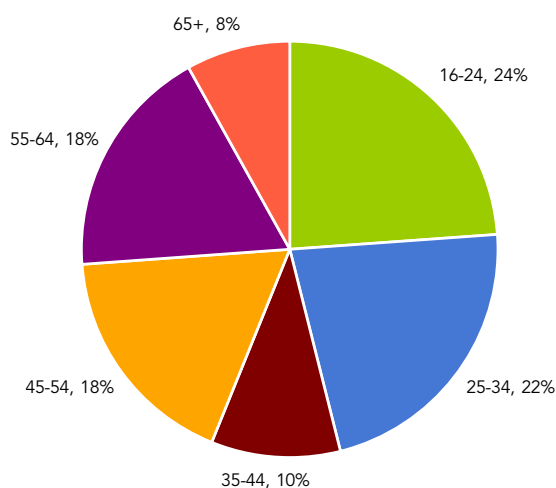
Figure 14: Age of focus group participants

A quarter of participants were in either part- or full-time employment and 9% in full-time education or training. The remainder of the sample were either retired, unemployed, unable to work or acting as a carer. Based on what was said in some of the focus groups, we noted a significant tendency to mis-report occupation to mask unemployment (e.g. over-reporting of 'retired'). Thirty-four per cent of the sample had attained a GCSE/Standard level qualification and 20% had no formal qualifications. The highest level of education for 16% of the sample was a certificate, diploma or NVQ, 16% of the sample had an undergraduate degree and just over 4% a post-graduate qualification. All of the attendees claimed to have some knowledge about politics.
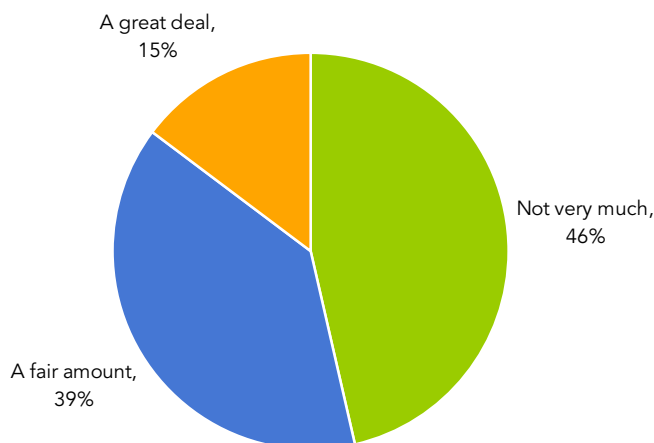
Figure 15: How much do you know about politics?

Again, all the participants felt that they knew at least something about their local council, however, the majority (51%) said they knew 'not very much' and only 13% reported knowing 'a great deal'. This is lower than those who claimed to know 'a great deal' about Parliament (15%), however, over 58% reported knowing 'not very much' and 5% 'nothing at all' about Parliament before the focus group started. The role of MPs is slightly better understood by the sample: 51% know either 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' about what MPs do, 42% claimed to know 'not very much' and 7% 'nothing at all' (see Table 6).

Table 6: Knowledge of local council, Parliament and role of MPs

How much do you know about…	Local council	Parliament	MPs
A great deal	13.3%	14.6%	14.6%
A fair amount	35.6%	22.0%	36.6%
Not very much	51.1%	58.5%	41.5%
Nothing at all	0.0%	4.9%	7.3%

Focus Group 1 – Peterborough

Conducted in Peterborough on 29 April 2010, this group had 13 participants – all female. Four were in full-time employment or self-employed, the others were looking after the home or in education/training. Five participants were educated to degree level or above, the remainder had either left school without qualifications, had completed an NVQ, certificate or diploma or had completed their GCSEs.

This group had a strongly negative view of politics and politicians, focused at the time mainly on the MPs' expenses scandal. Most saw no distinction between MPs and Parliament and therefore Parliament as a whole (including officials that allowed expenses abuses) was seen to be culpable. A lot of anger was expressed at what had taken place and participants

felt disillusioned with the system but remained passionate about and interested in politics (this group was held in the last week of a close-run general election campaign).

MPs as a Conduit for Engagement

MPs as a group were seen by the group to be 'cheats', 'self-serving' and living in a different world to the rest of the public. However, reflecting an Audit of Political Engagement finding that there is a direct correlation between familiarity and favourability, participants did have more positive things to say about MPs who they had been in contact with, saying that they received a good response to their enquiries, appreciated feedback and further information and that they were treated as an intelligent, informed citizen. Crucially for this study, Parliament was not seen to be in any way separate from MPs. MPs were seen as the only conduit for information and contact with Parliament and the legislative process. The political parties were also seen to be very close to Parliament – there was no understanding that Parliament has separate functions to political parties and could therefore provide impartial information on legislation that MPs and parties might not provide.

Modernising Parliament

It was felt that the parliamentary building reflected the activity going on inside. It was seen as 'unwelcoming', 'imposing', 'closed off', 'nepotistic' and 'too traditional'. These perceptions, in part, originated from the façade of the building, from visits to Parliament and the ceremonial aspects shown on television. Participants, regardless of age, felt that Parliament needed modernising to bring our democracy into the 21st century.

> It looks like you're watching some old-fashioned film, you think is this really our modern-day Parliament?... It's time to move on we're a different world now… it just needs really modernising.

Most participants felt that traditional, ceremonial elements – men in tights, Black Rod, dragging the Speaker to the chair – were inappropriate for a modern political institution and particularly for a serious workplace. Beyond these aesthetics and tradition, reform of parliamentary procedures and practices were mentioned repeatedly, for example the timetabling of debates and the perception that this was often used to limit the debating time and therefore scrutiny of legislation.

Trust and Reform

Lack of trust in Parliament followed the lack of trust in MPs and outdated, and what were seen as undemocratic, procedures were specifically cited as reasons for not trusting Parliament:

> We've all lost trust right across the board in our Parliament.

The lack of trust in Parliament was a more systemic problem bound up with a 'childish and adversarial culture' that was seen to keep citizens at arm's length and avoid scrutiny. Some

participants felt that Parliament's lack of representativeness meant they trusted it less and felt the need to be more involved as citizens themselves in order to ensure it was held accountable and worked for everyone.

> If you felt you were represented, I'd be happier not to be so involved. I vote them in, they should do the job but it's if you're comfortable that your voice is being heard… I'd be much happier taking a back seat let them do their job but because it's not representative and it's not democratic then they've got to… allow us access and be more proactive.

Other participants felt a lack of trust in Parliament, seeing it as an 'out-dated, archaic institution' in need of 'widespread reform'. Unsurprisingly this was seen as a significant barrier to interest in and engagement with Parliament. They didn't want to get involved if Parliament was 'closed off to the public' and 'undemocratic' (a view of Parliament as undemocratic re-appears throughout this focus group). There were numerous constitutional, cultural and procedural problems and these were seen as a barrier to engagement. Issues identified included; lack of representation for certain groups within Parliament, an unfair voting system, Europe having too much influence, England not having its own Parliament, political correctness, large majorities of governing parties, childish behaviour by politicians. Parliament was not seen to be powerful enough – either in relation to scrutinising and checking the power of the Government or European Union – to have much impact, limiting interest and potential engagement further.

Interest and Information

Despite their negative attitudes towards Parliament, participants wanted to know more about it and the issues that it was discussing. They felt that a lot of discussions took place behind closed doors and that the public were not welcome. Select committees were singled out as being particularly opaque; none of the group realised that members of the public were able to watch select committees either in person or online or were able to find out what had happened online.

> They have select committees don't they? Do we have access to that or do we know how to get access to what they've discussed… I wouldn't know where to go to find out who's on the select committee, what's their remit and what's the outcome.

Although much of the information that they were interested in is currently available online, none of the group knew this and none had visited Parliament's website. This is despite saying that they would like to access information online. It was clear that delivering this information purely online was not enough – they had to know it was there, that it would cover the topics that interested them and would be available in an accessible and understandable format.

Better education about Parliament and our political system was highlighted as important and delivering this through schools was seen as a good way to educate a large number of

future voters. Giving citizens more information about the role of an MP and about potential career paths to becoming an MP were also mentioned.

The group also highlighted that adults needed this information and the participants suggested a number of different places where citizens might find it easy to access information about Parliament, such as UK Online Centres, libraries, local media, direct mail leaflets, local MP, town hall, council offices, community centres and schools.

The Importance of Interaction

Most participants wanted a more formal and ongoing way of being contacted by MPs or Parliament throughout the election cycle. The local connection to Parliament through the MP was seen as very important, as were local issues. Invitations to debates and question time events with local MPs so people can get involved with Parliament through constituency issues was seen as a positive idea. Advertising these kinds of events in places that people visit regularly (schools, local shops etc) and through local community networks (UK Online centres, local newspapers) and local services (libraries, GP surgeries) was suggested as a way to make sure everyone who wants to attend knows that events are happening.

Personal, particularly face-to-face, contact with representatives was preferred to online or media communication as it gives more opportunity for debate and interaction. The internet was seen as important and necessary for procedural information but citizens needed to be directed to this information from elsewhere. More direct input on specific issues, through referendums or petitions, was seen as a way to involve and engage more citizens.

> Honest debate attracts me… if they say something and we can interact with them.

Suggestions for Improving Engagement and Communication with Parliament

The key recommendations to emerge from this focus group include:

- Regular public forums and meetings that local people could attend to increase debate around politics and to quiz local representatives;
- Allowing people to give their views to Parliament more directly through petitions, referendums and select committees;
- Cabinet meetings on camera;
- Making political debate more accessible – the language in particular was seen as being unnecessarily complicated and old-fashioned;
- Putting all the information on the internet to make Parliament more transparent (but publicising this using local networks and services); and
- A panel of ordinary citizens that hold Parliament accountable and feed back information to other citizens in the area.

Focus Group 2 – Poplar, London

The second focus group was held in Poplar, East London on 30 April 2010 and consisted of 15 participants. Of the participants who completed their demographic survey form, two were male, eight were female and one did not answer. Three of the participants were in the 16-24 age group, six in the 25-34 age group, one in the 35-44 group and one was in the 45-54 age group. Of those that responded to the questionnaire, three were educated to GCSE level, three had a Certificate, Diploma or NVQ and one had an undergraduate degree. Two participants reported themselves as being in full-time employment, six as looking after the home, one reported that they were looking after the home, studying part-time and volunteering and one reported that they were unable to work due to a disability.

As with the first group, the expenses scandal and the upcoming election formed the backdrop for the discussion. The expenses scandal again had a clear and negative impact on participants' perception of how politics and Parliament functions. Many identified 'money', 'expenses probe' and similar comments as their first thoughts of Parliament and politics. Parliament, political parties and MPs were all seen as largely the same thing throughout and Parliament itself was associated most strongly with conflict and argument, particularly the adversarial exchanges at Prime Minister's Questions. Most of the group felt that this put them off Parliament although one participant accepted this was part of the way the system works.

The televised leaders' debates held during the general election had had an impact with a participant highlighting 'debate' being what they associated with Parliament. This wasn't necessarily a positive association, as another commented with regard to the televised leaders' debates:

> It's confusing. They're all saying the same thing and they're all slagging each other off.

Participants said their sources of information about politics were television, local and national newspapers and the internet. If they were looking for something on the internet, they would use a search engine to search directly for whatever they wanted. This would make it more likely they would get information directly from the source (see below) and Parliament should therefore consider how to ensure pages with relevant information come high up in the search results.

The Importance of Parliament

There was a grudging acceptance that Parliament and politics are important in how the country is run but also scepticism about what politicians and Parliament can ever really achieve. Participants' priorities for Parliament were issue driven – for example, protecting the country, immigration and schools – but some doubted if MPs were capable of representing them effectively due to a perceived detachment from the experience of 'every day people'. These doubts coalesced around a discussion on benefits and housing:

> It's to do with local people it's not to do with them, [MPs] get enough money.
> They've got this house and that house… we're the ones who are living it.

This fed into a discussion around having more issues debated in 'public view' in which participants could get involved. Interest was expressed in having a direct means (possibly through a vote) of influencing Parliament and legislation.

Interest in Parliament

The group was split in terms of who talked about politics and Parliament with their friends, some saying it was too hard to understand and others saying they would vote for the first time (despite being eligible to vote in previous elections) on 6 May and have been discussing what to do with friends.

This general ambivalence was punctured when discussion turned to specifics, such as tax credits. Most of the group took turns in articulating stories and opinions on the problems with the tax credits system and its shortcomings in comparison to previous arrangements. Many who said they never spoke about politics spoke with some authority over the tax credit system, which is indicative of the wider disconnect between the issues people care about and what they perceive 'politics' to be for and about.

Motivation to Connect with Parliament

Most members of the group were keen on finding out more about Parliament. When asked what they would specifically like to know more about, the consensus was they wanted to know more about things that were relevant to them, as one respondent put it:

> Everything that affects my life.

This interest in being more directly involved in Parliament was in part a response to disenchantment with MPs and how the business of politics is currently conducted.

Preferred Format for Connecting with Parliament

Suggestions for how Parliament should communicate with people included an appealing online presence, leaflets with relevant information about what was happening in Parliament and visiting existing community centres and libraries, such as the Linc Centre in which the

focus group took place. Having someone come from Parliament who was not an MP was identified as a good way of getting unbiased information,

> Straight from the horse's mouth.

This kind of engagement was appealing as it offered opportunities to ask questions rather than what was seen as the one-dimensional and biased coverage in newspapers and on television, with the exception of live television:

> Because it can't be edited.

Visibility was strongly encouraged as an antidote to MPs who participants reported rarely seeing. One member of the group had been at a meeting attended by Gordon Brown and John Denham but observed she was one of the lucky few:

> It needs to be made more public and there need to be more opportunities.

Participants felt that the object of these meetings should be educational initially (finding out what Parliament did) rather than focusing on gathering opinions:

> That would be a bit much initially but second time we could give feedback.

They were less keen on an online discussion and felt face-to-face discussions in small groups or lectures in bigger groups were better. Meetings of this type were more appealing than MPs' surgeries, which were perceived to be for the purpose of addressing specific individual problems.

Parliament's Goals for Public Outreach

Participants were presented with a summary of Parliament's goals for how it should be seen by the public and gave their responses to these objectives:

- **Welcoming** – one person who had visited Parliament saw it as a tourist attraction and felt it was welcoming. Others didn't know enough and were not sure whether they could go in and hear what was being talked about. One participant felt that 'normal' people's opinions are needed but there was no way to be heard.
- **Holding government to account** – there was some confusion about what this meant but when it was explained the response was a firm 'no'. MPs were perceived as small fry, except for a few 'top' MPs such as government ministers.
- **Seen as worthwhile** – discussion here revolved around the expenses scandal with many of the group saying that MPs are paid 'to do nothing'.
- **Working for you and me** – MPs were seen as 'working for wages' rather than in the public interest and again the discussion centred on the expenses scandal.

Promotion of Parliament to the Public

When asked how Parliament could best promote more face-to-face engagement with the public there was a focus on local activities such as flyers on cars and in supermarkets. The most popular suggestion was to use existing centres and networks, like the Linc Centre where the focus group took place, that have a culture of inviting outside speakers to visit. This would help address Parliament being seen as something 'other' as it would sit alongside discussions on health, first aid, finance etc.

Suggestions for Improving Engagement and Communication with Parliament

The key recommendations to emerge from this focus group include:

- Work in local communities and use existing networks to explain what Parliament does and how people can get involved;
- Use people employed by Parliament (not MPs) to educate people about what Parliament does and how they can get involved;
- Face-to-face communication was stressed as being of primary importance.

Focus Group 3 – Sheffield
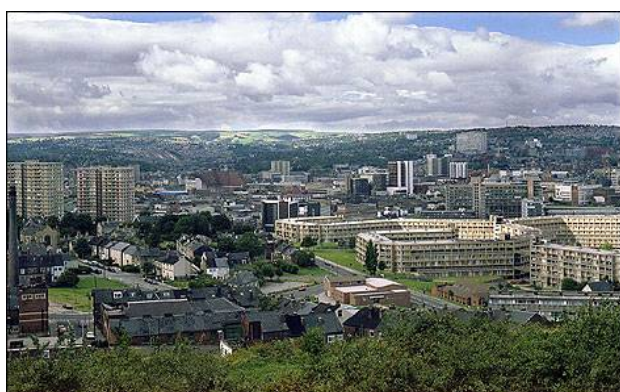
The Sheffield focus group was held on 21 May 2010 with 12 participants, two male and nine female (one uncompleted questionnaire) Two of the participants were aged 16-24, three were between 25 and 34, one was in the 35-44 age group, one was in the 45-54 age group, two were between 55 and 64 and the final three participants were over 65. None of the 12 participants reported being in full-time employment, two were in full-time education or training, one reported that they were in part-time employment and also part-time education, one reported that they were looking after the home, four were retired and two reported that they were unemployed. Of the 12 participants, four had left school without qualifications, six were educated to GCSE/Standard grade level, one was educated to Certificate/NVQ level and one had completed an undergraduate degree.

This group presented a generally negative view of politicians, with some commenting that they didn't know much about politics and found it hard to understand. The expenses scandal did not feature prominently in the discussion but there was a general feeling that MPs were 'self-interested', 'career-focused' and 'did not represent ordinary people's views'. Yet despite this, most of the participants had an interest in learning more about politics and had ideas about how Parliament might better engage with people, for example:

> They should come out to us more and promote Parliament more to us, we've got MPs that are in the constituency and they should be doing more for us. They represent us so they should know our feelings, that's what they're there for.

Perceived Lack of Effectiveness

A significant theme to emerge from this focus group was that participation in politics was unlikely to produce any change (for them) and that their opinions were unlikely to be listened to. One participant commented:

> They say it's your democratic right to vote et cetera. You wonder, at the end of the day, when the results come out, although you've used your democratic vote and the MPs keep telling you how valuable it is, you wonder if they'll do what they want to do anyway.

One younger participant suggested that voting was the only way to express their views to politicians. Another felt it didn't matter who they voted for because politicians were unlikely to keep any of their election promises and were 'all the same'. Some said that local politics was more important than national politics but others disagreed, arguing that national leaders assert control over local parties, with local councillors not representing their areas.

Interest and Information

Many participants expressed an interest in learning more about the work of Parliament. Newspapers and television (Question Time, The Andrew Marr Show and The Politics Show) seemed to be the most popular ways that participants got information. Some said that they heard about politics through friends, however, most said that they did not discuss politics with their families. Some participants said that they did use the internet and social media but never used them to find out about politics. The group agreed that the way they want to hear from politicians was through face-to-face interaction:

> You can't beat face-to-face.

Participants felt that they trusted newspapers far less than they used to when accessing political information. Some felt that newspapers tended to dramatise issues and that their political bias (The Sun=Conservative; Daily Mirror=Labour) were bad for politics. People trusted television more as a live audience was present to bring the public's opinion into the debate more:

> More often than not you have a public audience there and there is some feedback. You do, in that respect, hear people speaking what your values are, where you don't get that with newspapers, you just get their view.

Education about politics and Parliament through schools was seen as very important for communicating Parliament's message. One of the younger participants said:

> I think the reason kids find it boring is because they don't know much about it.

There was an acknowledgement that people often become more interested in politics as they get older, although some of the older participants expressed surprise at the younger people's level of interest in politics.

> I never know 'owt about it so it's always bored me… it's not that I don't care it's just that I don't know anything about it.

One of the participants also acknowledged the value of the internet and television in informing younger people:

> I've spoken to children recently, up to the age of 15 and so on and they're already pretty genned up, because of the internet and television.

School was seen as a good place to foster an interest in politics and to give students a basic understanding of Parliament. Making the teaching of politics engaging was seen as crucial to get younger citizens interested. It was felt that once they had a good level of knowledge they'd be more passionate and keen to get involved. One participant commented that they felt that Parliament was distant but sending school children to learn through experience would be beneficial and savings could be made in Parliament to fund this.

> I remember going as a 15 year old boy… people would understand a lot more and there would be less don't knows.

MPs – Local and National

Participants said that they felt like the only time MPs came into their local area was during election time and one participant said they had met a local candidate only once. They felt that MPs should go out and seek the public's views more. Local hustings were suggested as a good place to find out more about politics and the politicians they might be electing. Whilst some said that more should be done to get young people to visit Parliament with their schools, they also felt that having MPs come and debate issues in their local area would help them to engage. One participant made this suggestion:

> You've got Bramall Lane on this side of town, you've got Hillsborough on the other side of town, so you could have meetings at the football stadiums.

Participants also agreed that one of Parliament's aims should be to better understand ordinary people and the issues they care about and that affected them. This needed to happen through face-to-face interaction and discussion with MPs. There was a real interest in having a local candidate representing the community and a suggestion that MPs should spend less time on committees unrelated to their constituency work.

Reforming Parliament

The adversarial nature of Parliament and politics was an issue with some participants. One participant said that the system of whips should be abolished because it prevents wider ranges of opinions from being expressed. The same person also said that they felt not enough was done to talk about what happened in Europe and that British people were not protected enough from Brussels.

> There should be more debate about it rather than just quietly accepting what Brussels says.

There was also cynicism about the amount of money spent on trips for MPs overseas. It was felt that they didn't spend enough time listening to the concerns of their constituents to be able to justify spending time abroad on 'fact-finding' missions.

> You've got these video phones, you can sit in front of a television screen and you could be there and you could be talking to the people there. So why spend half a million quid on jetting round the world… again the MP represents us not people in Goa, New Zealand or whatever.

It was felt that the same could be achieved for a lot less money by sending a researcher or using teleconferencing. Participants agreed that the presence of financial incentives for politicians made them appear to be more corrupt and less representative of ordinary people.

> As soon as you start paying people they lose their moral standards.

There was a suggestion that more transparency was needed so the public could see what money was being spent on. Sitting on committees and going on fact-finding trips needed to be explained and justified to the constituents face-to-face. They wanted more transparency and the opportunity to ask questions and to better hold MPs to account, in the local area.

The Importance of Interaction

Participants wanted to be able to have face-to-face contact with politicians. They said that their preferred way of receiving information about the work of Parliament was through face-to-face discussions and debates in the local community.

Some participants did like the idea of hearing about what was going on in Parliament through leaflets handed out in supermarkets or adverts in newspapers, however they also said that their reading things like this depended on whether they felt like they were busy at that particular time. Keeping contact as local as possible was highlighted as important – information from Parliament could be available at the community centre where the focus group was being held as it was accessible to the whole community.

All participants (including the younger ones) rejected the idea of online communication, arguing that face-to-face was more personal and effective.

Suggestions for Improving Engagement and Communication with Parliament

The key recommendations to emerge from this focus group include:

- Public debates in local areas allowing local people to ask questions of their representatives;
- Better programmes of education on politics and Parliament for people, specifically school children;
- Government-funded visits for school children to Parliament;
- More literature distributed in local communities on the work of Parliament.

Focus Group 4 – Nairn

The fourth focus group, conducted in Nairn on 22 June 2010, consisted of nine participants. Of these participants, six were male and three were female. Four reported being in the 44-54 age group, with the remaining participants in the 65 or over age group. None of the participants reported themselves as being in full-time employment, with one reporting being in part-time employment, seven reporting themselves as being retired and one reporting themselves as a carer. Two had completed an undergraduate degree, one had completed a certificate or diploma, three had completed Standard Grade or GCSE qualifications, two completed Higher Grade or A-level qualifications and one had left school without qualifications.

The Nairn Access Panel consists of people with physical disabilities and their carers. The challenge of being physically disabled meant many participants had contacted politicians at different levels of government and Parliament including MPs. Participants who had contacted MPs reported varying levels of satisfaction with their experiences but generally were sceptical about whether MPs acted in their interest feeling they were likely to put themselves or their party first. The expenses scandal did feature in discussion but few expressed surprise at the revelations feeling it was a further expression of an insider mentality:

> They have one rule for themselves and another rule for everybody else.

Accessibility and Availability of MPs

Participants' experience of contacting MPs had been mixed but all reported exasperation at how their contact was dealt with:

> There is always a gatekeeper between you and them who confuses the matter.

They felt MPs often hide behind the complexity of Parliament:

> If they want to cut you off at the pass they can easily.

This was a source of frustration as every member of the group declared themselves interested in politics and interested in becoming more involved in the work of Parliament. Participants felt closed out by how the system works and by MPs themselves who they perceived as only being interested at election time or when the press were involved:

> Politics is important… we have no choice in its importance but we can't affect the machine. The decisions affect us but we can't affect them (MPs) except when they need our vote… MPs are only interested when the press are there or there is an election.

Participants felt MPs were only interested in acting on your behalf if they agreed with you:

> Unless they (the MP) have an interest in it (the issue) they are not going to open the door. Only if what you want lines up with what MPs want will you be successful.

Role of the Media and the Internet

Participants reported keeping up to date with politics through newspapers and television but all expressed a great degree of scepticism about their reliability:

> They don't just report, they colour everything with commentary.

It was felt the media close politics off to people by presenting what goes on as an insiders' game involving off-the-record briefings, unnamed sources etc. Newspapers were seen as least trustworthy, with unedited discussion seen as the only reliable source but even its usefulness was questioned:

> You just need to watch Question Time. The question can be quite normal and [MPs] twist it and answer the question they want.

Participants were not regular users of the internet and did not feel it was a useful avenue for finding out about politics. They stayed away from party political websites and questioned MPs' motives for using websites such as Twitter and Facebook:

> They try to look cool and show themselves up.

Participants had not used the internet for campaigning purposes though one person was a member of a Facebook campaign about a local issue.

Perception of Parliament

Participants found it very challenging to separate party politics from the work of Parliament feeling that the activity in Parliament is driven by 'realpolitik' and party manifestos. Despite their stated interest in politics, participants' awareness of Parliament's work revolved around their experiences of watching PMQs and the appeal of Parliament as a building:

> All I think about is a stunning building – I never think about what goes on inside it.

They had seen footage from news reports of debates but were unaware of how Parliament works:

> What happens after all these debates? What do they actually do? What goes to the House of Lords? Why is that there?

The coverage that they had seen was considered pretty unimpressive as the Chamber was almost empty and many of the MPs in attendance looked uninterested:

> After PMQs there's another debate but everyone disappears before it starts or falls asleep. If it, the issue being discussed in the debate, is important to you and so few people are there then that is frustrating.

This lack of awareness fed the scepticism participants felt about MPs as they were never sure what the MP could or should do to represent their interests:

> If I took my problem to my MP how would I know it is going to go any further? I don't know what can or should happen next.

If contact with their local MP did not yield the desired outcome, participants would then contact the newspapers or undertake direct local action.

Levels of Governance

The formation of the Scottish Parliament has caused a degree of confusion as participants reported being unsure about where the dividing line between the powers of the two legislatures was. Some responded to this by contacting both their MSP and MP but there was a feeling that the Scottish Parliament and the UK Parliament need to publicise their roles more effectively:

> We don't know who deals with which issue and rely on word of mouth to know whose responsibility it is. Better communication is needed with this.

Possible Actions

Participants expressed a desire to learn more about what Parliament does and wanted to know how they could get involved in its work:

> I feel like I should know more but I don't know what I could find out or get involved
> in.

Only two participants reported using Parliament's website but this was identified as a good avenue for the provision of accessible introductory information on Parliament. In addition, participants felt Parliament needed to think creatively about how to get people interested and a documentary was suggested as a way of achieving this:

> Parliament needs to sell itself… a documentary on television about how it runs would
> be fascinating set from the eyes of someone who isn't interested and is unbiased…
> They need to open the doors and say: 'this is how we work' and build from there.

All were unequivocal that this information and education work should not involve MPs:

> Information coming from Parliament should not come from MPs it needs to come
> from somebody who is unbiased. Like the work Brian Cox does for science.

Local meetings hosted by someone from Parliament were a popular idea and it was felt that there would need to be more than one meeting per group for there to be a benefit: the first meeting focusing on education with the second discussing the role people can play in Parliament's work:

> Parliament needs to explain how its interests are in line with people's interests.

There was an acknowledgement that the main audience for these meetings is likely to be people who are already interested but one participant didn't think too much focus should be put on attendance levels:

> If you provide an opportunity for contact, even if it's unused and are seen to be open
> you create a connection. This would help with the perception of Parliament.

Parliament's Goals for Public Outreach

When presented with Parliament's goals for how it should be seen by the public none of the participants felt they had been achieved:

> That's what we would like rather than something we see them achieving.

They suggested a number of other aims that Parliament could or should have included:

- Transparency
- Results
- Voice to the people
- Responsive
- Politicians to work for the country rather than for themselves

Suggestions for Improving Engagement and Communication with Parliament

The key recommendations to emerge from this focus group include:

- Think more creatively – produce a documentary following the people who work in Parliament as part of a 'fly on the wall' documentary;
- Work in local communities with established groups and educate them about how the work of Parliament relates to their life;
- Run a publicity campaign/produce material that clearly establishes the respective roles of the Scottish and UK Parliament.

Focus Group 5 – Usk

The final focus group was conducted in Usk on 11 August 2010 and consisted of five participants taking a youth work qualification at Usk Community College and aged between 16 and 24. Of the participants, four were female and one male. Two had completed GCSEs / Standard Grade education and two had completed A-levels/Higher Grade, whilst one gave no valid response.

This group recognised that politics was important but commented that they generally did not have a lot of knowledge of politics and the way that it works. At the same time, participants felt that it was important for people to know more about politics and the work of Parliament but also felt that it was difficult to understand and it was also impossible to get unbiased information.

> Everybody's got an opinion and I personally don't think that there's anywhere you can go to get unbiased information.

Participants also said that they had never had citizenship lessons at school and felt that it was very important that people learn about the way politics and Parliament works from a young age. They also felt that people needed to feel motivated in order to seek out information or that there needed to be a degree of compulsion to learn about the political system.

> If someone tried to explain what politics is right now I'd fall asleep, probably within the first two minutes.

Participants strongly associated Parliament with 'yah-boo' politics, arguments and blaming. They also felt that you rarely ever saw the outcomes of any of the debates that took place within Parliament. They felt if they knew more about the outcomes of parliamentary debates

and saw members of the public having a visible input into the process, then they would be more interested and likely to participate.

It was acknowledged that the work of Parliament was important but because of the way that the media covers the work of Parliament, all that is ever seen are arguments and not outcomes.

Lack of Information

Participants said that they had very little information on their MPs and only knew who they were because of their campaigning efforts during the general election. One participant commented that whilst politics had become more fashionable during the election, this did not mean that people became more knowledgeable as a result.

> The whole process is extremely unfamiliar for me. I wish I knew more, I wish I could understand it and when people are talking about it I could have my say.

Participants felt it was important that people were better educated about politics and Parliament, especially in schools but also felt that it was important that the material was kept interesting.

> I think it needs to be drilled into you when you're a kid. Then they'll get familiar as the years go on and learn more about it.

One participant also commented that they didn't vote and that was because they didn't know enough about the issues or the process.

> I didn't vote because I didn't understand what it was on. I went to work and everyone had a go at me because I didn't vote. Why would I want to vote for something that I don't know about?

This suggests a vicious cycle; participants lacked the knowledge to see the relevance of politics to their lives and felt excluded from political life but also did not have the desire to find out more because they were embarrassed by their lack of knowledge. In terms of gathering information about politics and Parliament, participants said that their main source of information was the media and, in particular, television. They also commented that they sometimes found out about politics through friends and work colleagues. One participant said that they did in fact vote and this was due to the perceived effect of party policy and spending cuts on their job.

New Ways to Gather Information

One suggestion to improve levels of information amongst young people was that there should be a period of time before an election where the process was explained clearly and the positions of all of the main parties were provided from an unbiased source. Part of the problem currently was that there was a sense of embarrassment amongst young people that

they did not have high levels of political knowledge and they would feel ignorant if they attempted to acquire political information from currently available sources. One participant suggested that learning about the political process with others of their age and with similar levels of knowledge might get around this embarrassment.

> If there was a period of time where you were informed of the parties and you were explained the whole process and how it worked...then we all went and voted together… you're with like-minded people there's no shame that you don't know anything about it. You're educated together and then off you go and make your decision.

One participant followed this up and said that they would be unlikely to seek out information off their own bat and, to an extent, learning about politics and Parliament would have to be mandatory.

In terms of online engagement, participants said that they did not feel that they would follow politics or politicians using social networks like Facebook or Twitter. One participant joked:

> David Cameron… Like [laughter][7]

Participants also said that to a certain extent the internet could be useful in becoming more informed about politics but felt that individual politicians using social networks was not very personal and it was unlikely that senior politicians would be posting things online themselves and would be more likely to use staff to do this. Some liked the idea of a 'Rate Your MP' site so that they could see other people's opinions of their MP.

The most popular way for participants to gather political information was to be informed by people that they knew and trusted and felt were unbiased in order to tell them about where the different parties stand and what was currently going on in politics.

Current Engagement with Politics and Parliament

Participants generally seemed to know who their MP was, though some did comment that the only way they ever hear about their elected representative is when they are campaigning. One had actively contacted their MP about an issue and felt that the experience had not been worth it:

> [They've] done nothing, so you lose faith in the system.

Another had met their MP during an assembly at school but said that at the time they had little knowledge of who they were or what they actually did. There was also some confusion about where an MP's jurisdiction lay, as two MPs represented neighbouring constituencies

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7   A reference to the 'Like' feature in Facebook.

and it was at times unclear to the participants where the boundaries were. One participant said that they lived in one constituency and worked in another and that this made it confusing as to who they were being represented by.

The main barrier cited by the participants, to any current or future engagement with politics was a lack of knowledge about the system, feeling embarrassed and confused when it was discussed and feeling unsure about how to even start finding out more information about it. General elections were seen as a time to think about politics, particularly how it directly affected their lives through job cuts but one participant suggested there wasn't enough information about the process prior to the actual election happening.

Most of the participants felt that they needed a push to find out more about politics, either by seeing how it directly affected their interests or because they were required to do it as part of their job as a youth worker.

New Ways to Engage with Parliament

Participants felt that it was important that they be informed of the outcomes of debates in Parliament, if not to feel more engaged and involved, at least to know more. It was also said that in order to feel engaged, it was important that people were better informed because they would feel intimidated if they were not equipped with more information about how Parliament worked and what was going on.

Participants also felt that MPs had a responsibility to actively seek out their constituents to communicate their work. They said that MPs could provide information 'straight from the horse's mouth' and that they should talk to children in schools through assemblies and face-to-face meetings.

> I never see my MP unless something opens or if there's a fête.

As youth workers they felt it would be a good idea for them to be given formal training on politics and Parliament so that they could then go on and educate the young people they worked with about these things. They felt that they would be better at tailoring information and making it relevant to their audience. They also felt that politics was something they could make fun and engaging if it was a part of their job.

> I think people have got a responsibility to know what goes on [in Parliament] especially in our job… while the election was going on I would have liked to have talked to the kids about it… but because I knew nothing I just steered away from the whole thing.

This demonstrates how the lack of political knowledge from one generation can have a negative impact on the next. If this topic is skirted around by those working with children and young people because they don't feel informed, it will be unlikely that new generations will become any more knowledgeable. Participants said it didn't really matter who provided

them with information as long as it was from an impartial, trusted source that was knowledgeable about Parliament and the political process. Training days and workshops on Parliament and politics were popular as a way of encouraging informal education through peer-to-peer information sharing.

> If someone's given me the responsibility to inform young people about Parliament you're just passing it down then, aren't you? When young people get told about it they'll have the responsibility to tell other people about it, people younger than them.

Participants also felt that Parliament needed to be more accessible and that if they were to contribute their views to their MP, then they should be able to see where their views have gone.

Suggestions for Improving Engagement and Communication with Parliament

The key recommendations to emerge from this focus group include:

- Informal peer-to-peer education in order to learn more about what was going on in politics and in Parliament;
- In order to engage, people should be better informed through compulsory lessons in school on how Parliament works;
- Better communication of the outcomes of debates in Parliament;
- Training about politics or Parliament for youth workers as part of their course or job to enable them to educate others; and
- A better process to show people how their views count.

Key themes from the Focus Groups

Participants were generally negative about the current political process and at times it proved difficult to banish the spectre of MPs' expenses from the discussions. Despite this, **many participants expressed an interest in learning more about politics and the work of Parliament**. A consistent theme was that participants recognised it was important to be well informed about current political issues and felt that they were not as informed as they could be and ought to know more. They perceived that once people understood more about how the system works there was more chance that they would become interested or even involved in politics and the work of Parliament.

Parliament was seen as aloof and not connected to the everyday lives of the participants, nor was it seen as being interested in their view. Across the focus groups **there was a common feeling of disconnection, with the outcome of events and debates in Parliament perceived to have little in common with the views of the participants in this study.** This situation was thought to be exacerbated by media reporting of Parliament and politics.

An overriding theme across all of the focus groups was that participants' preferred way of engaging with Parliament was through face-to-face means. Whilst many participants throughout the focus groups did receive information through traditional media such as newspapers or television, very few felt that these were unbiased sources of information. This distrust of provenance and bias extended to the internet and, when asked if they would like to engage online, very few expressed any interest. Some felt it was important that engagement take place through MPs themselves, whilst others felt that it was important that it happened through neutral intermediaries. In terms of resourcing and sustainability this is clearly an unrealistic goal. However, it is clear that, at least in terms of initial attempts to engage, face-to-face meetings must play some role. Once a certain level of knowledge is acquired, the interest might exist to provide extra information and communication channels online so that a relationship with Parliament can be built up and maintained.

A fourth key theme to emerge was the **importance of the local area as a forum for engagement**. Linking in with the finding that many would prefer direct contact with their MP as a primary method for engagement, many participants felt that public meetings held in their area would be accessible and provide a platform for further information or in which to debate and discuss the issues that were important to them. Key to this would, of course, be the establishment of a method of aggregating and reporting such discussions to their MP or other representative.

Finally, highlighting the importance of the local emphasis with regard to engagement and the taking of Parliament out into the community, many participants suggested that material about Parliament be placed in locations where people conduct their daily lives such as UK Online centres in which three of the focus groups took place, community centres, libraries, GP surgeries, schools, supermarkets and other local stores.

Practical Suggestions to Emerge from Focus Groups

By analysing the key findings from the focus groups with regard to improving the way Parliament communicates and for building awareness and understanding of Parliament amongst the public, the following practical suggestions emerge:

- Commission a down-to-earth TV documentary about Parliament;
- Provide more education about politics and Parliament in schools;
- Include a module about politics and Parliament in certain college courses where it is relevant to course content;
- More visits for school children to Parliament;
- Events to improve political knowledge before general elections, delivered by impartial individuals;
- Debates and hustings to discuss local issues with the local MP;
- More direct democracy such as petitions and input into select committees;
- Accessible information about what Parliament does placed in locations that people visit on a regular basis; community centres, schools, local shops etc;

- Information about the different roles and responsibilities of local councils, regional institutions, the UK Parliament and the European Union;
- Working with community groups to organise educational sessions about politics and Parliament;
- Better feedback on the outcomes of debates and the impact of Parliament on relevant issues to citizens;
- A place to find accessible, impartial information about politics;
- Cabinet meetings on camera;
- A panel of 'ordinary' citizens, who feed back information to their community about what is happening in Parliament; and
- Reforming the culture and procedures within Parliament, such as old-fashioned language and lack of transparency.

PART 2 – FINDINGS

4 FRAMEWORK FOR ENGAGEMENT

This chapter proposes a framework for engagement taking into account the beliefs, knowledge and motivations of citizens. It is based on two key overarching processes that emerged in this study as being vital to facilitate increased interaction between those who might be considered 'hard to reach' and Parliament:

- Education; and
- Participation.

> This research tells us that it is unlikely any single initiative would be sufficient to make a lasting, substantive change in the levels of public engagement with Parliament amongst the 'hard to reach'. Changing levels of engagement will be an ongoing, cumulative process requiring multiple strategies.

Educating citizens is an enabler, building confidence and empowering them with knowledge of how and when they can communicate their views to Parliament. This occurs through traditional educational systems, as part of wider training programmes but also as an embedded process through local communities and organisations. Alongside, participation processes need to be flexible to fit around people's preferences and lifestyles. Although this occurs to a limited degree through traditional means, such as petitions and select committee submissions, it can also occur through less traditional information gathering methods such as locally conducted focus groups and meetings with a reporting element allowing for their results to be fed back to Parliament.

This framework for engagement places considerable emphasis on the traditional and at times centralised methods of education and participation. However, it also recognises the limitations of this and introduces less conventional methods of education and involvement by placing greater emphasis on 'just-in-time' localised methods and by seeking to embed Parliament more widely in the day-to-day activities of citizens.

The Context for Engagement

As discussed in the background section below, it is important to be mindful of the different theories behind why one might engage politically. This allows us to better understand the possible motivations to engage and to explore how the results of our research align with this. Doing so, we describe a framework that encompasses the theoretical range of motivations of citizens, providing a stronger understanding of the many different reasons why one might choose to participate and align these with practical strategies for enhanced engagement.

How engagement can occur for an individual needs to be considered at a number of levels, starting with a focus on individual motivations and ranging through to a sense of collective benefit and importance. Rational choice focuses on the individual actor and views the actor as atomistic, with pre-determined preferences; making a particular political choice (such as communicating with Parliament) in order to maximise their benefit at the minimum possible cost.[8] So, the citizen decides to engage with Parliament (or not), if the perceived benefit from doing so is greater than the cost.

We also consider engagement from the perspective of culture, identity and social structure; Self-image and identity are constituted from institutional norms, images and signs provided by social life.[9] Parliament can engage with civil society collectively and, when it does so, an individual's actions are not solely motivated by personal benefit but what is appropriate in a particular social context. This makes the decision to participate, in part, a reflection of the norms within their particular social grouping. Other theoretical perspectives are at play here too; communitarian theory suggests stronger identity with a particular community will result in a greater level of political participation. [10] Putnam argues that a decrease in social relations has resulted in a decrease in social capital.[11] This in turn causes a decline in political participation in general because strong social networks between citizens encourage engagement. Consider also the distinction between strong ties that exist amongst friends and family and the weak ties that exist between members of civil society more widely.
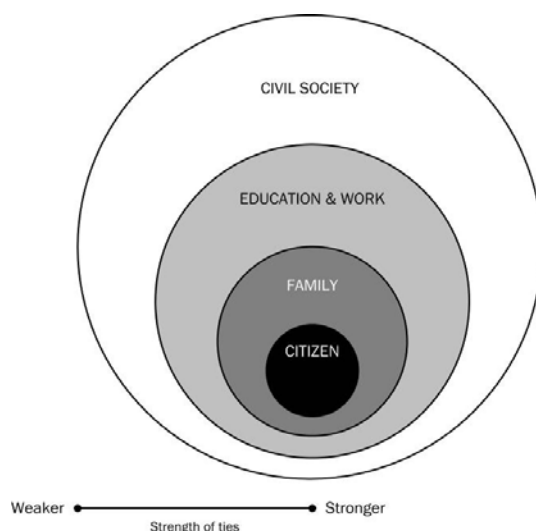
Figure 16: Varying strengths of ties in different parts of day-to-day life

As Figure 16 shows, as we move from the individual outwards, the strength of ties between citizens become weaker, representing multiple collections of acquaintances as opposed to

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8   A. Downs (1957), *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper). p.5.
9   P. A. Hall & R. C. R. Taylor (1996), *Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms*. p.15.
10 J. J. Rousseau (1968), *The Social Contract* (London: Penguin). p.149.
11 R. D. Putnam (1995), 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital', *Journal of Democracy* 6(1). p.67.

the close-knit family group towards the centre of the diagram. Yet it is these weak ties that bring together otherwise disparate individuals around shared beliefs.[12]

Whilst an individual will be more biased towards one approach given a certain situation and point in time, all of the above approaches are relevant to the issue of democratic engagement. The individual's point of motivation and world view will determine at what level and place engagement is likely to be most effective. For an individual focused on self, a direct approach could work most effectively, however, where the focus is on community outcomes then working with local community groups is clearly more appropriate. It is important to be conscious of these when exploring our new framework for different stages of motivation and engagement, considering the possible motivations for engaging with Parliament. The power of weak ties highlights the importance of maintaining long term contact across social networks.

We identified a number of groups that are not being reached through current touch points between Parliament and the public. Those who are not members of interested and organised groups or experts in a particular field, those with low levels of internet access, those without a working understanding of the policy process, young people who are outside formal education or are disengaged from their studies, the geographically remote and those who feel alienated from mainstream political culture were all groups identified as being missed by current engagement initiatives for a variety of reasons. It is important for us to be mindful of who is currently not being reached when exploring a framework that works to increase levels of engagement between Parliament and these groups. We identified six key themes that emerged from the research:

- The importance of face-to-face contact;
- An interest in becoming more informed about politics and Parliament;
- A strong feeling that Parliament is not listening;
- The importance of the local area;
- The importance of Parliament coming out to the people; and
- The utility of placing information about Parliament in accessible places where citizens live out their daily lives.

Through this research, it has become clear that it is vital:

- To know where information on Parliament can be found in terms of where people are and the existing communities, groups and media that they are engaged with;
- That the information produced is accessible, tied to local issues and connects the work of Parliament with the public's wider interests.

In order to achieve a stronger process of participation, it has become clear that:

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12   R. D M. Granovetter (1983), The strength of weak ties: A network theory revisited, *Sociological Theory*, 1 (1983), pp.201-233.

- The language used should be simple and existing processes must be explained better; and
- There must be a greater acknowledgement of people's views, along with a better feedback process.

The Process of Engagement for 'Hard to Reach' Groups
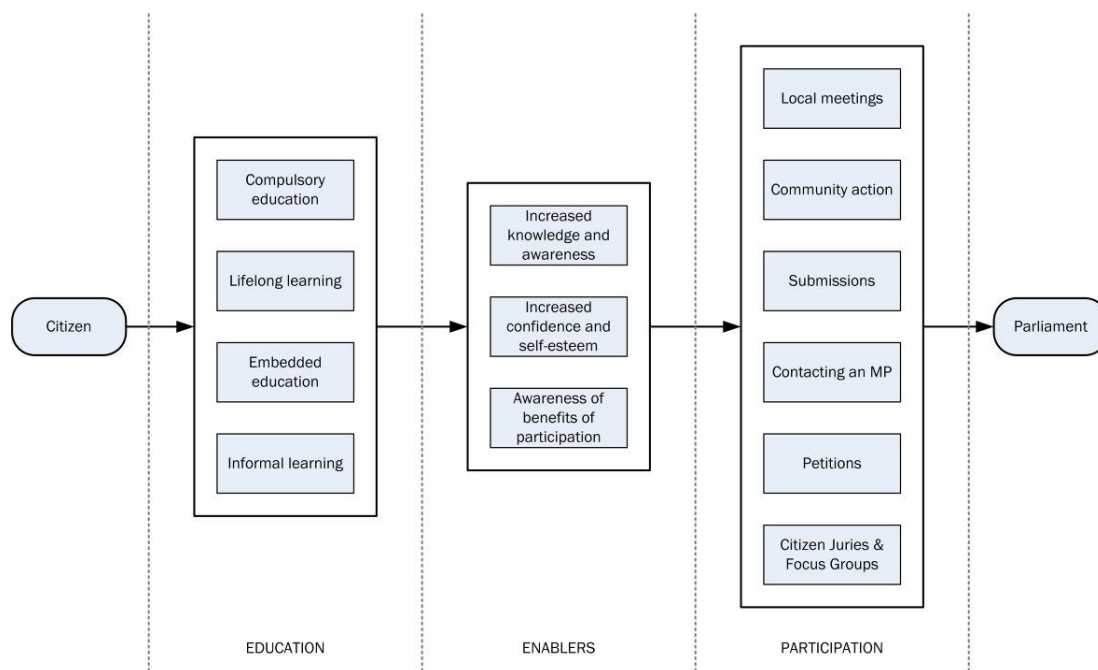
Figure 17: The process of engagement

Figure 17 shows three key stages between the citizen and Parliament in this new framework for engagement. These are:

- The education processes;
- Enablers (motivational factors); and
- Participation.

For someone who would be considered to be 'hard to reach', the participation stage is, to an extent, dependent on acquiring enablers as a result of increased levels of education. During the education stage (which can occur at any time and is also non-linear in nature), the citizen is able to build up their knowledge and awareness of politics and Parliament using one (or more) of the methods listed in Figure 17. This can be through traditional compulsory education in schools, through embedded learning as part of other training, through lifelong learning courses or through more informal ways of learning and knowledge gathering and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. Through these methods of education, the citizen then builds up enabling factors, including an increased level of knowledge and awareness, increased confidence and self-esteem and an awareness of the benefit of participation. These factors are all enablers of increased participation. This can be through a

number of different methods, including more traditional means such as contacting an MP or through the use of petitions or making submissions but can also potentially occur through new, localised methods of engagement suggested as part of this framework, including Citizen Juries and focus groups and through local meetings with a feedback element.
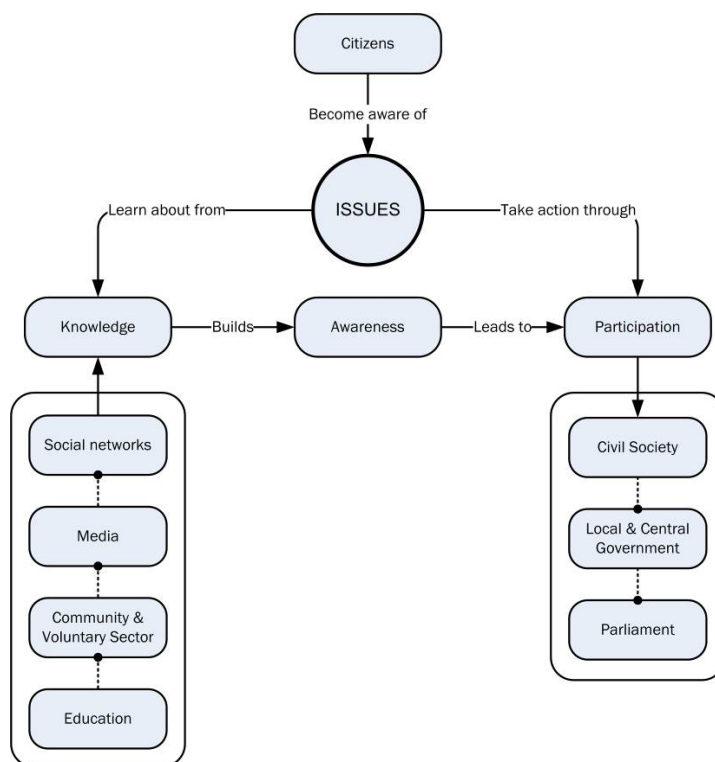
Figure 18: An overview of the framework for engagement

Figure 18 shows the knowledge component of the framework, which is built up through membership of social networks, media consumption; through intervention from and with the community and voluntary sector and through traditional methods of education. This helps to build levels of awareness amongst citizens, which can then lead to increased levels of participation amongst citizens and within civil society more generally with both local and central government and with Parliament itself. This research strongly re-enforces the importance of local issues and direct relevance to citizens as a key motivation for them becoming more involved and engaged with Parliament and politics.

The Education Process

Throughout the focus groups and in the survey, some respondents have indicated that they would like to have more knowledge of politics and Parliament. It was suggested that in order to get those from 'hard to reach' groups to communicate with Parliament, it is important that they have a minimum level of political literacy in order to feel confident to communicate their views. It was also suggested during the focus groups that citizens would be highly unlikely to engage with Parliament with little or no information or knowledge about how Parliament works or what it does. The first major part of this new framework for

engagement is a multi-faceted process of educating the citizen in politics and Parliament. It is expected that this will produce the following benefits:

- Increasing knowledge and awareness of politics and Parliament;
- Increasing the citizen's confidence; and
- Helping the citizen to understand how engaging with Parliament will benefit them.

Through gaining these benefits, the citizen will perceive a reduced cost and higher perceived value from engaging with Parliament, making them more likely to do so. This can be through one of the more traditional methods or through one of the new localised methods explored below.

The Role of Secondary Education

Political literacy education in the secondary curriculum has the potential to impact by helping young people gain an understanding of how politics and Parliament work, supported by the work of the PES and other organisations mentioned in this report. A number of the younger respondents in this research suggest that many are unlikely to make the effort to learn more about politics and Parliament unless it is compulsory (unaware that it already is). We make the argument that more effective political literacy education in schools is needed because, over the long-term, it raises awareness and knowledge and can be tied in holistically with broader aspects of students' lives. However, current weaknesses in the delivery of the political literacy education in many schools mean this potential is unfulfilled. This step, whilst important, does not address those who are not involved in compulsory education.

Embedding Political Education

Many of those in 'hard to reach' groups missed out on secondary-level political literacy education for a variety of reasons and we cannot rely on this as the sole vehicle for civic education. This framework proposes a localised, embedded approach to educating citizens about Parliament, its work and how to interact with it. Along with schools and colleges, the community and voluntary sector and lifelong learning programmes (such as local community education providers) can play a significant part in educating the public in a timely way. Mindful of the findings in this research with regard to partisanship and bias, those delivering this information and training must be trusted, impartial figures. This could be accomplished by training those who work and volunteer in local community centres to educate visitors about how politics and Parliament work (this is already done to some extent by Parliament but there is clearly scope for expansion).

It is also the case that lifelong learning programmes can help to educate people who would otherwise not be in a position to learn more about how Parliament works. Working with lifelong learning providers to add relevant, topical content on Parliament to their courses would help embed Parliament and politics into other areas of people's lives. As an example, someone who is training to be a youth worker or taking a food hygiene course might take a

unit on politics and Parliament focusing on how the legislation relevant to their work was created and the interest and impact Parliament continues to have in their chosen field. This would help show the student how the work of Parliament affects their career and what legislation is relevant. At the same time, it would help to make Parliament and politics appear more relevant and act as a bridge to better inform and connect citizens.

Informal Learning

Engagement generally occurs through issues, so it is important to ensure that citizens are sufficiently resourced to respond to issues that they feel strongly about. A further part of the education process, therefore, involves informal education. Here, citizens can become more informed about politics and Parliament not through any formal methods of education but instead through self-teaching or simply through information being picked up as part of one's day-to-day life or through conversations within their networks.

> Social networks (online and offline), the internet and public libraries are key resources and sources of knowledge but the key to activating these is the availability of a trigger mechanism. For example, a citizen might become aware of an issue that affects them and through this interest, come across a leaflet about Parliament. They might then choose to seek out further information through their networks, local resources and the internet.

Such mechanisms help people become more aware and knowledgeable about politics and Parliament and as a result their marginal potential to engage with Parliament will increase. This is reflected well in the concept of social network membership, where citizens absorb information as a result of increased levels of participation with social groupings that they self-identify themselves with. This research has shown that information will only be consumed when it is presented in a way that is convenient (in terms of time and place). In order to encourage informal education, triggers must be provided in a variety of different ways and locations, including, for example, disseminating leaflets via supermarkets or through advertising space in local newspapers.

The Media

The media plays a key supporting role in this framework. The mainstream media fails to reach a number of different groups as a result of low levels of parliamentary coverage on television, radio and in newspapers (of which circulation is decreasing) and a negative perception of television coverage (and political reporting in general). However, the media does play some role in increasing political knowledge amongst citizens and this should not be disregarded as part of our framework for engagement.

There is a strong case for Parliament proactively seeking to work with the next generation of journalists to educate them better about the role and work of Parliament and how citizens can engage with it. Parliament does this to some degree through journalistic training courses but it might work more closely with journalism training colleges across the country to develop internship, awards or scholarship programmes to raise awareness of and interest

in the work of Parliament among potential political correspondents of the future for whom such a placement or prize would be of both personal and career development value.

One factor that is particularly important will be the internet as a resource for learning. Whilst there was little interest amongst participants during the focus groups, the survey results showed that the largest proportion of respondents (73%) wanted to find out more about a national political issue through the internet. This suggests that whilst the internet might not be a suitable primary tool for engaging with Parliament for the bulk of those who would be considered to be 'hard to reach', it is likely that the internet can play a role as a secondary learning resource for citizens, supplementing other educational initiatives.

The Participation Process

The second key process that makes up this framework is to increase levels of communication between those from 'hard to reach' groups and Parliament. This could be accomplished partly by harnessing existing conventional methods of communicating citizens' views to Parliament but also through new, localised ways for the views of ordinary citizens to be fed back to Parliament. Combining current methods and developing new methods has the potential to help encourage greater levels of engagement from those in 'hard to reach' groups.

Increasing the Use of Conventional Methods of Engagement

As part of the process of education described above, citizens will gain an understanding of how to make submissions to select committees[13], how to have petitions delivered, how to contact their local MP and what their local MP is empowered to do for them. Although in the focus groups there did not seem to be a large appetite for using these methods to engage with Parliament it is quite possible that this was because people were largely unaware of how the more traditional methods of engagement worked and how they would go about utilising them. As Figure 19 shows, some new processes of participation, introduced as part of this framework, take place in community spaces where citizens already are. Here, citizens and Parliament engage and provide feedback to each other using a two-way discursive process.
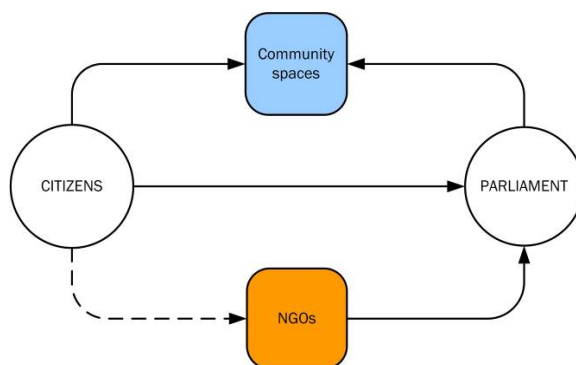

Figure 19: Participation in community spaces

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13   Although we note here that this process itself is in need of simplification and needs to be made more accessible to a wider public as at present it is a significant barrier.

Developing New Ways to Engage

One of the most popular ideas amongst focus group participants was the idea of participation and engagement taking place locally. The role of the local MP cannot be overlooked in this; they are the primary point of contact between local communities and Parliament and this role could be better resourced in terms of being able, on the one hand, to provide information and resources to citizens and, on the other, working more closely with parliamentary staff in terms of broader education and outreach strategies.

Enhanced local connections can also be achieved through Parliament conducting local meetings in local areas. For many, this appeared to be an arena that they would be comfortable in, allowing them to discuss issues that are relevant to them with their peers. These could be conducted in town halls, local community centres or anywhere that is convenient for citizens to attend. The results of these meetings would then be fed back to Parliament using a reporting mechanism that regularly gives updates on people's current views relating to different topics in different parts of the country.

Citizen Juries and focus groups could be conducted to better understand views on particular issues, allowing citizens to discuss the issues that are important to them. When done locally this allows for a broader range and perhaps more in-depth participation. This research also illustrates that, whilst NGOs and pressure groups are somewhat effective in engaging with those in Parliament (and Government), the connection between these groups and ordinary citizens has been shown to be relatively limited. Much as this framework suggests that more localised approaches to engagement could be adopted by decision-makers, it is also the case that NGOs and pressure groups could also have a more localised focus, allowing for more feedback from their members and supporters (perhaps through focus groups or local meetings), becoming an effective intermediary between those in 'hard to reach' groups (and the public more widely) and Parliament.

New Web2.0[14] technologies make the internet a more interactive and engaging space. Parliament already uses the internet and Web2.0, but developing web content and applications need not be the preserve of Parliament. Numerous examples already exist of third-party civil society led internet projects that attempt to provide greater access to and transparency of Parliament and its work. Yet much of the information that Parliament produces remains protected and locked-in. Opening up access to published information by treating it as data and by ensuring that it is made available wherever possible allows for innovation to emerge from civil society, no longer relying on the resources of Parliament to develop new content, interfaces or applications. This democratising of data is inherently important in extending the reach of democratic engagement. Open access data can be used to promote knowledge, awareness and engagement and can support the sorts of organisations (formal and informal) that the public are already connected with to better connect their work with that of Parliament.

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14   New internet technologies that are based on principles of participation, sharing and user-generated content, such as social networks.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

This research clearly shows that engaging more effectively with 'hard to reach' groups will not be achieved through a single 'big bang' change; it requires a number of smaller step-changes, many of which Parliament can initiate or suggest but cannot necessarily lead. To an extent, Parliament is already working towards implementing some of the changes suggested as part of this framework. There is clear scope for the extension of the current outreach and education work of Parliament as well as for the development of new initiatives.

Parliament

Parliament is itself a barrier to engagement because of arcane traditions and the complexity of its processes and procedures, many of which require significant amounts of knowledge and understanding not possessed by most of the public. **It is recommended that easy-to-read information on Parliament's business and Parliament's relevance to local life and topical issues is made available in a number of different formats (print and digital).**

This will help promote levels of informal education amongst current 'democratic outsiders' by providing resources for citizens to educate themselves at various points in their lives and by providing triggers for citizens to begin educating themselves using other resources. We commend attempts to reach out beyond the normal engagement channels, which all too often assume that the public must come to Parliament and **we recommend that efforts to engage in third-party internet spaces (such as MumsNet and MoneySavingExpert.com) are significantly extended – becoming the norm, not the exception.**

We recommend that Parliament reviews the findings of the Procedure Committee report on petitions with a view to revising the petitions process and introducing some form of cost-effective e-Petitioning system. Parliament should also consider how it can promote the acceptance of third-party generated ePetitions in an appropriate open digital format.

In terms of public experience of Parliament, **we suggest that Parliament could consider a 'shadowing' scheme where interested young people and community leaders are able to spend a few days in Parliament 'shadowing' Members or staff to see more of how it functions and to gain familiary with it. Extending this, we also recommend consideration of longer internships within Parliament that could be made available to school-leavers and young people from 'hard to reach' communities.** Graduates of these schemes would not simply build personal knowledge but would become ambassadors for Parliament in their own communities.

Media Engagement

As the survey findings suggest, the primary ways in which people want to find out about what is going on in Parliament are the internet, television and newspapers. We suggest a focus on trying to reach citizens through media that they are already familiar with and interact with regularly in their day-to-day lives but also note that, for young people in particular, contact and awareness might come indirectly through social networks rather than directly from the media.

Use popular newspapers to advertise when public consultations are being held or submissions are being called for (as the Australian Parliament already does). These need to provide links to easy-to-access resources that can demystify the process of engagement such that people feel more inclined to take part. We cite the example of the New Zealand Parliament, where the submission process has been made open, flexible and simple.

Identify opportunities to create 'advertorial' or 'feature' type material for popular newspapers and magazines on life in Parliament (building interest) that can explain in lay terms how the public can take part (building opportunities to engage). Focusing this around specific public interest topics would further enhance the propensity to engage.

Parliament already uses YouTube but the material often lacks mass appeal.[15] **We recommend that short videos explaining how Parliament works are produced using 'real people' (or celebrities) who are recognisable to the target audience (not Members or officials). These short videos must be approachable, accessible and – if they are to engage – most likely humorous.** For an example of how this can work, see the '*Pola Bipola*' videos created by Chilean Deputy Ramón Farias.[16] It is possible that videos of this nature will be virally distributed on social networking sites and via email as part of people's day-to-day use of the internet. Again, citizens would be reached through a medium that they are familiar with and also interact with on a regular basis.

We note recent developments in the US Congress to provide members with near-live video footage and the tools to produce short clips for their own repackaging and redistribution and recommend this to Parliament. **Video footage from the chamber (and the tools to manage it) should be easily available to Members to repost on their own blogs and websites.**

Television also offers the opportunity to develop strong engagement messages through a campaign-based approach, targeting both citizens and third-sector organisations. **Officials should seek to work with television production companies to develop positive storylines about Parliament and politics in popular soap operas and by looking for**

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15 A notable exception is the trailer for the 'Lights, Camera, Parliament!' film competition on Parliament's YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/user/UKParliament#p/c/03FFE1F0B34AA057).
16 R. Farias *Official website*. Retrieved 26/10/2010 from www.ramonfarias.cl

opportunities to feature the work and role of Parliament on popular chat shows, such as Loose Women and the One Show. The use of television in this way could act as way of providing informal education to the citizen about how Parliament works and about aspects of recent parliamentary business.

Parliament should also proactively seek to work with the next generation of journalists to educate them better about the role and work of Parliament and how citizens can engage with it. Officials should approach journalism training colleges across the country to facilitate discussions about how they might better support those training modules which cover politics and government. Parliament could develop an internship, award or scholarship programme(s) to raise awareness of and interest in the work of Parliament among trainee journalists for whom such a placement or prize would be of both personal and career development value.

Digital Engagement

As this report has shown, the internet is an important communication and engagement channel and Parliament has become an effective user of the internet and has extended its reach beyond the traditional push-based media into the social media space through YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and others. We fully endorse the importance of these channels and recommend going further in order to link up with and build on the suggestions made elsewhere in this report about the importance of Parliament going out to engage with the public in their own community through timely and local access to information. However, we note that agreeing an 'institutional' voice for social media channels is an issue for Parliament.

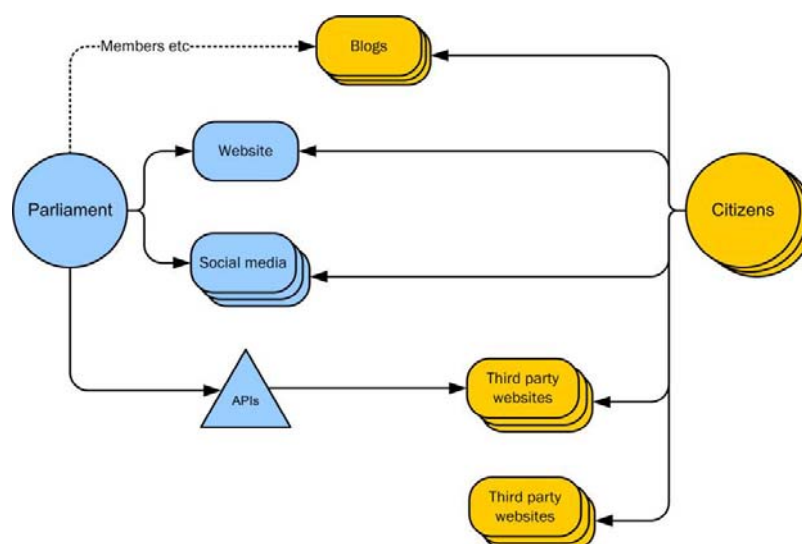Figure 20: Web-based parliament to citizen data flows assuming open data provision

Projects such as Lords of the Blog show that a space not directly within Parliament's web estate can successfully engage new audiences and examples such as TheyWorkForYou show a demand, albeit a niche one, for parliamentary information. We recommend that all published information be treated as data and made available in open machine-

readable formats and that appropriate application programming interfaces (APIs) be provided wherever possible to enable third-party websites to access, use and 'mash-up' Parliamentary data.

To further facilitate the effective re-use by citizens of what is in effect public data, the above also requires consideration of the restrictive use of Crown Copyright (and the need to reform historical cultural attitudes to publishable information). In this regard we note the moves made by the Australian and New Zealand Parliaments and **further recommend that all information produced by Parliament, wherever possible, be released under at least an open Creative Commons licence or, going further, a 'no known rights' statement or the Open Government Licence for public information.**[17] This in turn creates new opportunities for collaborative content building, delivery and engagement.

Local Engagement

It is clear from this research that an important conduit for many citizens is through already familiar local networks and community groups. **We wholly endorse the local partnerships approach taken by Parliamentary Outreach and recommend that this is extended, particularly taking advantage of the existing relationships that MPs have in their constituencies and the presence of active local third-sector organisations and local government agencies.** In trying to embed Parliament and encourage engagement in places where citizens already come together, it is likely that those in 'hard to reach' groups would be more capable of engaging. As an example, Parliamentary Outreach has previously solicited select committee submissions from community groups. This should be extended, as it encourages participation in a localised fashion, allowing people to engage from their usual community spaces.

As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, high-quality education plays a key role in this new framework, facilitating increased levels of knowledge about politics and Parliament for students. Parliament's Education Service works to facilitate this and has grown steadily in the past few years. However, the PES' work should be extended still further. **Providing more training to teachers on Parliament and democracy and continuing to provide high quality teaching resources through the Parliamentary Education Service will help to encourage the education component of the new framework and as a result, will also help to encourage the participation component of the new framework.**

We also believe that in the longer term strategies are needed to encourage the wider embedding of political literacy education within both the secondary and tertiary curricula, including vocational training and apprenticeships. This needs to be tailored to the course of study, relevant and accessible and we note the current thinking within the South African Parliament for such training at the technical and vocational level.

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17 National Archives Open Government Licence. Retrieved 29/10/2010 from
    www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the development of new methods of participation, allowing the public to discuss issues that are relevant them in a local setting amongst their peers would also work to promote engagement between 'hard to reach' groups and Parliament. We have already recommended the extension of online evidence taking and discussions, piloted in the last Parliament. This is an important part of re-shaping access to Parliament so that it can occur where, when and how it suits the public. This research highlights the importance of localised engagement so **we further recommended that Parliament investigates the use of Citizen Juries and local meetings in order to obtain and feed back a wider set of the public's views to Parliament beyond current committee-based evidence gathering.** Such fora would create spaces for the deliberation of emerging issues, where people can address the issues that they care about with people that they are familiar with and in a place that is familiar. This fits well with the idea of Parliament coming out and meeting the public where they are comfortable and significantly reduces the cost of participation for citizens.

Finally we recommend that **Parliament proactively develop a wide-ranging national network of strategically placed educators/ambassadors at local and regional level who can actively disseminate information and knowledge in their own community spaces and workplaces**. Parliament has tended to focus on supporting teachers as holders of knowledge and information but it is vital to look beyond the classroom to engage with 'hard to reach' groups. Parliament's Outreach Service already provides training sessions for interested individuals and community groups on a regional basis. However, a sectoral approach is needed that seeks to identify and approach strategically placed, well respected individuals/organisations with community influence whose work brings them into direct and regular contact – for example, local faith leaders at places of worship with heavy BME attendance or the youth workers from our focus groups.

PART 3 – BACKGROUND

6 PARLIAMENT AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Previous Hansard Society research has highlighted the difficulties that exist when trying to engage the public in the work of the Westminster Parliament. There is widespread lack of knowledge about how Parliament works and a parallel lack of interest in politics. Participation remains low, as does the public's satisfaction with politics, politicians and Parliament.[18] This has been compounded by the reputational damage inflicted by the expenses scandal and a possibly related decline in the perceived impact that Parliament has on our everyday lives. Improved public engagement is seen by both the House of Commons and the House of Lords as being at the core of their strategic goals to 2015. Both Houses recognise the need for a robust, multi-faceted engagement strategy that can *strengthen* Parliament's reputation with the public, *enhance respect* for and *trust* in it as an institution. This in turn could make their work more accessible to the public, foster greater understanding and *appreciation* of Parliament's work and lead to greater participation.[19]

Parliament has invested significantly in promoting a wide and innovative range of on- and offline informational, educational and outreach activities for a variety of audiences. These largely outward facing initiatives are invaluable but the balance of thinking around public engagement within Parliament has begun to change. More recent recommendations, particularly from the Wright Committee, propose that the engagement agenda must shift focus 'towards actively assisting a greater degree of public participation'.[20] This is tacit recognition of the need to move from primarily informational modes of engagement to more participatory forms. In the future, Parliament's public engagement strategy must focus on both outward communication and inwardly directed participatory models. This echoes a broader political agenda articulated by the coalition government, with its focus on localism, devolved decision-making and community empowerment, including greater public access to Parliament through a Public Reading Stage for bills and ePetitions.

Parliament has got better at engaging with the 'already engaged' but what of those who remain disengaged? Public knowledge, interest and involvement in politics remain skewed in terms of gender, age, class and ethnicity. Men, older people, more affluent social classes and people from white ethnic backgrounds remain disproportionately more politically engaged. A significant number of individuals, communities and social groups do not engage with Parliament (or with politics in general for that matter) and remain 'hard to reach'. The reasons for this exclusion are complex and nuanced. Such a situation is a serious

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18 Hansard Society (2011), *Audit of Political Engagement 7* (London: Hansard Society); A. Brazier, S. Kalitowski & M. Korris (2008), *Removing Barriers to Engagement* (London: Hansard Society); A. Williamson (2009), *Digital citizens and democratic participation* (London: Hansard Society); B. Allen & A. Williamson (2009), *Parliament 2020: Visioning the Future Parliament* (London: Hansard Society).
19 Text in *italics* indicates Parliament's emphasis, not the author's.
20 House of Commons Select Committee (2009), Rebuilding the House, HC 1117, p.6.

concern for anyone attempting to improve parliamentary engagement. Unless these 'hard to reach' groups can be brought in to the fold, participation remains the exclusive preserve of the 'usual suspects' and decisions are influenced by those who are already privileged.

Parliament's Audiences for Engagement

Parliament has articulated a number of aims regarding how it goes about informing the public about the work and role of Parliament, promoting Parliament as an institution and describing why it should be valued and to listen to the public by seeking and responding to feedback.[21] There are five key groups in its target audience:

1. **Internal:** Members, Members' Staff, House of Commons and House of Lords staff;
2. **Westminster Village:** Individuals and organisations professionally engaged with the work of Parliament, including civil servants, NGOs, lobbyists, journalists and others;
3. **Democratically Active:** People who vote and take an interest in politics, policy and current affairs;
4. **Democratic Outsiders:** People not yet interested in politics, policy and current affairs; and
5. **Young People:** Both within the formal education system and informally.

And two further groups are seen as intermediaries:

6. **Teachers**; and
7. The **Media**.

We contend that groups one to three are already engaged and comparatively easy to reach. Young people too, so long as they are within the education system, are generally well catered for by Parliament in terms of education and outreach, either through visits to Parliament or via the provision of curricula resources or other educational initiatives. However, many young people are not receptive to actual engagement attempts and providing the opportunity is one thing, having young citizens make effective use of them is quite another. Furthermore, engagement with young people – both of school age and in the immediate 18+ age group – who are outside formal educational is even more problematic.

The fourth group identified by Parliament, the 'democratic outsiders' represent a different and distinct challenge for Parliament. This group is the primary focus of this research. According to our own research, Parliament's definition of 'democratic outsiders' as 'people not yet interested in politics, policy and current affairs' does in fact describe most of the population. However, not everyone who is uninterested in politics will necessarily be 'hard to reach' and some individuals might have a latent interest but lack the skills, resources or

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21   GIP (2008), *Engaging the Public: Business Plan 2008/9* (London: Group on Information for the Public).

knowledge to be able to engage at present. Furthermore, a significant number of young people in group five can also be classified as 'democratic outsiders'.

> Parliament's segmentation of target audiences is too broad; it does not provide sufficient granularity for effective consideration of 'hard to reach' groups.

The Practicalities of Engagement

Research regarding public attitudes to political engagement and participation suggests that public views are complex, contradictory and rarely uniform. Most people are not that interested in engaging with the political process, locally or nationally and, when they are, prefer options that demand little by way of sustained effort. As already noted, political participation, party membership and trust in the people and institutions of politics are at an all time low and have been declining since the 1960s.[22]

> One of the starkest findings from the Audit of Political Engagement is that 57% of the public do not want to be involved in national-level decision-making (and 55% do not want to be involved locally).[23]

This response hardly differs between genders and ethnic groups. Yet, the public remain nuanced about political engagement; one quarter draw a clear distinction between 'having a say' and 'being involved' in decision-making, wanting a voice to exercise influence but not necessarily expecting or wanting a greater level of involvement. As Fox notes, when politicians appear not to listen, the public feels that lack of influence in decision-making and what they value most are methods of engagement and participation that deliver their preferred policy outcome; altruistic views of politics and the policy process have a role but self-interest can be a more powerful motivating factor for many.[24]

Interest in the political process is not fixed and is not sufficient on its own to foster political engagement as a range of hurdles or barriers exist that must still be overcome regardless of interest. These barriers reflect a real or perceived lack of knowledge; the sense that involvement or participation will not make a difference; a disconnection from politics and an inability to find the necessary points of connection to sustain engagement; a feeling of distaste for the political process; and a profound sense that politics and politicians are remote and alien.

For members of 'hard to reach' groups, even those who might be interested in politics, these general barriers to engagement are compounded by their own specific barriers related to the very nature of their social exclusion, whether it is geographic, demographic, attitudinal or cultural. As a consequence, overcoming the hurdles placed in the way of

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22 C. Hay, G.Stoker & A.Williamson. (2009). Revitalising politics: A position paper. Presented at the Revitalising Politics conference London

23 Hansard Society (2011), *Audit of Political Engagement 8* (London: Hansard Society). p.77.

24 R. Fox (2009), 'Engagement and participation: what the public want and how our politicians need to respond', *Parliamentary Affairs* 62(4), pp.673-85.

engagement is an enormous challenge and will never be solved by a single 'big-bang' engagement initiative. It requires sustained, consistent engagement initiatives that offer citizens a variety of ways to learn, exercise influence and become involved, building up knowledge and trust, over a period of time.

Research tells us that there is a clear correlation between familiarity and favourability in terms of how politics and Parliament are perceived.[25] The more knowledgeable the public are about an institution, an individual or an issue, the more likely they are to view it favourably. Building on public interest, a desire to at least have a voice in the political process and to exercise influence if not necessarily involvement, there is scope to use the provision of knowledge and information as a springboard for their engagement with Parliament. For those who are not currently interested in Parliament or aware of the opportunities to engage with it, the challenge lies in ensuring that appropriate information is available in a range of timely and accessible ways and that the pathways exist from this through to greater engagement for those who wish to do so.

Theories of Engagement

Defining 'democratic outsiders' as 'people not yet interested in politics, policy and current affairs' suggests that everyone could be reached and engaged if only the right mechanisms and messages were harnessed. Whilst theoretically true, what we have said so far suggests that this is unrealistic given that a democratic deficit is linked to broader, fundamental and deep-rooted factors of socio-economic exclusion. Exclusion often results from multiple deprivations and is usually rooted in economic marginalisation, which in turn creates political marginalisation and polarisation and ultimately social marginalisation, as networks and opportunities for participation in society are lost.[26] Because of this exclusion and marginalisation, certain groups and individuals will remain extremely difficult if not impossible to reach from a practical standpoint.

What Makes a Group 'Hard to Reach'

There is no concrete definition of what constitutes a 'hard to reach' group, whether in the political context or any other, in fact such a definition is by its very nature contestable and fluid. A 'hard to reach' group is usually the product of multiple identifiable characteristics of deprivation or exclusion, of which there are a considerable number of possible combinations. The very fact that 'hard to reach' groups have diverse identifying traits makes them difficult to precisely identify and challenging to engage with, however, some broad characteristics include:

- lower socio-economic status;
- low levels of educational achievement;

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25   Hansard Society (2010), *Audit of Political Engagement 7* (London: Hansard Society); B. Hayward, T. Brunwin, C. Bassett, D. Elston & H. Lambert (2008), *Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2008* (London: Committee on Standards in Public Life).

26   A. S. Bhalla & F. Lapeyre (1999), *Poverty and exclusion in a global world* (Basingstoke: Macmillan).

- geographic location;
- disability; and/or
- ethnic and linguistic minorities.

There are also Invisible groups who are intrinsically hard to identify too, such as the homeless, sex workers, criminal groups and non-openly gay people.[27] In terms of public services, those who are underserved, such as minority groups, those slipping through the net or who are service-resistant are considered to be 'hard to reach'.[28] Whilst the term itself seems to suggest a degree of homogeneity this is seldom the case and it is important to recognise that within groups as many or more differences are likely to exist as similarities. It is important to resist over-arching essentialising attempts to ascribe likenesses to groups that do not reflect the lived experiences and realities of its members.[29]

> In the very broadest sense, 'hard to reach' groups can be defined as 'those who are inaccessible to most traditional and conventional methods for any reason'.[30]

In the context of this research, we have already seen that it is not only general factors of exclusion that affect being 'hard to reach' but attitudes, awareness and knowledge of politics and Parliament. Behaviour as a result of these attitudes has an effect on whether or not a group is considered to be 'hard to reach'. There are generally low levels of political interest and literacy; the most recent Audit of Political Engagement suggest only 17% of were 'very interested' in politics.[31]

There is a clear, causal link between interest and action. Those who are not interested in politics, who view political or social participation as a low priority, are less likely to engage or become involved in civic activity. In 2009, almost half of the British public had not taken part in any political activity in the last three years[32] and just over half were certain they would vote in an immediate general election.[33] As the level of involvement increases, the public's propensity to take part shrinks even further, with only 14% willing to express an opinion to a governmental or parliamentary consultation and only 4% actually doing so.[34] Of those who are willing to participate, they are overwhelmingly middle-aged, white, well-educated and

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27 T. Jones & T. Newburn (2001), *Widening Access: Improving Police Relations with Hard to Reach Groups* (London: Home Office). p.15.

28 P. Doherty, A. Stott & K. Kinder (2004), 'Delivering Services to Hard to reach Families in On Track Areas: Definition, Consultation and Needs Assessment', *Home Office Development and Practice Report* 15. p.11.

29 B. Guerin & P. Guerin (2007), '17 ways that 'community talk misguides research', in A. Williamson & R. DeSouza (eds), *Researching with Communities* (Auckland: Muddy Creek Press); S. Whitnell (1994), *Successful Interventions in Hard to Reach Groups* (London: Health and Safety Executive).

30 S. Whitnell (1994), *Successful Interventions in Hard to Reach Groups* (London: Health and Safety Executive).

31 Hansard Society (2011), *Audit of Political Engagement 8* (London: Hansard Society). p.64.

32 Hansard Society (2010), *Audit of Political Engagement 7* (London: Hansard Society). p.81.

33 Ibid. p.73.

34 Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *Audit of Political Engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission). p.48.

financially stable.[35] So why don't Britons engage? Lack of time is the main reason cited (for 32% of us), followed by a lack of interest (22%).[36]

> In Britain today, there are a significant number of people who are completely disengaged from the political process.

Only one third believe they can have any impact on the way the country is run. Contrast this with the 69% who see Britain's current system of government as ripe for improvement.[37] The political 'hard to reach' includes those with an inherent distrust of authority or who have had negative experiences dealing with authority. This group can form an aversion to communicating with public officials, making them challenging to engage with, as too are those who are unwilling to access public services.[38]

> Alienation from 'mainstream' political culture does not simply decrease the propensity to engage with Parliament, it increases the likelihood that individuals will be unaware of how to or even that options for engagement exist.

Citizens who feel that the way in politics is conducted, how it is reported on and how Parliament engages with citizens are not relevant to them present a significant challenge. It is unlikely that engaging them with Parliament would be the first step or an easy step in terms of democratic re-franchising. Their interest is more likely to be piqued by relevant, possibly local, issues: there is a symbiotic relationship between participation in the democratic process and everyday forms of civic engagement and in this connection lies opportunity.[39]

Institutional Barriers to Engagement

Individual and communal barriers to engagement exist but so do institutional and structural ones; Parliament itself, its role, processes, traditions and appearance, is for some a barrier to engagement, particularly when this is taken in the context of one or more of the pre-existing barriers discussed above.

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) comprises just 30 minutes of the parliamentary week, yet has the strongest public association with Parliament. Much less is known about Parliament's work beyond PMQs and it is understandable that the public might assume the bulk of

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35 For example, those educated to at least A-level standard are 10 times more likely to be willing to take part in a parliamentary or government consultation than those without any educational qualifications. See D. McHugh (2006), 'Wanting to be Heard but Not Wanting to Act? Addressing Political Disengagement', *Parliamentary Affairs* 59(3), pp.546-52. p.549.

36 Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *Audit of Political Engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission). p.50.

37 Ibid. p.87.

38 P. Doherty, A. Stott & K. Kinder (2004), 'Delivering Services to Hard to reach Families in On Track Areas: Definition, Consultation and Needs Assessment', *Home Office Development and Practice Report* 15.

39 R. D. Putnam (2000), *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster). & R. D. Putnam (ed) (2002), *Democracies in Flux* (New York: OUP).

Parliament's work was similar in style and function. Our Connecting Communities project found that the largely combative and negative tone of oral questions alienated people; it made them feel isolated and uninterested in what Parliament was doing.[40]

Politicians are seen as part of an exclusive group with whom the public have little in common. The under-representation of women and ethnic minorities in Parliament exacerbates this perception even further. Our Parliament 2020 project found that young people felt getting involved in politics was like 'mission impossible'.[41]

Parliament and the Media

The UK has seen a general and consistent decline in the coverage of politics and Parliament for at least the last 20 years. Outside of PMQs and the annual Budget statement, media coverage of Parliament is irregular, with questions and debates, legislative scrutiny and select committees receiving limited media attention.[42] The traditional reporting of proceedings has been superseded by political commentary, focusing more on opinion, gossip and humour. [43]

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40   Hansard Society (2004), *Connecting Communities with Parliament* (London: Hansard Society).p.11.
41   B. Allen & A. Williamson (2009), *Parliament 2020: Visioning the Future Parliament* (London: Hansard Society). pp.4-5.
42   R. Negrine (1999), 'Parliaments and the Media: A changing relationship?' *European Journal of Communication* 14(3), pp.325-52.
43   V. Gibbons (2007), 'Lights, Camera, Inaction? The Media Reporting of Parliament', *Parliamentary Affairs* 60(4), pp.700-8.

7 TOUCH POINTS

> A touch point is any way in which the public come into contact with information or take part in an activity.

This includes ways in which citizens feed into the policy-making process but also methods of educating the public about the work of Parliament. The scope of this project does not allow for an in-depth analysis of every single project or medium that ever involves interaction between parliamentarians and the public. As such, organisations and touch points have been grouped together where appropriate to allow for a broader analysis. Particular attention has been given to what Parliament itself is doing in order to directly engage citizens. We have only included methods of engagement where they are no more than one step removed from Parliament and citizens, in other words:
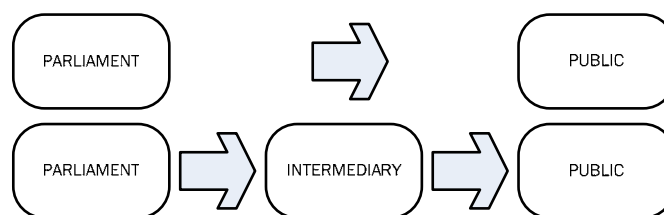
Figure 21: Direct and indirect touch points

The public can access Parliament directly through the legislative and scrutiny processes of the two Houses and via the Palace of Westminster as a visitor attraction and venue for events. They can also interact with Parliament indirectly through their MPs and, to a lesser extent, via peers using traditional forms of communication and increasingly by various online channels. They interact indirectly through the media and civil society. Parliamentary Outreach and the Parliamentary Education Service help to facilitate visits to Parliament, produce educational materials and run events and training courses throughout the UK.

Internal Parliamentary Functions

In addition to the media and communications services of Parliament, including its web services (discussed later) and the House of Commons and House of Lords Information Offices, which answer many thousands of enquiries annually from the public, the main points of contact between the public and Parliament are described below:

Parliamentarians

MPs and peers are a central conduit between Parliament and the public. The public can lobby parliamentarians on proposed legislation and in connection with their work scrutinising government. The public can contact MPs (primarily) to seek to raise issues in Parliament (via questions, debates or early day motions) and also co-ordinate petitions with MPs to be presented in the House of Commons. While much of the work of MPs in their constituencies is not engaging people with the work of Parliament, the visits of parliamentarians to schools, either by individual MPs or through the Peers in Schools programme, provides a structure for education, discussion and engagement on the work of Parliament.

Parliament Building

The Palace of Westminster itself is an important touch point for Parliament. As well as being an iconic destination for visitors who wish to simply stand outside to admire the architecture, public tours of the building are available (organised primarily via MPs' offices while the House is sitting, via the Tours Office during recess and via Parliament's Education Service for school groups) and of the Clock Tower (organised exclusively via MPs' offices). Additionally Westminster Hall, the Jewel Tower and Portcullis House are all open to the public free of charge during the London Open House weekend.[44]

The Official Report (Hansard)

The Hansard report provides a comprehensive print and online account of every speech given in both Houses of Parliament, details of votes and both written statements and ministerial answers to questions; it is published every morning covering the preceding day and followed by weekly and final reports. Whilst the report provides a full illustration of all arguments made in Parliament, repetitions, redundancies and obvious mistakes are omitted from the publication.

Legislative Process

The legislative process offers a number of opportunities for the public to engage with Parliament. At the most basic level the legislative proceedings in Parliament are open to the public, televised on BBC Parliament, streamed via Parliament's website and available to read in Hansard, either electronically or in print form. However, there are opportunities for more meaningful public engagement with legislation.

Pre-legislative scrutiny of draft bills offers the public a [theoretical] opportunity to consider and respond to proposed legislation. In reality, this happens rarely and, when it does, few members of the public are likely to even be aware of, never mind take advantage of this opportunity. The public can submit written evidence to committees undertaking pre-legislative scrutiny and there might also be the opportunity to engage via online

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44   See www.londonopenhouse.org

consultation forums.[45] Despite offering the potential for innovative ways of connecting with the public,[46] pre-legislative scrutiny is still very much the exception.[47]

Public bill committees, a recent innovation, provide a similar opportunity for the public to engage with the scrutiny of legislation by submitting written evidence. However the ad-hoc arrangements, short timescales and a lack of publicity make them challenging for the public to access, even more so than other parts of the parliamentary process.[48] The government is implementing plans for a 'public reading stage' for bills which should increase opportunities for public involvement in this process.

Select committee inquiries also provide an opportunity for the public to engage with Parliament by submitting evidence and attending hearings. Committees undertaking visits as part of their inquiries allow the public to interact with Parliament beyond the confines of the Palace of Westminster. Following on from a Hansard Society pilot, select committees increasingly use online forums to solicit evidence from members of the public, with the Liaison Committee describing them as 'an important means of information-gathering' for many committees. One interesting joint initiative with the Treasury Select Committee saw evidence gathered for an inquiry by utilising an external consumer website, MoneySavingExpert.com. This was viewed as being highly successful and there are plans to employ a similar method when gathering evidence for other select committee inquiries.

A lesser-known means of engaging with select committees is through the submission of petitions. Petitions to the House of Commons (and to a much lesser extent, the House of Lords) are now forwarded to the relevant departmental select committee and committees are encouraged to place them on their agendas. In most cases committees do not appear to have taken specific action in response to petitions received,[49] although the Business and Enterprise Committee has noted that information received in this way can trigger new inquiries or provoke new lines of questioning within existing inquiries.[50] A proposal is being developed to introduce ePetitions and to modernise the petitions process.

That small minority of the public that are familiar with them react well to the workings of select committees and view them as generally non-adversarial, well researched and not divided on party lines.[51] Our previous research has found that the public view committee meetings as more interesting than Commons debates, as MPs were perceived to be

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45 See for example, Joint Committee on the Draft Climate Change Bill (2006-07), *Draft Climate Change Bill*, HL 170. appendix 2: Summary of Online Consultation.
46 Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons (2005-06), *The Legislative Process*, HC 1097. p.11.
47 A. Brazier, S. Kalitowski, G Rosenblatt & M. Korris (2008), *Law in the Making: Influence and Change in the Legislative Process* (London: Hansard Society). pp.225-226.
48 Ibid. pp.222-223; J. Levy (2009), J. Levy (2009), *Strengthening Parliament's Powers of Scrutiny: An assessment of the introduction of Public Bill Committees* (London: Constitution Unit). pp.35-41 & 45-46.
49 House of Commons Liaison Committee (2008-09), *The work of committees in 2007-08*, HC 291. p.42.
50 House of Commons Business and Enterprise Select Committee (2008-09), *Work of the Committee in 2007-08*, HC 175. p.8.
51 Hansard Society (2004), *Connecting Communities with Parliament* (London: Hansard Society). p.10.

seriously discussing 'real issues'.[52] However, despite improved media profile in recent years, select committees still remain one of the least known and understood parts of the parliamentary process.[53]

Digital Engagement

A key part of Parliament's new engagement strategy has been to increase the use of interactive tools on the website and to increase the amount of information Parliament gets back from the public. Some forums will be gathering evidence from a specific group of people with expertise/interest in a particular area; others are relevant for everyone to contribute to. Some examples of forums used so far include:

- Traditional Retail Markets – April 2009 (Communities and Local Government Committee);
- People and Parliament – May 2009 (House of Lords Information Committee); and
- The Role of the Prison Officer – May 2009 (The Justice Committee).

As of May 2009 there were 63,600 unique visitors making 120,200 visits[54]. There are not huge numbers of comments on most of the forums but the comments are mostly informative and highly relevant to the subject being discussed. As this is about gathering evidence for good policy-making or evaluation of current laws then it is appropriate that the comments are more evidence-based and less discursive.

Allowing web forums to contribute evidence to committee enquiries is a valuable form of engagement and is good for effective policy-making and post-legislative scrutiny. It allows Parliament to listen to the viewpoints of a wider audience and feed their experiences into parliamentary procedure. It could remove barriers to engaging with committees and the less formal nature of the evidence gathering could mean that more people feel it is an appropriate way for them to influence politics. However to be effective, engaging and inclusive these forums need to be publicised to the right group of people, in advance and the forums should be open for a reasonable length of time to allow people adequate time to comment.

Outward Looking Parliamentary Functions

Whereas the previous section described processes and functions within Parliament that are inherently internal (albeit with external stakeholders), Parliamentary Outreach and the Parliament's Education Service warrant specific mention as the two services that have been established to build relationships and levels of engagement between the public and Parliament. A discussion of these is followed by a review of Parliament's digital touch-points

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52 Ibid., p.10.
53 S. Kalitowski (2008), *Parliament and the Public: Knowledge, interest and perceptions* (London: Hansard Society). p.5.
54 House of Lords People and Parliament Evidence 2008-09 p.119.

and a description of the way that the internet and particularly social media is used by Parliament and members.

Parliamentary Outreach

Parliamentary Outreach aims to increase awareness of the work and relevance of Parliament. It has regional officers based around the country and offers talks and free training sessions to organisations wishing to know more about Parliament. The Outreach service has found that its work is most successful (in terms of the numbers and diversity of citizens reached) when delivered in partnership with other organisations who promote civic engagement. It has worked with Sure Start centres, Citizens Advice Bureaux, YMCA and UK Online amongst others, allowing Parliament to reach people from marginalised groups such as adults with mental illness, the homeless, female prisoners and young people at risk of offending. In several cases Outreach has created opportunities for these groups to submit evidence to select committees and committee clerks are regularly involved in visits.

> A Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into knife crime came to the attention of a group of young people who then submitted evidence. Having done so, they were then invited to give evidence at the inaugural seminar for the inquiry.

Outreach can offer accredited training to business and third sector organisations and invites citizens to attend 'Get involved' sessions. Here participants learn about the work of Parliament and how they can get involved by focusing on topical issues that matter to them. Around 25 to 40 people attend a typical session, mostly from civil society organisations. The Outreach service is flexible, tailoring times and locations for its information sessions according to need. With certain groups Outreach has employed alternative ways of exploring relevant themes and subject matter, such as producing works of art.

During the first year of Parliamentary Outreach:[55]

- Over 75,000 people visited Outreach exhibitions.
- 12 regional web pages were created.
- 4 regional select committee visits were arranged.

Parliament's Education Service

Parliament's Education Service (PES) works with schools and parliamentarians in order to improve young people's understanding of Parliament and democracy. The PES has grown from five staff in 2002 to 21 in 2010 and the scope of its work has increased accordingly. Their resources and projects assist in delivering the political literacy elements of the citizenship and modern studies curricula in the United Kingdom and are provided free of charge. Many of the services provided involve young people and teachers visiting Parliament. The number of educational visits has increased from 11,000 in 2005-06 to

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55   Parliamentary Outreach (2009), *Annual Review 2009: Connecting Parliament and the public.* p.3.

36,000 in 2008-09.[56] A range of pupil visit programmes are offered to cater for young people of varying ages and abilities. Visits usually involve a tour of the Palace of Westminster and an interactive workshop. Some include a session with an MP or peer whilst others involve debates held in committee rooms. The visits are greatly oversubscribed and it is estimated that a further 40,000 young people visit Parliament through member-sponsored tours.

Following a recommendation from the House of Commons Administration Committee the PES has offered travel subsidies of up to 75% to state schools from remote constituencies since early 2009. As a result the proportion of visits from areas outside London and the South-East rose significantly and 80% of state schools who booked visits during the pilot period had not visited Parliament in the previous two years.[57] The PES also runs training sessions for teachers. They are able to spend a day in Parliament and attend a week-long Teachers' Institute professional development course. Travel costs, residential accommodation and most meals are covered for delegates of the Teachers' Institute. The course is popular and there are plans for it to be expanded. They also offer a range of online, print and DVD classroom resources and information about the work of the PES is available on the main Parliament website.

The work of the PES is expanding, with a purpose-built facility due to open in the Palace of Westminster in 2013. However, it is acknowledged that even then the parliamentary estate will only be able to accommodate visits from around 100,000 young people per year. The service is therefore enhancing its online presence. New resources such as iPhone applications and computer games have been developed and marketing and promotion have increased.

Parliamentary Website

The parliamentary website brings together information about Parliament and provides interaction with a range of parliamentary activities. It is a hub that delivers information about the institution of Parliament separate from its Members and the political parties; a non-partisan and unmediated channel of communication between Parliament and the public, featuring:

- Current business of Parliament – including legislation being debated, information about committees, research, inquiries and reports;
- Information about parliamentary process, the history of the Palace of Westminster, Parliament's Education Service;
- Information about MPs and Lords, what their roles are within Parliament and how to contact them;

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56 House of Lords Information Committee (2009), *First Report: Are the Lords listening? Creating connections between people and Parliament*, HL 138-II. p.122.
57 House of Commons Commission (2009), *Thirty-first report of the Commission, and report of the Administration Estimate Audit Committee*, HC 912. p.23.

- Ways to get involved with Parliament, watching or listening to material online and feeding into consultations on specific issues through forums, petitions and visits; and
- Links to a variety of social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr.

The online strategy has seen major improvements over the last four years that addressed the recommendations from the Puttnam Commission. The current business plan aims to improve engagement with the public by 2011, focusing on Parliament as a whole, rather than on the Houses, and emphasising the difference between Parliament and Government. The 2010 redesign of the website plays a key part in this new engagement strategy and ongoing improvements in usability are clear from the evaluations carried out so far.[58]

The website also has a vital educational role explaining the workings of Parliament. If this is available in easy to access and understand formats then attempts at engagement are likely to be more effective in the future.

Parliament's use of Social Media

Parliament has stepped beyond its own website, introducing (with the Hansard Society) Lords of the Blog and through social media, which it first adopted in mid-2008. Social media channels are effective for promoting public understanding of the work and role of Parliament and at reaching out to people and communities that would be less likely to visit the Parliament website.[59] Linking these social media channels back to Parliament's website is beneficial for engagement because they:

- Reach a different demographic (often younger) that might not engage with Parliament in any other way;
- Communicate with and within networks that are politically active but which don't necessarily see the benefit in engaging with formal politics;
- Allow Parliament to take advantage of low cost viral marketing to reach a greater number and range of people; and
- Present Parliament as a more dynamic, forward thinking institution.

Parliament is currently using:

- Facebook – 2,168 fans [26 November 2009]
- Flickr – 179, 430 views [11 June 2009]
- FriendFeed – 763 subscribers [26 November 2009]
- Twitter – 14,946 followers [26 November 2009] number of followers has almost doubled in 6 months
- YouTube – 85,579 Channel views, 731 subscribers [26 November 2009]

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58 House of Lords Information Committee (2009), *First Report: Are the Lords listening? Creating connections between people and Parliament*, HL 138-II. p.120

59 UK Parliament (2009) *Our social media stats, one year on.* Retrieved 26/11/2009 from parliamentlabs.wordpress.com/2009/06/11/ukparliament-social-media-stats/

Interactive ways of using social media are likely to have the most effect on engagement as people start to feel more positive towards Parliament once they have had some two-way interaction with it.[60] They are also more likely to return knowing they will get a personalised response to questions they ask and knowing that someone is listening.

MPs' Use of the Internet

MPs are increasingly likely to communicate their views to constituents collectively (via email newsletters, website or blogs) and individually (via email or Facebook).[61] Their focus remains largely on promoting themselves through reportage of their efforts in the House or constituency and by linking to ideologically similar commentators or websites. Digital adoption patterns for MPs mirror those of the general public, with email the primary tool in use in their offices. In the last Parliament, 92% of MPs used email, 83% had a personal website and 11% had blogs.[62] Whilst research has not been undertaken on the current Parliament, it would be anticipated that the figures would be slightly higher, particularly given the number of new Members elected in May 2010.

Two types of communication emerge as prevalent for MPs. Firstly, one-to-one communication via email and, secondly, traditional 'publishing' of information. Social media, sitting somewhere between these two approaches is becoming increasingly prevalent amongst MPs. The uptake of different digital media over the last three years varies quite dramatically, most notably social networking (such as Facebook and Twitter) grew from only 3% of MPs in 2005 to 23% of MPs in 2009. The trend is now levelling off, suggesting that adoption is likely to settle somewhere around the one-third mark, even given the boost of new Members in the current Parliament.

Table 7: MPs on Twitter[63]

Party	MPs on Twitter
Conservative	79
Labour	84
Liberal Democrat	29
Other	11

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60 A. Williamson (2009), *Digital citizens and democratic participation* (London: Hansard Society).
61 C. Leston-Bandeira (2007), 'Are ICTs Changing Parliamentary Activity in the Portuguese Parliament?' *Journal of Legislative Studies* 13(3), pp.403-21.; P. Norton (2007), 'Four Models of Political Representation: British MPs and the Use of ICT', *Journal of Legislative Studies* 13(3), pp.354-69.; T. Zittel (2003), 'Political representation in the networked society: the Americanisation of European systems of responsible party government?' *Journal of Legislative Studies* 9(3), pp.32-53.
62 A. Williamson (2009), *MPs online: Connecting with constituents* (London: Hansard Society). p.8.
63 Tweetminster (2010) *MPs on Twitter*. Retrieved 06/10/2010 from tweetminster.co.uk/mps/party/other
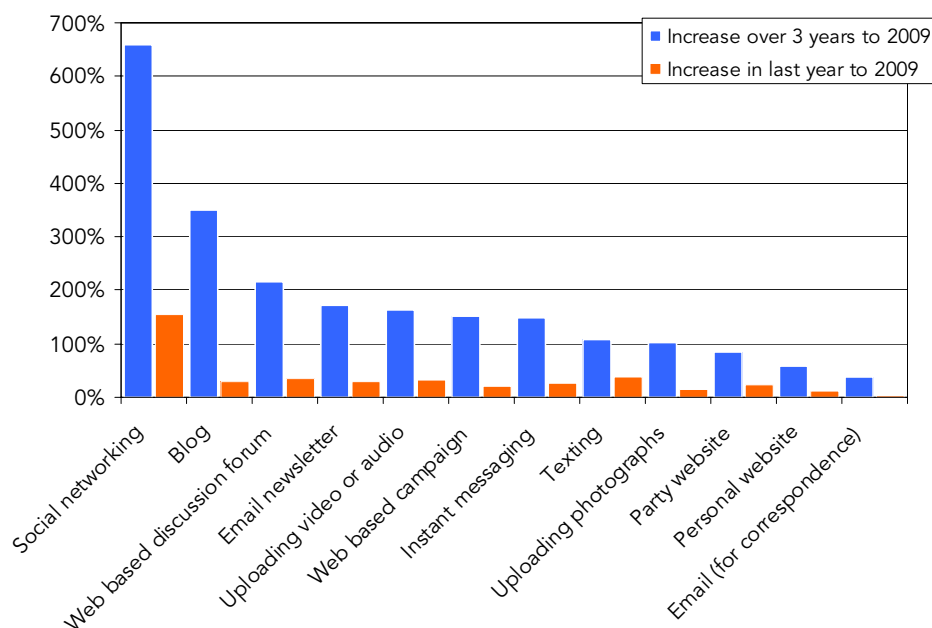
Figure 22: Rates of change in adoption patterns

In terms of touch points, email, websites and blogs are useful tools to engage citizens and to manage relationships with them, however, more traditional web-based platforms are now being rapidly superseded by social media tools, which have the advantage of large existing communities and higher levels of social capital. The close proximity of this engagement between MP and citizen makes digital channels important for constituents, however, the reach of digital tools can be highly unfocused therefore it can be difficult for MPs to determine how well they are reaching constituents as opposed to a wider politically-active section of the public.

Schools and Political Literacy

All pupils in formal education through secondary level learn about parliamentary democracy at some point during their studies, however, the way political literacy is delivered differs[64]:

- England – Citizenship curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4;
- Northern Ireland – Part of 'Local and Global Citizenship' strand for 11-16 year olds;
- Scotland – Modern Studies syllabus; and
- Wales – Personal and Social Education (PSE).

Links between parliamentarians and schools existed prior to citizenship education, with MPs making visits to schools within their constituency. As peers do not have a constituency they traditionally made fewer school visits but this has changed with the advent of the Parliamentary Outreach service and the 'Peers in Schools' programme. By March 2009, 187 visits had taken place, involving over 10,000 young people and around 80 peers.[65]

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64   At the time of writing the national curriculum is under review.
65   Ibid.

Educational Organisations

A number of educational charities are helping to increase engagement between young people and parliamentarians.

> The UK Youth Parliament has 600 elected MYPs (Members of Youth Parliament) aged 11-18. MYPs are elected in annual youth elections throughout the UK. Any young person aged 11-18 can stand or vote. In the past two years one million young people have voted in UK Youth Parliament elections.[66]

Following a vote by MPs, the UK Youth Parliament was allowed to sit in the House of Commons chamber for their annual debate in October 2009 – the first time anyone other than MPs had sat on the green benches for over 300 years. A number of MPs attended the debate. The Lords' chamber has also been used for debate. The UK Youth Parliament campaigns both at local and national levels on issues that are important to young people, a recent success being a planned change in the 'sex and relationships' curriculum in schools. In England, the UK Youth Parliament works with local authorities to organise elections. The Scottish Youth Parliament, the Funky Dragon in Wales and the Northern Ireland Youth Forum also serve similar functions in their respective countries.

The Hansard Society works with schools and colleges in order to increase awareness of the work of Parliament and promote engagement between young people and parliamentarians. For example, the HeadsUp online forum allows young people and decision-makers to discuss topical issues together, with a report produced at the end of each three-week debate and submitted to relevant select committees and government departments, allowing young people to feed into the policy-making process. The Hansard Society's Parliamentarians in Schools teachers' pack provides ideas and advice on organising a pupil-led visit from MPs and peers.

Other organisations exist that are attempting to involve the public more in democratic life and to encourage greater awareness and understanding of democracy, these include: the Citizenship Foundation, which is an independent charity that encourages and supports individuals to participate through education and their activities, and Involve, a not for profit organisation that links public institutions, communities and citizens nationally and locally as well as undertaking research on engagement and participation.

Civil Society

A large number of civil society organisations help to facilitate engagement between Parliament and citizens – these include non-governmental organisations, charities and voluntary groups, think tanks, pressure groups and interest groups.

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66 UK Youth Parliament (2009) *Youth Parliament website.* Retrieved 27/11/2009 from www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk/4655/index.html

Non-governmental Organisations and Pressure Groups

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and pressure groups play a number of different roles in influencing Parliament on behalf of citizens:

- Influencing the political agenda through public support for their aims or by directly persuading government to take (or not take) action;
- At the policy formulation stage, influencing the aims and objectives of government policy or policy instruments; and
- Nuancing policy implementation.

Just over one third of the public donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation in the previous three years to 2010.[67] Whilst this does not necessarily show membership levels as a whole or reflect the level of connectedness between NGOs and their members, it does suggest that a significant minority of the British population have participated indirectly through an NGO or pressure group that they have supported. This is in stark contrast to the falling membership of political parties.

Protest and Civil Disobedience

Parliament is 'the natural focus for the electorate to express its views'[68] and political protests, marches and various forms of legal civil disobedience, such as industrial action, are all legitimate methods for citizens to connect with Parliament and government. Indeed, many of the advances in social justice that we take for granted today originated not in the minds of politicians but in the actions of ordinary citizens putting pressure on politicians to the point where change becomes inevitable. Protest groups can be defined as:

> Groups of citizens who do not normally interact with governmental officials but who, under certain conditions organise an informal, issue-specific basis to make demands on public officials through pressure processes.[69]

Despite numerous recent examples of an institutional resistance to civil protest, any vibrant and effective democracy must by its very nature be made up not simply of passive citizens accepting the status quo but of a broad milieu of rebels, activists and change agents who can see injustices and are prepared to act to right them.[70] These can be instigated by well-established organised groups or, increasingly, they can be spontaneous and viral. The internet and mobile phone have become invaluable tools for organising protests, mobilising activists and publicising demonstrations. Generally speaking, civic participation in public demonstrations remains extremely low; only 4% had taken part in a demonstration, picket or

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67 Hansard Society (2010), *Audit of Political Engagement 8* (London: Hansard Society).
68 Human Rights Joint Committee. (2009). Seventh Report: Demonstrating respect for rights? A human rights approach to policing protest. HL 47-II/HC 320-II
69 P. D. Schumaker (1975), 'Policy Responsiveness to Protest-Group Demands', *The Journal of Politics* 34(2), pp.488-521.
70 B. Moyer (2001), *Doing democracy: The MAP model for organizing social movements* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers).; A. Williamson (2007), *A Model for Emergent Citizen-Focussed Local Electronic Democracy. Unpublished PhD.* (Melbourne: Monash University).

a march in three years to 2010.[71] This is not to say that such protests are not able to generate a profile and media interest, however, their ability to effect change at a policy level is debateable.

Mainstream Media

As noted in the previous chapter the media is consistently perceived to be the most influential institution on people's everyday lives. As such it is one of the most important – if not the most important – touch point between politicians and the wider public for it is through traditional media sources – newspapers, television and radio – that a majority of the public will learn about what is happening in politics and Parliament.

Despite changes in its reach and power and the encroachment of the internet, the media still holds significant influence on how the public perceive politics and whether they are willing to engage with it or not. For that reason it is a touch point that cannot be ignored in any attempt to remove the barriers to political understanding and re-engage the public.

Television

On average, Britons spend 225 minutes per day watching television, compared with 170 minutes listening to radio and 27 minutes per day using the internet.[72]
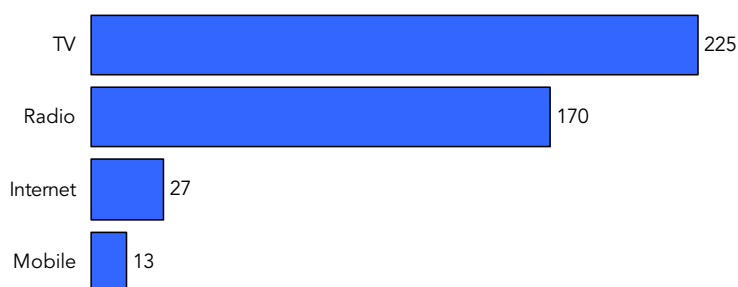
Figure 23: Average minutes per day spent using communication services (2009)[73]

Of the five main public, free-to-air television channels in the UK (BBC One, BBC Two, ITV1, Channel 4 and Five), 1,139 hours were dedicated to news and current affairs in the previous year, compared with 2,070 for drama, 2,015 for general factual and 1,330 for light entertainment and modern music.[74] This shows that both television and radio remain popular amongst the public, however, in terms of television at least, news and current events make up a relatively small part of programming and within that, coverage of Parliament is likely to be significantly smaller than total output for this programme genre.

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71 Hansard Society (2010), *Audit of Political Engagement 8* (London: Hansard Society).
72 Ofcom (2010), *Communications Market Report* (London: Ofcom).p.19.
73 Ibid. p.18.
74 Ibid. p.92.

Television is one of the most influential connecting points between people and politics with 76% of people getting information about politics from this source.[75] During the 2010 General Election, 9.7 million people watched ITV's first televised leaders' debate, falling to 3.6 million for the second, televised on Sky News and 7.4 million for the final debate on the BBC.[76]

Whilst BBC Parliament extensively covers the work of Parliament and its reach has increased since its launch (with the expansion of digital television), its viewing figures remain extremely low. The average number of daily viewers is 131,000 (a 0.2% audience share) and the weekly average 654,000 (a 1.2% share). In other words, the 'average' British television viewer watches one minute of BBC Parliament a week. More people watch the History Channel, the Sci-Fi Channel or More-4+1.[77]

The primary television touch point with Parliament for most is mainstream news; either on the BBC national news, local news or News Channel, ITN and ITV regional news, Channel 4, Five or Sky News. The main national news bulletins on the BBC attract four to five million viewers, on ITV it is over three million. By comparison, X-Factor attracts around 14 million.

Television viewing is inversely proportional to socio-economic circumstances and attracts a lower social status than magazines, books or the internet,[78] meaning those in the 'hard to reach' groups and those who are most politically disengaged could potentially be more heavily influenced by television than other groups, recognising here that we might be talking Jeremy Kyle, not Jeremy Paxman. In other words, such influence is more likely to be generated via popular programming such as daytime and primetime slots rather than niche, esoteric outputs. According to Ofcom, 63% of young people say that they use television to learn about politics and 55% thought that television covered the election in 2005 'quite well' (14% 'very well'). Seventy-five percent of young people thought that party election broadcasts were a useful and effective means through which to learn about politics.[79]

Radio

In 2007, 34% of people got their information about politics from the radio.[80] Popular politics programmes maintain large audiences. BBC Radio 4's the Today Programme reaches 6.6

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75 Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *Audit of Political Engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission). p.54.
76 D.Wring & S.Ward. (2010). The media and the 2010 campaign: The television election? In A. Geddes & J.Tonge, Britain Votes 2010. (London: OUP/Hansard Society). pp.217-248.
77 *Broadcasters' Audience Research Board weekly viewing summary*. Retrieved 14/11/2009 from www.barb.co.uk/report/weeklyViewingSummaryOverview?period_year[]=2009&period_month[]=10&period_week[]=25&button_submit=View+Figures&period[]=200910060125
78 P. Rasanen (2006), 'Consumption disparities in information society: Comparing the traditional and digital divides in Finland', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 26(1/2), pp.48-62.
79 Ofcom (2005), *Viewers and Voters: Attitudes to Television Coverage of the 2005 General Election* (London: Ofcom).
80 Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *Audit of Political Engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission). p.54.

million listeners, which compares favourably with Radio 2's Breakfast Show hosted by Chris Evans with an audience of 7.5 million. Again on Radio 4, Today in Parliament has seen its audience figures rise by 10% over the last year, now reaching an audience of around 500,000 people per edition and 1.1 million listeners over a week. The early morning Yesterday in Parliament (broadcast at 06:45) shares the large audience reach of the Today programme.[81] Talk show programmes also give people a chance to engage with political issues and sometimes feature parliamentarians, for example political blogger Iain Dale's evening programme on local London station LBC.

Programme	Audience (millions)
X-Factor (ITV)	14.0
Chris Evans Breakfast Show (BBC R2)	7.8
Today Programme (BBC R4)	6.6
National News (BBC1)	4.5
Mock the Week (BBC2)	3.0
Question Time (BBC1)	3.0
National News (ITV)	3.0
Loose Women (ITV)	1.2
Newsnight (BBC2)	1.0
Daily Politics (BBC1)	0.2
BBC Parliament channel	0.1
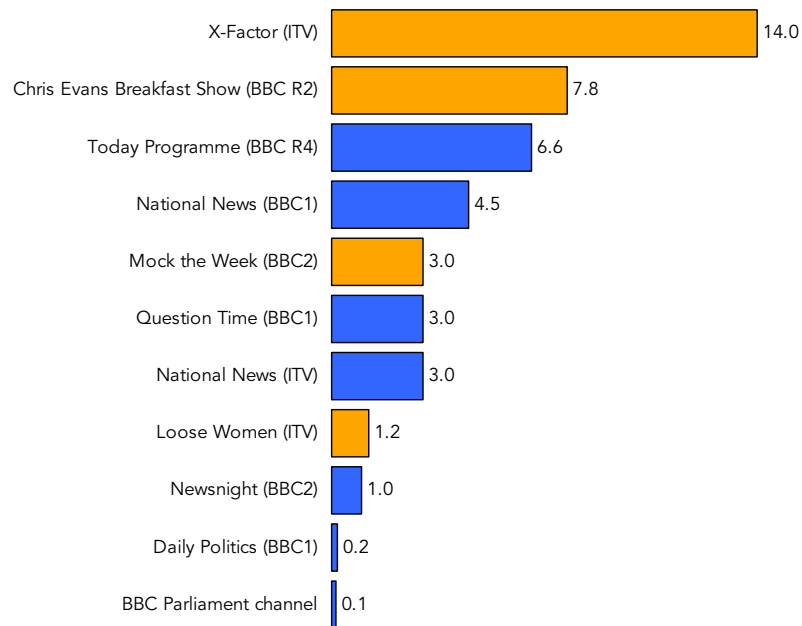
Figure 24: Audience figures for politics, current affairs and light entertainment programmes (millions)[82]

The Internet

Given the normative position of the internet in the lives of the majority of the British public, it is to be expected that there are many examples of how digital media can be used by organisations outside of Parliament to better inform and connect the public. The following section discusses three examples of this, the BBC's Democracy Live site, Public Whip and the MySociety's ground-breaking TheyWorkForYou website.

BBC Democracy Live

The BBC's Democracy Live website offers live and on demand video coverage of the UK's national political institutions and the European Parliament. It uses new technology that allows audio and video content to be searched for using key words and phrases, taking the user directly to the point in the content that contains the relevant phrase or words. This allows people to find the information they are interested in without having to watch or listen

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81 House of Lords Information Committee (2009), *First Report: Are the Lords listening? Creating connections between people and Parliament*, HL 138-II.

82 The audience figures for Today are per week, which suggests it would be marginally lower on a daily basis. The audience figures for BBC Parliament are daily figures for the entire channel.

to whole debates. Content can also be embedded elsewhere on the internet from BBC Democracy Live in its unedited format – however, Parliament doesn't currently allow footage of the House of Commons and House of Lords to be embedded elsewhere. This maintenance of control over footage by Parliament is not beneficial to public engagement. All the other legislative chambers of the UK allow footage of their proceedings to be embedded and this insistence on having control by Parliament makes it look out of touch and paranoid. This attitude is in some ways surprising because in focus groups carried out for the Parliament 2020 project,[83] parliamentary officials dealing with engagement and web strategy were very clear that they felt it was necessary and important for Parliament to allow its data and resources to be used by outside organisations to effectively engage the public. Not allowing video footage to be embedded on other websites is contrary to these aims, short-termist and overly risk-averse. We also note the work of other parliaments in this regard and particularly the US Congress' ability to provide members with near-live video footage and the tools to produce short clips for their own repackaging and redistribution.[84]

It is too early to assess what impact Democracy Live will have and how many people it will reach. It has the potential to be useful to a wide range of citizens as it does not assume high levels of knowledge about or previous engagement with Parliament. As it is within the BBC family it also has a sense of being independent of Government or party politics and is more trusted than the parliamentary institutions it covers.

Public Whip and TheyWorkForYou

Public Whip is a website that takes data from Hansard and sorts it so that the public can easily see which MPs voted in which divisions. There is plenty of frank and accessible information on the site to allow the public to understand more about how voting in Parliament works as well as to help interpret the data. When data has been regularly misinterpreted or given too much weight, e.g. attendance in divisions, they have removed this data set as it does not increase the public's understanding of voting in Parliament. It also lists information about rebellions and controversial votes. It gives summaries and explanations of what has been voted on and encourages the audience to interact with the site and improve the data available by annotating divisions. It also links to relevant parts of the Parliament website to enable users to view more information about a division. It allows users to search for information by the representative involved in the division or by issue and much of the data is represented visually as well as in list format.

Public Whip and TheyWorkForYou have a number of reciprocal links which allow people to view information about how their representatives voted then contact them and follow their actions over a period of time. TheyWorkForYou also allows constituents to sign up to hear from their MP and harnesses the power of a group of people to request information from their MP. This way of forming virtual relationships with representatives can promote ongoing

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83   B. Allen & A. Williamson (2009), *Parliament 2020: Visioning the Future Parliament* (London: Hansard Society).
84   Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives *HouseLive Beta*. Retrieved 26/10/2010 from www.houselive.gov

engagement between representatives and those they represent, improving the exchange of information between the two groups. TheyWorkForYou provides much more information about specific representatives including their speeches and recent appearances, their attendance record for committees, registered interests and expenses. However on TheyWorkForYou (as opposed to Public Whip) there is an emphasis on numbers rather than qualitative data that could be misleading. There is some supporting information about how to use the data but specific context is sometimes lacking, although the website often redirects to Public Whip.

Both Public Whip and TheyWorkForYou have established themselves as important channels to find out what is happening in Parliament as well as allowing citizens to then take action to contact their representatives. The projects, run by MySociety, appear to have successfully pushed Parliament towards rethinking the way it uses and represents its own data as prior to these kind of engagement projects Parliament was much less transparent about the information and very little was published in an accessible way online.

Who is not being reached?

Having identified which groups are marginalised and the means by which Parliament 'touches people', this next section briefly discusses the gaps that exist in the system and whether or not the sections of society that have been identified as 'hard to reach' are effectively provided for. This in turn provides an illustrative example of the extent to which the touch points are effective in connecting Parliament with different parts of society

The factors are procedural and perceptional – the way Parliament works creates a problem but equally the general public's perceptions of Parliament creates barriers too. Despite the rhetoric of wider engagement, examples within Parliament, such as public bill committees, are not engaging with a wider public. They in reality remain available to an elite afforded the knowledge, confidence and ability to access them. Despite attempts to broaden access to public bill committees and select committees, the reality is that these attempts are limited and remain isolated examples, not the norm. The process of engagement is hindered by the media, who provide very limited coverage of legislative scrutiny.

> Parliament claims to be listening but, to many, it still appears to be hard of hearing.

Parliament as an institution has made significant efforts to bridge the information gap, providing comprehensive resources on its website. Unfortunately this is more likely to be accessed by those who are already engaged and interested in politics; just over half of the visitors to the website appear to be located within the SW1 postcode district (which is remarkably similar to the approximately 50% of visitors to the Australian Parliament's website who come from Canberra).[85]

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85 Personal communication with UK Parliament staff, June 2010; and R.Missingham (2009). E-Parliament: Opening the Door (Canberra: Parliament of Australia).

The public sees parliamentarians themselves as a barrier and, in many ways they do not help themselves. Despite evidence that the public want conversations, MPs largely continue to work in 'broadcast mode' and are more likely to act in ways that are seen as partisan. Their role in informing and educating the public about Parliament is limited to facilitating school visits and sponsoring events for their constituents. The effectiveness of their public engagement capacity is heavily influenced by their party political role in the constituency and shaped by the, generally negative, media portrayal of politics and politicians. It is not helped by the lack of a clear 'job description' for the role, being left largely to the individual Member to shape their function.

Geography and mobility too are barriers, although mitigated increasingly by digital and media resources such as the parliamentary website and BBC Democracy Live. However, it is a reality that those who do not have easy access to central London, those who live in local authority areas with poor funding levels and those who have little interest and are disengaged from politics are unlikely to be well reached by these touch points.

Where public perceptions and attitudes are negative and interest low, news and information provided by television and other media has proven ineffective as an outlet for informing and promoting Parliament to minority groups and young people. In reality, many people will also seek out views that support their own, rather than seeking to be influenced or to be educated. This too becomes a problem for the internet, where this pattern is even more clearly replicated. The internet too is problematic as a tool for engagement because, despite being a useful and usable channel, significant barriers still exist to its effective use, particularly amongst those who are disadvantaged (and therefore more likely to be hard to reach in democratic terms).

Touch points

8 CONCLUSION

In this research we have explored the motivations to engage with Parliament and the barriers that stand in the way of this happening. Through this we have developed a framework for engagement which shows how, through a combination of formal and informal education combined with traditional and new, locally focused forms of participation, citizens from 'hard to reach' groups will be better informed, more enabled and, therefore, more likely to engage with Parliament. Parliament has already made progress in supporting aspects proposed in this framework through the work done by the Parliamentary Education Service, Parliamentary Outreach and through its online resources, all of which have worked to facilitate increased levels of both formal and informal learning in local areas and increased interaction with those who might not otherwise participate. However, this work so far has limited reach and we recommend that it should be expanded further.

In this context it is worth noting that although other parliaments around the world place a similarly increasing emphasis on public engagement, few have actually developed a comprehensive public engagement strategy, provided a detailed analysis of their target audiences or addressed how best to communicate and engage with 'hard to reach' groups.[86] If the Westminster Parliament successfully deploys a framework for engagement with 'hard to reach' groups in the future, it will be well placed to retain its reputation for innovative strategic thinking and operational implementation of effective public engagement tools. In so doing it will continue to positively influence the work of other parliamentary institutions in this important field in the years ahead.

It is clear from this research that it is vital for Parliament to provide information in a variety of different formats, for different audiences, through different touch points that they come into contact with in their day-to-day lives. Earlier in this report, we gave examples of placing relevant, easy-to-understand information about Parliament in popular newspapers and magazines, using accessible online videos and the potential for daytime television and soap operas to be used to convey information and build awareness about Parliament.

These strategies are designed to embed greater awareness of Parliament, what it does and how it works, in people's lives and help reduce barriers to engagement caused by lack of awareness and lack of knowledge. We identify the power of social networks and the effectiveness of 'weak ties' – networks of association, particularly within our communities –

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86 Hansard Society (2010), *Lessons from Abroad: How Parliaments Around the World Engage With Their Public* (London: Hansard Society). p.69.

as important factors for awareness building and knowledge transfer: we learn best from those we know and trust.

> Engagement is a many-stage, cyclical and self-re-enforcing process but this is also a double-edged sword, creating numerous points of failure, and as much the cause of the democratic deficit as it is its potential saviour.
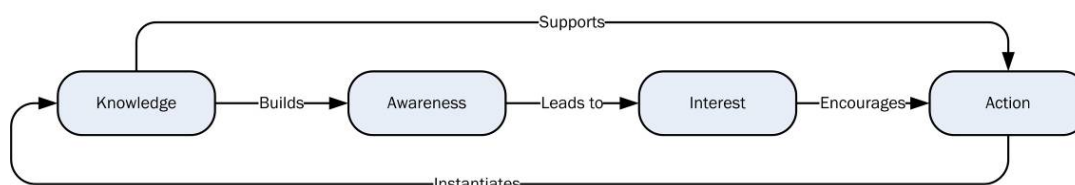
Figure 25: Multi-stage engagement lifecycle

Whilst existing forms of engagement, such as contacting MPs, signing petitions and making submissions to select committees play a key part in this framework, we strongly recommend the need to explore new processes of engagement as well.

> What exists is demonstrably insufficient to engage the public; social media and changing attitudes mean that new means of engagement are not optional extras but core parts of a public engagement strategy. They do not (necessarily) replace what is being done but they must be used to extend and enhance it.

Allowing citizens to communicate their views through local meetings or Citizen Juries, where they can discuss issues that are important to them with their peers and have this information fed back to Parliament will make the process of participation more attractive to those in 'hard to reach' groups, as they would feel more comfortable amongst their peers and less like the 'democratic outsiders' identified in Parliament's target audience.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

Focus groups are a facilitated discussion amongst a small social group, they capitalise on the communication (verbal and non-verbal) that occurs between participants to generate understandings (but not necessarily consensus) about the topic under discussion. They are particularly effective for research that explores ideas and concepts and where there is a desire to create shared meanings. They are an appropriate method for exploring in greater detail the meaning and rationale behind data obtained in a quantitative study, which is relevant and appropriate to the study of political attitudes, given the highly discursive nature of the subject. The primary value of the focus group is that it leads to the discovery of participants' perceptions, beliefs, traditions and values. The group dynamic is an important part of the process; participants are encouraged to talk to each other about the (open-ended or semi-structured) issues raised in the group. They are able to explore their own concerns, using the language and syntax with which they are most familiar and comfortable; the everyday terms which people use to talk about the issues raised are important, highlighting understandings that are not always apparent in more formal responses to research questions.

Participation and Practicalities

The research team utilised a Focus Group Protocol guide for the project to ensure a consistent and rigorous approach to all groups and to data collection. The guide dealt with issues of consent, participation and withdrawal, methods of facilitation and recording. The focus groups were held on the following dates:

Date	Location	Attendees
29 April 2010	Peterborough	13
30 April 2010	Poplar	11
21 May 2010	Sheffield	12
22 June 2010	Nairn	9
11 August 2010	Usk	5

Participants in England were recruited through UK Online Centres, in Scotland through Nairn Community Centre and in Wales through Usk Community College (with the assistance of the National Assembly for Wales). Each participant was offered a £20 gift voucher for taking part in the discussion, which is common industry practice to incentivise attendance at focus groups. Focus Group participants were provided with:

- An information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, describing the process of the focus group and what will be done with the data. This confirms their right to withdraw from the research at any time and not to answer questions should they wish.

- A consent form to confirm their agreement to take part in the research, which was retained and kept in a locked filing cabinet.
- A basic demographic survey (including optional contact details) (see Appendix 3).

Method

Each focus group discussion was conducted using a semi-structured approach whereby the facilitator used a pro-forma set of broad open questions. The focus group was recorded and a non-participant observer took notes,[87] audio was then summarised rather than being transcribed in full and analysis took place using the summarised notes, the observer's notes and the audio recordings. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis technique whereby data is reviewed to identify themes and patterns that emerge from it and to describe what relationships, if any, exist between them. Themes emerge as words, sentences and concepts that are identified and 'marked-up'. Whilst individual items can appear random and fragmented, as more data is considered a depth and richness emerges that illuminates themes. Once a focus group has been analysed, the themes can then be separated from the original context and reviewed in light of both the wider research questions and other data that exists. From here they can be merged to develop over-arching key-thematic lines of enquiry and inform future data collection and, eventually, to identify the key themes to emerge from the research itself.

It is important that no participants can be identified by name or identifying traits or features in any published or publicly available findings and therefore all efforts have been taken to avoid this, for example direct quotes from focus group participants in this report have been anonymised.

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87   Except in Nairn where this was not possible due to logistical reasons.

APPENDIX 2: SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The survey was carried out online by ICM with a random sample of n=2,005 adults, aged 18+, conducted between 25 and 26 August 2010 and weighted to the profile of Great Britain. The survey utilised an online self-completion survey and the sample is randomly drawn from members of ICM's Online Panel (therefore, the maximum population for the survey was limited to existing participants; 135,000 people across Great Britain). With a 95% confidence interval there is a margin of error of 2.2%. Survey data was analysed using a number of statistical analysis tools, including Microsoft Excel and SPSS.

The report makes reference to social grade classifications, which are the classifications used by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising.

Class	Definition
A	Professionals such as doctors, surgeons, solicitors or dentists; chartered people like architects; fully qualified people with a large degree of responsibility such as senior editors, senior civil servants, town clerks, senior business executives and managers and high ranking grades of the Services.
B	People with very responsible jobs such as university lecturers, hospital matrons, heads of local government departments, middle management in business, qualified scientists, bank managers, police inspectors and upper grades of the Services.
C1	All others doing non-manual jobs; nurses, technicians, pharmacists, salesmen, publicans, people in clerical positions, police sergeants/constables and middle ranks of the Services.
C2	Skilled manual workers/craftsmen who have served apprenticeships; foremen, manual workers with special qualifications such as long distance lorry drivers, security officers and lower grades of Services.
D	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, including labourers and mates of occupations in the C2 grade and people serving apprenticeships; machine minders, farm labourers, bus and railway conductors, laboratory assistants, postmen and door-to-door and van salesmen.
E	Those on lowest levels of subsistence including pensioners, casual workers, and others with minimum levels of income.

APPENDIX 3: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Q1. How interested would you say you are in politics?
- Very interested
- Fairly interested
- Not very interested
- Not at all interested
- Don't know

Q2. How much, if anything, do you feel you know about the Westminster Parliament?
- A great deal
- A fair amount
- Not very much
- Nothing at all
- Don't know

Q3. Which of the following best describes your attitude towards the Westminster Parliament?
- I already feel involved in what it does
- I would like to be involved more in what it does
- I do not want to be involved in what it does
- I am not really interested in the Westminster Parliament
- Don't know

Q4. Would you like to be more informed about what happens in the UK Parliament at Westminster than you currently are?
- Yes – I want to be a lot more informed
- Yes – I want to be a little more informed
- No – I am well enough informed already
- No – I am not interested in being more informed
- Don't know

IF ANSWERED 'YES' TO Q4:

Q5. Which, if any, of the following explain why you would like to be more informed than you currently are?
- To understand how the system works
- To follow issues I care about
- To find out what my MP is doing
- To have a say in the running of the country
- To take action on issues I care about
- Because it is important in order to be a good citizen
- For personal interest
- To know about the history of Parliament
- Other SPECIFY

Q6. If you were interested in a national political issue, which, if any, of the following would you use to find out about it?

- Campaign organisation
- Community centre
- Email newsletter
- Friends/family
- Information provided on the internet
- Internet
- Leaflets delivered to my door
- Library
- Education establishment
- Local newspaper
- Local shop or supermarket
- National newspapers
- Private meeting in my area with my local MP
- Public meeting
- Public meeting in my area with my local MP
- Public meeting in my area with staff from Parliament
- Radio
- Television
- Visit the Houses of Parliament
- None of these
- Don't know
- Other SPECIFY

Q7. If you were interested in information about the Westminster Parliament, which, if any, of the following would you like to use to find out about it?

- Campaign organisation
- Community centre
- Email newsletter
- Friends/family
- Information provided on the internet
- Internet
- Leaflets delivered to my door
- Public meeting
- Public meeting in my area with my local MP
- Public meeting in my area with staff from Parliament
- Radio
- Library
- Education establishment
- Local newspaper
- Local shop or supermarket
- National newspapers
- Private meeting in my area with my local MP
- Television
- Visit the Houses of Parliament
- None of these
- Don't know
- Other SPECIFY

Q8. Which, if any, of the following would encourage you to get more involved with politics or find out more about Parliament?

- If I had more time
- If it was relevant to me
- If I felt strongly about an issue
- If it affected my local area
- If I trusted MPs more
- If I understood more about politics and Parliament
- If Parliament was more accessible
- If my friends/family/community were involved
- Other SPECIFY
- Nothing
- Don't know

APPENDIX 4: SURVEY DATA TOPLINE FINDINGS

Results of the Connecting Communities with Parliament ICM Survey results. An Online survey, base n=2,005 GB adults, fieldwork undertaken 25-26 August 2010. Where percentages do not add up to exactly 100% this may be due to computer rounding or to multiple answers.

Q.1 How interested would you say you are in politics?

Very interested	18%
Fairly interested	46%
Not very interested	25%
Not at all interested	11%
Don't know	1%
NET Interested	63%

Q.2 How much, if anything, do you feel you know about the Westminster Parliament?

A great deal	6%
A fair amount	39%
Not very much	44%
Nothing at all	11%
Don't know	1%
NET A great deal/fair amount	45%

Q.3 Which of the following best describes your attitude towards the Westminster Parliament?

I already feel involved in what it does	6%
I would like to be more involved in what it does	32%
I do not want to be involved in what it does	31%
I am not really interested in the Westminster Parliament	21%
Don't know	9%

Q.4 Would you like to be more informed about what happens in the UK Parliament at Westminster than you currently are?

Yes – I want to be a lot more informed	14%
Yes – I want to be a little more informed	39%
No – I am well enough informed already	24%
No – I am not interested in being more informed	18%
Don't know	4%

Q.5 Which, if any, of the following explain why you would like to be more informed than you currently are? (of those who said they would like to be more informed in Q.4)

To follow issues I care about	68%
To find out what my MP is doing	63%
To understand how the system works	56%
To have a say in the running of the country	54%
For personal interest	51%
To take action on issues I care about	48%
Because it is important in order to be a good citizen	31%
To know about the history of Parliament	16%
Other	4%
Don't know	*

Q.6 If you were interested in a national political issue, which, if any, of the following would you use to find out about it?

Internet / email	73%
Television	57%
National newspapers	51%
Local newspapers	32%
Radio	26%
Friends/family	21%
Public meeting in my area with my local MP	19%
Leaflets through the door	18%
Public meeting	14%
Library / education establishment	13%
Private meeting in my area with my local MP	12%
Public meeting in my area with staff from Parliament	11%
Campaign organisation	8%
Visit the Houses of Parliament	5%
Community centre	4%
Other	1%
None	4%
Don't know	4%

Q.7 If you were interested in information about the Westminster Parliament, which, if any, of the following would you use to find out about it?

Internet / email	73%
Television	46%
National newspapers	40%
Local newspapers	20%
Radio	20%
Public meeting in my area with my local MP	15%
Library / education establishment	14%
Friends/family	13%
Leaflets through the door	12%
Visit the Houses of Parliament	10%
Private meeting in my area with my local MP	10%
Public meeting	9%
Public meeting in my area with staff from Parliament	8%

Campaign organisation	4%
Community centre	2%
Other	1%
None	5%
Don't know	6%

Q.8 Which, if any, of the following would encourage you to get more involved with politics or find out more about Parliament?

If I felt strongly about an issue	**51%**
If it was relevant to me	41%
If it affected my local area	36%
If I trusted MPs more	36%
If Parliament was more accessible	23%
If I had more time	22%
If I understood more about politics and Parliament	21%
If my friends/family/community were involved	15%
Other	2%
Nothing	15%
Don't know	4%