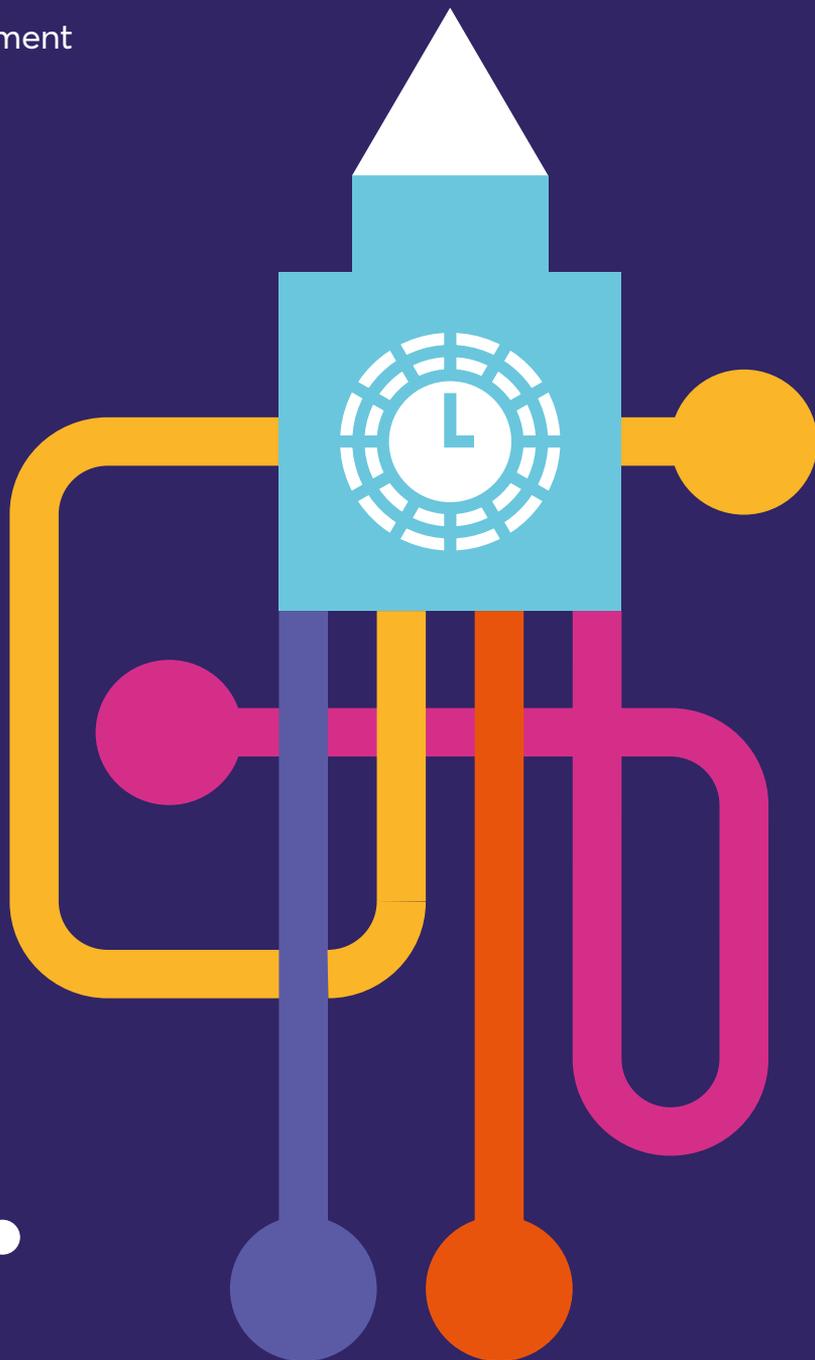# Smarter select committees

Using digital tools to grow public engagement in Parliament

Theo Bass

nesta

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Contents

Executive Summary

This report outlines how digital tools and methods can help select committees restore public trust in democracy, reinvigorate public engagement in Parliament and enhance the work of committees themselves.

Since their establishment in 1979, select committees have provided one of our most important democratic functions.

They allow a cross-party group of Members of Parliament to scrutinise the work of government and hold it to account. Select committees can cut through the political language and tactics deployed by MPs and Ministers, speaking truth to power and presenting the facts without the spin.

At their best, select committees gather available evidence, data and insight; tap into public experiences and concerns; provide a space for thoughtful deliberation; and help parliament make better decisions.

However, the 40th anniversary of select committees presents an important opportunity to re-examine this vital parliamentary system and to ensure they are fit for the 21st century.

In 2012 select committees committed to make public engagement a 'core task' of their work; but their approach has not been systematic, and they still struggle to reach beyond the usual suspects, or find ways to gather relevant knowledge quickly and effectively.

With public trust in democracy deteriorating, the imperative to innovate, improve legitimacy and find new ways to involve people in national politics is stronger than ever. This is where digital innovation can help.

The best examples of digital participation tap into the collective wisdom of a crowd and strengthen decision making. If used effectively, digital tools and methods offer select committees the opportunity to be more transparent and accessible to a wider range of people, improving relevance and impact. Like any good public engagement, this needs careful design, without which digital participation risks being distorting and unhelpful, amplifying the loudest or least informed voices.

With a range of digital tools and methods now available, failing to grasp the opportunity presented by these innovations risks undermining not only the effectiveness of Parliament but also its credibility. The recommendations in this report demonstrate how select committees can design digital processes to work most effectively, while enabling better forms of participation in Parliament to take root and grow.

The report offers the following key insights and recommendations:

Improving the quality of engagement

To ensure digital tools and methods are used intelligently and appropriately, select committees should articulate a clear purpose and intended outcomes for digital participation from the outset. Only by being clear on their intended outcome can committees choose the right tools and methods for the job.

Select committees should appoint staff to act as facilitative moderators of digital participation, making committees more proactive and responsive to online engagement, and in turn encouraging more productive contributions.

Parliament should commission and support the development of better software tools for participation to meet the specific needs of select committees. New tools are necessary to help lower barriers to participation and make it easier for staff to manage large volumes of evidence.

Improving the diversity and relevance of evidence

Committees should be wary of using digital tools as a rough yardstick for gauging public opinion. Digital can deliver greater value by targeting specific stakeholders who have the relevant knowledge to participate.

In order to achieve this **committees should explore making smarter use of digital marketing tools, data from petitions and external partnerships** as strategies for reaching the 'right' audiences (i.e diverse and informed).

Making the most of digital capability

Committees should introduce a standardised online form for submitting evidence across all inquiries, improving accessibility while making it easier to manage submissions. They should also **improve and develop common standards for tagging information, and share recommendations as open data.** This will help to break down silos between committees while enabling better scrutiny of select committees themselves.

Committees should establish an 'engagement register' to improve Parliament's memory of public engagement efforts. This should be a simple, shareable record of engagement activities that have taken place across the committee system, including reference to the type of engagement, areas of success and some simple evaluation metrics.

Parliament should give clearer guidance on the effective use of online methods for select committee staff and MPs (i.e. shared resources and training). They should additionally facilitate better collaboration between teams focused on offline and online public engagement.

Parliament must build more trust by meaningfully integrating public input into select committee work. To make this a reality, stronger ambition and commitment by senior staff and MPs, as well as experimentation and learning through trial and improvement will be essential. We recommend that the UK Parliament commits to running at least five pilots for digital participation, which we outline in more detail in the final section of this report.

Introduction

The work of national parliaments offers a wealth of opportunity for democratic innovation. Yet, being bound by decades if not centuries of tradition means that it can be difficult to establish different ways of working or easily adopt new technologies.

This lack of innovation wouldn't matter so much if our democratic institutions were working as they should be. But with rising populism, increasing sense of division and decreasing faith in formal institutions, the imperative to innovate, improve public trust, and find new ways to involve people in national politics is stronger than ever.

The purpose of this report is to lay out a range of options for how Parliament can innovate using digital democracy tools. We make practical recommendations for how digital participation can be integrated into parliamentary work. Specifically, we focus on select committees, which we argue can play a vital role in reinvigorating our democracy through public engagement, and, through smarter use of digital tools, can promote more effective gathering of knowledge and more transparent working practices.

Why select committees?

Over the past few years, House of Commons select committees have grown in independence, confidence and credibility following a series of reforms. They have brought us some of the most significant parliamentary events in recent memory, from the full exposure of incompetence behind the BHS collapse, to Amber Rudd's resignation as Home Secretary after questioning by the Home Affairs Committee during the Windrush scandal. As ex-MP Andrew Tyrie puts it, select committees pose the questions that the public want asked and answered.[1]

Although select committees thrive in the public spotlight, they also play a significant role in building awareness of important topics that are not necessarily conducive to media attention. For example, warnings around the use of external cladding on council buildings came almost twenty years before the Grenfell disaster, in the form of recommendations from the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs.[2]

What are parliamentary select committees?

Select committees are cross-party groups set up within parliament whose role is to scrutinise the government. They examine new policy announcements; uncover important topics or policy areas; and scrutinise high-profile figures, ministers or legislation. They usually perform these functions through inquiries, which gather written and oral evidence from relevant expertise. Their findings and recommendations are then reported to the Commons and receive a formal response from the government within 60 days.

A central message of this report is that select committees can offer several key advantages as platforms for democratic engagement.

First, they have clear purpose and role within Parliament. One analysis found that around 40 percent of recommendations made by select committees are implemented by the government.[3] This is an important precondition for good public engagement, since people feel more motivated to participate when they feel like their input can have real impact.

Second, select committee inquiries help break the government's stranglehold over information and advice from the civil service, gathering evidence from a wide range of expert witnesses, organisations and publics across the country.[4] In doing so they can operate in a kind of 'campaigning role', bringing communities together around important or undervalued issues, or giving them a voice.[5]

Third, select committees provide a rare environment in British politics where politicians across the political spectrum actively search for common ground. This makes committees especially conducive to more deliberative forms of public engagement, as well as providing a much needed contrast to the adversarial style of politics within the chamber.

The challenge

Recently, there has been an accelerated push for more public engagement in select committees. More staff are now hired to organise and deliver public engagement, and MPs and senior staff have become more aware of the tools and resources available to them to conduct these activities. But one area that remains untapped is digital engagement.

Technology is often in the news for undermining or hijacking our democracy, but what is less well covered is its potential to strengthen democratic decision-making and engage people productively in national politics. Recent advances have made it possible to significantly widen the scope of communication and knowledge that can feed into policymaking, and parliaments and governments around the world have been trialling many of these in an effort to create meaningful new channels for citizen engagement.[6]

While more and more democratic institutions are adopting the use of digital tools, UK Parliament's few experiments have struggled to achieve formal integration. This is somewhat surprising given the clear appetite that exists within parliament for digital engagement.

Part of the challenge is normalising these kinds of experiments and embedding a mindset of more rigorous trial and error. But this has proven difficult in an institution with such a high aversion to risk. As one select committee clerk put it, 'we don't really have a culture of thinking it's OK to fail, but that's probably because it's not.'

Like most institutions attempting to adapt to new technologies, Parliament has struggled to develop a clear strategy for how these innovations should be integrated into formal processes. It has also suffered from a lack of direction, about what the purpose of digital participation should be, or of the value of public engagement more generally.

Why now?

There's a sense that we've had this discussion before. In 2015 the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy attracted a fantastic array of ideas for how digital tools could be adapted into the process of UK legislation, making it more participatory, accessible and transparent. Many advocates within parliament have expressed frustration that the momentum built during the Speaker's Commission has since been lost. Yet since 2015, the field of digital participation has flourished and now has a renewed focus, and range of experience to draw from.

We also now face an historic opportunity to revive this agenda in UK Parliament. In a few years, MPs, Peers and parliamentary staff will move out of the UK's Palace of Westminster for the duration of approximately two full parliamentary terms, while vital repairs to the building take place.

However the repairs also present an opportunity to think far beyond the task of physical renewal. With such a large chunk of the public purse at stake (approximately £3.5 billion), Restoration and Renewal (R&R) is a once-in-a-generation chance to rethink the relationship between our Parliament and the people.[7] We believe the approaches and recommendations outlined in this report can form part of a broader effort to extend the remit of R&R to include a range of experiments in democratic innovations.

In a new, temporary working space, MPs, Peers, staff and all those who interact with them will have no choice but to do things differently. So rather than just making do, what would happen if we took the chance to actively try out some new ways of working? Experiments might include efforts to improve the integration of screens or live information sharing during committee hearings; better streaming or more immersive camera angles; live commenting and content moderation; or experimenting with new ways of presenting or hearing evidence. If Parliament is going to make the most of R&R as an opportunity to be made fit for the 21st (and 22nd) century, then it will need to adopt a much clearer vision for how it can best interact with and engage with the public using digital tools.

This report outlines how select committees can be vehicles for this, gathering ideas, opinions and experiences from people across the country in order to improve both the relevance and the quality parliamentary scrutiny.

Method and outline

This report has been written after over 40 interviews with parliamentary staff (clerks, specialists and engagement staff) as well as written and oral witnesses ('users') to understand the opportunities and barriers for digital participation in select committees. We also hosted two workshops: one with the Web and Publications Unit and Select Committee Engagement Team in September 2018; and another with a wider group of UK Parliament, Welsh National Assembly and Scottish Parliament staff, held at Nesta in March 2019. The research also draws on experiences from our own extensive work investigating digital democracy experiments in local and national legislatures worldwide.[8]

In what follows we argue that digital participation offers potential to improve the relevance and accessibility of public engagement in select committees (section 1). Parliament has already experimented with a range of digital participation activities (section 2) and there are opportunities to improve the ambition and effectiveness of these experiments. However, doing it properly needs careful design (section 3), and a series of longer-term strategies will be necessary to enable digital participation to take root and grow within Parliament (section 4).
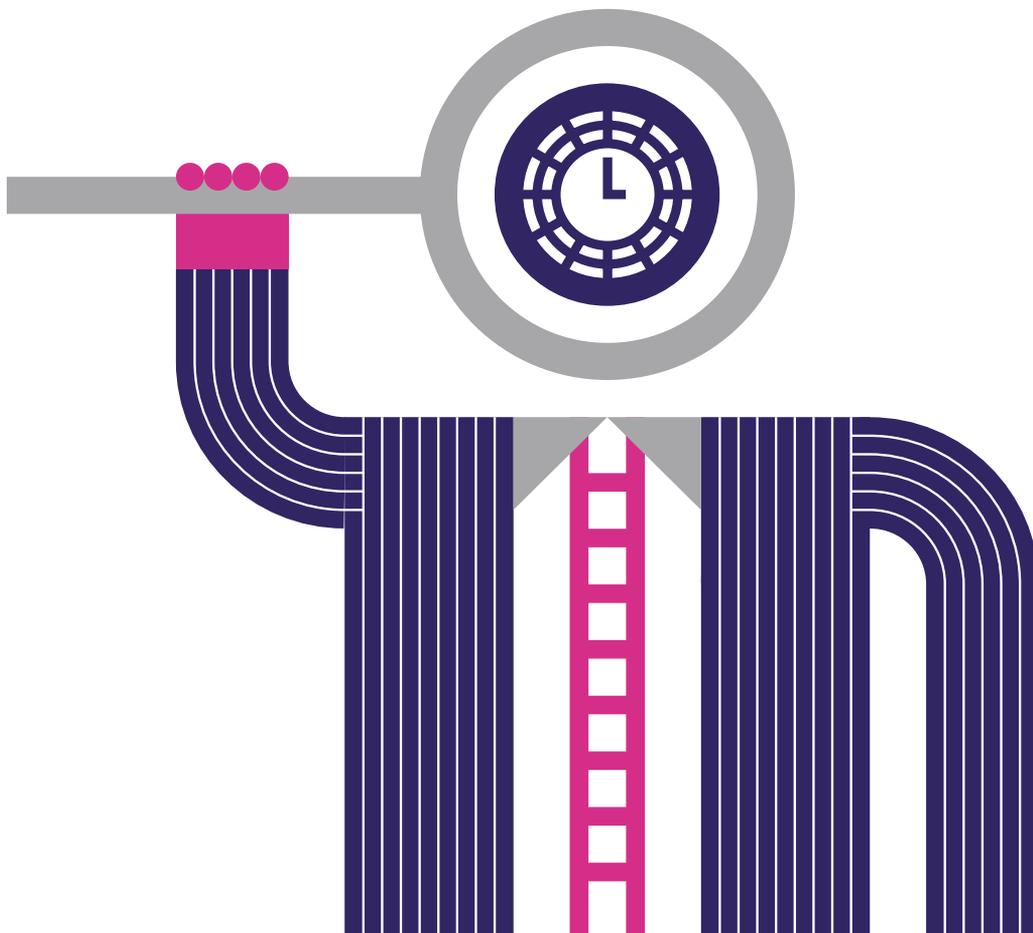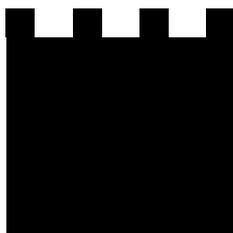
Restoration as an opportunity to upgrade and innovate

From broadcasting to active listening

More experimentation with digital participation

Making (digital) participation the new normal

Improving accessibility and transparency

Focus on clear goals

Define the crowd carefully

Target and curate audiences more effectively

Make participation clear, responsive and meaningful

Commission better tools

Smarter select committees

Using digital tools to grow public engagement in Parliament

Hospital

University

School

Crowdsourcing

Real time information

Data

$£

Real time information

Select committee

Participants

Digital communication

Visitors
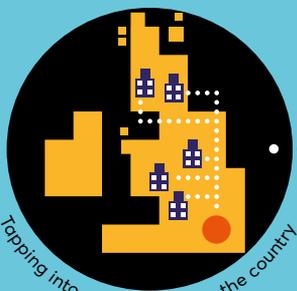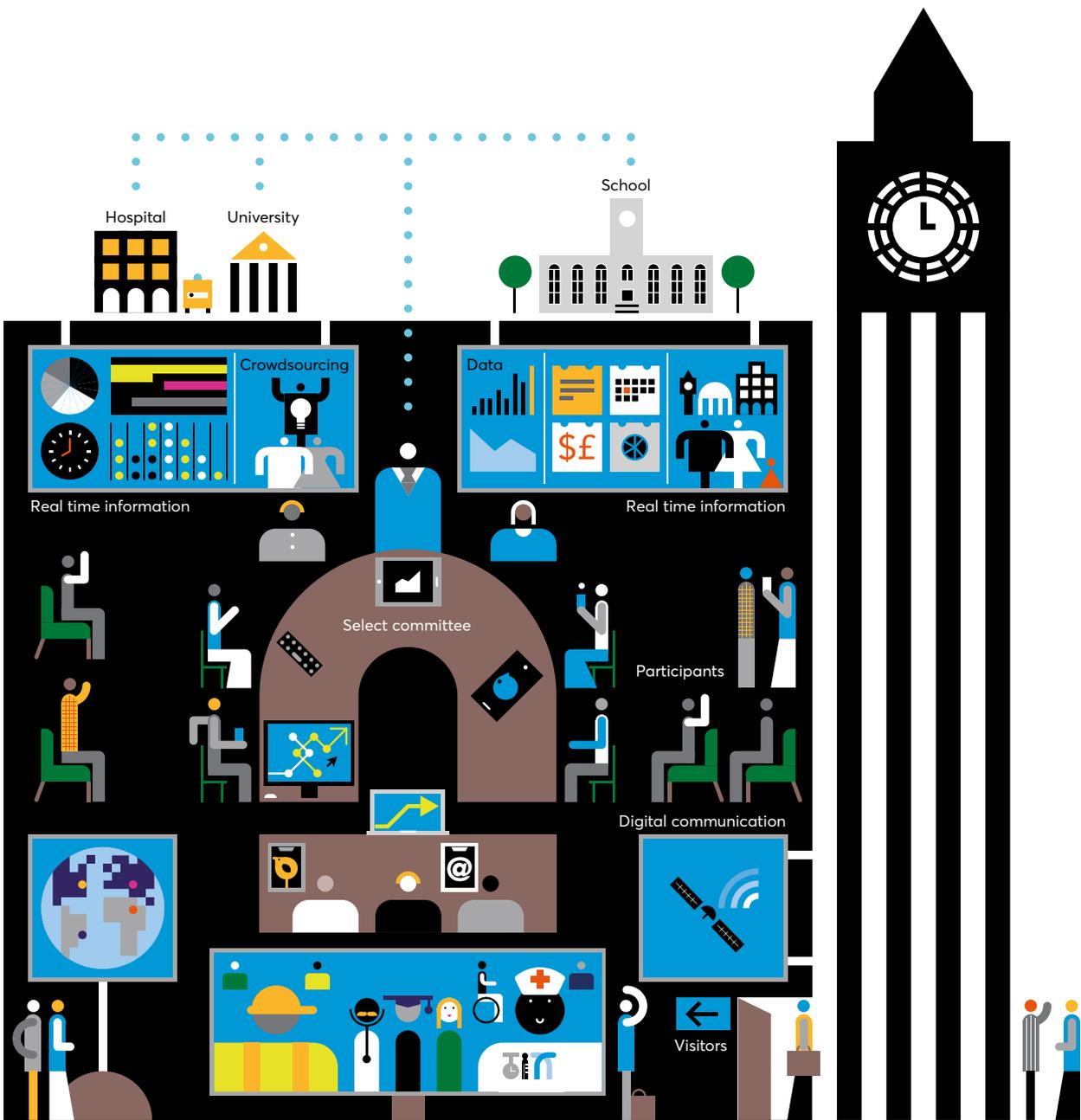
Tapping into expertise across the country

Blending online and offline engagement

1. Digital participation and the opportunity for select committees

What we mean by digital participation

In 2012, The Liaison Committee agreed to revise the core tasks for departmental select committees to include public engagement. It refers to this role as 'engaging with the public by ensuring that the work of the committee is accessible'.[9] In some ways this reflects the fact that, for many years, public engagement in Parliament has been linked to the corporate objective of making the work of Parliament more understandable.[10] This is still a vital step, and should be the first in enabling good quality public engagement to flourish.
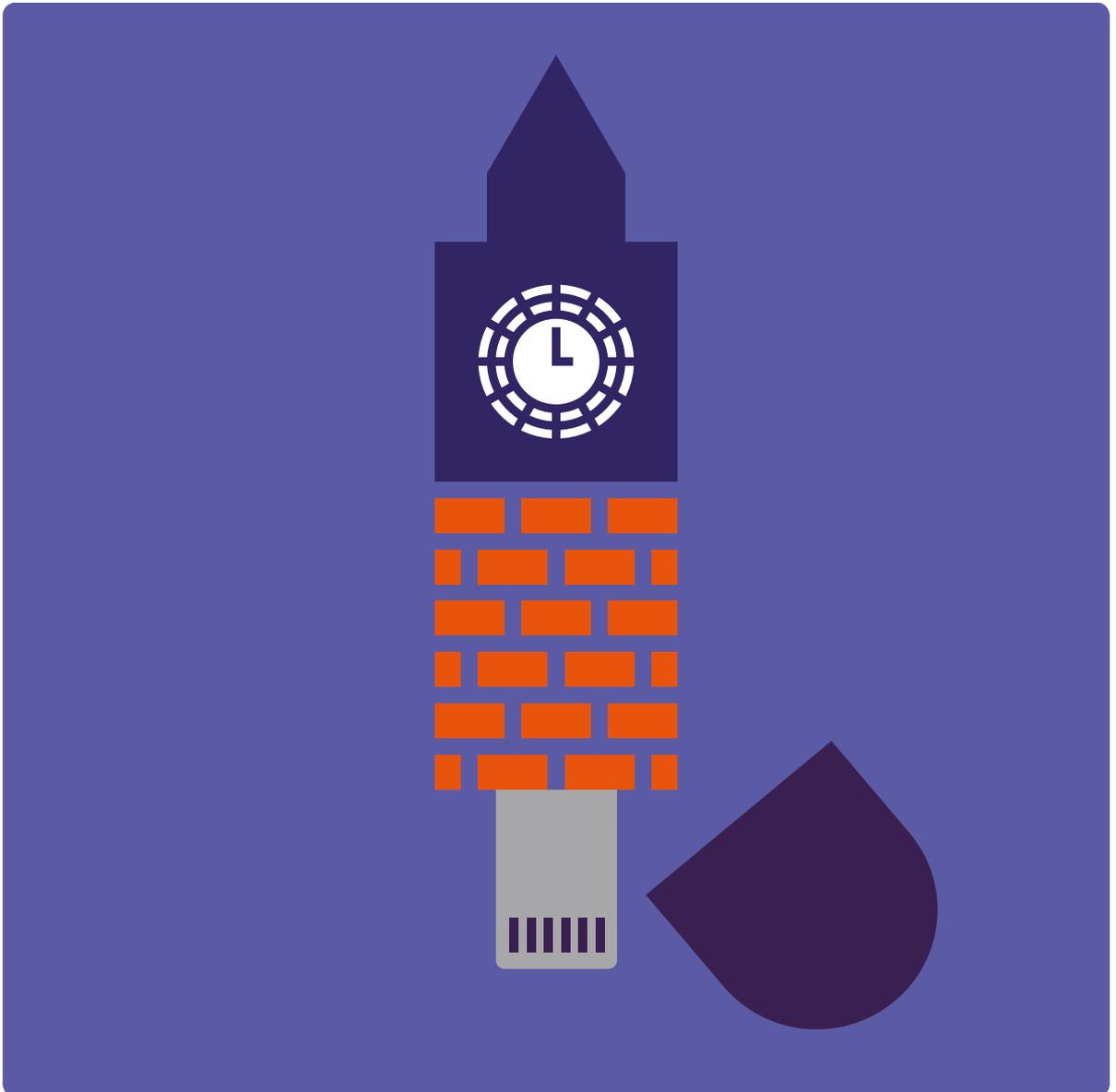
However, one of the core messages of this report is that select committees should improve their ambition for this task, moving from public engagement as something which is 'done' to the public, to something that actively involves them, gathers and nurtures their contributions and integrates them into parliamentary business. When designed well, digital participation can provide a crucial mechanism for this type of engagement in Parliament.

Throughout this booklet we use the term 'digital participation' because we believe it encompasses the range of methods available . 'Participation' implies more active involvement on the part of those involved, including consultation, crowdsourcing and active monitoring and scrutiny of parliamentary of activity by the public.

Four broad purposes for digital participation in parliaments

This section aims to answer the question of 'why should we use digital participation?' In parliaments and governments across the world, digital participation often suffers from a lack of clear purpose – there's a tendency for people to focus on the technology rather than designing an exercise that has a clear role in policymaking and meaningful support from senior decision makers. Below we summarise four broad purposes identified in our work that can help practitioners with a more targeted approach:

1) Better access to ideas.
Parliamentary select committees play an important role in bringing to light issues of high importance that would not otherwise find their way into the public spotlight. Using digital tools can be a useful way to uncover new or more relevant ideas across large, diverse segments of the population.

For example, in Madrid a digital crowdsourcing platform for the city has led to the implementation of new policies, from a universal ticketing system for public transport to plans for making the city more sustainable. Another famous example includes the Open Ministry in Finland – an effort to crowdsource proposals on a range of topics from civil society, one of which led to the eventual legalisation of equal marriage.[11]

2) Better understanding of facts and evidence.
Parliamentary select committees often strive to gather evidence in order to scrutinise government departments, or to develop public understanding of important issues. Digital tools can be helpful in widening the pool of expertise that feeds into policymaking.[12] This tends to work best when clearly constrained around specific policy topics.

For instance, in 2015 France's Senator Joel Labbe ran an online consultation on the use and sale of pesticides by local authorities, in which one of the 521 participants spotted a potential loophole that would allow local authorities to bypass the restrictions. Another example from France includes the Digital Republic Bill. This was an effort to crowdsource a bill for the digital economy with nearly 8,500 contributions including suggestions for new Articles and amendments, many of which were eventually enshrined in law.

3) Better understanding of opinions.
Committees need to be able to tap into the public mood, shedding light on the opinions that matter or perspectives of people that are underserved by government. Crowdsourcing can help policymakers understand a wider range of opinions, or the key dividing points between different groups on an issue. For instance, the Taiwanese Government used an opinion mapping software (Pol.is) with around 700 people, alongside a series of live-streamed meetings to understand what the key points of contention were between taxi drivers, companies, passengers and unions, before drawing up six new regulations on ridesharing.[13]

It may also be necessary to invite the public to share opinions more openly with one another where there is moral disagreement between groups across society. This is often a cue for more deliberative methods that bring multiple stakeholders together to achieve compromise. Deliberation among randomly selected citizens can provide better or more reasoned judgement or help to break a political deadlock on an issue. For instance, the Irish Citizens' Assembly on abortion – which used online methods to crowdsource opinions – helped temper the public mood in the run up the country's referendum on the same topic.

4) Improved monitoring and transparency.
Politicians may not always be the best people to ask questions or hold people to account during select committee sessions (recent hearings with Mark Zuckerberg in the US come to mind). The alternatives here don't have to mean replacing politicians, but they could involve more actively crowdsourcing questions or inviting live comment or feedback on parliamentary activity.

Other examples are less about proactive crowdsourcing, and more about creating the conditions for more effective scrutiny of parliamentary activities by those outside of parliament. This can include providing better open data, live-transcription of parliamentary activities or improving live-streaming and video capabilities. For example, in order to help people understand the role of parliamentary work, the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies has appointed an institution within Parliament – a 'Hacker Lab' – with a remit to open up parliamentary information, streaming parliamentary videos and creating new tools that make it easier to visualise and explore legislative data.

Three distinctive benefits of digital participation

Digital enables more efficient access to knowledge
Digital participation can enable politicians to tap into distributed knowledge more quickly and easily by lowering the barriers to participation using good user-design and improved accessibility, or by enabling people to contribute remotely. Digital participation is not always about volume. Sometimes there is benefit in tapping into a group of no more than fifty people. The value is that they're providing more relevant knowledge, which wouldn't have otherwise fed into the process because of geographical constraints or lack of awareness.

Digital creates a space for competing perspectives to arrive at more nuanced views
We hear lots about digital tools amplifying hate speech, fake news and echo chambers, but digital tools can also be used to help people break out of filter bubbles and allow deliberation between diverse voices. When designed well, this kind of engagement can lead to more nuanced contributions and higher levels of consensus among participants.[14]

Digital can complement and enhance offline methods
Any self-selecting public engagement is likely to exclude certain groups over others (public meetings held at midday on a Thursday are more likely to attract stay-at-home parents or retirees, for instance). Digital tools can help to enhance or supplement traditional methods, whether making asynchronous participation possible, or by improving transparency of public engagement.[15]
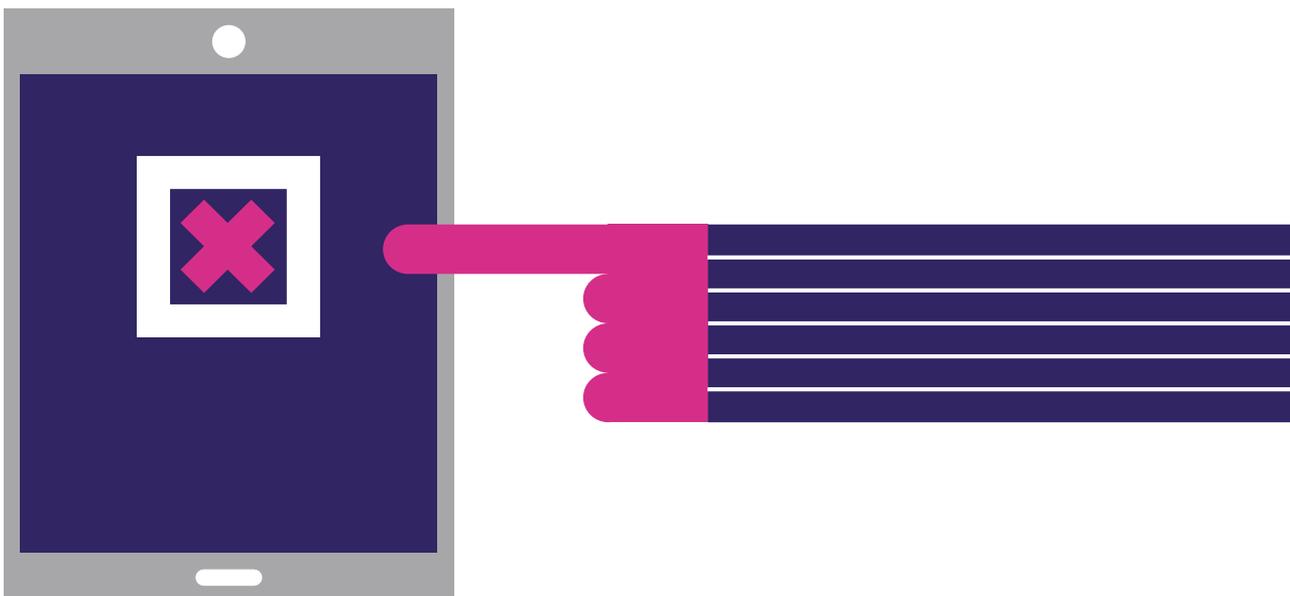
The opportunity for select committees

In our research we spoke to both parliamentary staff and users, in an attempt to go deeper into the specific pain-points facing select committees where digital participation methods could help them innovate. These can be summarised under three broad categories.

Low diversity and reliance on usual suspects
A common concern among staff was that current evidence feeding into select committees relies disproportionately on some groups over others, namely men from in and around the south east.[16] Staff therefore see high potential for crowdsourcing to help expand the pool of ideas and evidence that feed into select committee inquiries, as well as making committees less reliant on the 'usual suspects'. As expressed by one clerk:

> We're talking about hundreds of thousands of people who are affected by things like Universal Credit, in very difficult situations, spread all over the country. How do we reach them? Often at speed. That's the fundamental problem we have.

High barriers to entry
Invitations to submit evidence to committees are often framed around what are known as 'terms of reference', which help to describe the topics and scope of an inquiry. Many of our interviewees suggested that these can be framed in inaccessible language, or in ways that may be off-putting or unnecessarily complex to some audiences.

> *'The word "evidence" creates a hierarchy that even the committees aren't interested in … they just want to hear from people.'*
> Staff Member, Web and Publications Unit

There are also more subtle ways in which the guidance provided by committees might dissuade certain audiences from submitting. One interviewee mentioned that including the instruction 'no more than 3,000 words' might make some people feel like the committee expects essay-length responses. This is partly a challenge of explaining in simple terms what the select committee process is and how to engage with it. Beyond that, the use of digital could include tweaking user-interfaces for different audiences, making them easier to navigate. Or it could mean trying different methods of inputting evidence, from higher effort to simpler or quicker types of interaction and engagement (including surveys, ranking or more interactive commenting).

Low capacity
Resources are a key challenge and public engagement activities are thinly stretched. There's a corresponding challenge that when staff do receive large volumes of written evidence (say, when the topic is highly popular or controversial) it can take weeks to sort through the evidence. Parliament has huge audiences, but select committees rarely find optimal ways to harness them.

> *'We got 8,000 submissions … I could never say responsibly as a manager that we could do that again with the resources we had.'*
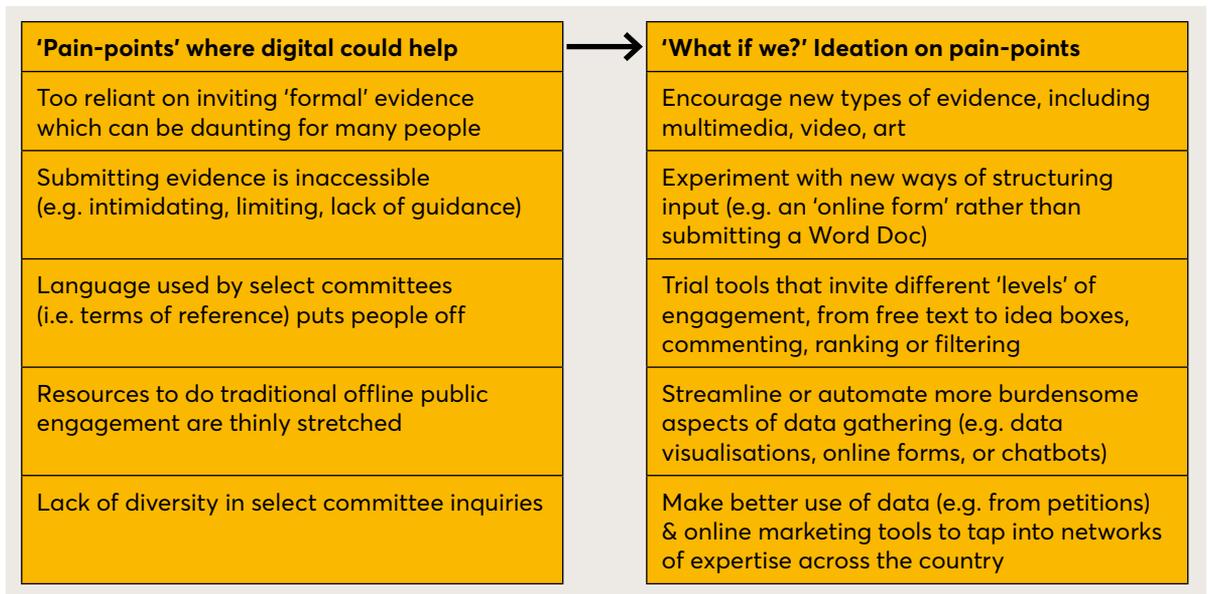> Committee Clerk

'The primary assessment inquiry attracted 400 responses, some of them were 10 pages long.'
Committee Specialist

The implication here is that digital could help to improve efficiency and reduce some of the burden of large-scale public engagement, whether streamlining or automating existing approaches using technology; helping to filter, sort and summarise evidence more effectively; or inviting the public to do more of the work of scrutiny in collaboration with committee members.

Pain-points where digital could help

In a workshop with parliamentary staff, we extended the above challenges to try and arrive at more specific problem statements. We asked participants to suggest and vote on some of the problems common to public engagement activities where digital participation has potential to improve effectiveness or legitimacy of their work. Below on the left are five of the highest ranked suggestions, and on the right are some of the ideas that were raised during a subsequent ideation session.

'Pain-points' where digital could help	'What if we?' Ideation on pain-points
Too reliant on inviting 'formal' evidence which can be daunting for many people	Encourage new types of evidence, including multimedia, video, art
Submitting evidence is inaccessible (e.g. intimidating, limiting, lack of guidance)	Experiment with new ways of structuring input (e.g. an 'online form' rather than submitting a Word Doc)
Language used by select committees (i.e. terms of reference) puts people off	Trial tools that invite different 'levels' of engagement, from free text to idea boxes, commenting, ranking or filtering
Resources to do traditional offline public engagement are thinly stretched	Streamline or automate more burdensome aspects of data gathering (e.g. data visualisations, online forms, or chatbots)
Lack of diversity in select committee inquiries	Make better use of data (e.g. from petitions) & online marketing tools to tap into networks of expertise across the country

There is considerable untapped potential for digital engagement to address all of the issues and to supplement more traditional forms of outreach. So what does better digital participation in select committees look like?

2. From 'broadcasting' to active listening – a brief overview of digital participation in select committees
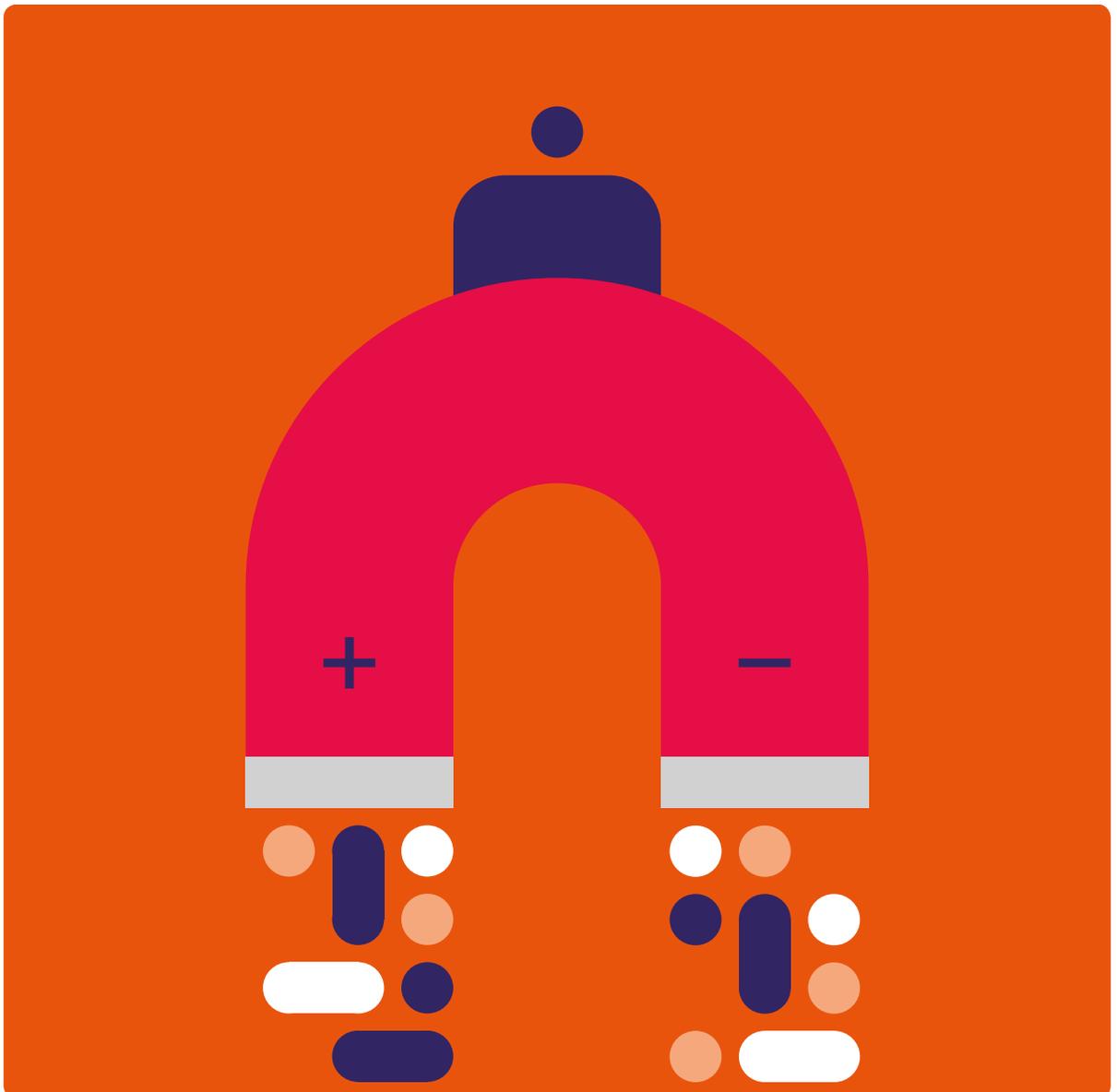
Currently, the majority of digital engagement activity in parliamentary select committees is 'push' rather than 'pull' engagement. Select committees largely engage through broadcasting (e.g. via Twitter) rather than actively trying to gather ideas and expertise in a way that can be constructively fed into inquiries. Here we highlight examples of committees trialling the latter, where digital tools are being used to create new types of participation in parliament.[17]

What are select committees already doing?

One area where digital engagement has already helped committees is by improving access to ideas. The Science and Technology Committee's 'My Science Inquiry' is an open call for people to help the committee decide on future topics for inquiry. In an example from last year, the committee attracted 86 written and video submissions from people ranging from academics and think tanks to interested citizens, and on topics as varied as commercial genomics to food security.

Ten ideas were shortlisted and asked to make a pitch, before four were finally selected to form the basis for new inquiries over the next 12 months.[18] The committee was impressed by the high quality of submissions and, during an interview, the clerk expressed that they had found it helpful in ensuring that the committee does not lose sight of issues that matter to the public. Other committees have experimented with a similar format, such as the Scottish Affairs Committee, who presented the results as an interactive digital report.

Select committees have also made use of Twitter to crowdsource questions for witnesses to answer. In an exercise called #AskGove, the Education Committee gathered over 5,000 tweets, synthesised them on their web page and these were read out as questions to the Education Secretary Michael Gove during a live-streamed hearing.[19]

> *'We had people calling us up asking how to join Twitter just so that they could participate.'*
> Staff member, Parliamentary Digital Service

This proved a basic though effective way of improving the breadth and relevance of questions asked, while drawing attention to the inquiry. However, some interviewees mentioned that #AskGove drew attention from MPs mostly for its novelty value, rather than for the fact that it was a meaningful effort to draw in more relevant perspectives and questions.

Beyond Twitter, committees have had some success gathering input from third-party sites Mumsnet, the Student room and Army Rumours. The Political and Constitutional Affairs Committee used a variety of third-party platforms to gather over 16,000 responses to its inquiry on voter engagement.[20]

Committees have also made significant use of custom web forums on the Parliament website for crowdsourcing comments and personal stories. The web forum's use of simple language inviting people to participate, as well as relative ease-of-use, has shown them to be successful in attracting large volumes of input. One web form on funding for research into brain tumours attracted over 1,000 comments, with highly personal and relevant contributions based on real-life experiences from health care professionals and sufferers of brain tumors themselves.

Another promising area for crowdsourcing has been inviting people to submit empirical or scientific evidence that could refute the government's position on a topic. Select committees have experimented with 'evidence checks', where members of the public and experts are invited to comment on the evidence base underpinning government policy decisions. One staff member explained the limitations of traditional calls for evidence as follows:

> In traditional calls for evidence, it all goes into a box and at the end you publish it all afterwards. One issue here is that this encourages everyone to work in their own silo, leading to a lot of duplication of effort. The government also makes a submission that also goes into that box and comes out at the end. So there's no chance to effectively scrutinise what they're doing as part of the process.

Evidence checks aim to flip this traditional engagement model on its head. Instead of inviting submissions on terms of reference, the government is asked to publish the evidence they hold on a particular policy area, and members of the public are then invited to comment on that evidence, providing critical responses or information that challenges the government's position. Submissions are screened and then posted in a public online forum, thereby aiming to reduce duplication of effort. However, when talking to committee staff, many complained of extremely basic tech, which severely limits what users can do on the forum.

In terms of participation, evidence checks have varied from no responses at all to over 500 responses (although often responses are worried comments from citizens rather than anything relating to the quality of evidence). More successful examples have taken a more targeted approach including breaking topics down into digestible pieces of evidence for people to comment on, and reaching out to specific online communities on Twitter rather than simply publishing an open call for contributions. An evidence check by the Women and Equalities Committee received between 3 and 12 contributions on each piece of evidence, many of which were incorporated into the subsequent ministerial briefing and led to a specific change in the government evidence used.

3. Designing digital participation in select committees: five recommendations

Committees have already been trialling a range of digital engagement activities, with some examples more successful than others.

This section describes how select committees can build on the best of these examples to design digital participation in a way that improves the quality of engagement, while unlocking diverse and more relevant evidence.

These five recommendations are given in response to commonly cited challenges identified in our research.

1

## Focus on clear goals for digital participation

As already discussed, any digital participation exercise needs to start with a clear purpose. In one example raised during interviews, a select committee ran an online web forum that attracted several thousands of submissions, creating a lot of manual work. One staff member reflected: 'sometimes we do need to think about why we're doing massive engagement, especially when we're thinking about targeting our resources. There are occasions where you can do just as much with two, three or four really high quality responses.' Here a clearer definition of the purpose may have led staff towards a more qualitative research approach.

Furthermore, when objectives and goals are clearly defined this can help to build trust and create more productive engagement. The four broad categories outlined in Chapter 1 can act as a starting point to guide practitioners on the 'why' of digital engagement. But where possible, these should be narrowed down to clearly defined tasks or goals where the specific objective is clear.

A good example is the recent the Petitions Committee inquiry into online abuse of disabled people. As part of the inquiry, the engagement team organised a workshop and invited comments from disabled people on an early draft of committee's official recommendations to the government. As one member of the Select Committee Engagement Team described:

> In terms of clear outcomes that was very high impact. They came in and had the draft recommendations in front of them. They prioritised them with agree, disagree, then ranked them.The feedback we got was that they felt like they were being listened to. Usually we would say 'You're going to help shape the committee's inquiry,' but that isn't as explicit as saying 'You will help us make recommendations to the Government.'

Although this process was primarily offline, there's scope for select committees to experiment with simple ways to scale up similar initiatives where targeted communities of people are invited to comment on recommendations using digital tools. Despite their challenges with marketing and basic tech, evidence checks are another good example of a digital participation exercise where the task is clearly defined (i.e. commenting on a specific piece of evidence). As described in the previous section, these methods have potential to enhance the collective intelligence of participants and reduce siloed working between organisations.
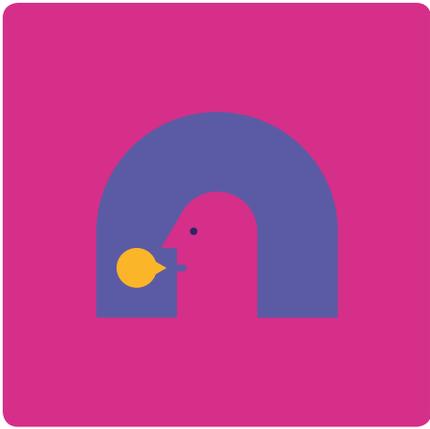
2

Define the crowd carefully

When it comes to digital engagement the temptation is often to set up an open website, and then push it out to as many people as possible and hope for the best. However, experience from a range of digital participation exercises shows how this often leads to an underwhelming level and quality of engagement.

One illustration of this is The Public Reading Stage, a pilot launched in 2010 with the aim of giving the public an opportunity to comment on three pieces of legislation online as they were passing through the House of Commons. Although the exercise attracted thousands of contributions, the quality of them was questionable. An evaluation said this was partly down to the communication approach. The consultation was posted online via Facebook and Twitter, and although the Select Committee Engagement Team offered to publicise the exercise to relevant contacts, this was declined due to concerns about whether or not Parliament would be able to manage the volume of responses.[21]
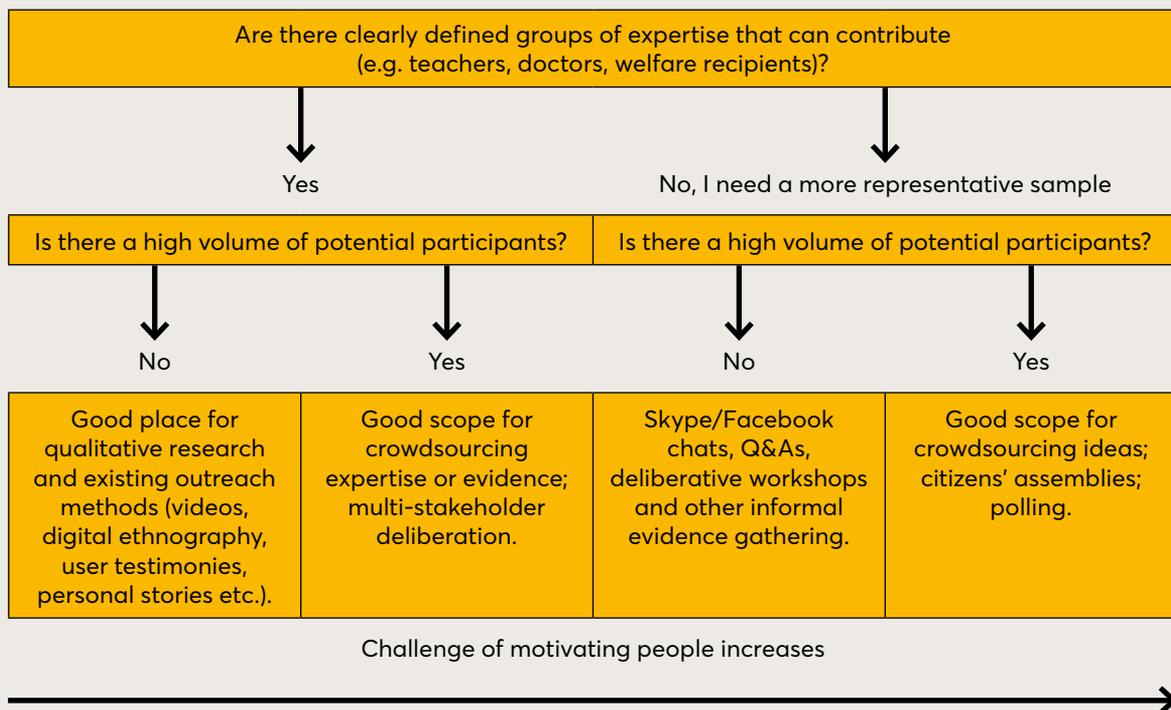
In more successful examples, select committees have started with a clear understanding of who the key stakeholders are, i.e. who is most likely to be affected by a particular issue, and how they will be reached. This can help staff to get a clearer understanding of what methods should be chosen, as well as the likely motivation of participants in each scenario.

In our experience, the best examples of digital participation use digital tools as a mechanism for knowledge search, rather than a rough yardstick for gauging public opinion. They target specific stakeholders who have relevant knowledge, define a clear role for participants and then feed back to them clearly about the outcomes of engagement. This doesn't mean that digital engagement should operate any less openly or transparently. It means being smarter about who will be willing to provide time and energy to make a valuable contribution.

Widening participation to a more representative sample of the public comes with an increased challenge of how to motivate people to take part. This is because people are not being invited to participate based on particular expertise, and therefore will have less incentive to contribute.

In the past, select committees have tried to understand the public experience of a particular issue by running surveys, such as on how easy it is to get an MOT, or asking people's experience of local GP services. The difficulty is that the people who contribute are self-selecting. This tends to invite angrier or more opinionated voices than a broader sample of the public would otherwise produce.

Decision tree: Deciding on relevant types of engagement for an inquiry

Are there clearly defined groups of expertise that can contribute (e.g. teachers, doctors, welfare recipients)?

Yes →

No, I need a more representative sample →

Is there a high volume of potential participants?	Is there a high volume of potential participants?

No	Yes	No	Yes
Good place for qualitative research and existing outreach methods (videos, digital ethnography, user testimonies, personal stories etc.).	Good scope for crowdsourcing expertise or evidence; multi-stakeholder deliberation.	Skype/Facebook chats, Q&As, deliberative workshops and other informal evidence gathering.	Good scope for crowdsourcing ideas; citizens' assemblies; polling.

Challenge of motivating people increases →

If a topic is broad and groups are less easy to define, committees should consider limiting their activities to those where success depends less on who participates, e.g. crowdsourcing ideas (as opposed to expertise), where it's possible to achieve good results by simply collecting hundreds or thousands of ideas and then filtering out all the bad ones (see My Science Inquiry above). Committees should also consider working with external expertise to access the right audiences, rather than spending time and resource on in-house efforts (e.g. if looking for a highly representative sample of the population).
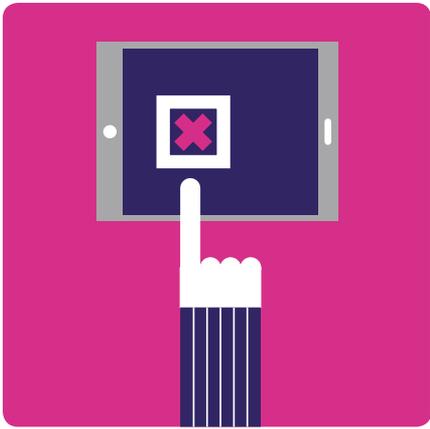
3

Target and curate audiences more effectively

Having chosen the right crowd, a big factor in making digital participation in select committees a success will be how they reach out to and invite relevant audiences to take part. Achieving this will require a shift in mindset about who participates in select committees.

We recommend that committees broaden their primary audiences to include not only institutions or civil society actors, but also informed individuals who have the freedom to make contributions outside of the requirements of their professional organisation. These audiences are more likely to provide committees with so-called 'situated knowledge' - insights taken from personal experiences, which are often deeper and more complex than what is usually submitted by advocacy organisations or interest groups.[22] This should also help committees to reach outside of London, and to look beyond the 'usual suspects' who tend to be biased both in terms of gender and location in and around the south east.

There are a range of strategies available to select committees when planning their outreach. Below is a selection of the most relevant for digital participation.

Mailing lists: a more joined-up approach
Mailing lists help to build up a long-term picture of stakeholders across the country. Committees already have their own mailing lists, but only some of them ask people for more detailed information (e.g. people's location, profession and areas of interest). Committees would benefit from a more joined-up approach (system wide CRM) to design more targeted email campaigns when necessary, and to do so in a GDPR compliant way.[23]

Digital marketing
Parliament has nearly 1.5 million followers on Twitter and over 150,000 subscribers on YouTube - that's more than all three main political parties combined on both sites. This is an underexploited audience for select committees, and they should reserve a bigger budget for digital marketing on these platforms, especially where committees need to access granular audiences.

Marketing efforts can be used to invite people to participate directly in an online engagement exercise. They might also be used to send out a survey at the beginning of an inquiry, asking people to provide basic information and inviting them to be kept up to date, while also asking participants to rank options or share what issues matter to them the most. This can help the committee to refine its messaging for later crowdsourcing efforts.[24] Surveys can also be used to ask people to anonymously recommend more stakeholders who may be interested. This is a useful method of snowballing, while also helping to build trust by sharing responsibility of who is being invited to participate (i.e. not just people chosen by the committee).

Other digital marketing tactics that committees are already trialling include playing with different communications materials for different groups (including icons, social media 'cards' or GIFs) or creating shareable video introductions to the consultation that help build awareness and lower the barriers to entry.

Reaching out to existing digital communities
Committees have had success in targeting particular groups by simply using hashtags on Twitter, where a range of relevant communities of expertise are already engaged. They have also used so-called 'digital ethnography', which involves participant observation in online forums like Mumsnet. The aim may be to gather relevant insights or direct people towards participation elsewhere. Again these sites often have moderators or gatekeepers, and an open and transparent approach is important.

Partnering with specialist organisations
External organisations specialising in various public engagement activities can provide access to otherwise hard-to-reach audiences. These can range from organisations specialising in random sortition[25], to organisations that have active communities specifically for the purposes of crowdsourcing using digital tools. For example Teacher Tapp regularly run quick polls with thousands of teachers across the country via an online app. Committees could also look to more recent developments such as the use of chatbots, which have been effective in reaching younger audiences (eg. Apptivism via Facebook Messenger).

Making the most of petitions data
Since September 2017, 25,000 petitions have been signed in a process which is overseen by the Petitions Select Committee. All of this data is geotagged, meaning it could be used to provide a heatmap to see what issues matter to people across the country, or in determining relevant topics for inquiry.

Not only that, millions of people sign petitions across the UK on a wide range of topics. This provides the rest of the committee system with a resource to steer relevant audiences into other, deeper forms of engagement in committee inquiries. It could also offer a hugely valuable marketing resource, such as better targeting of audiences on topics they have knowledge or experience of. One staff member estimates that if they were to scale up re-engagement efforts with people after signing petitions, they could be emailing 10 million people a year about parliamentary business relevant to their interests.[26]

This does however raise a challenge around diversity of opinion. It's likely that people voting in one petition will share similar views. This is also the case with some of the strategies outlined above, such as snowballing, or reaching out to online groups or organisations who see the engagement as an opportunity to mobilise in support of a cause, which may not be helpful to the committee. One staff member mentioned the challenge of inviting engagement from one source:

> We had and inquiry into abortion law: 2,500 submissions, and most of them are identical. Why? Because one organisation has made a call for people to provide evidence in favour of one argument.

To avoid these pitfalls, committee staff should avoid targeting people based on opinions and instead focus on other factors such as their background or relevant experiences. For instance, people who signed a petition in favour of extending school starting hours would be a biased sample for an inquiry on the same topic; but it may still be a useful way to access students or parents across the country for other inquiries related to education.

Other tactics, such as framing engagement questions, and facilitation and moderation will encourage people to make more valuable contributions online. Committees could also consider using tools that do more of the work of summarising the crowd's knowledge, or structuring responses in a way that is useful regardless of how many people mobilise in support of one opinion or another. These are topics we turn to below.
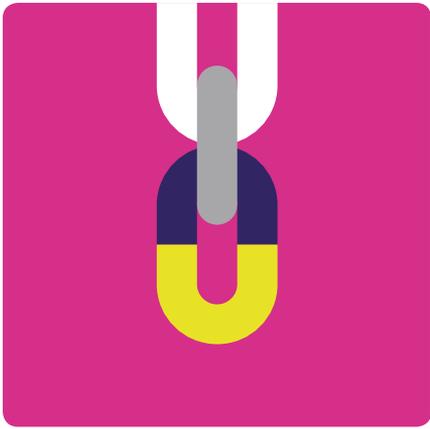
4

Make participation clear, responsive and meaningful

Nudging people to make informed contributions

Once a purpose is clear, and the crowd has been defined, the process will then need to be designed in a way that invites the specific type of contributions the committee needs.

Committees should provide clear resources and access to information that can help participants make better contributions. This is particularly important where the topic of consultation is complex or contested. For instance, one example of a UK Parliament evidence check on smart meters attracted low quality participation, either from people paranoid about the implications of smart meters in their homes, or people confused about how their input would be used (e.g misunderstanding of parliament and government).

Evidence from e-Participation research shows that the user-experience of digital participation has a high impact on the quality of crowdsourcing. It's shown that this improves where participants are given clear guidance and user-friendly briefing materials.[27] This can be through a combination of plain language, visual prompts and fact sheets, or behavioural nudges. This level of customisation is currently a challenge for select committees, as echoed in a conversation with a clerk about the use of online forums:

> Whether we like it or not [the website] remains our primary shop window. But … nothing is well signposted. I'd love us to have a better explanation about what it is that select committees do, that's easily accessible, that could be tweaked so different committees can adjust.

An e-consultation process used by the Taiwanese Government and Parliament called vTaiwan uses a number of different signposting methods to improve the quality of online contributions, including key definitions, glossaries and educational resources, which are summarised in a user-friendly and readable format. For some consultations, vTaiwan also uses an online platform where each government department is signed up with an account, and where participants can ask questions targeted at a specific department, who are then are required to provide a response within 7 days. This might not be possible in the context of a select committee inquiry, but having more proactive involvement by members of the committee or staff who promptly respond to questions and provide supporting definitions could be one way to encourage people to participate more productively.

Facilitation and moderation
Facilitation and moderation should be considered equally as important online as it is in guiding face-to-face deliberations. It is vital in enabling participants to move beyond their first, often emotional or rhetorical reactions, to the sharing and discussion of relevant knowledge or experience.[28]

During our workshop, select committee staff raised the challenge of impartiality, which is a barrier to more proactive content moderation. One clerk mentioned that it's unclear what their role should be as active participants in online discussion, especially as select committees must be strictly neutral in who they solicit evidence from and how they summarise that evidence.

It should be the role of parliamentary staff to follow a clear code of moderation online. Below, we adapt the framework provided by the University of Cornell as a guide for UK Parliament select committees.

Supervisory	
Social functions	• Welcoming • Positive reinforcement
Site use issues	• Resolving technical issues
Explaining the role of the moderator	• Providing information about the role of the moderators and their role within parliament
Policing	• Redact and quarantining comments or unhelpful sections of comments • Wrong venue (redirecting user)

Substantive	
Clarity	• Asking for clarification of a comment
Wrong information	• Correcting misunderstandings or clarifying what the committee is looking for • Clarifying the difference between parliament and government.
Substantiation	• Pointing out characteristics of effective commenting • Asking for more information, factual details or data • Asking for examples of personal experience • Providing substantive information about the inquiry • Pointing the commenter to relevant information in primary documents or other data sources
Focusing comment	• Pointing an off-topic commenter to engage in the question at hand

Further engagement	• Asking for more information, factual details or data
	• Asking them to make or consider possible solutions / alternatives
	• Asking for elaboration
	• Stimulating discussion
	   – Encouraging users to consider and engage comments of others
	   – Posing a question or comment to the community

The role of facilitative moderation in improving digital participation (adapted from The University of Cornell's Regulation Room/Smart Participation Project).[29]

Managing expectations

From the outset, it's essential to provide clear information about what the process aims to do, how the process works, how people's contributions will be used and what the rules of engagement are. Many staff members said that they find it hard to communicate this information to the public clearly. There are also concerns about whether expectations for public engagement can be met.

This is partly a challenge of people mistaking Parliament for Government – a common issue in parliamentary engagement activities. This makes managing expectations even more of a challenge because most people expect select committees to have more power than they actually do.

In response to this challenge, The Welsh National Assembly has been trialling ways to close the feedback loop, while educating participants about the role that their contribution has played within inquiries. After the Welsh Government's response to an inquiry on pregnancy, maternity and work, committee staff invited two contributors into the National Assembly. Their role was to interview the Chair of the committee on a live-streamed session which was broadcast on Facebook, collecting and asking questions raised online in real time. According to one member of the Engagement Team, this helped to clarify the process and manage expectations of what the committee could achieve as 'there were recommendations within the report that weren't accepted; it gave the chair the opportunity to clarify that.'

Relevant examples from further afield include ePart, a platform that gave Israeli citizens the opportunity to track, comment and receive notifications about upcoming committee hearing topics about to reach their national legislature.[30] Similarly Parlement et Citoyens – a crowdsourcing platform used by lawmakers in France – splits online consultations into several distinct phases, which can be followed on a public timeline. In the last stage, a final draft of the original proposal is published by the representative in charge of the consultation so that participants can see how their contributions made a difference.

In all of the examples above, technology can help to make the process of consultation more transparent, responsive and meaningful for participants. However, in each case it also needs strong commitment from committee staff, a Chair or MPs to work more openly and collaboratively with members of the public. This reminds us that good digital participation needs more than just better and more responsive process; like all public engagement, it requires commitment and leadership from the very top to commit to the excercise and run with the results.
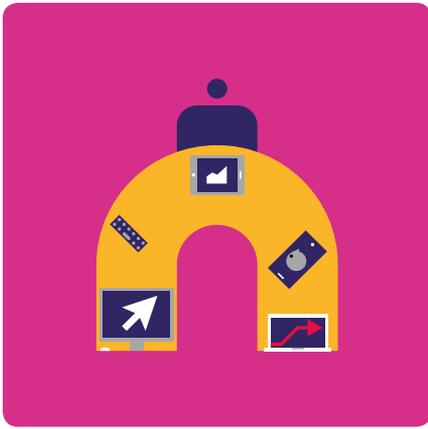
5

Commission better tools

When deciding which tools or methods to use, committees should consider how different tools and methods are conducive to different styles of engagement. The diagram below is intended to provide a guide as to some of the methods available, and how these generally compare to the status quo of select committee digital participation. It shows that more could be done to encourage a wider range of different participation activities in Parliament, as well as harnessing larger-scale participation.

There was a clear consensus among parliamentary staff that the bespoke forum tools that select committees are using to crowdsource information are too limited in their functionality. As one clerk put it, in reference to running an evidence check online consultation: 'We had a very low-tech forum. There wasn't even threading so you couldn't respond to others' comments … the tool could not enable what I was trying to get the community to do.' This demonstrates a clear need to improve the current technology.

> **Based on discussions in our workshop about bespoke forum tools, we conclude that a parliamentary web forum tool should:[31]**
> - be accessible, visually exciting and user friendly;
> - allow for different formats and types of content (e.g. images and videos) to be uploaded;
> - allow for dialogue (e.g. between the committee and the user, and between users);
> - have an easy to use back-end;
> - allow for thematic grouping of content (based on issues rather than committees);
> - make it easy to find and search for content; and
> - give staff the choice to make it open or closed (for example on topics that require anonymity).
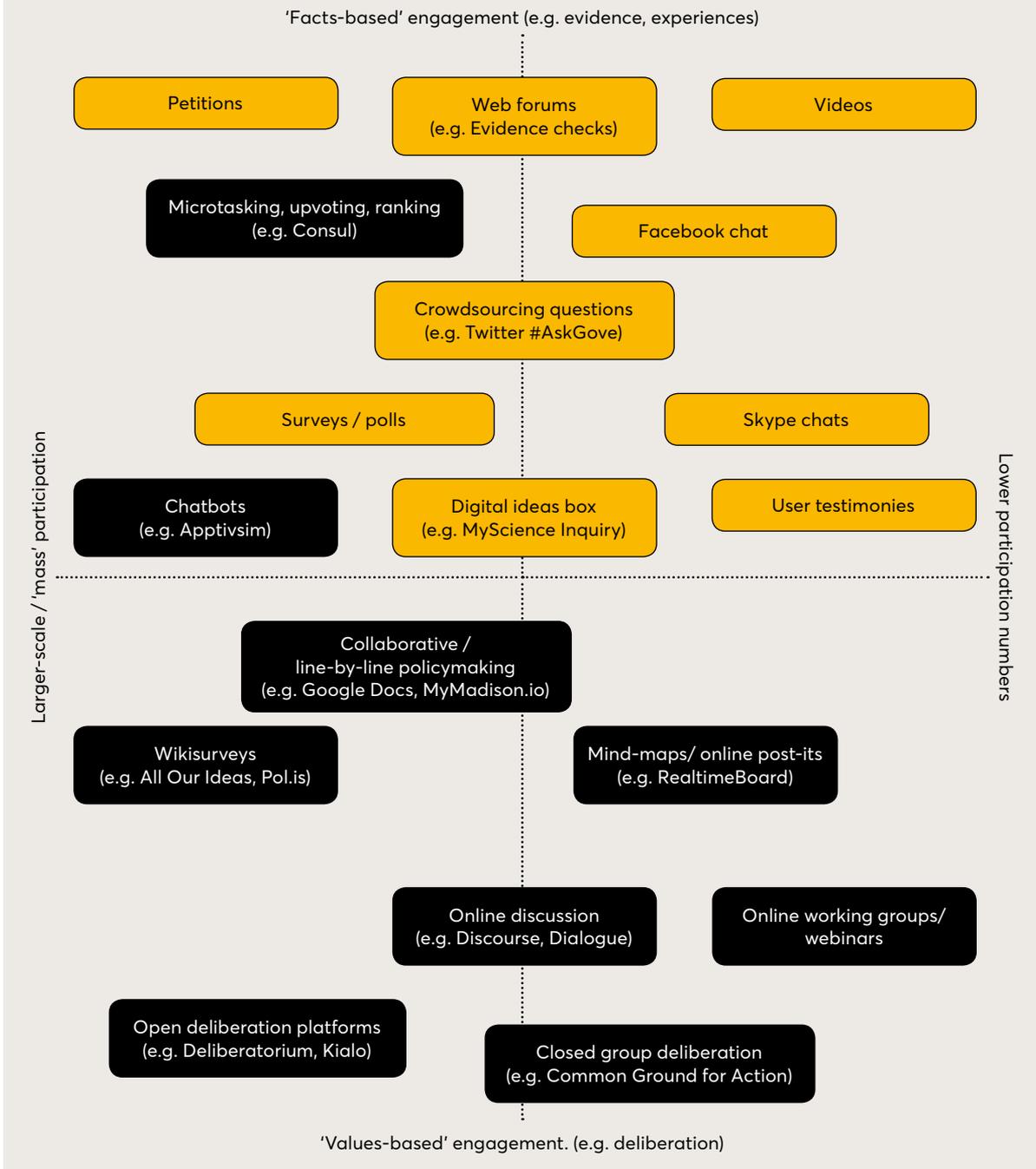
Two main challenges arose frequently during interviews with parliamentary staff. The first challenge is how to condense and make sense of large volumes of information. The second is around fear of inviting loud voices, or where online discussion amplifies views of more digitally competent users, or more confident or opinionated users.

There are a range of bespoke digital participation tools used by parliaments elsewhere that can help here. These tools can help to capture more of people's democratic energy, as well as making it easier to design more productive online conversations. The Welsh National Assembly has been successful using the proprietary forum tool Dialogue for running online consultations involving small- to medium-sized crowds. The Brazilian Chamber of Deputies uses open-source forum tool Discourse for online discussion. Discourse has in-built positive reinforcement or 'gamification' features whereby active users, over time, earn public 'badges' the more they contribute, effectively rewarding good behaviour on the platform. Another tool called Your Priorities - used by the Scottish Parliament - is specifically designed to encourage a more consensual style of online conversation.[32]

Matrix of digital crowdsourcing tools and methods

☐ Methods committees are already using
■ Methods novel to committees

'Facts-based' engagement (e.g. evidence, experiences)

Larger-scale / 'mass' participation

Lower participation numbers

Petitions

Web forums
(e.g. Evidence checks)

Videos

Microtasking, upvoting, ranking
(e.g. Consul)

Facebook chat

Crowdsourcing questions
(e.g. Twitter #AskGove)

Surveys / polls

Skype chats

Chatbots
(e.g. Apptivsim)

Digital ideas box
(e.g. MyScience Inquiry)

User testimonies

Collaborative /
line-by-line policymaking
(e.g. Google Docs, MyMadison.io)

Wikisurveys
(e.g. All Our Ideas, Pol.is)

Mind-maps/ online post-its
(e.g. RealtimeBoard)

Online discussion
(e.g. Discourse, Dialogue)

Online working groups/
webinars

Open deliberation platforms
(e.g. Deliberatorium, Kialo)

Closed group deliberation
(e.g. Common Ground for Action)

'Values-based' engagement. (e.g. deliberation)

Where participation numbers are expected to be much higher, select committees could explore engagement software built for massive crowdsourcing of ideas and opinion. A tool called Kialo offers more visual mechanisms for summarising large-scale debates, which could be useful if an MP needs to get up to speed quickly, or understand the competing arguments and perspectives on a particular topic.

Wikisurveys are another promising area. A Wikisurvey is a type of survey where participants ask the questions, which are in turn randomly presented back to participants. The process encourages reflection on individual ideas, and therefore more nuanced ideas can emerge over time – effectively acting as a form of large-scale deliberation and consensus. It also reduces duplication as people are asked to reflect more carefully on one another's statements before submitting their own. One of the best known examples is the use of a tool called All Our Ideas, run by the New York City Mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability. Over four months around 1,400 respondents provided nearly 32,000 votes and 464 new ideas, many of which the council had previously not considered. Top-ranked ideas were integrated into the city's PlaNYC 2030 Sustainability Plan.

Some Wikisurveys can also help to deal with the issue of 'loud voices'. A tool called Pol.is was used recently by German political party Aufstehen to map the ideas and opinions among 34,000 people. The tool collects people's responses and then clusters them visually on the screen. Groups are represented on the basis of how divided they are, regardless of the number of people who agree or disagree with them. This means that you can have one group mobilising many people in favour of one idea, but minority ideas will still remain represented with equal space on the screen.

By constraining the type of responses that users can submit, Wikisurveys provide a clear summary of what a large group is thinking and reduce the need to read through masses of citizen-generated text. That said, while they are useful for large-scale ideas crowdsourcing or deliberation, they may be less useful where select committees are looking for more in-depth stories or qualitative evidence.

The Web and Publications Unit, along with the Select Committee Engagement Team, should work proactively with the Parliamentary Digital Service to customise and trial some of these tools. It's also important to remember that no single tool can achieve everything, and every consultation will be different from the last. Therefore it's crucial that the new parliamentary website allows for a modular approach, with a basic landing page and anchor that can be customised and adapted, pointing to relevant content or separate engagement tools if necessary.[33]

4. Longer-term strategies for digital participation in select committees
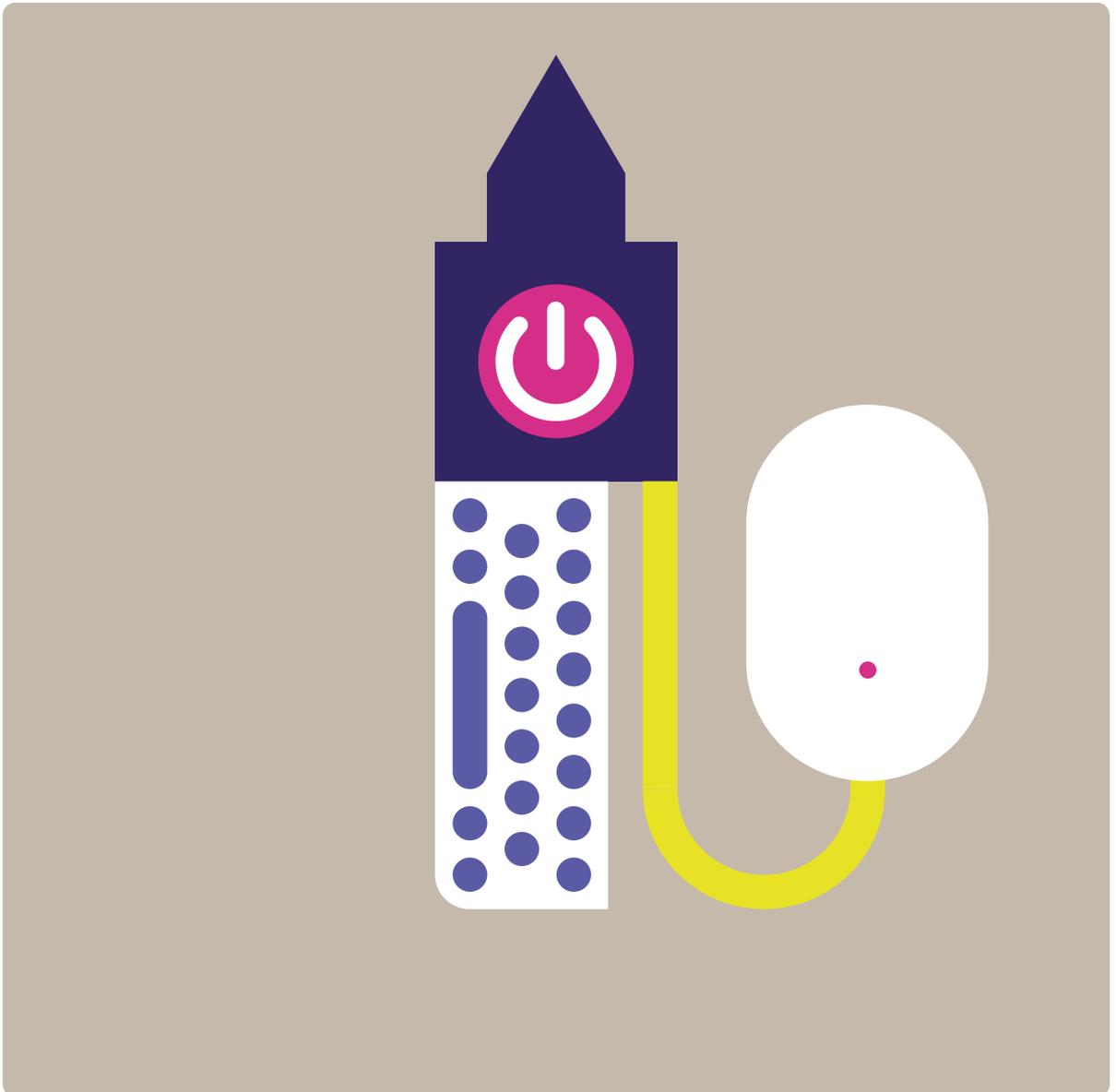
Obstacles to progress on public engagement

In order to understand the obstacles to achieving the ideas outlined above, we held a workshop with the Select Committee Engagement Team and the Web and Publications Unit. We asked what the obstacles are to greater progress on digital public engagement. We also put the same question to clerks, committee specialists and assistants in our interviews. The results are summarised in the box below, with findings separated according to the groups above (labelled 'Engagement staff' and 'Business staff' respectively).

Engagement staff
• Not enough resource. • Public engagement is undervalued. • Keen to hear from 'qualified' experts as opposed to the public. • MPs and business staff not convinced of the benefits. • Hierarchical decision-making and bureaucracy. • Fear of bad press. • Restrictions around what constitutes evidence. • Fragmented teams.

Business staff
• Not enough resource. • Timelines between teams unaligned. • Sometimes the need for public engagement is realised too late. • Lack of clear guidance (no precedent for digital participation). • Lack of understanding of what success looks like. • Fear of bad press. • Restrictions around what constitutes evidence. • Fragmented teams.

Some of these obstacles can be overcome by our suggested approaches above, for instance better design of digital participation could help to counter the view that it only invites biased or loud voices. However other obstacles, such as lack of understanding of what 'success' looks like or misalignment between teams, will require rather different approaches.

This section provides recommendations under three broad categories for enabling select committees to build a culture of digital participation in Parliament. We focus on higher-level, institutional factors – from team structures, to transparency and use of data – which will be necessary to make high-quality public engagement take root and grow.

Improving accessibility and transparency

Transparency and openness are core principles for enabling good public engagement. In the world of digital democracy, this requires open technology that makes it easy for people find out what stage the process is at, and how their input is being used. This can also enable better knowledge-sharing internally, breaking down silos between committees and helping to improve collective awareness and memory of activities across Parliament. Here we provide three key action areas, drawing from our workshop where participants were asked to come up with methods for making select committee inquiries more accessible:

A standardised and accessible online form
From our interviews with select committee users we discovered that the requirements for submitting evidence can sometimes put off people contributing.[34]

> *'You're giving people a blank piece of paper pretty much. For some people you might need a little more guidance, a little more hand holding.'*
> Anonymous witness of written evidence

Select committees ask witnesses to upload evidence in the form of Word documents, which makes them non-standardised and adds an extra burden for staff in sorting and extracting information. Committees should implement the option of an easy-to-use and customisable online form. This could be adapted by staff to help guide witnesses through different stages of giving evidence, inviting them to provide shorter, snappier submissions, and combining survey functionality with more traditional free-text submissions. It would also open up new opportunities to summarise and present people's input in new ways, whether comparing answers across similar questions, or by providing easy-to-access statistics and data export.

Make data open and searchable
Information about committees is often difficult to navigate and explore, which makes it harder to follow the specific activities of an inquiry. This is a barrier to internal collaboration as well as public understanding.

Evidence, along with other committee publications, should be easily searchable not only by committee but by issue area. We recommend that select committees work with the Parliamentary Digital Service to introduce common standards for tagging evidence across the committee system. Witnesses could be prompted to add tags to their evidence, including location, profession, keywords, type of evidence (stories, pictures, videos) when posting their submissions via the online form mentioned above.

Committees should also ensure that data generated in digital participation is open, searchable and accessible.[35] By opening this data, as well as providing accessible developer tools like APIs, users of the website would be able follow inquiries more easily, while performing new forms of data analysis and visualisation in the same way that many third parties have created open source tools for petitions data. It will also help journalists or other researchers to analyse how diverse the audiences are that engage with select committees.[36] This relates to our final recommendation.

Make it easier to scrutinise the work of select committees themselves
Select committees often struggle to obtain feedback, follow up on recommendations, or engage in any wider attempt to evaluate the long-term impact of their work.[37] Committees also need to get better at enabling the public to follow their impact.

We recommend select committees find more innovative ways to present their recommendations to government, rather than burying them in reports. In particular, we suggest implementing more mechanisms for exploring recommendations across the committee system, and a 'traffic-light' system, indicating what the recommendation was, who it was aimed at and whether the recommendation was responded to. Not only could this help to improve institutional memory, it could also be a public advocacy tool, helping external audiences see what the Government is or is not doing on a particular topic, or areas for the committee to follow up on. One staff member described how something like a 'search engine' for recommendations could benefit committees internally:

> Staff [want] a resource that they can easily use like Google. A reference database to bring people up to speed on what committees have worked on in the past and the impact it had … All this information exists online anyway, it's just so inaccessible.

This should not be a manual process compiled in Excel, but should be part of the overall effort to make more of the proceeds of select committee inquiries available in open and machine-readable formats. Useful examples to look at from other countries include Helsinki's Open Ahjo API, an effort to make all decision-making across the local legislature available as real-time data, using the Popolo open government standard.[38]

More experimentation with digital participation

Particularly prominent feedback from research highlighted that although interesting experiments in digital participation have taken place, there is little effort to follow up on these activities, or to provide a systematic method to document failures and learnings. Better evaluation of outcomes and impact must start with having a clear purpose for digital participation activities, and also having a clear understanding of what success looks like.

> *'On Twitter, what is the plan? Is it more followers, engagements? What is our KPI? We don't know what success looks like.'*
> Committee Clerk

An example to learn from is Open North, a Canadian non-profit that has developed an interactive online consultation method called Citizen Budget. They have established a framework to understand tangible impacts (qualitative evidence, policy decisions, reports and plans) and intangible impacts (willingness to participate in the future, increased understanding and trust in government).[39] Other useful guides for designing and measuring impact in digital engagement include The World Bank's detailed framework.[40]

Another striking insight from speaking with a range of select committee staff was how little they spoke to each other, or knew about public engagement methods being conducted by other committees.

A better 'gatekeeper role' would be useful here, including who decides what public engagement to prioritise (across both digital and non-digital), and how this fits into the broader strategy and pool of experiments taking place. We also recommend that committees keep an 'engagement register': a simple, shareable resource of engagement activities that have taken place across the committee system. The engagement register should include reference to the type of engagement, areas of success and some simple engagement and evaluation metrics. Again, this would help to build up a better memory of engagement activities as well as better standards of evidence about 'what works', so that digital participation can be used more consistently and regularly across committees.

## Making (digital) participation the new normal

A lot of progress has been made in improving Parliament's work in public engagement over the years. But there's still a lot more to be done to reduce the stigma around public engagement, and to acknowledge it as a valuable source of information for committee work. Better integration of public engagement will also lead to people engaging more actively and productively; people are more inclined to participate if they feel their input is part of a formal process and can make a real difference.

Here we recommend that committees be more creative in communicating to the public how their engagement informed an inquiry. Instead of being buried in the final inquiry report or annex, a public engagement response should be presented in a more accessible format such as a web page, or as a live-streamed session or video posted online. The response should be delivered personally by either senior committee staff, or the Chair on larger-scale engagements, summarising how submissions were used and how they influenced the final inquiry recommendations to the government. The final report from the Speaker's 2015 Commission on Digital Democracy is a good example that select committees should build upon.[41]

It's also important to recognise that select committee work is one among a range of competing pressures on MPs' schedules, amid constituency work, legislation and campaigning. In recognition of this, the Select Committee Engagement Team and the Web and Publications Unit should work more closely together with business staff in designing creative and engaging ways to summarise the results of public engagement activities when presented to MPs, whether through the use of infographics, short clips or video summaries, slide decks, or interactive data visualizations.

### Experimenting with innovative ways to present and share data visually

Examples like Pol.is are a powerful way to visualise consensus across a wide array of ideas and opinions, whereas other tools may useful to visualise consensus within an online forum-style setting (e.g. Your Priorities and Kialo for larger groups, or Loomio for smaller groups). Other approaches like sentiment dashboards or interactive tiles are being trialled increasingly, and would be greatly aided by better tagging and categorisation of evidence.
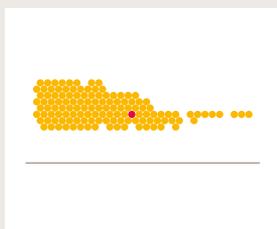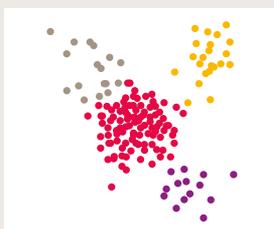

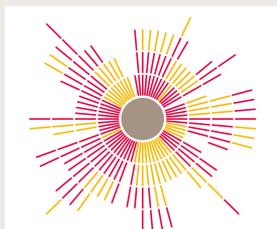Statement clusters: consensus vs divisive (Pol.is)
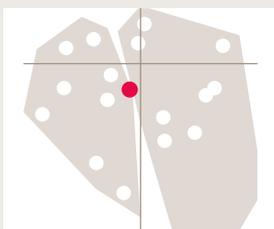
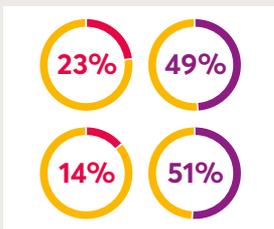Statement clusters: spatial consensus (Pol.is)
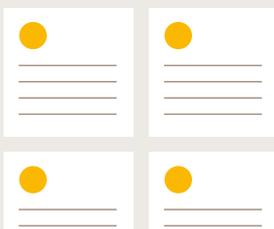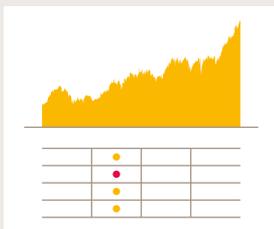
Discussion tiles (Your priorities)
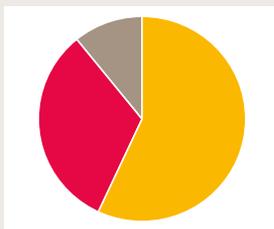
Network clusters (Gephi / Kumu)

Discussion topography (Kialo)

Statement lists: consensus and divisive (Pol.is)

Sentiment dashboards

Pie chart (Loomio)

Staff should also more actively support MPs to participate in digital engagement, in the same way they have done for other public engagement activities. The Science and Technology Committee experimented with a 'Schools pack' for MPs to deliver public engagement in schools. Committees could design similar briefings describing how MPs can meaningfully take part in online engagement exercises.

Another set of challenges are around the relationship between offline and online engagement. It's a misconception that digital should replace more traditional methods of public engagement. Some of the most innovative examples of digital participation in fact complement offline methods. There's a growing group of organisations in the UK thinking about how we blend large-scale crowdsourcing with more established deliberative methods of engagement, for instance.[42]

Other interventions needn't be as complex. They could be finding simple ways to improve the reach of offline meetings by live-streaming, improving audience interaction tools or by allowing people to feed into discussions in real-time. One staff member spoke of a 'missed opportunity' when a select committee hearing was held at the V&A Museum, with an audience of 400 people, but staff didn't want to involve the public because it was thought that this might undermine the committee or invite questions that MPs weren't prepared for. In this instance some live moderation by staff, alongside use of audience interaction tools like Sli.do or Pol.is, could have established a simple way of crowdsourcing relevant, useful input from the people in the room, while creating a more engaging overall experience for audience members.

Some interviewees mentioned that the structure of teams involved in delivering public engagement doesn't always lend itself well to a joined up approach to public engagement across digital and non-digital. For instance, the Web and Publications Unit (who are generally relied upon for digital participation) and the Select Committee Engagement Team (who conduct offline outreach and research) are fragmented and located in separate buildings. There's also fragmentation between these engagement-oriented teams, and the staff in charge of everyday running of select committee inquiries (i.e business staff). One specialist attributed this fragmentation to common timeline misalignment between staff:

> People might say 'can we do a forum for next week's session' … but these things take months. [Engagement staff are] approaching specialists at the wrong time. That's why it's good to have a framework in place at the very beginning of the inquiry.

Although it can be difficult for select committees to plan where inquiries may take them, it's crucial that public engagement work starts as early as possible, and there is sufficient lead-in time to ensure adequate marketing and process design. Committees should put clearer frameworks in place at the beginning of inquiries to help manage roles and timelines. For instance, the Select Committee Engagement Team has recently been using the OASIS campaign-planning system which is designed to bring together multi-disciplinary teams. These types of approaches should be further explored with a view to creating a more joined up approach between public engagement and relevant committee staff from the beginning.

We also recommend more resources are put towards training for digital participation activities across all staff members involved in public engagement work, including online form design, digital marketing and online facilitation and moderation. Digital participation methods should also be integrated into the formal public engagement guidance provided to committee staff at the beginning of any inquiry.

Where to start

Integrating digital participation methods into the select committee system will not happen seamlessly overnight. Innovating in such long-established systems will require careful planning, experimentation and learning through trial and improvement.

With several hundred inquiries taking place by Commons committees in any one year, there is ample scope to begin this process. We recommend that Parliament commits to at least five pilots in which new digital tools and methods are incorporated to improve participation in a select committee process.

At the outset of these pilots, there should be careful consideration of the nature of the inquiry, and selection of appropriate digital tools and methods, feedback loops and a clear commitment from senior staff and MPs. Each committee should also start with a clear understanding of the process they're trying to improve and set clear metrics for how they will measure their success. To illustrate where to start, below we sketch out some basic select committee processes which could be improved using digital tools.

Better access to ideas
• Use digital tools to crowdsource inquiry topics. Make the process transparent and user-friendly (e.g. clear timelines and interactive tiles to explore ideas). Notify people at different stages and be clear about why decisions are made.

Better understanding of facts and evidence
• Continue to roll out the use of evidence checks with a more joined up approach to marketing and improved participation tools to encourage more and better participation. Trial these in areas where expertise is distributed and untapped, e.g. healthcare (nurses, doctors, hospital staff and patients).

• Test the use of online forms for submitting evidence, with clearer guidance, splitting up into 'chunks' of evidence, and tagging of information for better searchability.

Better understanding of opinions
• Use Wikisurveys or online fora to gain a better understanding of the key dividing points and identify common ground between stakeholders. This should be on topics where different groups are clear. For instance, post-Brexit agricultural policy might require input from different stakeholders like farmers in different sectors, importers and exporters of agricultural produce, small business owners, and so on.

Improved monitoring and transparency
• At the end of an inquiry, integrate the use of live-streamed Q&A sessions with the committee Chair (as in the Welsh National Assembly), or video summaries of how public engagement was integrated. This should be delivered by the Chair, as a mechanism to better satisfy public expectations in engagement activities.

• Trial the use of technologies to better track the impact select committees are having, including publishing recommendations as data, making them searchable and allowing users to easily see how the government has responded

Nesta looks forward to working with select committees as they seek to experiment with these tools and methods. Our work in digital democracy brings together years of experience, from practical work building and testing digital tools for participation, to research that uncovers examples of best practice. For more information on our work, see our project page on democratic innovations, or get in touch: information@nesta.org.uk.

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1 Tyrie, A. (2015) 'The Poodle Bites Back'. Centre for Policy Studies.

2 See Sawer, P. (2017) Warnings over 'deathtrap' high-rise building cladding 'ignored' for decades. 'The Telegraph' [online]. Available from: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/17/warnings-deathtrap-high-rise-building-cladding-ignored-decades/ [accessed 5 June, 2019].

3 Russell, M., Benton, M. (2011) 'Selective Influence: The Policy Impact of House of Commons Select Committees.' London: UCL Constitution Unit.

4 Wallace, P. (2018) Select committees have come of age in the Brexit parliament [online]. 'Prospect'. Available from: https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/select-committees-have-come-of-age-in-the-brexit-parliament [accessed 5 June, 2019].

5 The Petitions Committees' recent inquiry into online abuse of disabled people, which began after a petition led by the celebrity Katie Price, is a good example.

6 Simon, J., Bass, T., Boelman, V., Mulgan, G. (2017) 'Digital Democracy: the tools transforming political engagement'. London: Nesta.

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8 See: https://www.nesta.org.uk/project/democratic-innovations/ [accessed 5 June, 2019].

9 See: https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/liaison-committee/core-tasks/ [accessed 5 June, 2019].

10 See for instance the Puttnam Commission or recommendations by the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy.

11 Simpler uses of digital tools here might involve gathering ideas via video, as experiments in virtual town halls with US Senators have shown. See for example Lazer, D., Neblo, M., Esterling, K., Goldschmidt, K. (2009) 'Online Town Hall Meetings: Exploring Democracy in the 21st Century' [online]. Congressional Management Foundation. Available from: http://www.congressfoundation.org/storage/documents/CMF_Pubs/online-town-hall-meetings.pdf

12 Aitamurto, T., Landemore, H., Lee, D., Goel, A. (2013) 'Seven Lessons from the crowdsourced law reform in Finland' [online]. The GovLab Blog. Available from: http://thegovlab.org/seven-lessons-from-the-crowdsourced-law-reform-in-finland/ [accessed 5 June, 2019].

13 See: https://blog.pol.is/uber-responds-to-vtaiwans-coherent-blended-volition-3e9b75102b9b [accessed 5 June, 2019].

14 Aitamurto, T., Landemore, H. (2016) Crowdsourced Deliberation: The Case of the Law on Off-Road Traffic in Finland. 'Policy and Internet.' Vol.8(2). For more on the importance of diversity in collective intelligence see Landemore, H. (2017) 'Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence and the Rule of the Many'. Princeton University Press; and Hong L., Page, S. (2012) Some Microfoundations of Collective Wisdom, in Landemore, H., Elster, J. (eds.) 'Collective Wisdom: Principles and Mechanisms'. Cambridge University Press.

15 Given that digital tools will amplify the voices of those who are more tech-savvy, these tools must be used with sensitivity to who the relevant audiences are, and extra efforts must be made to reach those who cannot participate.

16 See Berry, R., Kippin, S. (2013) 'Parliamentary select committees: who gives evidence?' London: Democratic Audit.

17 Many of the examples here were chosen as they provide context for recommendations made in later sections. For a more comprehensive account see: Flinders, M., Marsh, I., Cotter, L. (2015) Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach. 'First Special Report of the Session 2015-2016.' House of Commons Liaison Committee.

18 See: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmsctech/1716/171603.htm#_idTextAnchor000 [accessed 5 June, 2019].

19 See: https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/news/secretary-of-state-ev-session/ [accessed 5 June, 2019].

20 Flinders, M., Marsh, I., Cotter, L. (2015) Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach. 'First Special Report of the Session 2015-2016.' House of Commons Liaison Committee, p.45.

21 Petrie, L., Mulley, J. (2013) 'Evaluation of the Public Reading Pilot.' Scrutiny Unit.

22 Solivan, J., Farina, C. (2013) Regulation Room: How the Internet Improves Public Participation in Rulemaking. 'Cornell e-Rulemaking Initiative Publications'. Paper 13, p.61.

23 Any effort to do this should also liaise with the Select Committee Engagement Team who have also recently created their own CRM.

24 See combination of crowdsourcing and survey methods here for instance: Aitamurto, T., Saldivar, J. (2017) Motivating Participation in Crowdsourced Policymaking: The Interplay of Epistemic and Interactive Aspects. 'Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput Interact.' Vol.1(2), p.18:6.

25 See for instance the Australian Citizens Parliament where 300 people participated in online deliberation See: https://www.participedia.net/en/cases/australias-first-citizens-parliament-canberra-australia [accessed 5 June, 2019]

26 The Petitions Committee has already worked with other committees on experimenting with directing petitions signees into online forums. This worked particularly well for the inquiry on brain tumour research funding, as well as an inquiry into workplace rules for women and harassment for instance.

27 Farina, C., Newhart, M. (2013) Rulemaking 2.0: Understanding and getting Better Public Participation. 'Cornell e-Rulemaking Initiative Publications.' Paper 15.

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[31] Some staff expressed their preference for Facebook and Twitter, since that's where most of Parliament's audiences already are. Others raised concerns that traditional social media tools provide limitations (e.g. they cannot be customised), and their business models - which prioritise interaction or engagement regardless of its content - often engender emotional or incendiary responses rather than more reflective and considered ones. Facebook and Twitter should be one part of a much bigger toolbox. Indeed they can act as valuable marketing tools, for instance for reaching different groups and inviting them onto a separate page where the main consultation is taking place.

[32] See for example https://questions.parlement-ouvert.fr/group/4 [accessed 5 June, 2019].

[33] Rules around Parliament and data protection mean that any new software tool will have to be set up and maintained in the UK. All the tools mentioned above have been recommended with this in mind, and are therefore all either open source (and can be cloned and deployed locally) or have servers based in the UK.

[34] This finding is also reinforced by a survey of academics run by the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology. https://www.parliament.uk/documents/Published_Academics_perceptions_of_barriers.pdf [accessed June 5, 2019].

[35] Though this may not be the case for more sensitive topics where anonymity may need to be guaranteed.

[36] For an example of why this oversight is important, see Knaus, C., Evershed, N. (2019) Tim Wilson helped write 20% of submissions to franking credits inquiry [online]. 'The Guardian'. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/mar/28/tim-wilson-helped-write-20-of-submissions-to-franking-credits-inquiry [accessed 5 June, 2019].

[37] See White, H. (2015) 'Select committees under scrutiny: The impact of parliamentary inquiries on government.' Institute for Government.

[38] See: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/toward/ [accessed 5 June, 2019].

[39] Izdebski, K., Kamińska, A. (2018) 'Mapping Digital Social Innovation: 5. Digital Democracy.' ePaństwo Foundation. Nesta.

[40] Digital Engagement Evaluation Team (2016) 'Evaluating Digital Citizen Engagement: A practical guide' Washington: World Bank group.

[41] See http://digitaldemocracy.parliament.uk/chapter/foreword#main-content [accessed 5 June, 2019].

[42] See: https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/three-ideas-blending-digital-and-deliberative-democracy/ [accessed 5 June, 2019].

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