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1. Executive summary

1.1 At its last meeting the commission asked for proposals for how Policy and Scrutiny at Westminster might increase its engagement and particularly how it might use digital solutions to do this. This paper is intended to provide some ideas and prompt a discussion about how Westminster's Policy and Scrutiny Committees and task groups could increase engagement. It considers how committees and task groups could take advantage of technology and digital platforms in order to carry out more engagement. However, it also looks beyond this and explores ways in which effective engagement can be carried out more generally. The report covers:

- Promoting the work of scrutiny
- Using data to understand what the public thinks
- Asking the public for its thoughts
- Carrying out more in-depth engagement
- Important considerations before deciding whether to engage

2. Promoting the work of scrutiny

2.1 Carrying out engagement is an important part of the democratic process and underpins one of the four principles of good scrutiny, that effective scrutiny should

'amplify the voices and concerns of the public'.¹ It helps make the scrutiny process robust and responsive to the needs of residents by ensuring decisions, delivery, and evaluation of services are shaped by the relevant people and communities². In its *Good Scrutiny Guide* the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CFPS) says that meaningful public engagement begins with ensuring that the public has a clear stake in scrutiny and its work programme, and that there is a transparent opportunity for the public to use a mixture of ways to influence that work programme. This form of engagement will make engaging the public on individual topics much easier³. The Government's statutory guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities says that "Authorities should ensure scrutiny has a profile in the wider community. Consideration should be given to how and when to engage the authority's communications officers, and any other relevant channels, to understand how to get that message across"⁴. Scrutiny at Westminster does a lot of work that is very relevant and of interest to Westminster residents. However, many residents may not be aware of this work. To help ensure Westminster residents feel they have a stake in the work of scrutiny it is helpful to think about how Scrutiny could have more visibility and be better promoted in the community.

2.2 Because of its ubiquity, many organisations use social media as a primary way of engaging and reaching-out to stakeholders. Social media is used by the council to connect with residents, it has a presence on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. However, currently, Scrutiny at Westminster does not have a large presence on social media. Scrutiny, therefore, might want to think about how it could work with colleagues in the Communication Directorate to increase its presence on social media in order to raise its profile in the community.

2.3 Parliamentary Select Committees in the UK are now regular users of social media. Each "committee has its own Twitter account and regularly tweets about its work, publicising and live-tweeting and live-streaming oral evidence sessions, inquiry launches and reports"⁵. Committees' seek to attract interest in their work by posting clips of evidence sessions, specially made short films, as well as graphics and animations. Their tweets generally attract 60,000–90,000 'engagements' (retweets, likes and clicks) per month⁶. The use of social media by select committees in the New Zealand Parliament is another example of how scrutiny bodies have used social media platforms to successfully promote their work. In this case each committee has its own Facebook page where it posts about its work and upcoming meetings (some of which are live streamed) and also posts pre-recorded interviews with members of the committee. While either of these may not be the exact format that Scrutiny at Westminster would adopt (it may be that it

¹ Centre for Public Scrutiny, *Good Scrutiny Guide*, <https://www.cfps.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CfPS-Good-Scrutiny-Guide-v5-WEB-SINGLE-PAGES.pdf>

² Involve, *Making the case for public engagement*,

<http://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Making-the-Case-for-Public-Engagement.pdf>

³ Centre for Public Scrutiny, *Good Scrutiny Guide*, <https://www.cfps.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CfPS-Good-Scrutiny-Guide-v5-WEB-SINGLE-PAGES.pdf>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/800048/Statutory_Guidance_on_Overview_and_Scrutiny_in_Local_and_Combined_Authorities.pdf

⁵ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmliaisn/1860/186009.htm>

⁶ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmliaisn/1860/186009.htm>

is more appropriate for the committees to use the Council's existing social media channels) some of the elements could be quite useful.

2.4 Live streaming committee meetings

Over the pandemic scrutiny meetings have been lived streamed to maintain social distancing. This has been successful and may be something that Scrutiny wants to explore keeping in some form, even once in person meetings resume. It provides an opportunity for people to watch the meetings and engage with the Scrutiny's work without having to travel to City Hall. A link to the live-stream of the meeting could be shared on social media along with information about what the meeting will cover and who will be attending. This content can then be shared across social media by interested groups and people. Because of the nature of social media, the more people who engage with the content means the likelihood of more people seeing it increases. Since Select Committees in New Zealand started sharing live streaming links, many of the posts have been shared multiple times and many of the videos have been viewed between 100 – 500 times with some being viewed over 1000 times.

2.5 Scrutiny could also look at posting other member-based content on social media. Westminster already does something similar to this with the Leader's live Q&As. Scrutiny chairs and members could look at doing something similar. This content could be about specific pieces of work scrutiny is doing but could also be used to paint a larger picture about scrutiny's role at the council.

3. Using data to understand what the public thinks

3.1 There are also other sources of data that the council collects that scrutiny could draw on to understand the issues residents care about. For example, the council carries out the City Survey every year, which collects data about what residents think about the council and council services. Despite COVID-19, the City Survey for the 2020 year will still be going ahead. The council has also been collecting social listening' data from social media. This includes tracking and measuring sentiment regarding hashtags and mentions of Westminster. Parliamentary select committees in the UK have been experimenting with using 'social listening software' to help committees gauge the public mood an opinion on an issue. In future these methods could be used to help choose the topics for select committee inquiries⁷. Scrutiny at Westminster could look at using this data to feed into work programme compilation and ideas for task groups.

4. Asking the public for its thoughts

4.1 Scrutiny at Westminster could make more use of written submission processes to increase its engagement with the public about particular issues relevant to it work. These processes could be largely online via email or a submissions platform. Submissions could be in writing, but also could include mediums like video recordings or asking people to fill out an online survey.

⁷ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmliaison/1860/186009.htm>

4.2 An online submissions process has a number of benefits. It would allow committees to connect and hear from more people compared to the usual process of inviting witnesses to speak at the formal meetings. It also a relatively accessible format, especially compared to speaking at a public meeting which many people could find quite daunting. A submissions process is also a good stepping stone for further engagement. Committees would be able to hear people's thoughts and then decide whether they need to engage further with an individual/group. A committee might decide to invite someone they have received a submission from to speak at a future meeting. Having a written submission before a committee hears from someone is useful as members have an idea of what the person is going to say and can plan their lines of enquiry before engaging with that person/group.

4.3 *Targeted or open submissions*

A submissions process could either be open to the public or targeted to specific individuals and/or groups. In cases where a committee wants to seek targeted submissions, it could work with officers to come up with a list of groups and/or individuals who could be invited to make submissions. A committee might use a targeted process to hear from specific people/groups about an item it is considering at an upcoming meeting. This process could happen in tandem with the report commissioning process, which would give time for the submissions to be requested and received and then for a decision to be made about whether a person or group would be invited to speak further at a meeting or other engagement session. This same sort of process could be used by task group seeking targeted submissions.

4.4 An open process would allow anyone or anyone within a specific group to make a submission. This type of process is likely more appropriate for larger pieces of work, such as task group work. Task groups have already used this process in the past, for example, the Inclusion in the Evening and Night Time Economy Task Group had an open call for evidence. Having open calls for submissions is useful as it means members engage with voices they may not have heard if they had just sought targeted submissions.

4.5 *Crowd sourcing ideas for Scrutiny work-programmes*

The CFPS guidance talked about how involving the public in the complication of work-programmes gives it more of a stake in the work of scrutiny. Scrutiny Committees could consider ways to "crowd source" ideas for its work programme from the public. The Commons Science and Technology Select Committee in the UK did this to get ideas for setting up inquiries. "Using social media platforms, the public were invited, via written submissions or through video submissions using #MyScienceInquiry on Twitter, to put forward their ideas on topics for inquiries. Submissions covered a broad range of subjects and came from individuals, universities, learned societies, charities, and civil society organisations. The Committee shortlisted submissions and invited shortlisted submitters to pitch their proposal in person to the Committee. The Committee subsequently launched some of these as full inquiries and acted on the others through writing letters to Ministers and incorporating relevant questions into future evidence sessions"⁸.

⁸ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmliaisn/1860/186007.htm>

5. Carrying out more in-depth engagement

5.1 Scrutiny could also consider how it could do more in-depth engagement with the public. Task groups already carry out in depth engagement as a matter of course. However, this type of engagement does not need to be limited to task groups and scrutiny committees could explore options for carrying out more face to face engagement outside of meetings.

5.2 There are multiple methods for carrying out face to face engagement depending on what members are hoping to gain from it. For example, discussion round tables or conversation cafes are less structured sessions where the aim is hearing people's stories and perspectives. These could be useful for committees to carry out before a meeting to help inform their scrutiny of a particular item. These less formal settings, compared to a standard meeting, would likely mean people are more comfortable sharing their views and perspectives.

5.3 A conversation café is an open, hosted conversation⁹. It could be in a café or any other appropriate public space. They are “designed to gather participants' thoughts on a single topic or question. The topic can be very specific or reasonably broad”¹⁰. For example, the British Science Association ran a project called Community X-Change which aimed to find robust solutions to climate change that were supported by a range of stakeholders. It used conversation cafes to bring together a diverse group of participants, including, members of the public, scientists and decision-makers. “Through the cafes, the groups concluded that climate change could only be tackled if technical solutions were integrated with ways to address the social challenges facing communities. The safe, constructive space provided by the Cafés allowed for effective communication between citizens, scientists and decision-makers and enhanced understanding on all sides”¹¹.

5.4 *Scrutiny as a forum for deliberative democracy*

Deliberative democracy or deliberative engagement aims to bring people (citizens, residents, affected individuals) closer to the affairs of government and decision makers¹². It generally involves selecting a group of citizens that represent a cross section of the population and with the assistance of experts the group is tasked discussing and reaching a decision about an issue. Examples of deliberative democracy include deliberative workshops and citizens assemblies. Task groups in particular could consider using deliberative democracy methods to help inform their work and recommendations.

5.5 Deliberative workshops “are a form of facilitated group discussions that provide participants with the opportunity to consider an issue in depth, challenge

⁹ Conversation Cafes, <http://www.conversationcafe.org/faqs/>

¹⁰ Involve, *Conversation Cafes*, <https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Innovations-for-select-committee-engagement.pdf>

¹¹ Involve, *Conversation Cafes* <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/conversation-cafes>

¹² MosaicLab, <https://www.mosaiclab.com.au/what-is-deliberative-democracy>

each other's opinions and develop their views/arguments to reach an informed position"¹³. Through this process deliberative workshops are able to give the organisation conducting the workshop a greater understanding of what may lie behind group opinions and/or how people's views change as they are given new information or deliberate on an issue. Deliberative workshops have been used by UK select committees to help inform their work. For example, as part of the Education Select Committee's inquiry on the purpose of education, "forty-nine young people from across London's boroughs took part in a deliberative workshop in Parliament on political education"¹⁴. The workshop "enabled the young people to explore and put forward their views and experiences on topics including: where political education happens; the current quality of political education; whether political education is important; and what political education should cover"¹⁵.

5.6 Citizens' assemblies use a three-step process of learning, deliberating and decision making.¹⁶ In the first phase the participants learn about an issue from experts. These sessions should cover the breadth of opinions on the issue. The second phase involves the participants exploring their own opinion and hearing other's opinions through discussion and deliberation. The final phase involves the participants coming to a conclusion about what they have learnt. However, this does not mean they all need to agree and often voting is used to collect the views of participant and make sure minority voices are heard¹⁷. A citizens' assembly was conducted in South Yorkshire by the organisation Democracy Matters in response to a proposed devolution deal for the Sheffield City Region. The group was made up of a broadly representative group of 32 randomly selected citizens¹⁸. The assembly was considered a success when evaluated by Democracy Matters. The assembly members were willing and able to engage with complex policy and governance issues when given the opportunity and support¹⁹. A citizens' assembly also contributed to the Health and Social Care Select Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee as part of their joint inquiry into long term funding for adult social care. The assembly "brought together a representative group of 47 randomly selected English citizens to consider the question of how adult social care in England should be funded"²⁰. "Through "28 hours of learning, deliberation and decision-making spread over two weekends, the assembly members developed a clear and consistent set of recommendations for funding adult social care for both working age and older people"²¹.

5.7 *Doing 'face to face' engagement virtually*

The on-going COVID-19 means that 'face to face' engagement would more than likely need to be carried out virtually. While we expect that in person meetings will

¹³ Involve, *Deliberative Workshops*, <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/deliberative-workshop>

¹⁴ <https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Innovations-for-select-committee-engagement.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Innovations-for-select-committee-engagement.pdf>

¹⁶ Involve, *Citizens Assemblies*, <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/citizens-assembly>

¹⁷ <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/citizens-assembly>

¹⁸ <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-study-assembly-north>

¹⁹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-study-assembly-north>

²⁰ https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Citizens%27%20Assembly%20on%20Social%20Care%20-%20Recommendations%20for%20funding%20social%20care_2.pdf

²¹ https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Citizens%27%20Assembly%20on%20Social%20Care%20-%20Recommendations%20for%20funding%20social%20care_2.pdf

become more common again soon, the normalisation of virtual interaction provides some opportunities for increasing engagement and reaching more people. For example, it removes the need for people to travel. Using a virtual platform makes it easier for people both within London, but also around the country (particularly expert witnesses that might live outside of London) to engage with committees and task groups. As people are often joining a meeting from their own homes there are also fewer time constraints. Platforms like Teams and Zoom also have features that cater for more in-depth engagement/workshopping sessions. For example, the breakout room feature that divides participants into smaller groups to have more in depth conversations.

6. Important considerations before deciding whether to engage

6.1 There are a number of important considerations before deciding to engage and choosing what type of engagement is appropriate. Committees/task groups would need to be clear what they are engaging about and what they are hoping to achieve from the engagement. It would also be important to look at whether there has been or will be other consultations by the council on a particular topic. This is to ensure that work isn't duplicated and to avoid fatigue/confusion by people being asked to comment on the same topic multiple times.

6.2 Engagement processes can also be resource intensive, so it would be important for committees/task groups to be strategic and plan when they want to carry out engagement. This is also necessary to ensure there is enough time in the process for people to meaningfully engage.

6.3 Digital inclusion

This paper has discussed how there are some benefits of using digital platforms to carry out engagement. However, digital inclusion remains something to be mindful of. Digital inclusion is about the ability of individuals and groups to access and use information and communication technologies. It covers:

- Digital skills (the ability to use digital devices such as computers or smart phones and the internet).
- Access to digital devices (such as, computers, tablets and smartphones).
- Connectivity (access to the internet through broadband, wi-fi and mobile data).

6.4 When commencing an engagement process that relies heavily on virtual mediums, it would first be important consider anyone who could be excluded from this process. Depending on what a committee/task group is engaging about, it may be particularly important that it reaches people who are more likely to face barriers to engaging digitally. If this is the case a committee/task group could come up with a strategy with officers to try and reach these people.

If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers, please contact Lizzie Barrett
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