

Written Evidence for Modernisation Committee: Work of the Committee
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The below submission is based upon qualitative and quantitative analysis we have undertaken in relation to disability and political representation in the UK (2018-). We have published extensively in this area and we were commissioned to produce two research reports for the UK Government Equalities Office examining the barriers to elected office for disabled people and an evaluation of the EnAble Fund (the interim fund following the Access to Elected Office Fund)¹. We have continued to conduct research in this area paying particular attention to how parliaments could be reformed to be more inclusive and accessible.

What topic(s) do you think the Modernisation Committee should prioritise and how do they link to one or more of the strategic aims set out in the Leader’s memorandum?

We welcome the commitments and priorities set out as part of the *Improving Culture and Working Practices* strategic aim. This Parliament is indeed diverse, however according to our understanding (from a range of disparate sources) there are only 12 self-declared disabled politics – just 2% of the total number of MPs, whereas around 24% of the UK population are disabled. Parliament does not collect data on the numbers of disabled MPs, which is a problem, as we do not have a clear picture of the numbers of MPs who are disabled, or with what types of impairment (e.g. physical, sensory, mental health etc). The fact that this data is not collected does little to challenge the stigma of self-identifying as disabled or to raising awareness of the specific needs and requirements of disabled politicians. We know from our research that some MPs who are disabled do not describe themselves as such due to fears that it might be used against them. Meanwhile, our interviews with disabled people who might otherwise consider putting themselves forward for elected office show that some people are deterred from doing so because Parliament and its procedures are perceived to be inaccessible. Our interviews with disabled MPs past and present reveal that many experience Westminster as an ableist institution – one which is difficult for disabled people with varying types of impairment to navigate.

Therefore, focussing on making parliament more accessible for disabled people is essential, not just for those few current disabled MPs but also for future generations of disabled candidates and MPs. There are several topics which the Modernisation Committee could usefully examine to make Parliament more accessible including:

- job-sharing for MPs;
- greater use of hybrid working;
- remote electronic voting for MPs;

¹ Evans and Reher. 2024. *Disability and Political Representation*. Oxford: OUP; Evans and Reher. 2023. ‘Gender, Disability and Political Representation: Understanding the Experiences of Disabled Women’, *European Journal of Politics and Gender* DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510823X16779382116831>; Evans and Reher, S. 2022. ‘Disability and Political Representation: Analysing the Obstacles to Elected Office’ *International Political Science Review* 43(5): 698-712; Evans and Reher. 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/barriers-to-elected-office-for-disabled-people/barriers-to-political-representation-disability-and-the-enable-fund#conclusions>

- allowing MPs to register for a timed speaking slot in advance;
- avoiding long working hours;
- sanctions for those involved in bullying or discriminatory behaviour towards disabled MPs;
- incorporating disability into the data Parliament collects and publishes about its members.

Why would the topic(s) benefit from the attention of the Modernisation Committee?

Our democratic institutions must be made to be work for all, as such it is vital that Parliament adapts to become accessible for disabled people. Disabled citizens are often amongst the most politically, socially and economically marginalised, therefore ensuring that parliament is a space in which they can take an equal part is important. Reviewing outdated practices which either deter disabled people from putting themselves forward for elected office or make life harder for disabled MPs is essential. Parliament should not lag behind modern workplaces and be fit for purpose – part of this is ensuring processes and procedures are accessible.

Many of the changes that would make Parliament more accessible for disabled people, including those listed above, would also benefit other groups, for example Members with caring responsibilities. More generally, reforming the processes with a view to mitigating the physical and mental stress they place on Members with will not only make Parliament more accessible for disabled people but also potentially prevent some of the mental and physical health issues experienced by Members as a result of their work.²

Are you aware of examples from other Parliaments relevant to the topic(s) which may be interesting for the Modernisation Committee to consider?

The Committee could usefully look at the use of Online Voting in the House of Lords. Other legislatures use a range of different types of electronic voting equipment, e.g. Scottish Parliament.

Is there any existing work relevant to the topic(s) which you think the Modernisation Committee can build on?

There is little work on making parliaments more accessible for disabled people around the world. This offers an opportunity for the UK to be a world leader when it comes to thinking about making their processes and procedures more accessible.

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² Flinders, M., Weinberg, A., Weinberg, J., Geddes, M., & Kwiatkowski, R. (2018). Governing under pressure? The mental wellbeing of politicians. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 73(2), 253-273.