



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Public engagement in the UK Parliament: overview and statistics

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1. Introduction
2. Providing information
3. Opportunities for participation



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On request, the Library can provide MPs and their staff with any of the images in this briefing paper (charts, maps, tables) in a different format (such as larger text, bigger scale, black & white charts)

## Summary

In response to concerns about political disengagement in society, the UK Parliament has developed strategies to engage the public with its work and processes. This Briefing Paper provides an outline of public engagement activities in Parliament and discusses statistical information about numbers of participants and satisfaction with the activities.

Greater understanding of Parliament is generally seen as a precondition to greater engagement with it, and engagement activities often aim to provide clear and accessible information about what Parliament is, how it works and what it does. The website is a key platform for information provision and there has been an upward trend in the number of visitors since July 2010. The most visited page after the homepage is the page giving information about MP's offices (including contact information). The website also hosts dedicated resources explaining different aspects of Parliament (for example, approximately 51,000 episodes of the *Parliament explained* podcast have been downloaded); and analysis to inform parliamentary and public debate. The resources available online are promoted through Parliament's social media presence; as at 12 July 2017, the @UKParliament Twitter account had 1.28 million followers. Information is also provided directly in response to questions from the public, and to the media.

Parliament also organises outreach activities across the country for a variety of audiences. In 2016, just over 46,000 people attended these events. This includes workshops explaining the role of Parliament as well as more specific seminars, for example on how to submit evidence to a select committee. In addition, almost 3,000 school groups from across the UK visited Parliament in 2016/17 and about 550 students studied the Parliamentary Studies module offered jointly with 20 universities. In 2015/16, about 211,000 people visited Parliament through their MP or a peer, or to watch proceedings in the House of Commons; a further 223,000 paid to do a tour of the building.

Opportunities to take part in democratic processes directly are also provided by Parliament. For example, select committees engage with members of the public through special outreach events organised across the UK, and by offering online opportunities to share views with committee members. Through Twitter and Facebook (and other online forums), members of the public can share their views with MPs sponsoring debates in the Chamber; the debate on baby loss on 13 October 2016 reached more than 16 million Twitter accounts. Members of the public can also start or sign e-petitions, which receive a Government response and are eligible for debate in Parliament if they meet certain thresholds. In the 2015 Parliament, e-petitions were signed almost 32 million times.

### Further reading

Library Briefing Paper 7501 [Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?](#)

# 1. Introduction

Political disengagement has been a concern in the UK as well as abroad: commentators suggest that a growing number of people are disaffected, lack faith in their political system and political leaders, and fail to engage in the political process.<sup>1</sup> Parliaments have been described as “the face of political disengagement”, placing them “under particular pressure to develop public engagement strategies”.<sup>2</sup> This Briefing Paper outlines the UK Parliament’s approach to public engagement and provides statistical information about the different activities it comprises.

## 1.1 Public engagement: challenges for the UK Parliament

Generally speaking, public engagement can be understood as sharing information with the public to invite their views,<sup>3</sup> or to involve the public to some extent in the practices of policy making bodies.<sup>4</sup> In the context of the UK Parliament, it refers specifically to activities that aim to engage the public with Parliament’s work and processes. In the words of the House of Commons Modernisation Committee, these activities matter because:

The legitimacy of the House of Commons, as the principal representative body in British democracy, rests upon the support and engagement of the electorate. The decline in political participation and engagement in recent years, as well as in levels of trust in politicians, political parties and the institutions of State ... should be of particular concern to the House of Commons.<sup>5</sup>

The UK Parliament’s history and location within the UK’s political structure pose a number of specific challenges for public engagement.

### Representation and participation

The UK Parliament was established as a representative institution, where MPs can debate the concerns of their constituents and scrutinise Government actions.<sup>6</sup> This tradition may continue to shape Parliament’s approach to public engagement; some scholars suggest the emphasis

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. ‘Apathetic and disaffected: the generation who may never vote’, *The Guardian*, 26 December 2013

<sup>2</sup> Cristina Leston-Bandeira, ‘Why symbolic representation frames public engagement’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18:2, 2016, 499

<sup>3</sup> [National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#) [website accessed 11 August 2017]

<sup>4</sup> Gene Rowe et al, ‘Difficulties in evaluating public engagement initiatives: reflections on an evaluation of the UK GM Nation? Public debate about transgenic crops’, *Public Understanding of Science*, 14:4, 2005, 331

<sup>5</sup> Modernisation Committee, *Connecting Parliament with the Public*, 16 June 2004, HC368 2003-04, para 1; there is some question about the extent to which the public was ever engaged with Parliament – according to Kelso, for example, they were always engaged with their MP, but not with Parliament as a whole (Alexandra Kelso, ‘Parliament and Political Disengagement: Neither Waving nor Drowning’, *The Political Quarterly*, 78:3, 2007, 372)

<sup>6</sup> Alexandra Kelso, ‘Parliament and Political Disengagement: Neither Waving nor Drowning’, *The Political Quarterly*, 78:3, 2007, 365

has been on reinvigorating Parliament's representative functions, rather than developing new opportunities for participation.<sup>7</sup>

Advocates of more participatory forms of democracy, such as the Power Commission, have suggested that the UK's political system should offer greater opportunities for the public to participate in decision-making directly – rather than through their representatives.<sup>8</sup> But Ruth Fox, Director of the Hansard Society, suggests this could result in those with the strongest interests or the most resources dominating decision-making processes; instead, she argues, Parliament should complement reinvigorated representative structures with new opportunities for participation tailored to the public's needs.<sup>9</sup> Some new opportunities for participation are discussed in Section 3.

## What is the UK Parliament?

It is generally assumed that greater understanding of Parliament is a precondition to greater engagement with it.<sup>10</sup> Hence, according to Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira, there has been a "recognisable focus on reinforcing the identity and image of the institution" in the UK Parliament's public engagement activities.<sup>11</sup> But it is difficult to present a coherent and consistent view of what the UK Parliament is, because it is a complex institution that embodies several divisions or dualities. The most pertinent of these are described below.<sup>12</sup>

### Government and Parliament

One characteristic feature of the Westminster democracy model is the fact that the Government includes MPs who continue to serve as parliamentarians; the Government usually holds a majority of seats in the House of Commons. This may explain why many people – 51% of the population – struggle to distinguish between Government and Parliament.<sup>13</sup> It also poses a challenge for Parliament's engagement activities.

Informing the public about how Parliament works entails describing outcomes of Parliamentary processes. Dr Alexandra Kelso suggests that:

in the adversarial atmosphere that structures Westminster, describing the outcomes of parliamentary work, rightly or wrongly, involves the language of victory and defeat in the context of executive-legislative relations.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. Kelso, *ibid*, 372

<sup>8</sup> Power Commission, [Power to the people](#), March 2016, 20-25

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Fox, 'Engagement and participation: what the public want and how our politicians need to respond', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62:4, 2009. See also Barry Winetrobe, 'Political but not partisan: marketing parliaments and their members', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 9:1, 2003, 4-5

<sup>10</sup> Aileen Walker, 'A people's Parliament?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65:1, 2012

<sup>11</sup> Cristina Leston-Bandeira, 'Why symbolic representation frames public engagement', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18:2, 2016, 509

<sup>12</sup> Most literature discussed in this section was published between 2000-2012; academic interest in the topic levelled off somewhat after

<sup>13</sup> Susanna Kalitowski, 'Parliament for the people? Public knowledge, interest and perceptions of the Westminster Parliament', in *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62:2, 2009, 352

<sup>14</sup> Kelso, *ibid*, 367

Such language fails to convey the complexities of the formal and informal relationships that exist between the Government, backbenchers, the official Opposition, and MPs from other parties. It also ignores how Parliament was effectively designed to support a strong Government (even if more recent developments, such as reforms to the select committee system, have strengthened its scrutiny function).<sup>15</sup> Parliament encompasses – and publicly debates – a range of views, which can complicate its representation as a single institution.

### **Commons and Lords**

The UK Parliament is 'bicameral': it comprises two Houses, the Commons and the Lords. People may not be aware of the differences between these Houses, and they may hold different views of each House. The media may report on activities in each House with varying frequency and tone. Occasionally, the Commons and the Lords will disagree on a specific policy issue.

The bicameral nature of the UK Parliament can make it difficult to represent it as a single institution. Bicameral public engagement work takes place alongside separate activities organised by each House.

### **MPs and institution**

The UK Parliament is made up of MPs, but it is also an institution that predates and will outlive the current set of MPs. It is intensely political, but also a neutral institution, and its operations are managed by a mix of MPs and administrative staff.<sup>16</sup> This dual nature is illustrated by the difference in levels of trust people have in Parliament, with 34% stating some degree of trust, and in politicians, with only 20% doing so.<sup>17</sup>

Barry Winetrobe points to the difficulty this poses for Parliamentary public engagement, which he says:

requires a collaborative effort between its officials and its elected members, because the public will only understand and accept the brand when it is being promoted in a consistent way by all its participants.<sup>18</sup>

In practice, the content of public engagement activities has largely been developed and delivered by officials, who have emphasised the role Parliament plays in the UK's democracy.<sup>19</sup>

The divisions embedded in the UK Parliament make it an inherently plural institution. This makes it difficult to communicate a singular view

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<sup>15</sup> See Matthew Flinders and Alexandra Kelso, 'Mind the gap: political analysis, public expectations and the parliamentary decline thesis', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 13, 2011, 261-2

<sup>16</sup> Barry Winetrobe, 'Political but not partisan: marketing parliaments and their members', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 9:1, 2003, 1-13

<sup>17</sup> [European Social Survey](#) 2014, weighted data for the UK, score 1-4=negative, 5=neutral, 6-10=positive

<sup>18</sup> Barry Winetrobe, 2003, 12

<sup>19</sup> Cristina Leston-Bandeira, 'Why symbolic representation frames public engagement', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18:2, 2016

of what Parliament is, and means Parliament lacks a single spokesperson.<sup>20</sup>

## 1.2 A developing approach: a brief overview

Like many other parliaments, the UK Parliament has increased its efforts to engage with the public in the last two decades.<sup>21</sup> Initial steps towards public engagement were taken earlier: the House of Commons Information Office's helpline was set up in 1978 and the first Education Officer was appointed in 1980. The prompt for greater engagement came from two reports: the House of Commons Modernisation Committee's *Connecting Parliament with the Public* (2004), and the Puttnam Commission's *Parliament in the Public Eye* (2005).<sup>22</sup>

Both reports were written in the context of declining voter turnout and perceived 'apathy' towards politics, and recommended a stronger focus on public engagement, for example by improving Parliament's website and education facilities. 'Transparency and accessibility' were listed as one of the principles of procedural reform identified in the Reform Committee's report [Rebuilding the House](#), published following the 2009 expenses scandal.<sup>23</sup>

Initiatives introduced following these reports include webcasting, email access to MPs, and experiments with online consultations.<sup>24</sup> A detailed overview of public engagement initiatives developed since 2004 is given by the former House of Commons Director of Public Engagement, Aileen Walker.<sup>25</sup> Parliament's administration adapted to accommodate a greater focus on communication with the media and the wider public; a parliamentary outreach service was established in 2007. A renewed website was launched in 2006 and an online presence was established for Parliament on social media sites including Flickr, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. In 2015, the new Education Centre was opened.

The first public engagement strategy (2006-2011) focused on three pillars:

- promoting a greater understanding of Parliament, seen as a necessary condition for greater engagement;

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<sup>20</sup> Not only to communicate an authoritative message about what Parliament is, but also to defend it against criticisms. Alexandra Kelso, 'Parliament and Political Disengagement: Neither Waving nor Drowning', *The Political Quarterly*, 78:3, 2007, 369; Barry Winetrobe, 2003

<sup>21</sup> Cristina Leston-Bandeira, 'Studying the relationship between Parliament and citizens', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 18:3-4, 2012, 269

<sup>22</sup> Aileen Walker, 'A people's Parliament?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65:1, 2012, 270

<sup>23</sup> Reform Committee, [Rebuilding the House](#), 24 November 2009, HC1117, 2009-10, para 26

<sup>24</sup> Wainer Lusoli et al, '(Re)connecting politics? Parliament, the Public and the Internet', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59:1, 2006, 27-8; Alexandra Kelso, 'Parliament and Political Disengagement: Neither Waving nor Drowning', *The Political Quarterly*, 78:3, 2007, 367

<sup>25</sup> Aileen Walker, 'A people's Parliament?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65:1, 2012, 270-280. Further committee reports recommending public engagement in Parliament have since been published, for example: Liaison Committee, [Building public engagement: options for developing select committee outreach](#), 30 November 2015, HC470, 2015-16, and Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, [Open up!](#), 26 January 2015, 2015-16.

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- emphasising Parliament's openness and accessibility, aiming to encourage more people to visit Parliament and observe parliamentary processes; and
- building on this "stage of understanding" to "influence people's perceptions of Parliament and promote it as an institution to be valued."<sup>26</sup>

This approach continued under the second strategy (2011-2016). It was complemented with a new focus on creating opportunities for participation in parliamentary processes, for example through the e-petitions system (first opened under the Coalition Government in 2011) and experiments with a public reading stage of bills.<sup>27</sup>

Following an internal review, the House of Commons Service was reorganised in 2016 and the Outreach Service was merged with other public engagement offices to form the new bicameral Participation Team. As well as general engagement activities offered to the public at large, the team develops activities targeting groups that are more likely to be politically disengaged, such as young people and people from ethnic minorities.<sup>28</sup> The 2016-2021 Strategy for the House of Commons Service explicitly emphasises the importance of public engagement: one of the three core objectives is "involving and inspiring the public." Likewise, one of the three key objectives of the House of Lords Administration strategy for 2016-2021 is to "promote public understanding of the House and engagement with its work."

### 1.3 Evaluating public engagement activities

Parliament's public engagement activities ultimately aim to increase the public's engagement with Parliament. Political engagement is measured through social surveys such as the annual Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement (APE) and the biennial European Social Survey (ESS). Voter turnout is another indicator of the public's engagement with Parliament. The charts below show trends in levels of engagement, as measured against different indicators.<sup>29</sup>

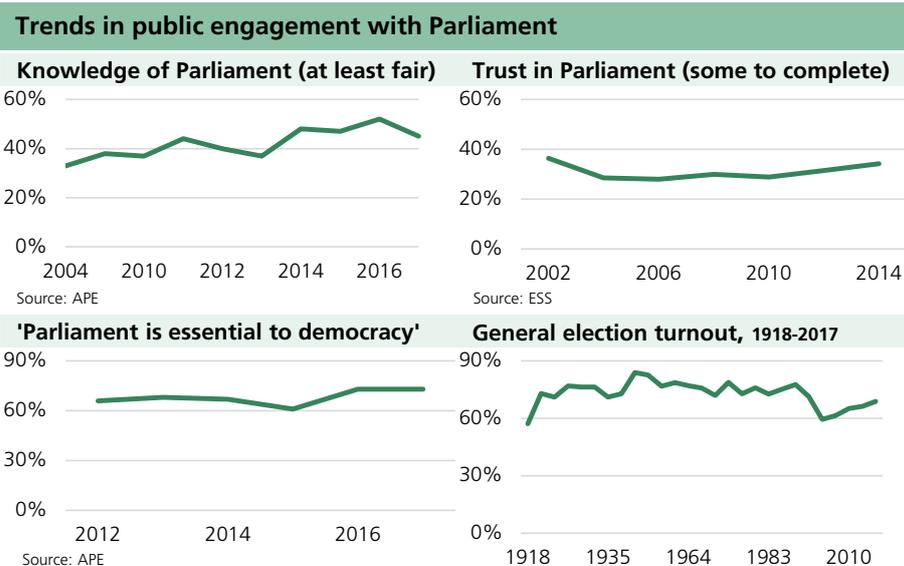
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<sup>26</sup> Aileen Walker, 'A people's Parliament?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65:1, 2012, 272-5

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-9; see Library Briefing 6406 [Public Reading Stage of Bills](#)

<sup>28</sup> See Library Briefing 7501 [Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?](#)

<sup>29</sup> Trust in Parliament: European Social Survey data (weighted), score 6-10



Knowledge of Parliament has gone up, while there has been some variation in trust in Parliament, turnout, and the proportion of people saying that Parliament is essential to democracy. Note that the 2009 expenses scandal does not appear to have had a strong effect on these trends.

It is not possible to say that Parliament's public engagement activities have directly caused the changes in political engagement shown above. These activities reach a relatively small proportion of the overall population, and there are many other factors that can influence levels of engagement.

### Case study: ethnic minorities

In 2016, Parliament developed specific engagement activities targeting ethnic minorities. The APE 2017 shows that despite this focus, knowledge of politics among Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups decreased: while 43% of BME respondents said they had a fair amount or a great deal of knowledge about politics in 2016, this was 37% in 2017.<sup>30</sup>

However, it is not possible to conclude from these figures that Parliament's efforts have been in vain, or even counterproductive: the proportion of people from ethnic minorities taking part in these public engagement activities is relatively small compared to the overall ethnic minority population, and cannot be assumed to be representative. There are a great many other things that might explain this decrease in political knowledge, and the decrease might have been even starker without Parliament's efforts. And the difference between 43% and 37% may not be that meaningful: there were 384 BME respondents in the 2017 APE, which means the margin of error for statements about this group is  $\pm 5\%$ , and in 2016, there were 269 BME respondents, giving a margin of error of  $\pm 6\%$  (see [You Gov's](#) explanation of the margin of error for more information).

### Internal data

Parliament collects data on its public engagement activities, for example on the number of people attending events and how satisfied they are with the activity they participated in. This is useful information, because if the activities are 'good' (as measured in terms of participant

<sup>30</sup> Hansard Society, [Audit of Political Engagement 14](#), 2017, p39

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feedback), then “it would seem *more likely* that the outcomes will be good than if the process is ‘bad’”.<sup>31</sup>

Data on activities are available for different periods. Different parts of Parliament deliver a wide range of public engagement activities and this briefing paper necessarily focuses on some while excluding others.<sup>32</sup> Activities undertaken by external organisations, and by individual MPs, are not discussed.

This briefing paper will first discuss engagement activities that aim at providing information about Parliament, and how to engage with it, to the public. The second part discusses opportunities for participation that Parliament offers to members of the public.

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<sup>31</sup> Gene Rowe et al, ‘Difficulties in evaluating public engagement initiatives: reflections on an evaluation of the UK GM Nation? Public debate about transgenic crops’, *Public Understanding of Science*, 14:4, 2005, 347

<sup>32</sup> Former Director of Public Engagement Aileen Walker prepared a [list of public engagement activities](#) for the Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy in 2014

## 2. Providing information

Parliament's public engagement activities aim, among other things, to improve the public's understanding of Parliament. That means they must provide clear and accessible information about what Parliament is, how it works, and what opportunities it offers for citizens to get involved. This information is communicated in different ways: the sections below will discuss Parliament's online presence; phone and media; face to face engagement in Westminster and beyond; and the experience of visiting Parliament.

As mentioned above, there are some challenges to presenting a singular, unified image of Parliament: it houses both the Government and the Opposition, both MPs and a timeless institution, and both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Moreover, a variety of teams within Parliament are involved in presenting information to the public. Both Houses have therefore developed external communications strategies to encourage consistent and integrated external messages and conversations.

The Commons' external communications strategy emphasises the impact of Parliament's scrutiny on the Government, public participation in the work of the House, and information about the parliamentary system and the role of MPs. The Lords' strategy emphasises information about the role of the House of Lords and its members (as distinct from the Commons) and opportunities for the public to engage with the Lords.

### 2.1 Online engagement

Parliament's website, [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk), is an important tool for public engagement: the Hansard Society's APE 2017 found that making material available for download from the website was seen as the most preferable way for parliamentary staff to provide information about how democracy works.<sup>33</sup>

The sections below will discuss the different types of information Parliament's website conveys: information about what goes on in Parliament; resources dedicated specifically to promoting a greater understanding of Parliament; and analysis to support parliamentarians in debating topical issues. Parliament uses social media, including Twitter and Facebook, to promote this information to a wider audience.

A project to renew the parliamentary website and make information about Parliament more easily accessible is currently underway. The Parliamentary Digital Service is testing its approach through ongoing user research including interviews with members of the public.<sup>34</sup>

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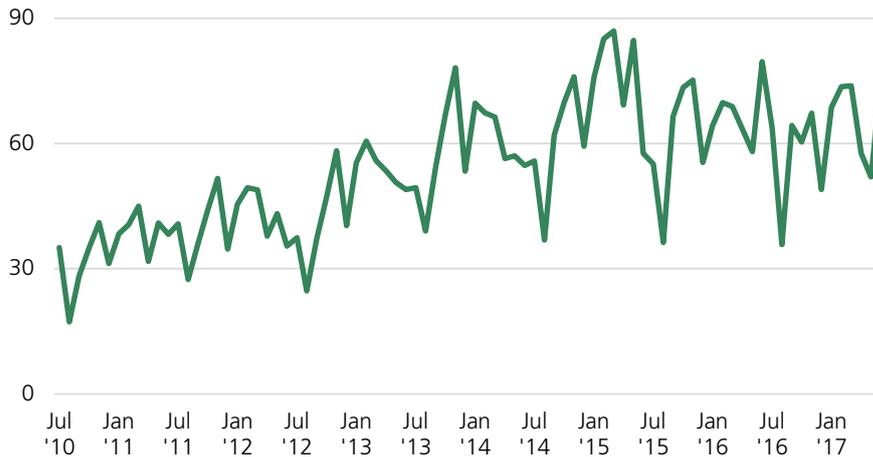
<sup>33</sup> Q18

<sup>34</sup> For more information on PDS' user research, see for example <https://pds.blog.parliament.uk/2016/04/26/discovery-findings-and-our-next-steps-for-alpha/>; <https://pds.blog.parliament.uk/2016/10/28/exploring-topics/>

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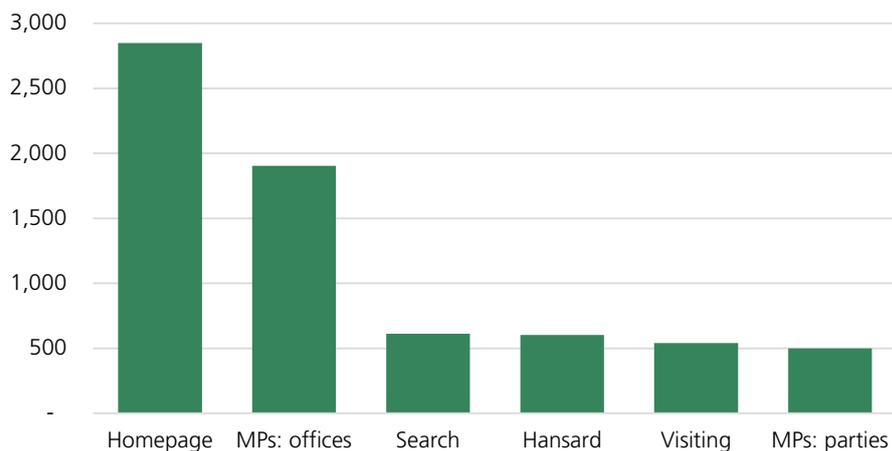
In the year to 30 June 2017, more than 15 million people visited Parliament's website (including almost 12 million from the UK and almost 1 million from the US).<sup>35</sup> The chart below shows that the average number of people visiting Parliament's website per day each month varies throughout the year, around an increasing trend since 2010.

**Daily website users: monthly average, July 2010 - June 2017 (000s)**



People visit Parliament's website for different reasons: the chart below shows the most visited pages in the year leading up to 30 June 2017. The homepage received the largest number of visits, followed by the page showing information about MPs, including their contact details.

**Most visited pages: total users, July '16 - June '17 (000s)**



Hansard gives edited transcripts of debates in the Houses of Parliament. The Commons [debate on the EU referendum rules](#) (5 September 2016) attracted 391,637 views, making it the 12<sup>th</sup> most visited page

The most common search terms were "recess" (3,003), "spoken" (2,760) and "divisions" (2,613)

### Publicising Parliamentary business

Parliament's website includes information about [parliamentary business](#), including a [calendar](#) showing what is being considered in the debating chambers and committees of both Houses. The website also provides information about [MPs and Lords](#), including their contact details,<sup>36</sup> and about select committees.<sup>37</sup> Proceedings are [broadcast live](#) on the

<sup>35</sup> Based on IP addresses

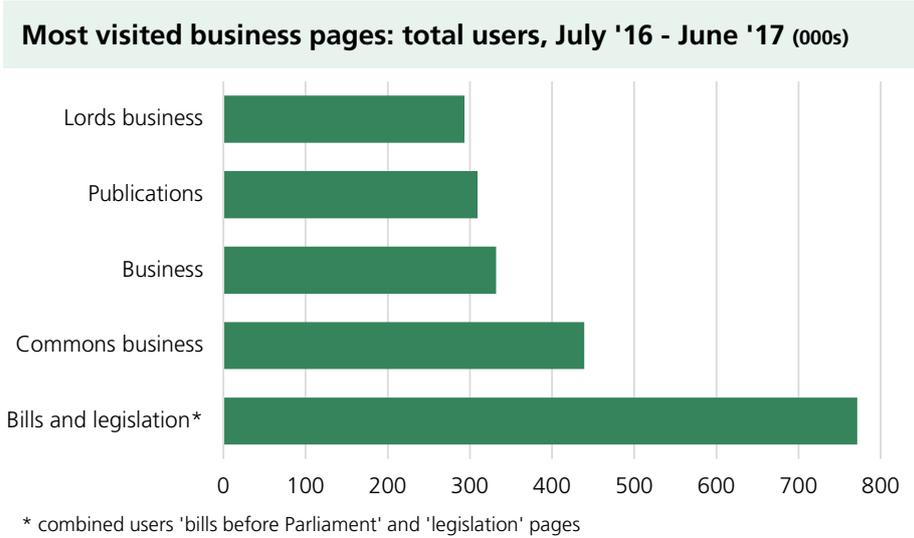
<sup>36</sup> For more information on how these pages are used, see [PDS' blog](#)

<sup>37</sup> For more information on how select committee pages are used, see [PDS' blog](#)

website. [Select committee reports](#) and proceedings are published online, and so is a record of the proceedings in the [House of Commons](#) and the [House of Lords](#) (covering the topics debated and decisions taken).<sup>38</sup> Full transcripts of the debates are also available from [Hansard online](#).

Parliament also offers information about its business through apps such as Commons Vote results

The chart below shows the most visited business pages and their user numbers in the year to 30 June 2017. The pages giving information about legislation had the highest number of users.



### Recent initiatives

Recent initiatives to make information about parliamentary business more accessible include:

- the [House of Commons Divisions Search](#), providing data on divisions (voting) in the House of Commons
- the House of [Lords Amendments page](#), which enables a search of all amendments tabled to public bills in the House of Lords

## Promoting understanding of Parliament and encouraging participation

Parliament has developed resources dedicated specifically to promoting a greater understanding of Parliament and of how people can get involved. The [How Parliament Works](#) portal acts as a gateway to some of these resources. Examples include:

- [education resources developed for different age groups](#). In the year up to 30 June 2017, there were around 100,000 resources downloads and video views on the [education pages](#);
- [a range of podcasts](#) and [videos](#) explaining different aspects of Parliament, its history and its processes (including a [film about the House of Commons Chamber](#)). Each episode of the Parliament Explained podcast was downloaded an average of around 8,550 times (adding up to approximately 51,000 downloads across the whole series) and around 7,000 people listened to the entire series;

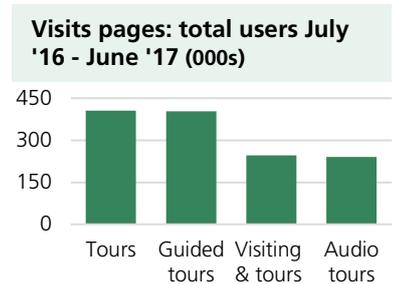
On the [Lords of the Blog](#) page, curated by the Hansard Society, members of the House of Lords write about their life in Parliament and topics of interest

<sup>38</sup> House of Lords minutes of proceedings in business paper

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- short [guides](#) explaining how people can engage with the work of Parliament;
- a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) offering a free, online [introduction to the UK Parliament](#). More MOOCs will be developed, covering petitions, select committees and women. The MOOC was run twice, in November 2016 and February 2017, and attracted almost 19,000 people to join (slightly over 10,000 of whom went on to activate the course).

Parliament's website also includes information on [visiting parliament](#) and [opportunities to get involved](#) in parliamentary processes. More information on visits and participation is included in later sections.



### Case study: Your story, our history

Parliament worked with partners across the country to develop several [short films](#) showing the impact of legislative developments on people's lives to highlight the relevance of what goes on in Parliament to everyday life.

The first set of films, released on 14 July 2016, shows how race relations legislation affected the lives of Leyla, Shango and Jannett. As at 12 October, YouTube viewing figures for these films added up to about 18,500 and there had been more than 683,000 views through the UK Parliament Facebook page.

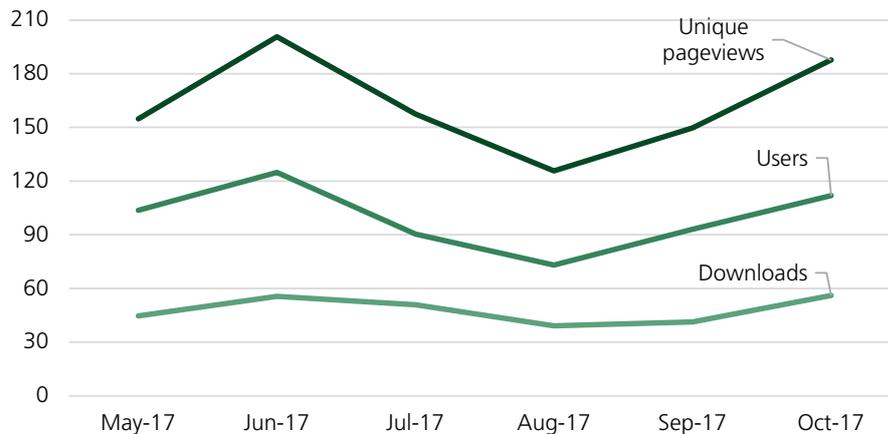
The second set of films, released on 3 July 2017, shows the impact of legislation enshrining LGBTQI+ rights on Nadine and Tia, Jake, and Peter and Geoff. Combined viewing figures on YouTube for these films total more than 9,000, while there were almost 548,000 views through Facebook and more than 72,000 through Twitter (as at 12 October 2017).

### Analysis to inform parliamentary and public debate

Parliament's website provides access to impartial analysis provided to parliamentarians in support of their work. The House of Commons Library, the House of Lords Library, and the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology produce [research briefings](#) on a wide range of topics, written and presented to be accessible to a wide audience. In the year to 30 June 2017, the pages for these briefing papers were visited just over a million times, and more than 384,000 briefings were downloaded.

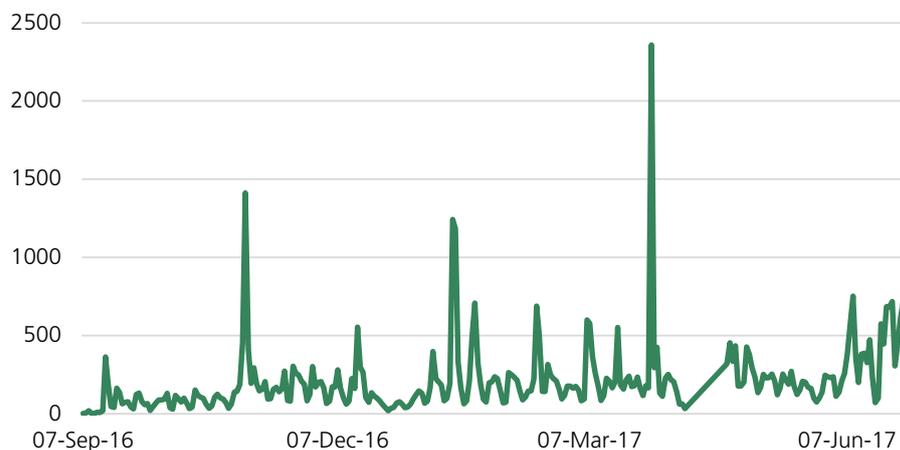
The chart below shows the monthly number of downloads, unique page views, and unique users that engaged with research briefings online between May and October 2017. It suggests that users tend to visit more than one page, but do not download the briefing paper provided on each landing page they visit.

**Research briefings online: monthly activity (000s)**



The House of Commons Library also publishes brief articles on its blog, [Second Reading](#). Between the blog’s relaunch in September 2016 and 30 June 2017, it has been viewed by more than 60,000 users, 6% of whom are internal users (accessing the blog from the Parliamentary network). The chart below shows the pattern in the number of users engaging with the blog between September 2016 and June 2017. There was a notable high on 29 March 2017 and no data is available for 11-24 April. The average number of users per day over this period was 212.<sup>39</sup>

**Blog: daily users, September '16 - June '17**



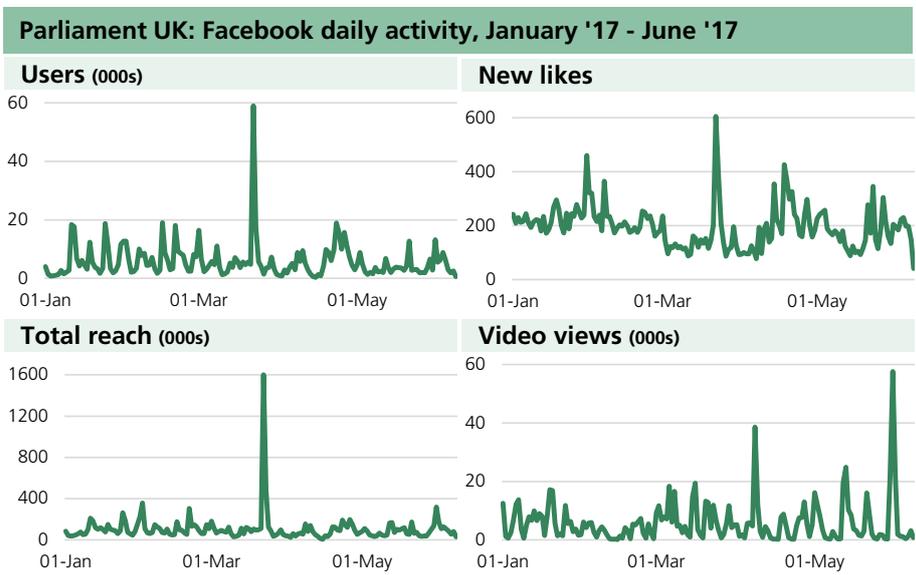
**Social media**

Parliament uses its presence on social media platforms such as Twitter, Flickr and Facebook to promote the information available on its website and to publish additional information.

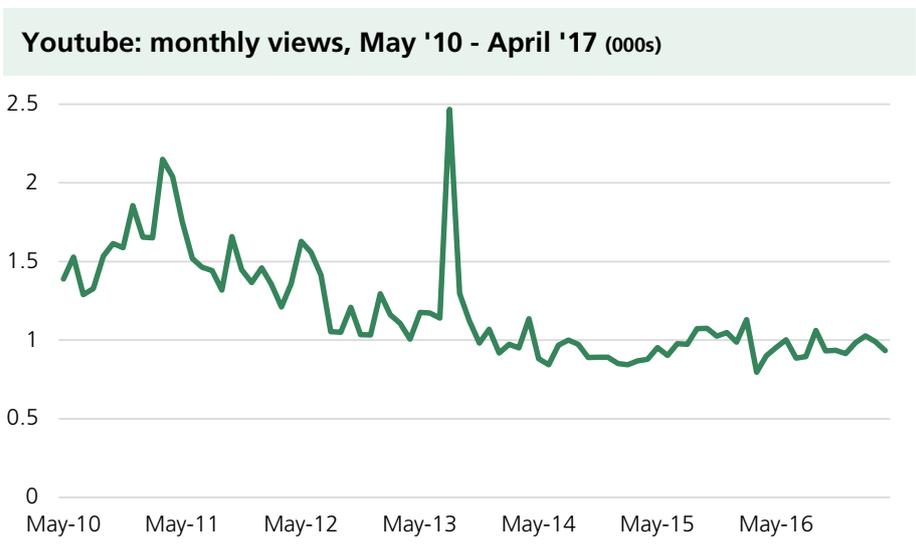
Parliament has three Facebook pages: UK Parliament, UK House of Commons and UK House of Lords. The chart below shows activity on the UK Parliament Facebook page between 1 January and 8 June 2017. The figure for total reach is higher than that for total consumers: Parliament has focused its advertising strategy on ‘boosting’ posts,

<sup>39</sup> Days for which no data is available have been excluded from this calculation

which means these appear on the newsfeed of people who do not necessarily visit Parliament’s Facebook page. Pictures tended to get the most likes (almost 14,000, compared to just over 6,000 for videos). Notable highs were recorded on 22 March 2016, when Parliament concluded its debate on the Budget.



The chart below shows that since May 2010, the number of monthly views of Parliament’s YouTube content has declined. The post that received the highest number of monthly views was Theresa May’s first Prime Minister’s Questions on 20 July 2016 (almost 167,000 views).



There are over 60 Twitter accounts related to the UK Parliament, including the general @UKParliament, @UKHouseofLords, and @HouseofCommons, accounts for select committees in both Houses and accounts for parts or functions of the parliamentary administration, which tend to target specific audiences (such as @Post\_UK, @commonslibrary, @VisitParliament and @UKParEducation). Additionally, most MPs and Lords also have their own websites and social media accounts publicising their activities. The [Lords Digital Chamber](#) captures activity by Lords and related Twitter users.

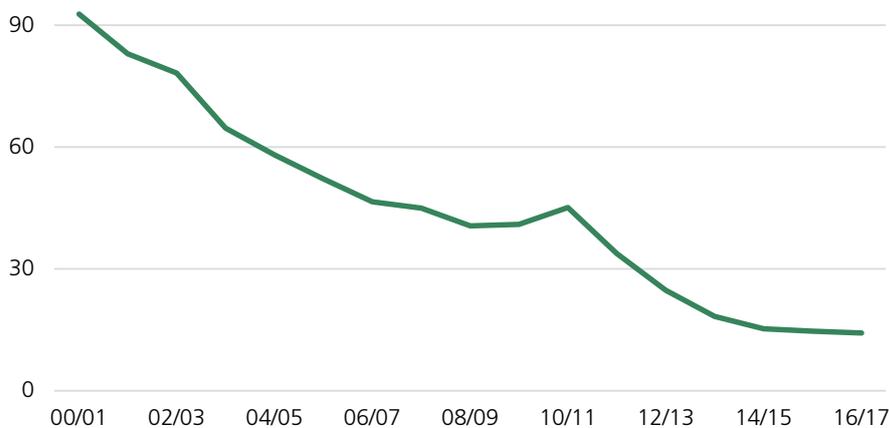
Data on the overall number of followers of Parliament’s various Twitter accounts is not held centrally. As of 12 July 2017, the @UKParliament account had sent 15,000 tweets and had 1.28 million followers.

## 2.2 Phone, email and media

Information about Parliament and its work is also communicated through more traditional means: directly to the public, through phone and email, and through the media.

The [House of Commons](#) and the [House of Lords](#) enquiry services answer questions from the public by phone, mail or email. The Commons enquiry service was established in 1978 and the Lords service in 1996. The Lords service answers an average of about 7,000 enquiries each calendar year. The Commons service answered approximately 14,000 enquiries in the year up to 30 June 2017. The number of enquiries answered has decreased since 2000, as shown in the chart below. This is explained by the expansion of parliamentary material available online,<sup>40</sup> as well as other operational changes. Around 90% of people asking the Commons enquiry service for information were satisfied with the response they received in the year up to 30 June 2017.

**Commons enquiry service: enquiries answered (000s)**



Source: House of Commons Commission annual report (various editions), internal data

Several teams in Parliament engage directly with the media, for example by answering questions, responding to news reports about Parliament, and releasing press notices about parliamentary activities, such as the publication of select committee reports.

### House of Lords: proactive engagement

Proactive engagement with the media by officials of the House of Lords resulted in almost 4,400 positive media articles about the House of Lords in 2016/17.

<sup>40</sup> [Twenty-fifth report of the House of Commons Commission](#), July 2003, HC 806, para 153

The sound of proceedings in the Chambers and committees of both Houses has been broadcast since 1978.<sup>41</sup> Television followed in 1983 in the Lords and 1989 in the Commons.<sup>42</sup> According to the [BBC's 2015/16 annual report](#), 0.6% of the population watched BBC Parliament for 15 minutes or more each week (1.3% for three minutes or more) in 2014/15. However, it is likely that a much larger proportion of the population would see part of Parliament's proceedings through watching or listening to news and current affairs shows on other channels (or through Parliament's website). The APE 2017 found that 39% reported they had watched or listened to a parliamentary debate or committee meeting, up from 31% in 2016.<sup>43</sup>

## 2.3 Face to face engagement in Westminster and beyond

Parliament organises outreach activities and events that convey information about the work of Parliament and how to get involved. Some of these take place in the Palace of Westminster, but many are organised in locations across the country: in the year up to 30 June 2017, an average of 90% of activities were held away from Westminster each month. These activities aim to show how what goes on in Parliament directly affects peoples' lives: to emphasise that the UK Parliament is "[your Parliament](#)".

Different types of activities and events have different aims and target different audiences. For example, the universities programme engages with academics and students, while the Speakers of both Houses visit a range of different organisations. There were about 900 such activities and events in 2016, reaching approximately 46,000 participants. The chart below shows that the number of participants in outreach activities has increased over the past six years.

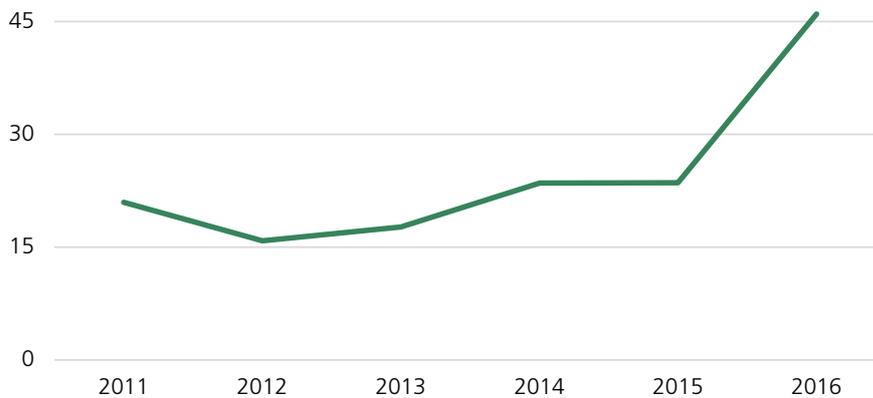
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<sup>41</sup> The [BBC](#) notes that the effect may not have been as intended, describing the letters they received after the first few broadcasts: "Far from reconnecting with parliamentary democracy, the British public's first reaction was to be appalled at the rowdy and posturing behaviour in the House, or confused by the arcane procedures. Sometimes they were simply bored."

<sup>42</sup> For more information, see <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-information-office/g05.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> p14

### Total yearly participants in outreach events (000s)



#### Outreach events: satisfaction

- In the year up to 30 June 2017, an average of 90% of participants each month rated outreach events as excellent or good
- In April to June 2017, an average of 88% of participants each month either agreed or strongly agreed that they understood more about Parliament's role and activities following the events they attended

## Education

Parliament engages with providers of education at different levels. School groups visit Parliament (see section 2.4) and Education Officers visit schools in regions and nations that have low school visits to Parliament (Scotland, Wales, the North West, South West and North East of England). They reach about 50,000 children each year and develop partnerships with local organisations to extend their reach. Schools can also request a Parliament loan box including a range of objects to help recreate the House of Commons and the House of Lords in the class room, free of charge; 30,000 pupils each year are reached through this scheme.

Parliament supports universities in delivering a module in Parliamentary Studies, with parliamentary officials teaching some of the lectures. The programme has grown from 13 universities in 2013 to 20 in 2016, and it now reaches approximately 550 students each year. Workshops for students are also delivered outside of this module to a wider range of universities: in 2016, there were 9 student workshops, reaching approximately 490 students.

Academics can also apply to spend some time in Parliament as a research fellow, and can take part in [workshops aimed at amplifying the impact of their research](#) in Parliament.

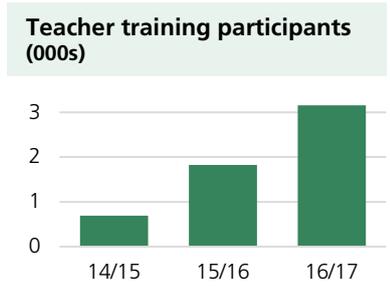
## Training

Parliament trains people to share what they learn about Parliament more widely. This way, information about Parliament spreads beyond the people who take part directly in activities organised by Parliament.

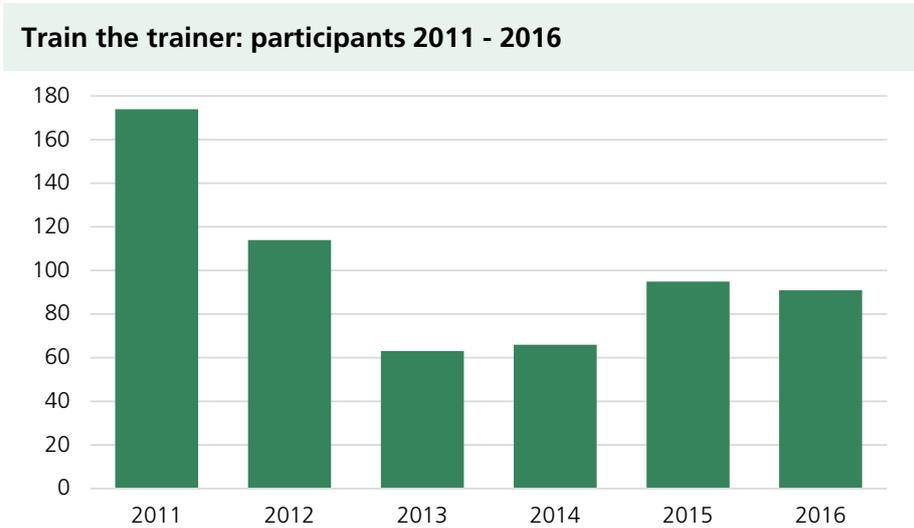
#### Peers in schools

Members of the House of Lords have spoken to about 50,000 pupils since September 2007. In 2016/17, they visited 182 schools.

Parliament offers training opportunities to teachers. The yearly [Teacher’s Institute programme](#) is a three day course aimed at providing teachers with the knowledge and resources they need to teach their pupils about Parliament and democracy. In addition to this course, Parliament also offers Continuing Professional Development opportunities and in-school training, and training for PGCE students. Parliament’s Education Service now has a total of 203 teacher Ambassadors.<sup>44</sup> The chart on the right shows the number of teachers taking part in training activities in the last three years.



The [train the trainer](#) programme prepares people to share what they learn about Parliament with community organisations. The sessions are held in locations across the UK. In 2016, 91 people participated in 8 events. The chart below shows participant numbers in the last 6 years.



Since 2015, there have also been ‘train the trainer’ sessions aimed specifically at people who will share their knowledge about Parliament with adults with learning disabilities. In 2015, there were 4 sessions with 52 people taking part; in 2016, there were 3, and 21 people took part.

### Community engagement

Parliament organises a range of events, workshops and projects both inside and outside of Westminster. Community workshops are organised in partnership with community organisations and aim to engage groups more likely to be politically disengaged with the work and processes of Parliament. Some workshops, for example, explain how to submit evidence to select committee inquiries, while others explain how Parliament makes legislation. There were 288 community workshops in 2016, involving women’s groups, medical leaders, local youth clubs, charities and many other types of group. More than 9,200 people participated. A further 30 events were organised for adults with learning disabilities, reaching almost 800 people. There were also 35 events aimed at women, highlighting the role and history of women in Parliament, reaching more than 1,000 people.

<sup>44</sup> As at 3 August 2017. The scheme was launched in January 2016.

A similar range of events explaining the basics of how Parliament works are organised targeting the general public across the UK; there were 33 such events in 2016, reaching nearly 1,000 people. Parliament also delivers a range of ad hoc activities: for example, during the campaign for the 2017 General Election, Parliament worked with student unions to promote voter registration.

In 2015/16, the House of Lords organised about 500 further events, reaching more than 16,000 people

Parliament develops projects with partner organisations to explore the role of Parliament in society and how it has developed. For example:

- [Connecting with Communities](#) used archival research to showcase how people have influenced Parliament and how Parliament has affected communities. The project included a number of events publicising the findings;
- [Vote 100](#) celebrates the extension of the vote to women in 1918, and will encompass a range of events. These will include 'Voice and Vote. Women's Place in Parliament', a major public exhibition in Westminster Hall during summer 2018, with an expected 100,000 visitors; Equaliteas, a UK-wide celebration of democratic equality on the anniversary of the Equal Franchise Act in July 2018; suffrage-themed tours of Parliament and educational visits; and a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) on women and the vote delivered in partnership with Royal Holloway, University of London.

### UK Parliament Week

Every year for [UK Parliament Week](#), organisations across the UK run events exploring what Parliament means to them and their community, and how they can engage with Parliament more effectively. Parliament provides resources to help organisations organise these events, which may cover, for example, information stands, discussion groups, panel discussions, performances and film screenings. In 2015, there were 131 Parliament week events, with approximately 8,000 people taking part. The event grew to 311 events in 2016, reaching almost 25,400 people. So far (as at 31 July), 2,853 events are planned for Parliament week 2017, taking place in almost all of the UK's constituencies, and expected to reach 200,000 people.

## 2.4 The experience of visiting Parliament

Parliament's building itself presents an opportunity for public engagement. Professor Cristina Leston Bandeira suggests that "the objects within a parliamentary building can represent a nation's historical heritage and therefore a collective sense of belonging to a community", so that access to this building can help to encourage a "subjective sense of identification and of sharing a common identity."<sup>45</sup> In other words, visiting Parliament may help members of the public feel they have a stake in it.

### Improving accessibility

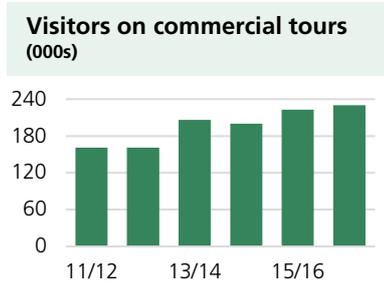
Parliament has tried to make its building more easily accessible, for example by:

- facilitating [access for people with disabilities](#), including through tactile tours;
- the introduction of visitor assistants to welcome members of the public and help them make their way through the building; and

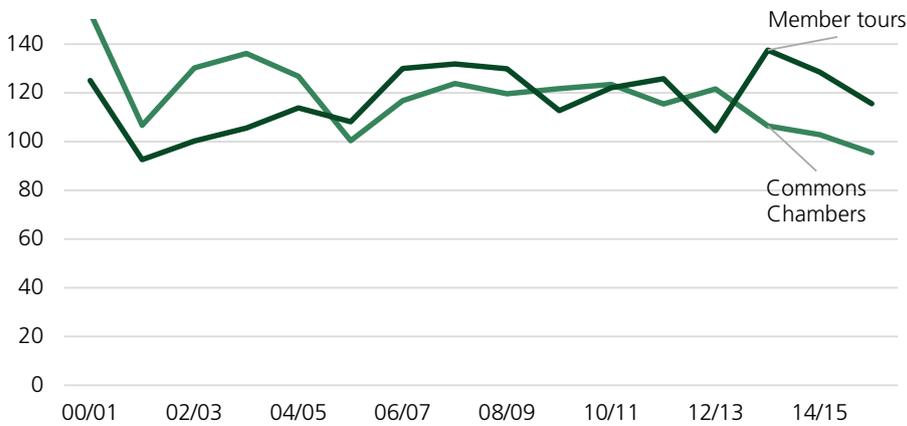
<sup>45</sup> 2016, pp10-1

- opening the building for a range of commercial tours on Saturdays and during recess periods.

People visit Parliament for a variety of reasons, for example to watch a debate in one of the chambers, listen to a select committee or a public bill committee take evidence, to learn about the history of the building or to speak to their MP. The chart below shows the number of people visiting Parliament in each year between 2000/01 and 2015/16 to watch debates in the Commons Chambers, or go on a tour booked through their MP or a member of the House of Lords. The chart on the right shows the number of people visiting Parliament on commercial tours.



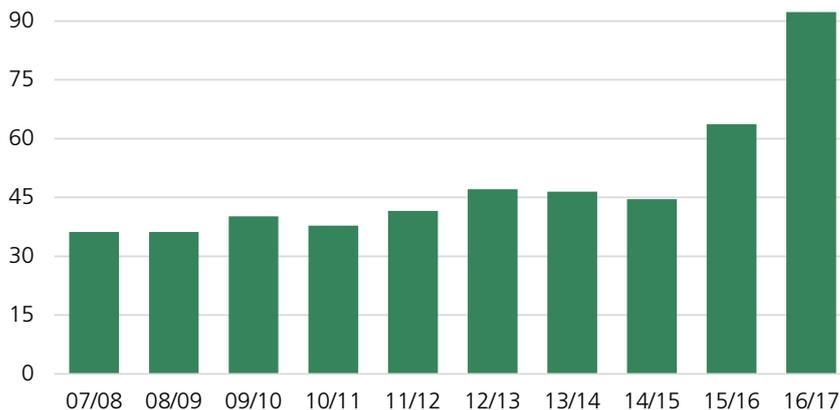
**Visitors to Parliament, 2000 - 2015 (000s)**



Source: House of Commons Commission annual report (various editions)

School groups visiting Parliament receive a tour of the building as well as an educational workshop. A new [education centre](#) was established next to the Palace of Westminster in 2015. Since then, the number of pupils and teachers participating in school visits to Parliament has increased substantially, from about 64,000 in 2015/16 to about 92,000 in 2016/17. The number of schools visiting Parliament increased from around 1,800 to around 2,800 in the same year. The chart below shows the number of pupils and teachers taking part in schools visits since 2007/08.

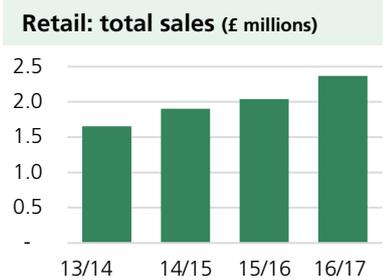
**Schools visits: number of visitors to Parliament (000s)**



Source: House of Commons Commission annual report (various editions), internal data

The Parliamentary Archives also offer tours; more than 7,000 people visited the archive since 2009, and over 14,000 people visited the search room. The Archives also organise exhibitions and displays, for example on the Gunpowder Plot (2005), Act of Union with Scotland (2007) and the Magna Carta (2015).

When people visit Parliament, they can buy a souvenir of their trip in one of three shops on the Parliamentary estate. In 2016/17, the bestselling item was the Palace of Westminster Guidebook.



### Visiting to take part: the Lords Chamber event, the Youth Parliament and the Youth Select Committee

The young people and members of civic organisations taking part in the annual Lords Chamber event not only visit Parliament but also directly engage with its processes. They debate a topical issue in the House of Lords Chamber, chaired by the Lord Speaker. In 2016, the debate was on [freedom of speech](#). The 189 participants debated whether or not to limit or monitor freedom of speech and voted to refrain from imposing any limits.

Likewise, Parliament works with the British Youth Council to organise the Youth Parliament and the Youth Select Committee. The 300 Members of the Youth Parliament (MYPs) and 11 Committee members consider topics selected by nearly 1 million young people. The Youth Parliament debates these in the House of Commons Chamber, while the Youth Select Committee takes evidence in Parliament's committee rooms.

## 3. Opportunities for participation

As well as providing information, Parliament offers opportunities for citizens to take part in the democratic process directly. Engaging with local MPs remains one of the most important ways for people to do so (the APE shows that in 2017, 11% of people had contacted their local MP, MSP, AM, or local councillor). Many of the activities discussed in this paper help people to engage with their constituency MP, either directly or by providing relevant information after the event. But there are also ways in which people can participate directly in parliamentary processes. Three key forms of such participatory activity organised by Parliament are select committee outreach, digital debates, and e-petitions.

Mr Speaker and the Senior Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords regularly engage with pupils from across the UK using Skype through Skype the Speaker (more than 1844 students in 2016/17) and #LordsLive (130 students so far)

### 3.1 Select committee outreach

Select committees undertake inquiries on a variety of subjects and take evidence from a range of stakeholders to inform their work. Members of the public can submit evidence to these inquiries. Parliament works with local partner organisations to encourage a broader range of people to do so, and also to organise events where members of the public can share their views on inquiry topics with select committee members.

There were 17 select committee engagement events in 2016, reaching around 440 people in the West Midlands, London, Wales, the South West, the South East, the East Midlands and the East of England. The events covered topics including higher education and Brexit, the future of the Severn River crossings, and supported housing.<sup>46</sup>

Select committees also engage with stakeholders in a variety of ways, for example through visits (182 in 2016/17) and informal meetings (281 in 2016/17)

On average, 70% of people participating in select committee outreach events between June 2016 and March 2017 either agreed or strongly agreed that they had influenced the select committee inquiries they engaged with.<sup>47</sup> Of all people taking part in these events between April 2016 and July 2017, 88% rated the events as good or excellent.

#### Case study A: disability and the built environment

The Women and Equalities Committee conducted an inquiry into the difficulties people with a disability face when navigating the built environment. Events were held in Birmingham (25 participants), Bath (9 participants) and Leeds (22 participants). Members of the Committee and support staff met with people with a disability and people working in town planning, architecture or related professions to discuss issues in small groups. Overall, the participants who completed a survey after the events rated them as excellent or good (90%, 67% and 77% respectively). Notes from the events are included as an annex in the [Committee's report](#), which is also available in large print and in an easy read version.

#### Case study B: MP's Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules

The Committee on Standards held an [inquiry into the Code of Conduct for MPs and the Guide to the Rules](#) that govern their behaviour. Members of the Committee and support staff met with community

<sup>46</sup> Select committee outreach event aim to engage the public with Parliament.

Committee visits may involve public engagement, but aim primarily to inform committee members about a topic

<sup>47</sup> Events were not held in every month this year: average is for the months in which events were held

leaders to discuss their views on this topic. Events were held in Birmingham (14 participants), Guildford (8 participants) and Cardiff (7 participants). Participants responding to a survey rated the events as excellent or good (86%, 25%, and 75% respectively). The discussions will feed into the review of the Code and the Guide that is being carried out by the Parliamentary Commissioner of Standards.

Next to events, select committees have also used the internet to engage with members of the public. In January 2012, for example, the Education Committee invited people to suggest [questions](#) committee members could ask the minister during an evidence session, receiving over 5,000 responses. In 2014, the same committee asked people to comment online on the [strength of the Department for Education's evidence](#) to the committee, receiving 497 responses.<sup>48</sup>

## 3.2 Digital debates

Parliament works with partner organisations to engage people in digital debates, held on social media before a debate on the same topic is held in Parliament. These digital debates enable members of the public to share their views with the MP(s) initiating the debate.

Between June 2015 and July 2017, [26 digital debates](#) took place on topics ranging from fuel poverty, to women and low pay, to antibiotic resistance. Parliament aims to substantially expand the number of digital debates in the future.

Debates on Twitter are recorded in a Storify summary after the event, while Facebook debates remain available on the event page. A summary of comments is shared with MPs taking part in the debate.

Digital debates are organised before selected Westminster Hall, adjournment and Backbench Business debates. Participants receive information about the nature of these debates, which are unlikely to result in legislative changes.

### Case study: digital debate on safety of riders and horses on rural roads

On 3 July 2017, the digital debate feeding into the [Westminster Hall debate on road safety for riders and horses](#) the next day attracted almost 1,400 engagements (123,000 people were reached). The debate was held on [Facebook](#). Participants shared experiences of being endangered by drivers while riding a horse on a road and suggested solutions, such as better education for drivers and the creation of more bridleways and alternative roads for riders.

Derek Thomas MP, sponsoring the debate, asked participants a number of questions and referred to the digital debate when speaking in Westminster Hall the day after, noting the many "excellent suggestions and sincere concerns expressed" (HC Deb, 4 July 2017, c69WH). The Minister responding to the debate, Jesse Norman MP (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport), also referred to the digital debate, congratulating Mr Thomas on "the online debate, that he has so successfully promoted" and saying that "it has obviously proved to be an interesting and useful way to develop ideas, to share understanding and to promote awareness of these issues" (Ibid, c80WH).

The tables below show the Twitter debates that attracted the highest number of contributors and reached the highest number of accounts.

<sup>48</sup> For more information on select committees using web forums, see PDS blog ['Parliament web forums'](#), 7 December 2015

Digital debates: Twitter					
Contributors: top 5			Accounts reached: top 5		
#UKAidDebate	13/06/2016	1,120	#StopYouthViolence	22/02/2016	8,350,138
Diversity in STEM			#UKAidDebate	13/06/2016	4,189,544
#WomenInSTEM	18/01/2016	964	#Alzdebate	11/04/2016	2,861,796
#StopYouthViolence	22/02/2016	616	Diversity in STEM		
#funding4cycling	02/02/2016	606	#WomenInSTEM	18/01/2016	2,623,919
#Alzdebate	11/04/2016	446	#EBACCdebate	28/06/2016	2,165,302

For all digital debates on Twitter, the number of tweets and accounts reached increased substantially following the associated debate in Parliament. The table on the right shows the debates reaching the highest number of accounts post-debate.

The debate on baby loss, held on 10 October 2016 for the Backbench Business debate on 13 October, received the highest number of mentions in the Chamber (5).

Six debates were held on Facebook. Of these, the debate on free childcare (12-15 November 2016) attracted the highest number of comments and posts (more than 33,300) – while also attracting almost 300,000 likes. It also reached the highest number of people (almost 500,000) out of the debates for which this information was collected.

There were also two digital debates on online forums:

- A debate on fuel poverty on the Money Saving Expert website (23 November 2015), attracting 34 posts and 953 views (and 54 and 2000, respectively, after the Westminster Hall debate);
- A debate on early years development and school readiness on Mumsnet (12 June 2016), attracting 114 posts from 95 contributors (and 118 from 96 contributors after the Westminster Hall debate).

### 3.3 E-petitions

In 2015, Parliament established a Petitions Committee to consider e-petitions registered on a [shared system for petitions to Parliament and the Government](#). Petitions receiving more than 10,000 signatures receive a response from the Government, and petitions receiving more than 100,000 signatures are considered for debate in Parliament. The Petitions Committee can also decide to inquire into topics raised in petitions, take evidence from expert witnesses and produce reports.

In the 2015 Parliament, just under 32,000 petitions were started. About two-thirds of these were rejected before they were published, for example because they did not ask for a specific action from the Government or because they duplicated another petition. Of the nearly 11,000 petitions that were accepted, 480 received a Government response and 56 were debated in the House of Commons. As of July 2017, 14 were not debated, while a further 7 petitions await a Government response, and 9 a debate in Parliament. In total, e-petitions were signed almost 32 million times during the 2015 Parliament.

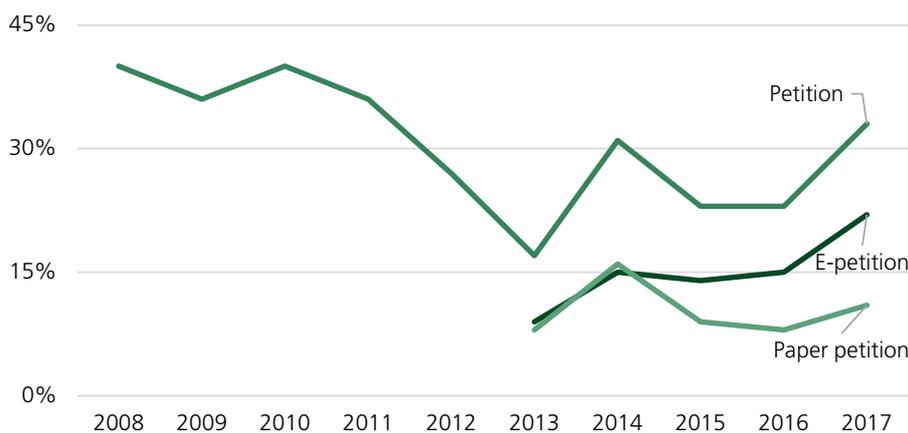
Twitter: post debate reach (top 5)	
#babylossdebate	16,005,875
#StopYouthViolence	11,249,054
#UKAidDebate	7715203
#EBACCdebate	5840115
#VotingWomen	3467711

The petition attracting the highest number of signatures in the 2015 Parliament (more than 4.1 million) called for the [EU referendum to be repeated](#) if the vote for leave or remain did not meet a specific threshold. The Government responded that no such threshold had been provided in the relevant legislation and that no further referendum would be held, and the petition was debated on [5 September 2016](#).

The second highest number of signatures went to the petition to [prevent Donald Trump from making a State Visit to the UK](#) (nearly 1.9 million). The Government responded that the President of the United States should receive “the full courtesy of a State Visit”. This petition was debated together with a petition stating that [Donald Trump should make this visit](#) (almost 320,000) on [20 February 2017](#).

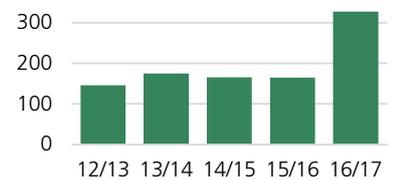
The APE asks people whether they have signed a petition in the last 12 months. The chart below shows the proportion of people saying they have signed a petition (later split into paper and e-petitions) each year.<sup>49</sup> The chart on the right shows the number of paper petitions received by the House of Commons in the past five sessions.

#### Petitions: signed in the last 12 months



Source: APE

#### Public (paper) petitions



Source: Sessional returns, various editions

Some people sign more petitions than others: [analysis of the signatures added to e-petitions on Parliament's system](#) by Professor Philip Cowley and others shows that petitions tend to be most frequently signed in the Bristol West and Brighton Pavilion constituencies (although this pattern is different for particular petitions).

This paper has discussed some of the ways in which Parliament attempts to engage with the public, and where possible, the number of people that were engaged. It is not possible to simply add up these numbers to arrive at a total ‘reach’ figure: the same people might participate in more than one of the activities discussed, and there are many more

<sup>49</sup> The figure for ‘Petition’ after 2013 is the combined total of the figure for ‘E-petition’ and ‘Paper petition’. The APE asks whether people have “created or signed a [paper/ e-] petition”: answers presumably are not exclusive to Parliament’s e-petitions system but could include petitions signed or created on local government and devolved legislature systems, as well as online petition systems such as 38 Degrees and Change.org

activities not covered in this paper that would likely have reached further people.

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