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House of Commons sittings in Westminster Hall



Summary

- 1 Procedure and practice in Westminster Hall: a quick guide
- 2 Establishing a parallel chamber
- 3 Review and permanent establishment
- 4 Other business taken in Westminster Hall
- 5 The Procedure Committee review of 2014
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Summary

Since 1999 the House of Commons has held debates in a parallel debating chamber, known as “Westminster Hall”.

This chamber is used for debates on issues raised by backbench Members, for debates on select committee reports, for debates on subjects selected by the Backbench Business Committee and for debates on e-petitions.

It was briefly used as a forum to enable Members to ask questions for oral answer from Ministers in several departments on subjects with cross-cutting responsibilities.

The establishment of a second debating chamber was first proposed by the Modernisation Committee in their report on the Parliamentary Calendar in 1998. The proposals drew on the example of the “Main Committee”, a similar chamber established in the Australian House of Representatives in 1994.

Although the introduction of Westminster Hall was met with some opposition and scepticism when it was first proposed, it is today an established feature of the House’s arrangements for holding Ministers to account.

Pattern of sittings in Westminster Hall

From the beginning of the 2015 Parliament, the usual pattern of sittings in Westminster Hall has been:

- **Mondays**
4.30-7.30pm – debates on petitions and e-petitions, determined by the Petitions Committee
- **Tuesdays and Wednesdays**
9.30-11.30am & 2.30-5.30pm – ½-hour, one-hour and 1½-hour debates initiated by backbench MPs
- **Thursdays**
1.30-4.30pm* – 1½-hour or three-hour debates determined by the Liaison Committee (on select committee reports) or the Backbench Business Committee
* 12.30-3.30pm, from 15 April 2024 until the end of the 2019 Parliament

Sittings in Westminster Hall during the Covid pandemic

At times during the course of the Covid pandemic, from March 2020 to July 2021, when the House introduced various procedural changes to continue business, sittings in Westminster were also affected. At times, they were suspended completely; at other times, virtual participation was possible.

On 6 September 2021, when the House returned from the Summer Recess, all provisions for virtual participation had lapsed. Sittings in Westminster Hall restarted in the Grand Committee Room (off Westminster Hall) and MPs had to be present to participate in proceedings.

Whilst sittings in Westminster Hall were suspended, the Petitions Committee used some hybrid and some entirely virtual oral evidence sessions to discuss petitions. The discussions involved ministers and Opposition spokespeople.

1 Procedure and practice in Westminster Hall: a quick guide

1.1 Days of operation

The House sits in Westminster Hall from the start of each Session, once the debate in the House on the Queen's Speech has been concluded.¹

Sitting days in Westminster Hall are Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Sittings may also take place on Mondays if the Petitions Committee allocates business for debate.

Sittings in Westminster Hall may be cancelled by order of the House: this most often occurs at the end of a session on a day when a Royal Commission for Prorogation is expected.

1.2 Sittings

Sittings in Westminster Hall from the start of the 2015–16 Session have followed the pattern below:

- **Monday:** debates on one or more e-petitions chosen by the Petitions Committee. Debate starts at 4.30 pm and can run for up to three hours.
- **Tuesday and Wednesday:** debates on subjects drawn by ballot according to a rota of answering departments published in the Order Paper. The Backbench Business Committee may allocate a debate with permission from the Chairman of Ways and Means to the 90-minute slot on a Tuesday morning. Debates are scheduled as follows:
 - 9.30 am — 11.00 am
 - 11.00 am — 11.30 am
 - 2.30 pm — 4.00 pm
 - 4.00 pm — 4.30 pm
 - 4.30 pm — 5.30 pm

There is a lunchtime suspension which coincides with Question Time and time for urgent questions and statements in the House.

¹ Standing Order No. 10(1)

If the House sits on a Tuesday or a Wednesday at 2.30 pm by virtue of it being the first sitting day after a periodic adjournment, Westminster Hall will sit from 11.30 am to 1.30 pm and from 4.30 pm, for up to three hours on that day.²

- **Thursday:** debates on subjects chosen by the Backbench Business Committee following bids from Members, or debates on select committee reports chosen by the Liaison Committee. Debate starts at 1.30 pm and can continue for up to three hours.

On 25 March 2024, the House of Commons agreed that from 15 April 2024, the Thursday sitting should start at 12.30pm, rather than 1.30pm.³ The sitting could continue for up to three hours.

If a division is called in the House during a Westminster Hall sitting, the sitting is suspended for the duration of the division (generally 15 minutes for a single division) and ‘injury time’ is added to the end of the debate. There is no provision for ‘injury time’ to be added in other circumstances (for example, a delay in the start of a sitting).

1.3

Chairing

Sittings are chaired by a member of the Panel of Chairs (MPs appointed by the Speaker to chair public bill committees and other general committees). In exceptional circumstances a Deputy Speaker may chair a sitting.

² Until 28 June 2023, if the House sat on a Tuesday or a Wednesday at 2.30 pm on returning from a periodic adjournment, Westminster Hall would sit from 9.30 am to 2.30 pm on that day. On 28 June 2023, the House amended Standing Order No 10 (2)(b) to sit from 11.30-1.30 and 4.30-7.30 on such days [[HC Deb 28 June 2023 c386](#)]. Before this, it had become conventional for the Leader to table a motion to temporarily amend the sitting times so that Westminster Hall sat at these times (see, for example, [HC Deb 22 September 2022 c920](#))

³ [HC Deb 25 March 2024 c1359](#)

2 Establishing a parallel chamber

The establishment of a second debating chamber was first proposed by the Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons in a report on the Parliamentary Calendar in 1998.⁴

2.1 Initial proposals

The Modernisation Committee examined “The Main Committee”, a similar chamber established in the Australian House of Representatives in 1994. The Australian example was in effect a second or parallel chamber in which Members could consider non-controversial legislation and Government reports: its scope was later expanded to include short adjournment debates.⁵ It was considered that this then freed the main chamber to have longer debates on more controversial issues and enabled more effective scrutiny of the Government.

The Modernisation Committee was broadly persuaded by the need for additional debating time and the experience in Canberra, and suggested a number of initial proposals for a parallel chamber. They were:

- The proposed chamber should be chaired by the Chairman of the Ways and Means as Deputy Speaker, supported by the Clerk Assistant (an arrangement modelled on the Australian system).
- Procedure should largely follow that of the main chamber, although decisions would only be taken unanimously.
- The proposed chamber should be located in Committee Room 14 or the Grand Committee Room, off Westminster Hall.
- The layout of the “Main Committee” could be in a horseshoe shape to facilitate a new, more consensual, form of debate.
- The “Main Committee” would meet on days when the main chamber was sitting, but should have greater flexibility on timings than the Australian version.
- Proceedings should be televised throughout.
- All business would be announced by the Leader of the House in response to the usual Thursday Business Question, in exactly the same way as business of the House.

⁴ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, [The Parliamentary Calendar: Initial Proposals](#), 7 December 1998, HC 60 1998-99

⁵ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, [The Parliamentary Calendar: Initial Proposals](#), 7 December 1998, HC 60 1998-99, Memorandum submitted by the Australian House of Representatives, Appendix 7, Ev. xlix–liv

- Possible types of business could be debates on non-controversial legislation, select committee reports, private Member's time and Government adjournment motions, with a view to a possible extension to debates on secondary legislation in the medium term.

This proposal for a "Main Committee" was seen as a way of freeing space in the main chamber's calendar, and to allow further debating time there for more controversial issues.

2.2 The Westminster Hall framework

The Modernisation Committee's initial proposal was generally welcomed, and in response a further report was produced on "Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall".⁶ The report attempted to address the concerns voiced by Members and to come up with detailed proposals for implementation, initially on a trial basis.

The Committee conceived the proposed arrangement primarily as a forum for private Members (backbench MPs), to enable them to hold the Government to account on a wider range of issues. Requests to the Speaker's Office for end-of-day adjournment debates were reported to be outstripping the capacity of the House to accommodate them. It was thought that by staging some of these adjournment debates in a parallel chamber, the pressure for debating time in the main Chamber could be alleviated.

The report recommended that the new chamber should be located in the Grand Committee Room. This location was favoured over the other possible location, Committee Room 14, because of the greater potential for experimentation with different layouts. From this recommendation also arose the suggestion that the parallel chamber be referred to as "Westminster Hall": it was not considered appropriate to refer to it as a "Main Committee", and "Second Chamber" risked confusion with the House of Lords.

Following consultation with the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Committee recommended that sittings in Westminster Hall should be chaired by the Deputy Speakers, and that the four members who had served longest on the Chairmen's Panel⁷ should be formally appointed by the House as additional Deputy Speakers to sit in Westminster Hall.

The Committee considered it appropriate that Westminster Hall debates should take place only on days when the House was sitting, as long as they

⁶ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, [Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall](#), 13 April 1999, HC 194 1998-99

⁷ Now termed the Panel of Chairs. MPs appointed by the Speaker to chair Public Bill Committees and other general committees. They may also chair debates in Westminster Hall and act as temporary chairs of Committees of the whole House. The Panel is chaired by the Chairman of Ways and Means

did not clash with either Question Time or Ministerial statements.⁸ Suggested sittings times were:

- Tuesdays between 10am and 1pm
- Wednesdays between 9.30am and 2pm
- Thursdays between 2.30pm and 5.30pm

The option of later sittings between 4.30pm and 7.30pm on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays was also proposed.

It was expected that Tuesdays and Wednesdays would be reserved for backbench⁹ business.

- On Tuesdays this would consist of one general debate and three half-hour debates, to be selected through a ballot held by the Speaker in a similar way to the ballot for end-of-day adjournment debates in the main Chamber.
- The Wednesday sitting would be made up of two general debates and three half-hour debates selected in the same way, except that the general debates would be replaced three times each session by debates on select committee reports chosen by the Liaison Committee.
- Thursday sittings would be decided through the ‘usual channels’¹⁰ and would include debates on select committee reports and other appropriate business.

Debate on the Modernisation Committee’s proposals

The report was debated in the Chamber on 24 May 1999.¹¹ Throughout this debate a range of opinions was expressed, not all supportive of the Committee’s proposals. For example, Gwyneth Dunwoody said:

I have debated with [Ian Harris, Clerk to the Australian Parliament] whether the establishment of a separate Committee will enhance the work of the Chamber or detract from it. I was not persuaded by him ...¹²

The fear that a second debating chamber would have a detrimental effect on the work of the Chamber was not shared by most participants. Dr Phyllis Starkey MP believed that the creation of the second chamber would increase the opportunities for backbench MPs to participate more fully in adjournment debates.¹³

⁸ At this time, the House sat from 2.30pm-10.30pm on Monday to Thursday

⁹ The Modernisation Committee referred to private Members

¹⁰ The working relationship of the whips from the different parties and the leadership of the Government and Opposition parties. the term refers to arrangements and compromises about the running of parliamentary business that are agreed behind the scenes – see House of Commons, [Usual channels](#)

¹¹ [HC Deb 24 May 1999 c81-132](#)

¹² HC Deb 24 May 1999 c91

¹³ HC Deb 24 May 1999 cc95-100

The report was endorsed by 145 votes to 36, and the experiment was ordered to begin at the start of the 1999–2000 session.

The first sitting of the House in Westminster Hall took place at 10am on Tuesday 30 November 1999 in the Grand Committee Room with Sir Alan Haselhurst, Chairman of Ways and Means, in the Chair.¹⁴ Following the formal moving of a motion for the adjournment by Jim Dowd, a Government Whip, four debates took place. The first was on Palestinian refugees, initiated by Dr Phyllis Starkey. The three subsequent debates, all of which arose on the same motion for the adjournment, were on road access to RAF Fairford, children and tobacco products, and pensions mis-selling.

¹⁴ [HC Deb 30 November 1999 c1WH-24WH](#). In the early days of Westminster Hall the Chair was addressed as Deputy Speaker: the House now follows General Committee practice, and Chairs are referred to by name

3 Review and permanent establishment

3.1 Evaluation of the first year of operation

In a report published in November 2000, the Modernisation Committee evaluated the effectiveness of Westminster Hall after its first year of operation.¹⁵

Westminster Hall had normally sat on Tuesday, Wednesday mornings and Thursday afternoons as scheduled.

- Tuesday and Wednesday sessions were dedicated to backbench business, in the form of adjournment debates.
- On three Wednesdays of the Session there were debates on select committee reports.
- Thursday sittings were devoted in equal shares to debates on select committee reports and other business.

The Committee found that in comparison to the previous Session the Westminster Hall experiment had given private Members an additional 134 opportunities to raise issues with Ministers. Select committees had been afforded 13 additional debates on their reports.

The Committee examined average attendance, and found that, excluding the opening day when 40 MPs attended, attendance had varied from 5 to 30 MPs, while the average attendance at general debates across the entire session had been “between 10 and 12”.¹⁶ As the Grand Committee room could hold just over 50 Members it was reaching, on average, between 20% and 24% of its capacity. The Modernisation Committee considered the comparatively low attendance to be relatively unimportant, as many of the debates were 30-minute adjournment debates, where only the MP in charge of the debate and the Minister answering had the right to speak.

A main aim of the experiment was to increase supply for the overwhelming demand from private Members for debating time in the Chamber. The report sought advice from the Speaker’s Office to ascertain whether it had been a success in these terms. Figures from the Speaker’s Office showed that even

¹⁵ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, [Sittings in Westminster Hall](#), 13 November 2000, HC 906 1999-00

¹⁶ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, [Sittings in Westminster Hall](#), 13 November 2000, HC 906 1999-00, para 14

though Westminster Hall had increased the number of private Member debates, the demand for general debates was still high.¹⁷

The Committee summed up its evaluation thus:

We recommend that sittings in Westminster Hall should be continued beyond the end of the current experiment, and that the next Parliament should decide whether or not they should be made permanent.¹⁸

The Committee further recommended that:

- The Westminster Hall chamber should be re-arranged into a “long” hemicycle, as it was observed that disturbance was often caused if large groups of visitors entered or left the room.
- Within this new layout there should be two seats in the public gallery reserved for the Member initiating the debate; this would be to ensure any of their constituents with a specific interest were given priority.
- Sittings on Tuesdays should be between 9.30am and 2pm, beginning with three hour-long debates.
- Two-thirds of Thursday afternoon debates should be given over to debating select committee reports.
- Six Thursday afternoons, rather than three Wednesday mornings, should be designated for debates on select committee reports.
- The Speaker should have the power to allow a debate to continue for up to three hours if he believed there was sufficient interest in a fuller debate.
- Sittings of Westminster Hall should resume as soon as the debate on the Queen’s Speech had finished.

The debate on the report took place on 20 November 2000.¹⁹ The House approved the report by 283 votes to 18. Among the dissenting voices was Eric Forth MP, who during the debate had referred to the “ghastly Westminster Hall”.²⁰

3.2 Permanent establishment

The Modernisation Committee’s report of Session 2001–02 on the Reform Programme for the House of Commons only had a small section on Westminster Hall. It recommended that the Westminster Hall arrangements be made permanent.²¹

¹⁷ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, [Sittings in Westminster Hall](#), 13 November 2000, HC 906 1999-00, para 16

¹⁸ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, [Sittings in Westminster Hall](#), 13 November 2000, HC 906 1999-00, para 33

¹⁹ [HC Deb 20 November 2000 c22-108](#)

²⁰ HC Deb 20 November 2000 c52

²¹ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, [Modernisation of the House of Commons: A Reform Programme](#), 5 September 2002, HC 1168-I 2001-02, para 101

This report was debated on 29 Oct 2002 and was approved by the House on division (ayes 411, noes 47).²² Westminster Hall was accordingly made permanent from the start of the 2002–03 session.

Other recommendations agreed to by the House were:

- That during the House’s process of altering sitting hours for the House of Commons chamber there should not be a reduction in the sitting time of Westminster Hall.
- A rota of answering Departments should be drawn up for Westminster Hall, to spread the burden on answering Ministers.

²² [HC Deb 29 October 2002 c689-844](#)

4 Other business taken in Westminster Hall

4.1 Cross-cutting questions

The Modernisation Committee report from September 2000 which recommended that the experiment be made permanent also suggested the introduction of cross-cutting questions—question sessions on issues which spanned a number of Departments, involving all the Ministers responsible in those departments—on an experimental basis.²³

The proposal was thought to offer MPs the opportunity to cover wide ranging issues that spanned the responsibilities of more than one department within one sitting.

This recommendation was also approved by the House, and the first cross-cutting questions in Westminster Hall took place on 23 January 2003, on youth policy.²⁴ The departments designated to answer questions were the Home Office, the Department of Health, the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Cross-cutting question sessions generally took place at Thursday sittings in Westminster Hall, with subjects for questioning announced by the Leader of the House in the Business Statement two weeks before the sitting.

There were seven further sessions during the 2001–05 Parliament,²⁵ but the experiment has not since been repeated.

²³ Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, [Modernisation of the House of Commons: A Reform Programme](#), 5 September 2002, HC 1168-I 2001-02, para 99

²⁴ [HC Deb 23 January 2003 c143WH-163WH](#)

²⁵ 27 March 2003 (Older People (Department for Education and Skills; Department of Health; Department for Work and Pensions)); 10 April 2003 (Urban Renewal: Liveability—Creating Decent Places (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Home Office)), 22 May 2003 (Tackling Drugs (Home Office, Department of Health, Department for Education and Skills, Lord Chancellor's Department and HM Treasury)), 17 July 2003 (Domestic Violence (Home Office, Department of Health, Department for Education and Skills, Department for Constitutional Affairs and Office of the Deputy Prime Minister)), 13 November 2003 (Older People (Department for Work and Pensions, Department of Health, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister)), 12 February 2004 (Healthy Living (Department of Health; Department for Education and Skills; Department for Culture, Media and Sport)) and 28 October 2004 (Anti-social Behaviour (Home Office, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Department for Education and Skills))

4.2

Consideration of e-petitions

The Government launched an e-petitions site in July 2011, and put forward a mechanism whereby e-petitions receiving over 100,000 signatures could be scheduled for debate in the House. The Leader of the House indicated at the time of the launch of the site that e-petitions receiving a number of signatures over the 100,000 threshold would be referred to the Backbench Business Committee, which would be asked to consider scheduling a debate in the House on the matters raised.²⁶

The Procedure Committee undertook a short inquiry into the scheduling of debates on Government e-petitions, and reported in January 2012. By December 2012 six e-petitions on the Government site had reached the 100,000 signature threshold and had been sent to the Backbench Business Committee for consideration for debate.²⁷ Natascha Engel, then Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, told the Procedure Committee that there was “a very high demand on our time” and that they had been given no extra time just for e-petitions.²⁸

The Procedure Committee recognised that even before the introduction of e-petitions for debate, demand for debates in backbench time had consistently outstripped the number of days available to the Backbench Business Committee for allocation. The Committee did not accept the argument advanced by the then Leader of the House, Sir George Young, that time should be found out of the existing allocation of backbench time, given that the e-petition initiative was one entirely of the Government’s undertaking and was concerned solely with e-petitions addressed to the Government.

So as not to restrict existing opportunities for holding the Government to account in the Chamber, the Procedure Committee recommended that debates on e-petitions be scheduled on Monday afternoons in Westminster Hall, for a maximum of three hours from 4.30 pm.²⁹

The first Monday afternoon debate on an e-petition in Westminster Hall under the Government system was held on 17 September 2012; the subject of debate was the West Coast Main Line. Debate took place on the motion “That this House has considered the e-petition from Ross McKillop and others relating to the West Coast Mainline franchise decision” moved by Rosie Cooper MP.³⁰

²⁶ see section 2.1 of [e-Petitions](#), Commons Library briefing, SN06540, 20 October 2015

²⁷ Procedure Committee, [Debates on Government e-Petitions](#) [PDF], 11 January 2012, HC1706 2010–12, para 9

²⁸ Procedure Committee, [Debates on Government e-Petitions](#) [PDF], 11 January 2012, HC1706 2010–12, para 8

²⁹ Procedure Committee, [Debates on Government e-Petitions](#) [PDF], 11 January 2012, HC1706 2010–12, para 13–21. The Backbench Business Committee broadly welcomed the Procedure Committee’s proposals – Backbench Business Committee, [Work of the Committee in Session 2010-12](#) [PDF], 26 April 2012, HC 1926 2010–12, paras 28–34

³⁰ [HC Deb 17 September 2012 cc191WH-236WH](#)

Following the establishment of a new e-petitions system, under the joint ownership and operation of the House of Commons and the Government, responsibility for scheduling debates on e-petitions passed to the [Petitions Committee](#). It was established at the end of the 2010 Parliament, to begin operating in the 2015 Parliament.³¹

Proposals for debates on e-petitions which have reached 100,000 signatures are considered by the Committee at its weekly meeting and allocated for debate in Westminster Hall on Monday afternoons. The debate arises, as before, on a motion expressed in neutral terms, i.e. “That this House has considered the e-petition on ...”.

The motion is generally moved by a member of the Petitions Committee: this is not necessarily intended to indicate support for the proposition in the petition.

³¹ [HC Deb 24 February 2015 cc248-256](#)

5 The Procedure Committee review of 2014

In October 2014 the Commons Procedure Committee published a review of the conduct of business in Westminster Hall. The Committee recognised that many MPs valued the opportunities for debate provided in the parallel Chamber. It offered “a package of reasonable and practical reforms” intended to “enhance Members’ experience of debating in the second chamber.”³²

The Committee reviewed the following matters:

- Arrangement of debates in Westminster Hall;
- The form of motion to be considered;
- The role of the Chairman of Ways and Means in arranging business; and
- Powers available to the Chair in Westminster Hall.

5.1 Arrangement of debates

A 60-minute debate slot

The Committee recommended the introduction of a one-hour debate slot on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, which, alongside the existing 90-minute and 30-minute slots, would provide further flexibility in the allocation of debates.

It was considered that some subjects, while not attracting sufficient interest to sustain a 90-minute debate, would nevertheless attract more Members to participate than could reasonably be accommodated in a 30-minute slot (which, in parallel with adjournment debates in the Chamber, generally comprise a speech from the Member in charge and a response from a Minister: other Members are not normally called to speak unless they have received consent from the Member in charge and the Minister responding).

In order that Members did not apply indiscriminately for all three slots for a debate subject, the Committee recommended that Members should be allowed to select no more than two of the three slots available. It also recommended that Opposition frontbenchers should be able to contribute to the new 60-minute debate slots, but that the Chair should “offer robust guidance” to Opposition frontbenchers “on the appropriate length of their speeches”.³³

³² Procedure Committee, [Business in Westminster Hall](#) [PDF], 13 October 2014, HC 236 2014-15, para 4

³³ Procedure Committee, [Business in Westminster Hall](#) [PDF], 13 October 2014, HC 236 2014-15, para 7

The Committee rejected as impractical a proposal that debate subjects should be published in advance and slots then allocated on the basis of Members subscribing to speak. It recommended that the new one-hour slot should replace the last 30-minute slot on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

Timings of sittings and allocation of business

The Committee recommended that the sitting time in Westminster Hall on Thursdays be brought forward by one hour to 12.30 pm, and that the sitting end no later than 3.30 pm, to assist Members who wish to return to their constituencies on a Thursday afternoon.

The Committee also noted that backbench debates in Westminster Hall on Thursdays could often clash with backbench debates on similar subjects scheduled for the Chamber, and recommended that in future the business normally allocated to Westminster Hall on Thursdays—debates chosen by the Backbench Business Committee and by the Liaison Committee—should therefore be switched to Monday evenings. It considered that debates on e-petitions – then allocated by the Backbench Business Committee—could be taken on Thursday afternoons in Westminster Hall.

The Committee also reported on the outcome of a trial whereby the Backbench Business Committee should have the right to allocate a debate to one 90-minute slot in Westminster Hall per week. The trial had worked well, giving the necessary flexibility to Members and to the Backbench Business Committee in the scheduling of debates, and it was recommended to continue.

5.2

Forms of motion

Use of motions for the adjournment

Since its establishment in 1999 debates in Westminster Hall had generally taken place on a motion for the adjournment moved at the opening of the sitting and either concluding before the scheduled end time for the sitting or lapsing when that hour was reached. So-called ‘general’ motions—where the form of motion is ‘That this House has considered [a specified matter]’—were introduced to Westminster Hall in September 2012 when e-petitions from the Government’s site began to be debated on Monday evenings. In the Chamber, general motions replaced adjournment motions in 2007.

The Committee considered that the general motion style was clearer and made proceedings more comprehensible, and recommended that the practice be adopted for debates Westminster Hall. It recalled that motions which were neutral in character would fall within the scope of Standing Order No. 24B and would therefore not be amendable. The Committee did not envisage divisions being forced on such motions.

The Committee noted that this would in consequence require changes in practice to mirror practice in the Chamber, in that a Member moving a motion at the start of a debate would have the right of reply at the end if called by the Chair and if he or she wished, without seeking the leave of the House to speak twice in the same debate. The decision on whether it would be appropriate to call a Member to reply to a debate would rest with the Chair.

Substantive motions for debate

The Committee considered whether substantive motions—motions expressing a proposition which could in theory be amended—ought to be permitted in Westminster Hall. While it recognised the force of the argument that Members should be allowed to debate motions which were not neutral, the Committee considered that the difficulty in providing for amendments to be tabled to Westminster Hall motions, and the constraints on holding divisions in Westminster Hall, meant that it was undesirable and impractical to allow substantive, amendable motions to be tabled for debate.

The Committee did recognise the case for using general motions in a more focused way, for instance to concentrate debate on a particular recommendation of a select committee report, provided that neutrality in the motion was ensured.

5.3

Role of the Chairman of Ways and Means, and powers of the Chair

The Committee recommended that the Chairman of Ways and Means be given overall responsibility for the allocation of business in Westminster Hall: formerly, they had only had authority to allocate the business on Tuesdays and Wednesdays (in practice done through a ballot administered by the Speaker's Office), Monday and Thursday sittings being in the gift of the Backbench Business Committee (since the 2010–12 Session) and the Liaison Committee.

The Committee did not envisage taking away from the Backbench Business Committee and the Liaison Committee their responsibility for allocating business on Thursdays as set out in Standing Orders, but considered that the overall oversight of the Chairman of Ways and Means provided a backstop: if no business were allocated by either committee then the Chairman could use their authority to allocate a debate.

5.4

The Government response

The Government responded to the report in December 2014, and the response was formally published by the Committee in February 2015, with a fresh proposal for a revision to Standing Order No. 10.³⁴

The Government accepted the majority of the Committee's recommendations and was content with several which it considered to be matters for the House:

- The provision of one-hour debates on Tuesdays and Wednesdays
- Participation by Opposition spokespersons in such debates
- Allocation of one 90-minute on Thursdays by the Backbench Business Committee
- Empowering the Chair in Westminster Hall to order that a disorderly Member withdraw
- Changing the terminology of debates to 'general debate'
- Clarifying the role of the Chairman of Ways and Means in respect to all Westminster Hall business and the specification of finishing times
- Repealing the unused provision to appoint members of the Panel of Chairs to sit in Westminster Hall as Deputy Speakers

The Government was not convinced of the Committee's arguments for taking substantive business in Westminster Hall, and did not support the recommendation that orders of the day could be taken in Westminster Hall .

The Government did not accept the Committee's arguments that Thursday sitting hours for Westminster Hall should be brought forward by one hour, and that the business usually taken on Mondays (e-petitions) should be switched with the business usually taken on Thursdays (Backbench Business Committee and Liaison Committee debates). The Government appeared keen to ensure that there were as few clashes as possible between Westminster Hall sittings and Questions and Statements in the Chamber.

The Procedure Committee agreed not to press the recommendations which the Government had objected to.

Following a short debate on 24 February 2015 the House agreed, without division, to the revised Standing Order No. 10 proposed by the Procedure Committee. The Deputy Leader of the House, Tom Brake MP, described the changes as "a sensible package of evolutionary changes to the work conducted in the second Chamber."³⁵

³⁴ Procedure Committee, [Business in Westminster Hall: Government response and revised Standing Order No. 10](#) [PDF], 28 January 2015, HC1035 2014–15

³⁵ [HC Deb 24 February 2015 cc239–245](#): Mr Brake spoke at c243

5.5 Westminster Hall and the Petitions Committee

A further change to Standing Order No 10 resulted from the House's agreement on the same day (24 February 2015) to establish a Petitions Committee from the beginning of the 2015 Parliament; and to give the Petitions Committee the power to determine whether petitions or e-petitions should be debated in Westminster Hall on Mondays.³⁶ If there are no petitions for debate, Westminster Hall simply does not sit on that Monday. There is no mechanism to appoint other business for debate.

5.6 Implementation of changes to Westminster Hall procedure and practice

The revised Standing Order No. 10 came into effect at the start of the 2015 Parliament. The first sitting to be held under the revised procedures was on Tuesday 9 June 2015.

On 14 October 2015 the first challenge to the decision of the Chair on a vote on a substantive motion in Westminster Hall was recorded. The Chair (Mike Gapes) declared that the decision on Mr Graham Allen's motion, "That this House has considered the creation of a House Business Committee", was not decided.³⁷ Mr Allen subsequently sought and received leave from the Backbench Business Committee for the question to be put on the floor of the House in Backbench Business time. The question was put, without debate, in the Chamber on 29 October 2015 and negatived.³⁸

5.7 Thursday sittings

The 2014 recommendation that Thursday sittings be brought forward was not implemented when the Procedure Committee's report was debated in February 2015.

However, on 25 March 2024, it was agreed that from 15 April 2024, the sitting in Westminster Hall on Thursdays should start at 12.30pm for the rest of the 2019 Parliament.³⁹

Earlier in 2024, Ian Mearns, Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, told the House that the Backbench Business Committee had written to the

³⁶ [HC Deb 24 February 2015 cc248-256](#); Procedure Committee, [E-petitions: a collaborative system](#) [PDF], 4 December 2014, HC 235 2014-15

³⁷ [HC Deb 14 October 2015 c175WH](#)

³⁸ [HC Deb 29 October 2015 c528](#)

³⁹ [HC Deb 25 March 2024 c1359](#)

Procedure Committee “to ask for a change to Standing Orders, so that Westminster Hall debates on Thursdays can begin at 12.30 pm instead of 1.30 pm”.⁴⁰

On 29 February 2024, Ian Mearns reported that the Procedure Committee had replied to his committee’s letter on the proposal to change the sitting time on Thursdays.⁴¹ Penny Mordaunt, the Leader of the House of Commons, said the Government was keen to ensure the change in sitting hours could be brought into effect.⁴²

⁴⁰ [HC Deb 22 February 2024 c862](#)

⁴¹ [HC Deb 29 February 2024 c436](#)

⁴² [HC Deb 29 February 2024 c436](#)

6 Sittings in Westminster Hall during the pandemic

Sittings suspended (March-September 2020)

In response to growing concern about coronavirus in March 2020, the House of Commons rose early, on 25 March (instead of the originally planned 31 March), for Easter 2020. Before it adjourned for Easter, it adapted its procedures and practices to help ensure distancing measures could be better implemented in its proceedings. After the Easter recess it formally agreed further changes to allow virtual participation in proceedings in the Chamber.

On 19 March 2020, it agreed to suspend sittings in Westminster Hall “until the House orders otherwise”.⁴³

During the summer of 2020, as restrictions eased across the country, there were calls for Westminster Hall debates to be resumed. On 9 July 2020, in response to a point of order from Chris Bryant, requesting a resumption of debates in Westminster Hall, the Deputy Speaker promised to pass the message to the Leader of the House and the Speaker, adding “in order that we can get the House fully operational as soon as it is safe to do so”.⁴⁴

On the same day, Catherine McKinnell, Chair of the Petitions Committee, wrote to the Leader of the House, requesting “an update on plans to reopen Westminster Hall, and confirm that if this is not possible by the time the House returns in September the Government will find more chamber time that my Committee can use for petitions debates”.⁴⁵

On 3 September 2020, in response to a question from Ian Mearns, the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, Jacob Rees-Mogg, the Leader of the House, indicated that he hoped Westminster Hall would “reopen” in October, saying that “there are certainly plans to do that”.⁴⁶

Resumption of sittings (October 2020-January 2021)

Sittings were resumed in Westminster Hall on 5 October 2020, after the House agreed to their resumption on 23 September. In agreeing to resume Westminster Hall sittings, the House also agreed that the Chair would be able to limit the number of MPs present as long as similar restrictions applied in

⁴³ [HC Deb 19 March 2020 c1246](#)

⁴⁴ [HC Deb 9 July 2020 c1165](#)

⁴⁵ Petitions Committee, [Letter from the Chair to the Leader of the House](#), 9 July 2020

⁴⁶ [HC Deb 3 September 2020 c312](#)

the main Chamber.⁴⁷ (The restrictions, including allowing the Chair to limit the number of Members present in the Chamber, were extended to 21 June 2021, on 25 March 2021.⁴⁸)

The sittings resumed (on 5 October 2020) with some special arrangements:

- Unlike the Chamber, but like general committees, MPs had to be physically present to participate in debates in Westminster Hall.
- Call lists were put in place for 60- and 90-minute debates and only MPs on the call lists were permitted to attend.
- Social distancing measures were put in place: only 15 seats were available. Four of these were reserved for frontbenchers. Five seats were available in the gallery for MPs towards the end of the call list but they had to move to empty seats in the main part of the Chamber to speak.
- MPs were asked to clean microphones before and after use.⁴⁹

Suspension of sittings (January-February 2021)

However, as England went into a further lockdown in January 2021, the Leader of the House “received representations from across the House, expressing concerns about the continuation of Westminster Hall”.⁵⁰ He tabled a further motion to suspend these sittings, from 14 January 2021, which was agreed on 13 January 2021.

In the debate on 13 January, the Leader of the House said that he hoped the suspension would not last long and that the House authorities were considering whether it would be practical to allow Westminster Hall to function virtually.⁵¹

The Speaker confirmed that “there are proposals to look at other rooms, but it will take three to four weeks to get that ready. That is now consistently being looked at—especially if the order goes through tonight—in order to make that happen and to try to ensure that we have a real proposal to go forward”.⁵²

On 11 February 2021, the Chairs of the Procedure, Petitions and Backbench Business Committees wrote to the Leader of the House, pressing for a resumption of sittings in Westminster Hall, “at the earliest opportunity,

⁴⁷ [HC Deb 23 September 2020 c1076](#)

⁴⁸ On 2 June 2020, the House agreed various restrictions on attending the Chamber [[HC Deb 2 June 2020 cc725-760](#)]. The duration of the restrictions has been extended on a number of occasions, most recently on 25 March 2021 [[HC Deb 25 March 2021 cc1109-1170](#)]

⁴⁹ House of Commons, [Order Paper](#), 5 October 2020

⁵⁰ Procedure Committee, [Letter from the Leader of the House of Commons to the Chair of the Procedure Committee](#), 11 January 2021

⁵¹ [HC Deb 13 January 2021 c426](#)

⁵² [HC Deb 13 January 2021 c427](#)

subject to arrangements being COVID-secure and open to hybrid participation without qualifying criteria on Members for participation”.⁵³

At Business Questions on 11 February, the Leader had been pressed to resume sittings in Westminster Hall, on a hybrid basis. He told the House that “between four and 10 additional people will be required to come on to the estate on a daily basis with the reopening of a hybrid Westminster Hall. ... That may not be a very large number, but the advice from the Government is currently that people should not be coming in if they do not have to do so”.⁵⁴

Resumption of sittings with virtual participation (March-July 2021)

On 25 February 2021, the House agreed that from 8 March, until 30 March 2021, Westminster Hall debates would resume. But they would take place in a committee room in order to allow MPs to participate virtually. The Order of the House provided that if a public bill committee was expected to meet to take oral evidence, in the committee room designated for Westminster Hall proceedings, no sitting of Westminster Hall would take place.⁵⁵ Consequently, for example, there was no sitting of Westminster Hall on the morning of 15 June 2021, when the Public Bill Committee on the Compensation (London Capital & Finance plc and Fraud Compensation Fund) Bill 2021-22 heard oral evidence.⁵⁶

On 25 March 2021, the House agreed that the Resolution allowing Westminster Hall debates to resume with virtual participation should continue to have effect until 21 June 2021.⁵⁷

As restrictions remained in place, the Resolution allowing virtual participation in Westminster Hall was further extended to 22 July 2021, the day that the House rose for the Summer Recess.⁵⁸

Return to wholly in person proceedings

On 6 September 2021, when the House returned from the Summer Recess, sittings in Westminster Hall returned to the Grand Committee Room and MPs had to be present to participate in proceedings.

⁵³ Procedure Committee, [Letter from the Chairs of the Procedure, Petitions and Backbench Business Committees to the Leader of the House](#), 11 February 2021

⁵⁴ [HC Deb 11 February 2021 c490](#)

⁵⁵ [HC Deb 25 February 2021 c1203](#)

⁵⁶ [PBC Deb 15 June 2021 cc1-26](#)

⁵⁷ [HC Deb 25 March 2021 cc1109-1170](#)

⁵⁸ [HC Deb 6 June 2021 cc327-398](#)

6.1

Sitting times

Section 1.2 reported the normal sitting times for Westminster Hall. These were varied during the second resumption of sittings during the pandemic (that provided for virtual participation). Intervals between debates enabled the broadcasting team to ensure Members participating virtually were ready. They also permitted MPs appearing physically to leave and enter, maintaining social distancing; and permitted additional cleaning in the room. The table below reports the changes that were made to sitting times.

Table 1: Sitting times in Westminster Hall

	Usual timing of debates (1)	Timings during hybrid proceedings (2)
Monday	4.30-7.30pm	4.30-7.30pm (a)
Tuesday & Wednesday	9.30-11.00am	9.25-10.55am
	11.00-11.30am	11.00-11.30am
	2.30-4.00pm	2.30-4.00pm
	4.00-4.30pm	4.05-4.35pm
	4.30-5.30pm	4.50-5.50pm
Thursday	1.30-4.30pm	1.30-4.30pm (b)

(1) In person only – including sittings in Westminster Hall from 5 October 2020-13 January 2021

(2) Hybrid proceedings (8 March-22 July 2021)

(a) sitting ended at 7.45pm if two debates were scheduled, with a break between them from 6.00-6.15pm

(b) sitting ended at 4.45pm if two debates were scheduled, with a break between them from 3.00-3.15pm

6.2

Petitions

Standing Order No 10 provides that the Petitions Committee can schedule debates in Westminster Hall on Mondays.

Whilst sittings in Westminster Hall were suspended between March and October 2020, and between January and early March 2021, the Petitions Committee arranged a number of Committee meetings in which a Government minister and MPs who were not members of the Committee could discuss e-petitions. These meetings were hybrid or entirely virtual, allowing MPs to participate remotely or in person. They were all chaired by Catherine McKinnell. On the first such occasion, Catherine McKinnell described how they had come about:

Thank you all for joining us today. I am delighted to be chairing our first hybrid e-petition session, which we have scheduled to give Members across the House an opportunity to discuss the issues raised by the e-petitions relating to the easing of covid-19 restrictions.

Sessions like this would normally take place in Westminster Hall, but due to the ongoing suspension of sittings there we have been looking at alternative ways to consider the issues raised by petitions and present these to Government. Although we would still very much like the resumption of our regular debates in Westminster Hall, I am really pleased to be holding today's session in the way that we are. It means that Members, in particular, who are shielding or self-isolating and are therefore unable to take part in some of the proceedings in the main Chamber are able to participate today.

I am also really pleased that the SNP and official Opposition have fielded Front-Bench speakers and that we have a Minister attending the session, listening to the debate, who will respond to the issues that Members raise.⁵⁹

E-petitions on the following subjects were discussed at meetings held in Petition Committee sessions rather than in Westminster Hall:

- [The easing of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions](#) (15 July 2020, hybrid meeting);
- [Support for individuals and households during COVID-19](#) (17 September 2020, hybrid meeting);
- [Stamp Duty Land Tax relief during the COVID-19 outbreak](#) (1 February 2021, virtual meeting);
- [Arrangements for touring professionals and artists in the EU](#) (8 February 2021, virtual meetings);⁶⁰
- [The movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#) (22 February 2021, virtual meeting); and
- [TV Licensing](#) (1 March 2021, virtual meeting)

When hybrid sittings of Westminster Hall began on 8 March 2021, as it was a Monday, e-petitions were debated.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Petitions Committee, [Oral Evidence Session: The easing of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions](#), 15 July 2020, HC 623 2019-21, Q1; see also, Catherine McKinnell, "[How is the petitions Committee representing the public amid the procedural and practical restrictions of the Covid crisis?](#)", Hansard Society Blog, 27 August 2020

⁶⁰ The Petitions committee held an oral evidence session with industry representatives on [Arrangements for touring professionals and artists in the EU](#) on 4 February 2021


⁶¹ [HC Deb 8 March 2021 cc1WH-24WH](#) and [cc25WH-50WH](#)

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