



Early Day Motions

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Early Day Motion (EDM) is a term used for a motion submitted for a debate for which no date has been fixed. Very few EDMs actually get debated. Instead, EDMs exist to allow Members to draw attention to a topic or to express an opinion.

There have been criticisms of the costs associated with printing and distributing EDMs; and that the number of trivial EDMs detracts from those that are significant. The House has reduced the number of occasions on which EDMs are reprinted.

In 2013, the Procedure Committee considered whether there was a case to reform or abolish EDMs. It concluded that there should be no changes.

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Contents

1	Early Day Motions	2
2	Purpose of EDMs	3
3	Tabling an EDM	3
4	Printing and cost	4
5	Criticism of EDMs	6
6	2007 Procedure Committee Report	7
7	2013 Procedure Committee Report	8

1 Early Day Motions

Early Day Motions (EDMs) are formal motions submitted for a debate in the House of Commons at ‘an early day’, that is, an unspecified future day. No time is available for debating EDMs but identical motions are occasionally tabled for debate. Consequently, very few EDMs are debated.¹ In practice, EDMs are a tool for Members to express a view or draw attention to a particular issue, topic or event.

In a memorandum to the Procedure Committee in 2006, the then Clerk of the House, Dr Malcolm Jack, briefly commented on the origins of EDMs.

EDMs came about largely by chance. In the mid-19th century, backbench opportunities for debates on the Floor were much greater, and a Member would give written notice of a motion he proposed to move on a particular future day. Towards the end of the Session, when the programme was uncertain, it was more difficult to name a specific future day, and the practice of simply naming “an early day” began.²

An EDM will normally begin “That this House...”, and must conform to certain rules of order which govern all motions. These are described on pages 394 to 400 of Erskine May’s *Parliamentary Practice*, 24th edition. They can be summarised as follows:

- Matters *sub judice* may not be referred to;
- The conduct of members of the Royal Family, a Member of either House, a judge, or the Chair, must be the main purpose of an EDM, in a form which would allow a distinct decision of the House; criticism in passing, or by way of amendment, is not permitted;
- an EDM must be no longer than 250 words in length; an amendment must not be long enough to exceed this limit if made;
- an EDM should not contain un-parliamentary language;

¹ HC Deb 8 November 2010 c91W

² Procedure Committee, *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, 8 May 2007, HC 513 2006-07, Ev 30

- even though it may consist of a large number of clauses and semi-colons, an EDM must overall be a single sentence;
- an EDM's title must be a neutral description of the subject matter, which would thus still be an accurate title even if the motion were amended in a sense opposite to that of the original text;
- a registered interest must be declared by any Member sponsoring or supporting an EDM, and is indicated by [R] alongside the printed name.

2 Purpose of EDMs

In its 2007 report into Early Day Motions, the Procedure Committee identified a number of purposes for which an EDM might be used:

Most EDMs fall into one or more of the following categories:

- expressing opinions on issues of general public interest, often to assess the degree of support amongst Members;
- continuing the political debate (for example, criticism of Government or Opposition policy);
- giving prominence to a campaign or the work of some pressure group outside the House;
- highlighting local issues (such as the success of the local football team, the achievements of constituents, the need for a bypass, and so on).

EDMs are also used for narrower purposes:

- for “prayers” against statutory instruments, usually in the name of the Leader of the Opposition or the Leader of the Liberal Democrats, which act as a trigger for reference of an instrument for debate in a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation. Such motions normally account for 2% or less of EDMs in a session (0.9% and 1.3% in the last two sessions);
- to criticise individuals (members of the Royal Family, Members of either House, a judge, or the Chair) where such criticism in debate would be disorderly;
- and to set out detailed allegations against a company, other body or individual under the protection of parliamentary privilege.³

3 Tabling an EDM

Any Member may table an EDM, or an amendment to an EDM, on any day that the House is sitting, up to the rise of the House. In practice, though, EDMs are not usually tabled by Government ministers or Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPSs). To table an EDM, a Member must take the text of the motion to the Table Office, or send a signed version in the post, or have another Member do either of these on their behalf. EDMs cannot currently be tabled via fax, telephone, email or the e-tabling system.

Once checked and approved by the Table Office, each tabled EDM is given a consecutive number, beginning at one each session. Once an EDM has been tabled it remains current for

³ Ibid., pp21-22

the rest of the session and other Members can express their support for it by signing it, unless it has been withdrawn. At the end of each session all EDMs fall. Although they can be re-tabled in the next session, they do not carry forward any of the signatures which were added to it in the previous one.

A searchable database of EDMs tabled since the beginning of the 1989-90 Session is available on the parliamentary website: [Early Day Motions](#).

4 Printing and cost

Tabled EDMs, amendments to them, and any added names in support, are printed the following morning in the Vote Bundle on blue paper. The title and text is set out, along with the names of the top six sponsors. The first-named sponsor, who is normally the Member who brought the motion to the Table Office, is regarded as the Member in charge of the motion. They may choose which five other names should appear among the six sponsors at the head of the motion. Other supporters are then set out following the sponsors' names, normally in the order in which they are submitted. A running total of the number of signatures to date is also printed each time an EDM appears in the Notice Paper.

A description of the current printing arrangements surrounding EDMs is given in the printed list of EDMs:

After an Early Day Motion (EDM) has been printed for the first time, it is only reprinted when names are added or amendments tabled; only the first six names and any names added since the last printing are included. After the week in which a Motion is first printed and the following week, added names and amendments appear only in a separate paper, Mature EDMs, distributed the next Thursday.

The number of EDMs tabled has generally increased steadily since the 1950s. In the session 1959-60, for instance, 111 EDMs were tabled. This had risen to 2,574 tabled by the 1992-93 session. However, in recent sessions, the number of EDMs tabled has fallen slightly, perhaps reflecting the increased opportunities that Backbenchers have to raise issues through other avenues, such as the Backbench Business Committee. The graph below shows the number of EDMs tabled from 1939-40 to 2010-12. The following table reports the number tabled in each Session since the beginning of the 2005 Parliament.

EDMs per session, 1939-40 to 2010-12

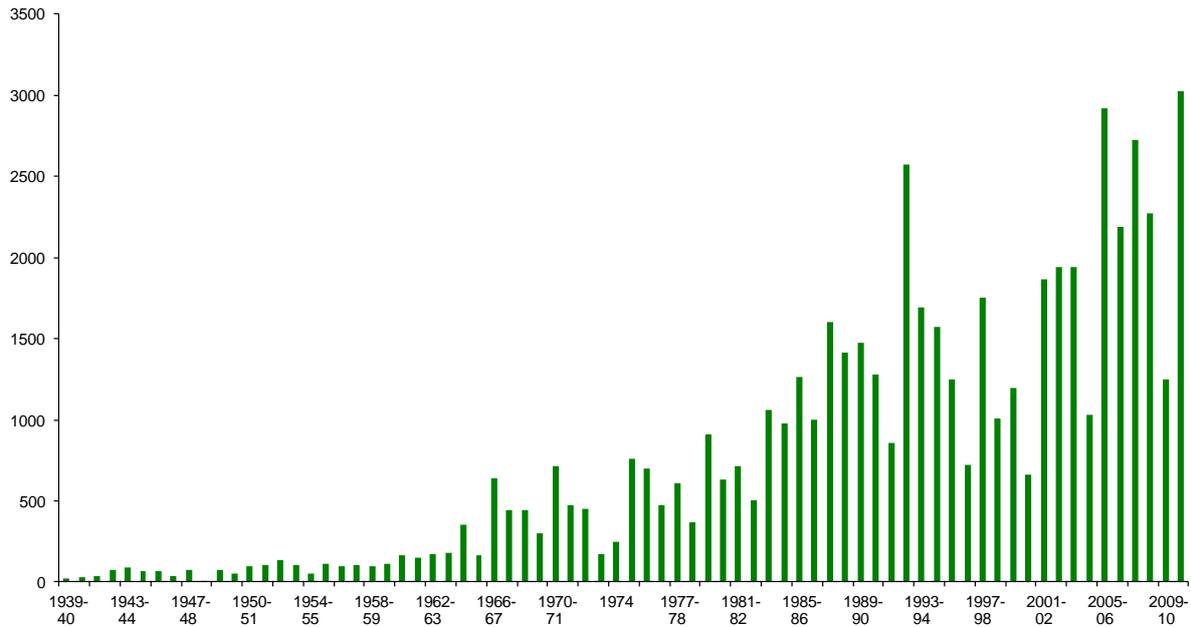


Table: Number of EDMs tabled 2005-06 to 2012-13

Session	Total number of Notices of Motions given for an Early Day	of which, Prayers for the annulment of Statutory Instruments
2005-06	2,924	48
2006-07	2,193	18
2007-08	2,560	28
2008-09	2,272	30
2009-10	1,248	15
2010-12	3,024	27
2012-13	1,312	13

Source: House of Commons, *Sessional Returns*

The cost of EDMs has similarly been reduced in recent years. In the financial year 2009-10, the cost of publishing an Early Day Motion, including printing, staff time and technical support, was given as being “approximately £1 million. Printing alone accounted for some £776,000”.⁴ However, from the start of the 2009 session, the practice of printing older EDMs on a weekly basis was stopped, saving 2.5 million sheets of paper and up to £300,000 in printing costs each year.⁵

The cost of tabling and printing an EDM was calculated by the Table Office for the financial year 2011-12. It reported the cost of tabling an Early Day Motion as approximately £360, including staff and printing costs.⁶

In February 2014, information on the costs of EDMs since 2010 was provided in response to a parliamentary question:

⁴ HC Deb 26 July 2010 c713

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ This figure was given in response to a Freedom of Information request.

Costs relating to early day motions are calculated in terms of financial years

£	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
Printing	431,000	354,000	374,500
IT support costs	169,000	12,000	3,500
Estimated staffing costs	² —	² —	33,000
Total	n/a	n/a	411,000

¹ £12,000 support contract, £57,000 technical support for database.

² Staff costs have previously been estimated at £78,000 in 2010-11 and £81,000 in 2011-12; however, a review of the methodology used to calculate staff costs suggests that they were significant over-estimates.

The cost of early day motions has fallen considerably since the House ceased printing early day motions which had appeared in print for a full sitting week. A saving of approximately £355,000 was realised between 2009-10 and 2010-11.

No costs are incurred in 'monitoring' early day motions, although a small cost will be incurred by the Department of Information Services, which adds subject tags to assist in finding early day motions online.

The IT support costs do not include the cost of developing a new back-office system for early day motions (around £50,000), which accounts for the reduction in support costs for 2012-13.⁷

5 Criticism of EDMs

Given the cost of tabling an EDM, their often trivial nature, and the fact that very few ever get debated in the House, EDMs are often criticised as being little more than “parliamentary graffiti”.⁸ Indeed, several MPs have recently expressed their unhappiness with the present system surrounding Early Day Motions.

In February 2012, Graham Evans MP secured an adjournment debate on the topic of Early Day Motions, during which he outlined some of his objections.

Nearly 3,000 early-day motions have so far been tabled in this Parliament. It is estimated that they cost the taxpayer around £1 million every year. Given that the spending review has looked carefully at every aspect of our public expenditure, it is only right that we take time to reflect on the cost-effectiveness and value of early-day motions. We should ask ourselves whether it is value for money to spend so much taxpayers' money on a mechanism that has no legislative effect and rarely has any influence whatever. We should consider whether a mechanism that does not ensure a parliamentary debate on a subject, no matter how many Members sign a motion, is an effective mechanism for Back Benchers to raise important issues.⁹

Another persistent argument against EDMs has been that they have been devalued by their sheer volume. In an oral evidence session before the Procedure Committee in 2007, Norman Baker MP noted that “there are too many and therefore the good ones, and the use to which

⁷ [HC Deb 3 February 2014 cc112W-113W](#)

⁸ Robert Rogers and Rhodri Walters, *How Parliament Works*, 6th edition, p301

⁹ [HC Deb 6 February 2012 c134](#)

EDMs can be put, become diluted by the ones which are chaff”.¹⁰ Similar criticisms were repeated by Graham Evans in 2012:

The truth is that early-day motions have been devalued by the sheer volume that have been tabled—nearly 3,000 were tabled during the last year. Early-day motions have been devalued by the utter ridiculousness of many of them. There are motions congratulating football teams on promotion; motions congratulating two celebrities on their engagement; motions arguing about the origins of Robin Hood; motions suggesting a common hash tag to be used by MPs on Twitter; motions praising Ann Widdecombe’s dancing ability; and even a motion expressing support for an asteroid wiping out the entire human race.¹¹

Other criticisms have been expressed before the Procedure Committee more recently. In April 2013, Dr Sarah Wollaston MP told the Committee that:

My concern is that they give our constituents a false impression that action is being taken...I also have concerns about the fact that it is clear that some of these EDMs could not have been written by the Member who tabled them. Many of them are very obviously written by lobbyists.¹²

However, some MPs and senior House staff have defended the use of EDMs. Robert Halfon MP has argued that:

EDMs are incredibly important for two reasons. Firstly, the organisations outside that look at them regard them with some importance as a reflection of the strength of opinion. Secondly, they are very, very useful ways of raising parliamentary issues.¹³

In 2007, the then Clerk of the House, Dr Malcolm Jack, also noted that “There are no proceedings which give the width that early day motions give...they do not have to link to ministerial responsibility, and that is a great freedom”.¹⁴

6 2007 Procedure Committee Report

In May 2007, the Procedure Committee published their report, *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*.¹⁵ This report noted that EDMs are “frequently criticised, but they remain popular with Members and with the public”.¹⁶ During their inquiry the Committee therefore looked at possible improvements to the EDM system, including:

- whether the House should take steps to limit the number of EDMs a Member could sign or the subject matter they covered
- whether a procedure should be introduced to allow some EDMs to be debated
- whether arrangements surrounding their printing needed to be changed

Despite hearing a number of criticisms against EDMs, the Procedure Committee still concluded that they remained “an effective way of connecting with the public”.¹⁷ It also

¹⁰ Procedure Committee, *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, 8 May 2007, HC 513, Ev 24

¹¹ HC Debate,

¹² Procedure Committee, *Early Day Motions*, 4 July 2013, HC 189, Ev 2

¹³ *Ibid.*, Ev 8

¹⁴ Procedure Committee, *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, 8 May 2007, HC 513, Ev 40

¹⁵ Procedure Committee, *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, 8 May 2007, HC 513

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p3

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p22

decided that any attempt to restrict the number of EDMs, including a possible limit of five per Member, would be ‘misguided’, as well as placing “an unacceptable restriction on the action of individual Members”.¹⁸

As part of its inquiry, the Procedure Committee had also sent out questionnaires to Members asking for their views on the procedures for EDMs. 44% of the respondents supported the proposition that it should be possible for some EDMs to be debated.¹⁹ Although the Committee considered a number of options of how this might be done, none of these were considered advantageous. Instead, the Committee made a more general recommendation that the Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons “give serious consideration to the reintroduction of an opportunity for Private Members to have substantive motions debated, and, if necessary, voted on”.²⁰

The Procedure Committee also examined issues surrounding the printing of EDMs, noting that “The rules governing the publishing of EDMs...are now some twenty years old”. Significantly, their report also highlighted that

Under the House’s contract with TSO, printing costs are calculated on the basis of the number of pages printed. Reducing the number of copies distributed would therefore not have any significant effect on the total cost to the House. If the costs are to be reduced, it can only be by printing less or by printing less frequently, or both.²¹

However, after reviewing several options, including only printing the text of an EDM once, the Committee took the view that:

The present printing arrangements for EDMs should remain. As long as the House takes the view that all formal notices must appear in print in the House’s official papers, added names to existing EDMs will need to be printed...[and] we do not support the proposal that the text of an EDM need not be reprinted.²²

Finally, the Committee also considered the possibility of tabling EDMs via the e-tabling system. Three quarters of the respondents to the Committee’s questionnaire supported the idea of being able to table and add names to EDMs electronically. Despite this, the Committee was concerned about issues of security, and therefore concluded that

Unless significantly stronger authentication than is currently required for parliamentary questions can be guaranteed, we cannot yet recommend the introduction of e-tabling for EDMs.²³

7 2013 Procedure Committee Report

In 2013, the Procedure Committee returned to look at EDMs, following a request from Graham Evans MP. The Committee considered whether there was a case to “reform or even abolish EDMs”.²⁴ Their report, *Early Day Motions*, was published on 4 July 2013.

The Committee heard evidence from a number of Members who refused to sign EDMs and from those who were prolific signers.²⁵ Although the Committee agreed that EDMs had been

¹⁸ Ibid., p24

¹⁹ Ibid., p27

²⁰ Ibid., p29

²¹ Ibid., pp30-31

²² Ibid., p31

²³ Ibid., p.32

²⁴ Procedure Committee, *Early Day Motions*, 4 July 2013, HC 189,p5

devalued by both the volume tabled and the utter 'ridiculousness' of some, they still concluded that:

EDMs are...a valuable tool for the Members who use them. During the last session there were 1312 EDMS, attracting 32,722 signatures, an indication of their continued popularity.²⁶

The Committee's report did acknowledge that the Backbench Business Committee "has provided a further avenue for Members to raise issues within Parliament". However, it also agreed with the assessment of David Crausby MP, who noted that, while the Backbench Business Committee offers quality, it "couldn't possibly deliver the quantity of opportunity that the Early Day Motion delivers".²⁷

The possibility of allowing Members to table EDMs electronically was also considered again by the Committee. Like its predecessor, however, the Committee remained unconvinced that there were sufficient safeguards surrounding secure authentication. Instead, it recommended that:

the Parliamentary ICT Service conduct further work with the Table Office to produce a full feasibility study on the electronic signing of EDMs.²⁸

Overall, the Committee concluded that there should be "no change to the system of Early Day Motions".²⁹

²⁵ Ibid., p5.

²⁶ Ibid., p6

²⁷ Ibid., p6

²⁸ Ibid., p8

²⁹ Ibid., p8