



Centenary Action response to the Modernisation Committee inquiry into Access to the House of Commons and its Procedures

[Centenary Action](#) was founded in 2018 by Professor Helen Pankhurst CBE to build on the legacy of the suffrage movement and campaign for a gender-equal Parliament by 2028, the centenary of equal franchise. We are a leading voice for women's political representation, bringing together over 100 activists, politicians, and academics to drive change.

Our mission is to dismantle the barriers women face in politics, including the specific barriers faced by disabled women. Our submission to this inquiry aims to help create a more inclusive and accessible parliamentary environment for all.

This submission draws on feedback from people working in the House of Commons and those attending as visitors, as well as input from our [academic advisory group](#) and partners including [Disability Rights UK](#), [Elect Her](#) and [The Disability Policy Centre](#). It is informed by leading research on political accessibility and representation, including publications by [Professor Elizabeth Evans](#) and [Dr Stefanie Reher](#), [Professor Sarah Childs](#), [Dr Minna Cowper-Coles](#), [Dr Ekaterina Kolpinskaya](#), and Centenary Action's own reports.

What feasible adjustments (deliverable in the short to medium term ahead of Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster) to the current physical estate would make Parliament more accessible to MPs, staff and visitors with disabilities.

Recommendations:

- Use readily available technology to add real-time subtitles to live Parliament broadcasts in the public gallery to improve accessibility for visitors who are deaf or have hearing loss. The current reliance on BBC Parliament subtitles is inadequate, as they are not synchronised with live proceedings.
- Review speaker placement in the public gallery benches. The current positioning in the back of the benches causes issues for loop system users, who hear audio twice, and makes it hard for those using text transcript apps to follow the debate while capturing audio.
- Improve door accessibility across the estate, as many are heavy and difficult for disabled MPs, staff, and visitors to use:

- Explore solutions such as discreet automatic opening systems or faster manual response mechanisms for doors around the Chamber. Currently security closures can cause delays during divisions due to slow door response.
 - At a minimum, toilet doors should be lightweight and offer little to no resistance when opened. They should be fitted with RADAR-style handles and locks, designed for ease of use by people with limited strength or dexterity. Push-button opening automatic doors would be ideal.
 - Improve corridor and hallway door accessibility, as many are narrow and heavy, posing challenges for wheelchair users and others with mobility impairments, especially where two doors must be opened at once. Install door-assist mechanisms or station stewards during busy times.
- Improve the lighting and visual contrast across the estate to aid navigation for those with visual impairments and reduce the risk of trips or falls. This would also support the safety and confidence of disabled and non-disabled women, especially after hours, by reducing feelings of vulnerability in poorly lit areas.
 - Explore whether Tactile Ground Surface Indicators could be installed around the estate to provide warnings of upcoming hazards, such as stairs or level changes, to improve navigation and safety for blind or visually impaired individuals.
 - Improve signage to clearly indicate accessible routes and key facilities, such as step-free exits, toilets including accessible toilets, baby changing facilities and lifts, ensuring disabled people can navigate the estate independently. Ensure proper signposting of fire evacuation procedures and refuge areas. Maps and guides should be easily available both digitally and in hard copy.
 - Improve the uneven pavement surfaces around Speaker's House to make it more accessible for individuals with mobility impairments, particularly those using crutches or other walking aids.
 - Ensure adequate seating at events to better accommodate individuals who cannot stand for extended periods. Consider the needs of wheelchair users when planning seating arrangements so they can engage comfortably at eye level. Ensure regular rest places across the estate.
 - Ensure there are adequate toilet facilities and baby changing facilities that are easily accessible and within walking distance of the main areas.
 - Conduct a comprehensive accessibility review of the [Chamber](#), with expert input, to better accommodate disabled MPs. Currently, the Chamber can only accommodate one wheelchair user, removing or adjusting benches could create space for more.

The layout of the clerks' seating in front of the Speaker's Chair should also be reviewed to ensure it is accessible to wheelchair users.

The physical Parliamentary estate can also be made more accessible for visitors by:

- Ensuring that trained assistance staff are readily available across the estate, with a clearly signposted accessibility support point at entrances to provide quicker assistance for disabled visitors.
- Guaranteeing the availability and timely provision of mobility equipment so that visitors are able to reserve and reliably access wheelchairs or other mobility devices.
- Clearly communicating any access and exit changes to disabled visitors on arrival. Disabled people often need to plan their journeys in detail and unexpected changes to which exits or routes are available can cause significant difficulties.
- Allowing wheelchair-accessible taxis onto the Parliamentary estate to offer safer, easier departures for disabled attendees after events.
- Improving security checks to ensure they take account of disabled people's needs. For example, ensuring there are clear guidelines for how to search people with conditions that find touching uncomfortable.
- Improving the process for disabled visitors attending debates on the Westminster Parliamentary Estate by having a direct, accessible route for requesting reasonable adjustments, independent of MP approval.
- Introducing the [Sunflower lanyard scheme](#) for politicians and staff to voluntarily share that they have an invisible disability and support accessibility for visitors coming into Parliament.

We also recommend a formal, independent [accessibility audit](#) reporting to the Speaker and Leader of the House, modelled on the [Scottish Parliament's approach](#). MPs should also be [surveyed](#) on how well facilities meet disability and health needs, with action taken on the findings.

How should the House of Commons collect and share information about the reasonable adjustments individual MPs require, to better support access to all services?

The House of Commons should establish a clear, confidential and well communicated process for MPs to request reasonable adjustments, while also moving towards a more [systematic and proactive approach to accessibility](#). This process should be regularly promoted to ensure awareness and uptake, recognising that access needs can change over

time.

To protect privacy while identifying systemic barriers, anonymised data on adjustments should be compiled into regular reports to help identify common access issues and inform service improvements.

The Commons should also cultivate an internal culture where requesting adjustments is understood as routine and responsible. Internal communications should reinforce that adjustments are a normal aspect of inclusive practice and senior figures should visibly support this message.

Efforts should also be made to raise public awareness and challenge misconceptions. Too often, MPs with disabilities feel pressure to reassure the public of their ability to '[carry on as normal](#)', which can discourage disclosure and limit access to support.

Recommendations:

- Establish a clear, confidential process for MPs to request reasonable adjustments supported by an accessible digital platform.
- Establish a [single](#) record for each MP to streamline support and reduce the need for repeated requests.
- Promote the process regularly, emphasising that access needs may change over time.
- Foster a workplace culture where requesting adjustments is seen as routine and responsible.
- Collect and publish anonymised data on adjustments in regular reports to identify trends and inform improvements.

What aspects of House of Commons procedure and practice pose a barrier to MPs with disabilities?

We are particularly focused on the intersecting barriers faced by disabled women, who experience both the structural inequalities encountered by women, and the accessibility challenges faced by disabled people. Below we outline some of the key barriers and in the following section set out recommendations.

- [Rigid schedules, late-night votes, long debates, and unpredictable timetables](#) can be particularly challenging for those with energy-limiting conditions or support

requirements.

- [The scheduling of votes](#) late into the evening and throughout the night poses significant challenges for some disabled people, particularly those with energy limiting conditions, and for people with chronic illnesses.
- Long hours and unpredictability can be especially challenging for disabled MPs, particularly those managing health conditions. [Extended time in the Chamber](#) without knowing when they'll speak makes it difficult to plan meals, rest, breaks, or medication.
- A culture of [presenteeism and resistance to remote participation](#) creates barriers for disabled Members, especially for women, who often also have caring responsibilities. The rapid withdrawal of hybrid measures after the pandemic demonstrated a tendency to [prioritise tradition over the needs of disabled politicians](#).
- [The informal institutional norms and traditional practices in Parliament](#) often assume that all political candidates and representatives will be non-disabled and able to adapt themselves to the existing political culture. This expectation places the [burden of adaptation on individuals](#), rather than addressing the inaccessibility of the system itself. Examples include:
 - The traditional [practice](#) of MPs 'bobbing' to catch the Speaker's eye and waiting to be called to speak, as well as in some instances being [unable to leave the Chamber](#). This is especially challenging for those who cannot easily stand up or remain seated for long periods or go without food or drink. Furthermore, this practice fails to account for essential (female) bodily functions.
 - The standing order requiring MPs to reserve a seat at prayers early in the day may [disadvantage](#) MPs with disabilities, health conditions, or caring responsibilities, as it assumes all MPs can be present at the start of the day.
- Being unable to access materials in accessible formats can be a significant barrier for disabled MPs. One MP interviewed by [Evans and Reher](#) described this as the "biggest challenge" of their political career.
- Fear of stigma can discourage disabled politicians from disclosing their conditions or requesting adjustments. When they do disclose, it's often to [reassure the public](#) that their performance won't be affected.

While we've highlighted some key barriers, disabled MPs are a diverse group and may face additional challenges specific to their condition that also require attention.

What steps are already in place to address them and what more could be done?

Our recommendations, based on [research](#) and international best practice, aim to address the barriers identified above and make the House of Commons more accessible for all.

Hybrid Working

Hybrid options increase flexibility for MPs managing mobility, health, or energy-related challenges. The [temporary hybrid measures](#) introduced during the pandemic were effective, yet most were withdrawn. Lessons could be learned from international best practice, including in the Senedd, Scottish Parliament, and the Lords.

While the Procedure Committee's inquiry into [electronic voting](#) is a welcome step other hybrid measures should also be considered.

Recommendations:

- [Review](#) online measures introduced during Covid-19 to identify which should be reintroduced to increase accessibility.
- Adopt an '[online-first](#)' principle for routine parliamentary tasks, so that, where possible, everyday practices are carried out online. MPs should be able to choose between in-person or remote participation where it does not affect Commons effectiveness.
- [Trial virtual participation](#) in Chamber debates, drawing on international best practice (allowing for intervention for example).
- Allow Select Committee members to participate [remotely](#), and permit fully virtual meetings. The technology to support this was proven to work during the successful use of hybrid proceedings during 2020.
- [Collect and analyse data](#) in relation to hybrid ways of working affect the participation of disabled and underrepresented MPs.

In a [modern and inclusive House of Commons](#), virtual participation should be recognised as a legitimate and routine way of working, particularly for disabled MPs who may need flexibility due to health, access, or energy-related reasons. Where there is no clear detriment to parliamentary effectiveness, Members should be free to choose how they participate, ensuring all MPs can do their jobs without unnecessary barriers.

Increase predictability of work schedules

MPs managing health conditions or living with energy-limiting conditions would benefit from increased predictability in parliamentary proceedings. The Procedure Committee's inquiry into the introduction of [call lists](#) is welcome and would enable Members to [plan around their medical needs](#). Wider measures should also be considered.

Recommendations:

- Trial a '[Division Time](#)' so multiple votes can be taken simultaneously and schedule it within standard business hours. This would provide MPs with greater certainty and avoid late, unpredictable divisions.
- [Undertake a review of sitting hours](#), including mechanisms to facilitate greater predictability. Consider introducing '[core hours](#)' in the middle of the day or trialling sittings of the House based around '[normal business hours](#)'.
- Introduce [greater predictability](#) in the scheduling of House Business so that MPs know whipping requirements and the timetable of the business of the House further in advance.

Review House rules and structures

Parliamentary rules, structures, and practices can reinforce an outdated ideal of what an MP should be, often excluding those with disabilities, caring responsibilities, or other support needs.

Recommendations:

- Conduct a [comprehensive review of parliamentary customs](#) and everyday practices to identify and remove barriers to disabled people's participation. This should focus on updating exclusionary language and practices, ensuring all rules and structures are inclusive and diversity-sensitive. Solutions could include:
 - Introducing a system to enable [disabled Members to reserve seating](#) (e.g. hearing impaired MPs who need to lip read, or Members who need to be located closer to the exit).
 - Allowing the use of [laptops in the Chamber](#) on an individual basis so assistive technologies (e.g. subtitles, immersive readers, and accessible digital documents) can be used.
 - Introducing mandatory disability confidence training for all staff.
- Ensure all materials are published in accessible formats and The House of Commons website has accessible versions available for all content (e.g. Easy Read formats on Committee Inquiry submission pages).

The restoration and renewal programme

The [Restoration and Renewal](#) (R&R) of the Palace of Westminster is a key chance to improve accessibility and ensure physical changes support inclusive working practices.

Recommendations:

- Establish an independent advisory panel of experts in disability and gender sensitive parliaments.
- Conduct annual audits on the R&R programmes's accessibility impact.
- Use the R&R programme as a testing ground for piloting innovative inclusion and accessibility solutions.
- Embed facilities to support hybrid and online participation (e.g. video conferencing infrastructure, and electronic voting systems) into the physical design and IT infrastructure.
- Explore transformative accessibility improvements. For example, the introduction of electronic voting would mean division lobbies were no longer needed, creating [space to expand the Chamber](#). This could enable every MP to have a seat and create space for multiple wheelchair users.

Other Recommendations:

- Establish a programme for [disabled interns](#) to gain experience of working in Parliament, such as the programme currently being piloted by [Impatience Wellbeing](#).
- Establish a [cross-party forum for Members](#) who are disabled, or who have a health condition, to have a formal role in the development of disability-inclusive practices. A [Member-specific peer network](#) would also provide a space for mentoring and mutual support, particularly for mental health.
- Commission a study to explore the feasibility of [job sharing](#) for Parliamentary seats to broaden access to the role of MP.
- Establish a formal process for [collecting and publishing data](#) on the number of disabled MPs to track representation and monitor changes over time. Other protected characteristics, such as sex, should also be monitored.