Summary:

- The House of Lords Committees’ work should complement the Commons Committees, rather than duplicate, namely by developing more in-depth inquiries and taking the long view on issues;
- Effective parliamentary public engagement needs to reach a diverse public, be issue-based, to listen rather than just broadcast, include feedback channels, be integrated with parliamentary business and be monitored;
- There is no one size fits all form of effective public engagement; this should vary according to the purpose of the activity, its relevant audience and topic;
- *Mini-Publics* could be an effective method to support a national conversation on specific topics;
- The use of social media by Lords Committees is very uneven and could be more coherent;
- The current web forum tool used in Parliament is very out-dated. This could be enhanced very considerably to become more user-friendly;
- Digital engagement is not necessarily always the best way to develop public engagement;
- Effective parliamentary public engagement requires expertise, staffing and resources.

1. I’m submitting this evidence as Professor of Politics, whose research centres on the relationship between Parliaments and citizens. This has recently led me to focus in particular on parliamentary public engagement, particularly in the UK. I am also a member and Deputy Chair of the Study of Parliament Group and I was one of the Commissioners in the Digital Democracy Commission. My submission addresses the section on Engagement with the Public, i.e. questions 11 to 14.

2. Before I outline the elements that make for effective parliamentary public engagement, I would like to identify how I see the role of the House of Lords’ Committee work. In line with the Lords’ overall role, its committees’ work should complement that of the Commons’ rather than duplicate it. One of the Lords’ strengths is the way in which it complements the Commons, bringing in a space for expertise, reflection and careful consideration, away from the fast pace of party politics and the demands of constituency work. The Lords' committee work should reflect this. It should therefore facilitate deeper scrutiny and adopt the long view on issues. This may lead to different types of inquiries, which are able to spend more time to consider issues at stake and which may be able to consult more widely, than the Commons’ committees would be able to.

3. In terms of how the Lords can engage with the public more effectively, it is important to highlight the following overall traits which make public engagement effective: it needs to reach a diverse public, it needs to be
issue-based rather than procedural, it needs to listen rather than just broadcast, it needs to include feedback channels; it needs to be integrated with parliamentary business rather than exist in parallel; it needs to be monitored and evaluated. I explain each of these in turn in the subsequent paragraphs.

4. **Reach**: research shows that those engaging with Parliament tend to come from a narrow group of people, namely white, well educated, middle/upper class. To reach a more diverse group of people, Parliament needs to actively pursue this goal, it will not happen naturally. Within the issue of diversity, there is also the matter of relevance. Not all issues will be relevant to everyone, but it is important within each issue to have an understanding of who the different affected publics may be and then actively seek to engage with those.

5. **Issue-based**: as I explained in my evidence to the Citizenship and Civic Engagement Committee, the vast majority of the population doesn’t wake up in the morning with a burning desire to engage; most of the public engages when they care about an issue. Effective engagement processes are therefore planned and implemented around issues, rather than around parliamentary processes.

6. **Listening**: most public engagement being developed by representative institutions has followed a broadcasting format, i.e., disseminating their activity and that of their members. Whilst disseminating information about what Parliament does is not to be disregarded, particularly in the case of an institution such as the House of Lords where there is so much misunderstanding about its role, the more important (and more difficult to do effectively) element is listening to the public. This requires the use of a multitude of approaches and channels, according to the issues at stake, the purpose of the engagement and the target audiences. In some cases this may take the form of a Twitter hashtag inviting for comments from the public or an online web forum; in many cases it may be most appropriate to have small face-to-face meetings with members of the public, when they feel at ease to convey their experiences. Fine tuning a multiplicity of methods that enable listening to the public should be part of developing effective public engagement.

7. **Feedback**: this is an element that parliaments tend to forget about, to communicate how public engagement may have been used as part of a parliamentary activity. There is a well-established process whereby those formally submitting oral and written evidence to committee inquiries then receive a notification of the report being published, where one can check if their evidence was cited or not. But feedback mechanisms beyond report publication (formal evidence) are still poor. Research consistently shows that the public feels the need to know whether their input was of any use; this is not necessarily about whether they achieved what they were after, but more about whether someone actually read/listened to what they had to say and considered their view. Research that I developed with Louise Thompson (Surrey University) on an online consultation on a bill in the House of Commons showed that participants felt their input had been pointless and
they were unaware of how their comments had been used by officials and MPs.¹

8. **Integration with parliamentary business**: my research has also shown that whilst parliamentary public engagement has developed considerably since the turn of this century, this has mainly been as an activity parallel to parliamentary business. One of its main challenges now is to integrate it better with ongoing parliamentary business. Parliamentary public engagement is often seen as an activity to make the public aware of the matters being discussed in parliament (with the expectation that if the public realises the institution is relevant to them, they are more likely to understand and appreciate it). However, Parliament also needs to better integrate the public’s voice into its actual work. This requires a re-thinking of parliamentary procedures to ensure there is an opportunity for inputs from a public engagement activity to be considered by parliamentarians (as well as a willingness from Members to utilise the public’s input). It also requires more staff and/or better tools to systematise views expressed through a public engagement activity. It is wiser to do fewer public engagement activities, but better, than ignore the potential for integration with parliamentary business.

9. **Monitoring**: whilst we have seen a plethora of public engagement initiatives being developed within the UK Parliament, some of these by Committees in the Lords, the monitoring element is still relatively under-developed. This is in great part due to time constraints, but monitoring is a key element of developing effective public engagement: only by knowing (1) which activities have been developed, (2) who has participated (as much as possible) and (3) with what effects, can the institution have confidence in the way it develops further public engagement. Monitoring should be based on embedded institutional processes that collate information about the activities being developed, as well as include evaluation mechanisms (public intake, public evaluation, relevance and use to parliamentary business).

10. **The Lords’ Committees have already developed some good practice in public engagement, but this can be developed further** namely in terms of increasing visits/fact finding sessions away from Westminster, diversifying its public engagement methods and sharpening its online engagement practice and tools. Increasing visits outside Westminster is particularly important to diversify the public it engages with, as is the diversification of public engagement methods. I could say far more about these, but will focus on two specific issues that are raised in the call for evidence: how can the Lords’ Committees encourage a national conversation about issues and how could digital tools be better used for engagement.

11. As stated above, Lords’ Committees should complement the Commons’ rather than duplicate. This gives the Lords an opportunity to consider issues in more depth and to consult more widely. One tool which could enable this, but which requires time to be done effectively, is the Mini Public (also known as

¹ C. Leston-Bandeira, L. Thompson and W. Mace (2016), *Letting the Public in on the Act*, report, project funded by British Academy/Leverhulme Trust (Ref: SG141934); also published as a journal article: ‘Integrating the view of the public into the formal legislative process: public reading stage in the UK House of Commons’, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 23 (4), 2017; and as a summary blog post: “Engaging the public with the scrutiny of legislation requires more than just asking for their views”, LSE Blog, February 2018.
mini assemblies). Mini publics are temporary bodies constituted of representative samples of the public (with about 50 to 100 members) brought together to consider and deliberate over an issue. Whilst there are now many examples of these,² demonstrating the value of consulting the public with time to deliberate on the issues at stake, there has only been a fledgling integration of this method with parliamentary processes. The 2012-2014 Irish Constitutional Convention³ is a good example of the use of this method with parliamentary integration. More recently, one of the recommendations issued by the Scottish Parliament’s Parliamentary Reform Commission supports the use of mini-publics as a public engagement method.⁴ Mini-publics are not suitable for every inquiry or engagement purpose, but they can be very effective methods for specific instances, helping to engage, consult and build legitimacy in the wider decision-making process. They would be particularly suitable to support a national conversation.

12. In terms of digital tools, the House of Lords has some good practice, such as the page that summarises Peers’ social media activity (The Lords Digital Chamber) and some of its YouTube portfolio, but could develop this far more, particularly at the level of Committees.

13. Although five Committees have a Twitter account and other have a dedicated hashtag, the use of this tool is very uneven in both its volume and quality. For instance, whilst the EU Committee has a regular presence on Twitter and makes an effective use, for instance, of short videos and infographics, this is not representative of the Lords Committees’ wider presence on social media. This could be enhanced by a more coherent presence across all committees. Likewise, the principles listed above for effective engagement could be better integrated in this use. The use of social media by the Commons’ Committees has developed considerably recently and constitute good examples from which the Lords Committees could draw. In terms of other upper chambers, the French Senate is a good example of a relatively effective use of social media. However, social media is only one part of digital engagement and can be of little use for some policy areas and audiences. It also requires appropriate resourcing to be done well.

14. Digital engagement can also include other tools, such as the web forum currently used by Committees in the UK Parliament to collate views from the public. Albeit a way of collating evidence from the public, this tool is now considerably outdated and needs to be far more user-friendly, as I have explained in more detail in a report to the Commons’ Petitions Committee during my Knowledge Exchange Fellowship there in 2016/17. This can be developed in many ways, but the Brazilian e-Cidadania (e-Citizenship) may be a good example of a digital platform to collate views from the public by an upper chamber. Other legislatures, such as the Welsh Assembly, have used external online platforms to host online deliberative discussions, such as Loomio.

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² See, for example, K. Grönlund, A. Bächtiger and M. Setälä (eds) (2014) Deliberative Mini-Public, ECPR Press.
³ See https://www.constitution.ie/
15. **The use of digital tools can enhance engagement significantly, but it also raises specific problems, namely its reach and the interpretation of its outputs.** Whilst a digitally based tool can be an effective way to reach a wider audience (beyond location limitations and the usual suspects), it does not naturally reach a representative audience; this needs to be actively pursued. Utilising web based discussion tools hosted by external organisations is one way to address this problem, by going where the relevant public is present digitally. The interpretation of outputs is a more technically challenging problem. Parliament is becoming better at consulting a wider public digitally, but often it is then difficult to use that evidence, due to its volume, difficulty in summarising key points and/or its timing in relation to parliamentary business. Some of this can be addressed by a better understanding of the potential of technical tools to automatically interpret and aggregate digital data. The Parliamentary Digital Service has developed considerably recently and a better integration of the expertise of its technical staff with those services supporting committees and engagement, could help address some of these challenges.

16. This however should not underestimate the value of smaller events or of face-to-face engagement events. Diversifying methods of engagement and considering in each instance the audiences and purpose of engagement should determine more specifically the shape of each activity. There is also another side of public engagement, which is the one of informing and educating the public about the committees’ role. Whilst the Lords have developed interesting initiatives such as the Peers in Schools programme, or its series of short informative videos, this can be developed much further and particularly in relation to the role performed by Committees. Working more with **schools** (beyond those specifically doing A-level Politics) and **small charities** (which often lack the expertise or staffing to establish relationships with Parliament), can be very effective ways to better disseminate the work of the Lords’ Committees.

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