1. This submission seeks to broadly address the issue of engagement with the public, and question 11 in particular:

*How can Lords committees engage more effectively with the public and media to encourage a national conversation?*

**Background**

2. I am currently a House of Commons Academic Fellow, undertaking research into Parliament’s engagement with the public and the extent to which this is underpinned by a procedural justice framework – essentially a fair process. This work has developed from my research into petitions systems in the UK (Bochel, 2016), which illustrates that procedural justice, defined as ‘the fairness of the process by which decisions are made, and the role participants may have in this’ (Bochel, 2016, p. 371), potentially provides a useful tool from which representative political institutions who wish to engage with the public can learn. Given that the vast majority of people who engage with Parliament are unlikely to get what they ask for, it is important that when they come into contact with Parliament their treatment and experience of the process of engagement is as positive as possible, reinforcing the view that ‘the political process may be as important as policy outcomes’ (Fox, 2009, p. 682). The first stage of the research involved looking at the nature and extent of Parliament’s engagement with the public, and is intended to be published as a House of Commons Library Briefing. The second stage is focusing on a number of forms of engagement, one of which is select committees.

**Findings**

3. The initial findings of the second stage seek to set out where elements of select committee work are underpinned by a procedural justice framework, and identify areas where this might be improved, in order to help devise ‘good processes’ for select committee engagement with the public. It is, of course, important to recognise that committees work differently and mechanisms that suit one committee, or even one inquiry, may not be appropriate for another. The findings illustrate important considerations: the degree of voice and participation that are enabled by select committee engagement; the extent to which the public have input into the decision-making process; the nature of the decision-making process – is the process consistent, is it impartial?; and the transparency of each element of the process.

4. There are, perhaps, three broad stages around select committees’ engagement with the public. These might be viewed as pre-engagement, engagement and post-engagement.
4.1 Pre-engagement - good processes might consider questions such as:

Which groups does the committee wish to engage with and why? What might be the most appropriate mechanism or mechanisms to do this?

Is it clear to the public why they are being asked to engage with a select committee? What can they get out of engaging with select committees? Are the limits to their influence made clear?

Is any information provided to the public on how they might engage with select committees?

How will the evidence collected be used?

What feedback will be provided to the public and what form will it take? If a committee considers such questions at the beginning of an inquiry, then there may be more potential for the public’s engagement be underpinned by elements of procedural justice.

4.2 Engagement

Committees engage with the public in a wide range of often innovative ways, including visits outside Westminster, informal meetings in Westminster, Twitter Q&As, seeking the views of the public on future programmes of work via written submissions and videos tweeted to a committee hashtag, using Easy Read calls for evidence, asking for suggestions for questions to put to Ministers via Twitter, and working with partner organisations such as thestudentroom.co.uk and moneysavingexpert.com. Different methods may help to encourage different groups to participate and can help to make the process more open and accessible, but consideration clearly needs to be given to what is appropriate for each inquiry. Some may also give participants the opportunity for additional voice and participation, for example, if they can be involved in some sort of dialogue with the committee. These can reflect elements of a fair process.

However, what happens to the evidence once it has been collected is also important from a procedural justice perspective. There are clear processes for formal written and oral evidence. It is possible to see from written submissions and the inquiry report where the evidence of an individual has fed into an inquiry, to what extent it has been listened to and whether it has helped to contribute to the inquiry recommendations. The processes for recognising informal evidence may be less clear. This raises questions, such as how informal evidence is incorporated into committees’ deliberations and into the final report? Notes taken at informal sessions may guide committees’ decisions. The clerks read the evidence and put it before the committee. It may contribute to committees’ thinking in forming their recommendations. But the processes by which this happens appear to be more ad hoc and are not necessarily transparent.

4.3 Post-engagement

As noted above, where committees do engage with the public, it is important that they have considered what feedback is appropriate and what form might this take. This might entail a link to a traditional report, or perhaps to a more
interactive report. It is important that the public can see how and to what extent their input has influenced a committee and its report.

Select committees should also evaluate the public’s experiences of engagement, not only in terms of the numbers who engage, but also the quality of the processes and their perceptions of the activity. The results of such evaluations can then be fed back to inform future development.

Conclusions

5. ‘Good processes’ for select committee engagement with the public are likely to be circular in nature. There will be a number of pre-engagement considerations including committees setting out why they wish to engage with the public, and in particular why they wish to engage with specific groups or the public as a whole, and identifying the appropriate mechanisms to achieve their aims.

Select committees currently engage with the public in a wide variety of innovative ways and some aspects of their work can be seen to be underpinned by elements of a fair process. One area that would benefit from further consideration is around the processes for demonstrating how informal evidence has been used, so that those who have contributed informal evidence can see to what extent this has been incorporated committees’ deliberations and into the final report.

It is important that all committee processes for engaging with the public should be transparent, consistent and fair, and they should, for example, include what involvement might consist of, the limits of any influence, and the feedback that they will receive.

References


18 March 2018