



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chi Onwurah MP
House of Commons
London, SW1A 0AA

3 April 2020

Dear Chi,

Thank you for your letter of 31 March in which you and your colleagues urge the House Service and the Parliamentary Digital Service to establish a digital Parliament in which all Members can participate.

I share your concern that we must ensure the House of Commons – including Members and the staff who support them – can do its work in as safe a way as possible in these unprecedented and challenging circumstances. That includes the safest possible working practices on the Estate for anyone who has to be here for essential work.

Colleagues and I are keen to find ways of enabling Members to maintain their scrutiny of Government, despite the restrictions that are in place. This has already borne fruit with the virtual committee meetings that have taken place during the recess and broadcast live. Three Committees have so far taken evidence with both witnesses and Members participating remotely, with one broadcast live, and four live-broadcast “virtual committees” are scheduled for next week. Thanks to very hard work by teams across the House and PDS, we will be able to increase the number of virtual evidence sessions we are able to hold once the House returns. If Committees can be flexible in terms of the day of the week when they sit, we hope to be able to support as many as 20 virtual committees starting from the week commencing 20 April. This would represent a typical weekly volume of evidence sessions. We have also been finding new ways to enable Members to carry out other key aspects of their work remotely. We appreciate the huge pressure that constituency Members are under and the constraints you are operating within while performing your roles.

Mr Speaker has asked us to ensure that a suitable temporary video-conferencing solution is available to Commons Members in order to facilitate your work while a more robust solution is developed. To meet this immediate need, we will very shortly be offering every Commons Member a licence for a parliamentary version of Zoom. We have worked at speed to enable this. We could not make it available sooner because we needed to ensure that our version of Zoom meets some basic legal, security and privacy requirements. This version of Zoom is closely aligned to that used within Government and is therefore more secure than Zoom’s consumer offerings which many Members are currently relying on.

Dr John Benger, Clerk of the House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

The Managing Director of the Parliamentary Digital Service and the Director of Broadcasting, and their teams, are already working hard together to identify and deliver a solution that would allow Members to participate remotely in questioning of Ministers, including departmental question times, Ministerial statements and urgent questions. They are drawing on the expertise and the additional capacity of external partners, including the BBC, to help them achieve this objective as quickly as possible. Colleagues are also in touch with other legislatures and assemblies to learn lessons from their experiences, including for example the Senedd in Cardiff which held their virtual sitting on 1 April.

As you will appreciate, there are challenges to be overcome, not just technological but also relating to information security and cyber security. We will also need to work out what adjustments need to be made to our usual practices and procedure in order to ensure the new arrangements work as smoothly as possible. For this reason, I have asked a senior Clerk to coordinate closely with colleagues in digital and broadcasting to ensure all these issues are worked through together. For now, I would be reluctant to give an undertaking that we could enable Members to take part in all of the House's proceedings remotely, given the scale and complexity what would be involved, even if the House decided it wished to do this.

I should emphasize that it is for the House as a whole to decide what changes it wishes to make to its ways of working, and for the House Service and PDS to make them work. The introduction of a further virtual element to the House's formal proceedings would require a resolution of the House, akin to the resolution which permitted virtual meetings of select committees. This means the House would need to meet first in its normal format in order to consider any such changes, which are usually proposed by way of a motion moved by the Government.

The House has already shown that it is willing to change how it works in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, and the recent successful work – done at great speed – to enable virtual committee meetings to take place, shows the ingenuity and commitment of my colleagues in many parts of the House service. I am confident they will display the same level of commitment in delivering new, virtual ways for Ministers to keep the House informed and for Members to discharge their vital function of holding the Executive to account.

Yours sincerely,



Dr John Benger



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Clerk of the House

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