

Parliament's Online Services

A Strategic Review containing Strengths, Weaknesses and Recommendations

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Background

The way in which information is made and distributed has been transformed by the Internet over the last decade. The pace and profundity of changing practices and expectations has challenged institutions of all sizes. Parliament itself is being challenged by these changes, but is far from alone.

The management of both Houses of Parliament have commissioned mySociety Ltd to undertake a review of Parliament's online channels, including governance, strategy, and delivery.

This document contains what we have learned about Parliament's strengths and weaknesses in the provision of online services, and sets out two recommendations which we believe would enable Parliament to take great strides in serving its various users better.

The document has three parts:

Section 1 - A description of our approach

Section 2 - Strengths and weaknesses observed

Section 3 - Recommendations

Section 1. Our approach

In order to develop a detailed understanding of Parliament's online activities, we carried out 90 interviews, ran a public consultation survey, and read through reams of internal data and documentation supplied by parliamentary staff. The overall goal was to develop a well-rounded understanding of how well online services are meeting user needs, and the processes used to deliver and maintain those services.

Interviews

mySociety interviewed approximately 90 individuals, beginning with a focus group and following up with a large number of one-to-one interviews, mostly conducted face to face in Parliamentary offices.

In each of these interviews we posed a standard, albeit open, series of questions. These probed topics including online strategy, execution and communication.

These interviews were carried out by three mySociety staff members - Tom Steinberg (Director), Dave Whiteland (Technical Consultant) and Benjamin Nickolls (Commercial Manager). Interviews were conducted under conditions of anonymity, in order to encourage staff, members and third parties to speak freely. Consequently, quotations in this document are not attributed.

Those interviewed included senior clerks, executives, senior management, project and programme managers, software programmers, designers, communications officers, human resources professionals, finance managers and legal representatives from the House of Commons, the House of Lords and Parliamentary ICT. We also interviewed representatives from legal, academic, media, activist, lobbyist and civic organisations, mostly via telephone.

Public consultation

mySociety conducted a public consultation survey over the course of two weeks to ascertain the primary online services used, the capacity in which they were used and an appreciation of services that may be missing. Most of the marketing for this was done via Parliament's various Twitter accounts.

94 survey results were collected over a two week period, which gives a useful if not statistically robust insight into the views of people from whom we otherwise would not have heard.

Data analysis

We were able to compare our own survey data with Parliament's regular website survey, which gets about 1,000 completions a month. We were also given access to a usability analysis conducted by Bunnyfoot, a company that specialises in such studies.

On top of these data, we were also given access to Google Analytics covering Parliament's web estate, and user testing reports which were also conducted by Bunnyfoot.

Lastly, we were given numerous internal documents about the structure and operation of Parliament's digital services.

Manual inspection of services

Lastly, we looked extensively at the online services offered by parliament, both on its own site and on social media feeds.

Section 2. The strengths and weaknesses of Parliament's online services

We have condensed all our interviews, observations and analyses down into just five strengths and weaknesses. This small number of themes reflects our desire to simplify the analysis of what could otherwise be an overwhelmingly complex situation.

Strength 1

Services are well used, and satisfaction levels are decent.

One of the fundamental strengths of Parliament's online services is that they do get used by a fair number of users. In a world changing more rapidly than some institutions can cope with, this is a very encouraging finding.

Over the three month period from 11th September 2013 to 11th December 2013, Parliament's online services saw 7.15 million visits from 4.9 million unique visitors in total. For context this makes it:

- Very roughly 100 times less visited than the Mail Online (including international audiences)
- Very roughly 5 times less visited than Gov.uk
- Very roughly half as visited as the Transport for London website
- Very roughly equally visited as Legislation.gov.uk
- Very roughly twice as visited as the Spectator website
- Very roughly ten times as visited as the Essex County Council website

The most popular reasons to visit the Parliament website are:

1. Bills and legislation - about 15% of visits (according to Parliament's own website survey, conducted by Bunnyfoot) or about 800,000 unique visitors over three months.
2. Visitors information - about 10% or about 500,000 unique visits over three months.
3. Information on Members - about 10% or about 500,000 unique visits over three months.
4. Audio and video - about 8% of visits or about 400,000 unique visits over three months.
5. Committees - about 8% of visits or about 400,000 unique visits over three months.

On the social media front Parliament's main Twitter account has 227,000 followers, the accounts of the Parliament Office of Science and Technology over three thousand, the Parliament Archives over four thousand, and various select committees have followers in the range of a few hundred to two thousand. The Parliament Facebook page has over eighteen thousand 'likes' and its YouTube channel over twelve thousand. The level of Twitter followers

is broadly in line with what would be expected from a comparison with the chambers of the US Congress.

Our overall view of this is that Parliament does succeed in attracting quite considerable absolute numbers of people to make use of its online services, especially its website. This does not, of course, mean those numbers could not be higher, or that users could not be better served. However, it is an achievement to see such traffic in the first place.

Satisfaction levels

Analysing the data from our survey, and from the monthly Bunnyfoot survey of web users, we have concluded that many users, both inside and outside parliament, are content with the digital services that they receive.

77% of respondents to the Bunnyfoot monthly surveys carried out by Parliament itself were either satisfied or very satisfied with their visit to the Parliament website. This satisfaction level has remained largely stable over the last year. About 60% of respondents reported succeeding in finding information while just over 11% reported failing to find what they were looking for.

Comparative data for satisfaction figures is hard to find due to widely varying survey methodologies: we found one survey that claimed Google's customer satisfaction score was also 77%¹, exactly the same as Parliament.uk. However, we do feel comfortable in reporting that a clear majority of surveyed users are reporting themselves satisfied when they visit the site. This is clearly a strength to be built on.

Some users in our survey also fed back positively, for example:

"It is generally excellent - takes a little while to find one's way around it, but that is inevitable given the amount of information provided and how up-to-date it is kept."

"Overall very good, but some further connectivity would be good."

¹ <http://searchengineland.com/google-sees-lowest-score-ever-in-customer-satisfaction-survey-167600>

Also, when compared with data about some similar bodies, and looking at some very high level data, nothing about Parliament’s visitor patterns stands out as exceptional or worrying:²

Site	Parliament. uk	National Archives	Welsh Assembly	Australian parliament	Manchester CC
Bounce rate ³	55.75%	55.6%	49.5%	58.1%	42.7%
Average time on site (minutes)	2:46	2:53	2:54	3:13	2:35
Pages per visit	2.74	3.83	2.80	3.2	3.7

Nevertheless, these high level numbers do not mean that uniform service excellence has been achieved. In the weaknesses section below we look at more details at two examples where the quality of service offered could definitely be better.

Strength 2

Parliamentary staff have a strong public service ethos, and they believe that better online services are essential, not optional.

Some organisations have problems because their own staff are not motivated or are disconnected from the purpose of the organisation. Parliament does not suffer this problem. Instead, we met and interviewed a workforce that is keenly aware of the unique and historic nature of Parliament as an institution, and that seemed passionate about making that institution work better. Here are some example statements from our interviews which reflect that passion:

“Fundamentally we are here to serve parliament.”

“[We are] contributing to a well-informed democracy.”

“We are all public servants.”

“We are stewards of the institute of parliament.”

“The imperative is to serve the public.”

² The data in this table are sourced from Alexa.com on 13th December 2013, with the exception of the data for Parliament.uk which is taken from Parliament’s Google Analytics account.

³ The Bounce Rate represents the proportion of visitors who leave a website without visiting more than a single page. It is used as a rather crude measure of whether or not visitors are finding a website useful or interesting.

However, a passion for public service is not the same as a belief in the importance of providing excellent online services. A neutral observer might expect Parliamentary staff to be suspicious of new technologies and processes, given that they work for a very venerable institution, with many traditions. But this, too, was not a problem. We heard repeatedly and from a wide range of staff that they are keenly aware of the importance of online services in the modern world. For example, we were told that:

“The web is [the] critical business front-end.”

“Digital strategy should be part of how we achieve our objectives, not an extra bolt-on.”

“Paper Less, E-Better.”

Furthermore, we heard staff talking in sophisticated terms about the importance of supplying raw data, an even more difficult, high-tech concept, and one that one would not necessarily expect to hear in an ancient institution. For example, we were told:

“Data is the greatest of assets, because it never runs out. The more you use it the more value it creates. If you lock it up it’s a wasted opportunity; it’s a poor return on investment.”

“We need to understand we’re a wholesaler of information, not a retailer.”

We conclude that the great majority of Parliamentary staff are strongly aware of the importance of excellent online services. Furthermore there is a relatively wide recognition that excellent digital services are not just about web pages or social media feeds, but also about data feeds and data dumps. This understanding and enthusiasm puts the whole institution in a strong position for moving forward rapidly, and must be considered one of Parliament’s best assets. It is a strong foundation for Parliament to build truly excellent online services upon.

Despite some fundamental strengths, there are also weaknesses to Parliament’s online services. We have put these under three headings.

Weakness 1

Getting information and services added to Parliament.uk is too slow and unreliable to meet the needs of Parliamentary staff.

Through our interviews we learned that getting new information and services added to the Parliament website is now a common requirement for Parliamentary staff, in order to do their jobs. However, we also learned that few staff think the process for getting materials added is working well.

The process

Before proceeding it is important to set out the three different ways in which Parliamentary staff can get information onto the internet:

1 - Via the Content Management System (CMS) - A tool that allows non-technical staff to edit and upload content to the Parliament site with only modest levels of training.

2 - Via social media tools - Popular, well known tools like Twitter and Facebook which require little or no training at all.

3 - Via software programmers - Specialist staff who have the skills to build completely new kinds of digital services.

Staff reported few problems with making use of social media tools, which is perhaps not surprising given the huge amount of private capital that has been spent on making these services very easy to use. But there were substantial concerns about the process of getting new information and services onto the website, especially when that information does not fit neatly into what the CMS currently allows.

Staff who need the services of a computer programmer are formally supposed to access those skills by lodging a request with the Web and Intranet Services team (WIS). WIS is, in turn, supposed to serve those needs, having weighed them against other competing demands.

This process is not working well. Numerous people we spoke to expressed the view that if they were to lodge a request with WIS, then there is a high probability that they would not see their project delivered in a timely fashion, or indeed at all.

Because of this low expectation, there has now been a substantial breakdown in trust between 'the business' and WIS, encapsulated in this quote from one of our interviewees:

"I would make every effort to avoid going through [WIS] with a new project, because I have no confidence it will come to fruition."

Why does WIS seem to have difficulty delivering projects?

Knowing that WIS is not trusted to deliver projects does not, however, answer the question 'why is this the case'? Through our interviews we tried to establish the cause and effect that was leading to these performance difficulties. We ultimately identified two principal problems, which are set out below.

Problem 1 - WIS does not have access to enough appropriately skilled computer programmers to meet the online service needs of Members, the public or staff.

WIS do not employ or in a meaningful sense control their own computer programmers, despite being the branch of parliament responsible for delivering services on the internet. Instead, when WIS want to deliver a new or amended online service, they assign the task to computer programmers who are supplied by PICT.

WIS are supposed to be allocated six computer programmers by PICT. However, in practice the number has often been less than this due to staff turnover and competing demands inside PICT.

The total number of computer programmers - about six people - was set when web development was moved from being an experimental project to being 'business as usual', a process that took place some three or four years ago. The number is actually a budget, not a headcount allocation: PICT are awarded six hundred thousand pounds a year to supply WIS with the required skills.

This allocation is, in our view, the fundamental reason that staff in 'the business' feel that WIS is unresponsive to their needs, as well as the fundamental cause of other weaknesses set out in this report.

The current allocation causes problems for three reasons:

1. Six computer programmers working on online services is far too few for an institution the size of Parliament. It is half the number employed by mySociety, the small social enterprise that has authored this report.
2. The budget allocation has, apparently, not been reviewed or changed in several years. Good practice would be to review this budget level at least annually, ideally every six months - such is the pace of digital change.
3. The current arrangement does not give WIS computer programmers that they 'own'. This has led to situations where WIS discover that computer programmers that they thought would be available to do work on client projects have actually been reassigned.

At this point it is appropriate to pause and highlight an observation that is at the core of this report - **six computer programmers working on online services is nothing like enough for the needs of an institution like Parliament.** Without an increase in the number of computer programmers and designers working full time on Parliament's online services, it is

inevitable that the current site will slip ever further behind what modern users consider to be normal.

We would also note that with so few computer programmers assigned to online projects it is **remarkable**, and indeed **laudable**, that the Parliamentary website functions as it does. WIS and PICT staff deserve praise simply for keeping the website online and the core data mostly up to date.

It is also clear that this resource constraint is, without doubt, the main reason why staff around Parliament feel that WIS cannot be trusted to deliver online projects for them. But there is a secondary problem, too.

Problem 2 - WIS could do better at managing client expectations about what can and cannot be delivered, and when.

The low level of technical resource available to WIS is the critical driver of current failure. However there is a secondary problem that is not excusable by staffing shortages.

Through our interviews with parliamentary staff, we came to the view that WIS has not successfully and reliably made it clear to colleagues that, due to resource constraints, they are unlikely to be able to deliver on projects that matter to 'the business'. WIS staff do tell us that they have alerted clients to this issue, but there is clearly a breakdown in communication going on. Too many people we spoke to said they couldn't understand why projects controlled by WIS didn't seem to be delivering. This is a straightforward communications problem that should be addressed.

We recommend that WIS staff are reminded that they must explain resource constraints to clients, especially when there are key project risks relating to staffing levels. Even were more computer programmers to be made available, there will still be times where staff elsewhere in Parliament need to be told that they will have to wait, and how long they will have to wait for. WIS need to improve their skills in this area.

The cumulative impact of these two problems

The resource shortage within WIS, combined with the secondary internal communications failing, has led to a lot of frustration from staff elsewhere in Parliament. These are a few quotes from different interviewees, all Parliamentary staff:

"We moved our dates six months forward in order to be sure [the project launch] would happen in time" – it did not.

"Little changes – which might be very important to us – never get [done]."

"We were promised and promised and promised and had no reason to be concerned" – from a staff member whose project was then delivered late.

Most worrying from the perspective of an organisation seeking to move with the times, this trust issue has led to departments sometimes abandoning plans to provide new online services before they are even commissioned:

“I would be reluctant to use the process, because it is broken. [...] The worry is it will die a death with the internal process.”

We do not believe that Parliamentary staff in ‘the business’ will have their confidence restored until changes are made to the process and governance structures that determine how online services are delivered. These are outlined in our two recommendations later in this document.

Weakness 2

There are some clear problems with Parliament.uk, and many missed opportunities.

There are some services on the website that appear to have significant problems that diminish their value to the public and to internal users. We have picked two examples.

Case Study A: Problems with the Find Your MP service

The first of these examples is the Find Your MP service, a simple yet fundamental public service, pictured here:

The screenshot shows the 'Find your MP' page on the Parliament.uk website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Accessibility, Contact us, RSS feeds, and Email alerts. Below this is a search bar with a 'Search' button. The main navigation menu includes Home, Parliamentary business, MPs, Lords & offices, About Parliament, Get involved, Visiting, and Education. A secondary menu includes Lords, MPs, Parliamentary offices, Members' allowances, Standards & financial interests, and Government & opposition. The breadcrumb trail reads: 'You are here: Parliament home page > MPs, Lords & offices > MPs > Find your MP'. The main content area is titled 'Find your MP' and features a search box with a 'Find MP' button. Below the search box, there is explanatory text: 'This service will recognise postcodes and names of MPs or constituencies, or fragments of these. If you are unsure of the name of your MP or constituency it may be easier to try searching by postcode.' and a note: 'If you have any queries about the Find Your MP service, please call the House of Commons Information Office on 020 7219 4272.' To the right, there is a 'Related information' section for the 'Commons Information Office', providing contact details: 'E: hcinfo@parliament.uk' and 'T: 020 7219 4272', and a link to 'More information about this office can be found on the House of Commons Information Office page.' At the bottom, there is a footer with links for A-Z index, Glossary, Contact us, Freedom of Information, Jobs, Using this website, and Copyright.

As the name suggests, the 'Find your MP' service is used by members of the public who are not sufficiently knowledgeable about politics to already know the identity of their MP. That makes this tool highly important if Parliament is serious about connecting with voters who are not highly knowledgeable about politics and political processes.

The tool is fundamentally a simple one, but user testing performed in 2013 by Bunnyfoot revealed a problem that meant that a large number of users were not being as well served as they should have been. The problem was with this page - the one shown to users after they input their postcode.

MPs

Find your MP

Help with Find your MP

Find your MP

Cities of London and Westminster

Member for this constituency	Mark Field
Party	Conservative
Website	www.markfieldmp.com
Address	Mark Field, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

Search

Find MP

This service will recognise postcodes and names of MPs or constituencies, or fragments of these. If you are unsure of the name of your MP or constituency it may be easier to try searching by postcode.

If you have any queries about the Find Your MP service, please call the House of Commons Information Office on 020 7219 4272.

Related information

Commons Information Office
Contact us to find out more about the work, history and membership of the House of Commons

- E: hcinfo@parliament.uk
- T: 020 7219 4272

More information about this office can be found on the [House of Commons Information Office page](#).

What Bunnyfoot discovered was that most users who visited this page did not realise they could click on their MP's name to find out much more information about them (see the name 'Mark Field' in the screenshot above - that is the key link). According to the testing report:

*"Most assumed they would have to visit the MP's website, so missed the link to the MP's specific page on the Parliament website."*⁴

During the three months prior to the writing of this report, there were around 240,000 unique pageviews for this service. Of these, only around 80,000 -- 33% -- followed the link through to the detailed page for their MP which contained full contact details and a full biography.

This represents a straightforward design problem that has negatively affected a large number of users, most of whom are probably members of the public.

Over the last three months, 18% of respondents to the regular Bunnyfoot website survey who said they were looking for information to contact their MP said that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their visit to the website. Almost 13% reported failing in their task to find this information. These are figures that we are certain could be rectified with appropriate improvements to the website, made at very modest cost. The key question is not 'How could this problem be fixed?', but 'How do processes need changing so that problems of this simple kind are prevented in future?'

⁴ Source: Bunnyfoot - HoP Live Site and New Homepage Testing - v2.0, February 2013

Case Study B: Problems with search

In general, search is most often used by users who fail to find something using a site's global or in-page navigation. It is essential, therefore, that the most frequently used search terms and the results displayed for these are regularly checked to ensure that users who are potentially lost are getting the results they need.

Screenshot: a typical search results page

The screenshot shows the search results page on www.parliament.uk. The search term entered is "mr speaker", and the results show 49,469 items. The page includes a navigation menu, a search bar, and a list of search results.

www.parliament.uk

Accessibility | Cookies | Email alerts | RSS feeds | Contact us

Home | Parliamentary business | MPs, Lords & offices | About Parliament | Get involved | Visiting | Education

Search results

You are here: Parliament home page > Search > Search results

Filters [clear all]

Section:

- Parliamentary Business (305)
- MPs, Lords & offices (153)
- About Parliament (15)
- Get involved (6)
- Visiting (6)

Search results

Help using search

mr speaker Search

You searched for... **mr speaker** Results per page: 10

Displaying results 1-10 out of 49469 Previous 1 2 3 4 5 Next

Speaker addresses Waikato University
Speaker addresses Waikato University
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2013/august/mr-speaker---new-zealand-parliaments/>

Outreach visits
Outreach visits **Mr Speaker** works closely with the Houses of Parliament's Outreach Service to promote the work and role of Parliament, and to encourage greater public engagement. The **Speaker** ...
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/commons/the-speaker/parliament-and-the-public/parliamentary-outreach-visits-/>

Speaker Honours Alan Turing - News from Parliament
Speaker Honours Alan Turing On 15 October 2013, **Speaker** of the House of Commons Rt Hon. John Bercow MP presented the "Attitude Icon Award for Outstanding Achievement" to Alan Turing's nieces Inagh ...
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2013/october/speaker-honours-alan-turing-/>

Mr Speaker's speech to the Univeristy of Edinburgh
Mr Speaker's speech to the Univeristy of Edinburgh
<http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/outreach-and-training/resources-for-universities/open-lectures/what-does-modern...>

We reviewed the top 24 most frequently used search terms on Parliament.uk in the last month. Only seven of these 24 results returned a dedicated page as the top link, as should be the case for a good quality user experience. The other 17 terms resulted in search results pages which we rated as ranging between 'less than ideal' and 'nothing'.

Top 24 Most Common Search Terms on Parliament.uk

1. Hansard	2. Recess	3. House of Lords	4. recess dates	5. Parliament's role
6. House of commons	7. videos	8. bills	9. prime minister	10. games
11. pmq	12. cabinet	13. edm	14. youth parliament	15. big ben
16. hs2	17. parliamentary questions	18. bedroom tax	19. select committees	20. autumn statement
21. immigration	22. green paper	23. all party groups	24. early day motions	

In a usability evaluation of the website conducted by Bunnyfoot in 2011, the researchers commented that “Search performs poorly in terms of accuracy, presentation and difficulty using advanced search functions”. They also noted that “The biggest impact and improvement of the user experience would be to enhance the search functions and search results...”⁵.

In a further evaluation conducted in 2013, Bunnyfoot found issues with the accuracy and presentation of search results. In this study, the researchers found that most users failed to find what they were looking for using the basic search, but succeeded when subsequently using advanced search. However, the advanced search has now been removed from the site, taking away this option for all of Parliament.uk’s users.

In the survey of website users we conducted, 24 of the 94 people surveyed (just over 25%) specifically mentioned search as something that needed improving on the site. One particularly illustrative quote was this:

“The information is not that easy to find, it’s often buried a few levels down [...]. Often searching for a specific function (Bill, Hansard, Journal etc) will take me to a page about that that provides an overview of that process/ thing (i.e. a page on what Bills are) rather than the thing itself.”

Other revealing quotes included:

“The search functionality is woefully inadequate.”

“The content of the standard notes is superb. However, the ease of finding them is difficult. The site is difficult to use and the search engine unnecessarily complex.”

⁵ from: Bunnyfoot - User testing (public site) - v1, Dec 2011)

“The worst thing about online is the search tool. It is rubbish. You are better off using Google.”

“For all its problems, the Advanced Search facility (now withdrawn) was of value. Now it's far harder to search Hansard and answers to PQs.”

We note that for an institution of Parliament's size, budget, and long experience in running websites, there are no specific technical reasons why the search feature should not be better. So again, the interesting question raised by this problem is not 'How do we fix this?', but rather 'What is it about current processes that means this problem wasn't fixed some time ago?'

Key observation - there must be some reason why both 'Find Your MP' and 'Search' have problems.

Parliamentary staff are already aware of the two problems presented in these case studies, and it is likely that improvements to both are already in progress. Solutions to one or both may even have been introduced by the time this document is circulated.

The question to consider is not, therefore 'How do we resolve these two problems?'. Instead it is 'Why were these problems not resolved some time ago?'. Neither of them is technically insuperable. There is no strong mitigating circumstance that explains why an institution of Parliament's size and resources would be operating services with these issues.

We believe that these two problems are indicative of a structural failing in the way that Parliament delivers online services. We discuss and propose improvements in the final section of this document.

Weakness 3

Parliament's site needs updating to avoid falling further behind the times.

Expectations of what is normal on the internet change very fast. What would have counted as an elegant, usable, interesting webpage just five years ago will now come across as clunky, unhelpful and perhaps hard or impossible to read on a smartphone or tablet (devices that did not exist until recently).

Parliament's site needs updating, and bringing the site up to speed would require addressing a range of the following issues.

Mobile and tablet devices

In order for information and services to be accessible on modern mobile phones and tablets, they need to be redesigned and re-presented to reflect the new medium. This is called

responsive web design - the screenshot below shows how a single page can be automatically reformatted to work well on screens of all different sizes.

Screenshot: An example of a responsive web page designed to work well on multiple devices

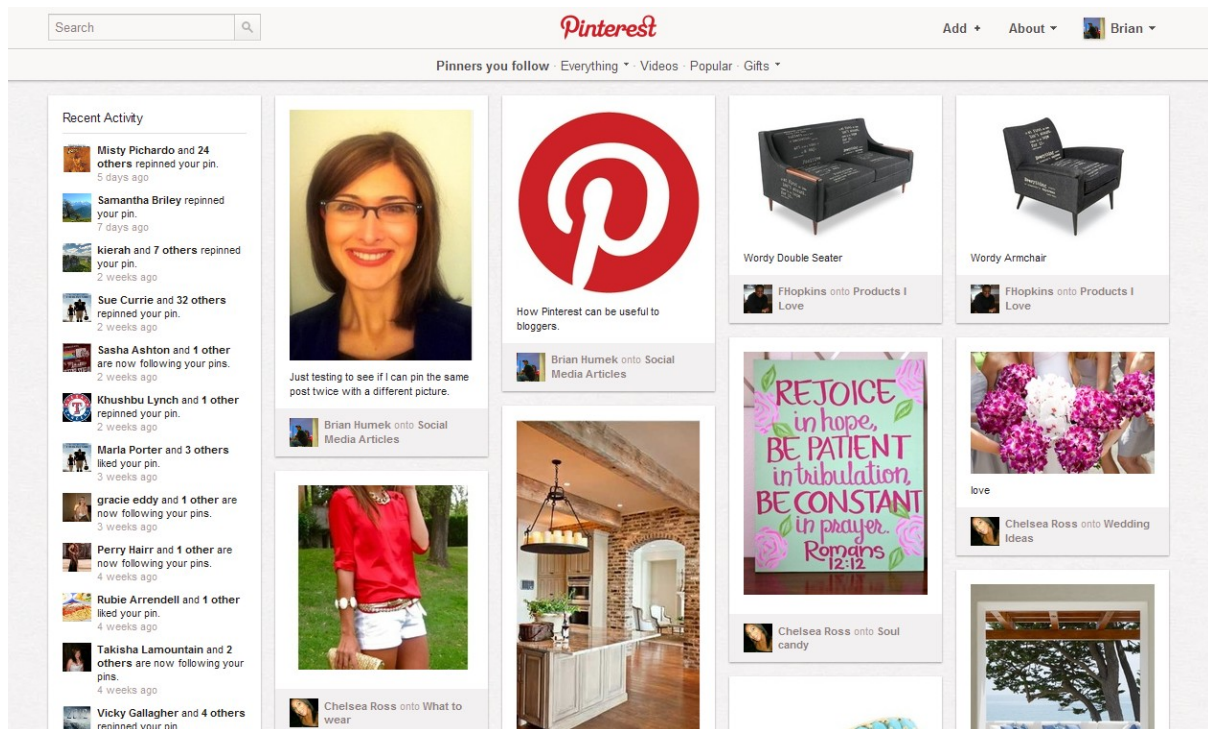


Nearly every page on Parliament's current website will need updating to achieve this.

Improved navigation

Modern users have expectations about how easy it is to navigate around sites and find information based on the usage of thousands of other websites. Parliament's navigation structure feels increasingly dated, and does not deploy many of the elements and standards that modern web users will expect.

Screenshot: Pinterest, a modern looking website. Note the clean, clear design.



More task-centric

Parliament presents most of its information by describing the name of a unit or process, not what it means to achieve. Good modern websites talk to users in terms of what they want to achieve - the outcome not the name of the process.

Parliament already does a reasonable job of this for contacting an MP (there is a page called 'Contact your MP'), but if you want to influence a vote, understand an amendment, discover the motivations behind an existing Act, or discover which members are engaged in a particular issue, the current Parliament site does not make this easy by describing these activities in so many words. Parliament's website should offer more answers to questions of the form 'How do I do X?'. This is what it means to operate a task-centric online service.

Appropriate, modern technologies

Currently most users of Parliamentlive.tv are asked to install outdated technologies onto their computers in order to watch the video streams. This is a barrier to entry, because users should not, in 2014, have to install any new technologies to watch a video. Outdated technologies will also tend to be poorer quality user experiences in various ways.

Tie information together

To give an example, a user visiting the page on a particular bill would, today, consider it normal to be able to easily find out who voted on that bill, read the different iterations of the bill, watch videos of speeches about that bill, and perhaps even see who had been lobbying on that legislation.

Parliament's website currently silos much of this information in separate places, when it should really be connected together in a rich and user-focused web of content. Parliament's website should make the process of following a bill's progress easy and attractive.

Present content for social media consumption

Social networks are now used to share large amounts of serious information, as well as large amounts of entertainment and trivia. Around 80% of world leaders are now on Twitter, for example⁶.

In order for interesting data to spread effectively on social networks, it may have to be written or produced in ways that align with the grain of the medium. So, for example, an image will be more likely to be shared on Twitter if it is an appropriate size or shape. And a news release from any organisation is more likely to spread if it fits into the 140 characters of a tweet. Parliament already has some skills at producing content in these forms, but the website needs to be designed around the shareability of often complex content.

Tools for Members

Members should be able to use technology to gain quicker, more balanced information on proposed legislation, and to help them make better judgements. This could be very simple, like improved site search, but it also could be delivered through more exotic and speculative tools, such as the following idea.

Case study: What an ambitious Member support tool could look like

A tool could be built specifically to assist a Member who was trying to analyse any specific part of any piece of pending legislation.

That Member could visit a public web page on Parliament.uk that contained a specific paragraph or clause of a current bill. Arranged under that section would be a wide range of links to external commentary, data and lobbyist advice from a wide variety of sources, none of which would have to be supplied by Parliament itself. Instead, this data would be submitted via an online system by the authors themselves.

⁶ Digitaldaya 'World Leaders on Twitter' report - <http://bit.ly/19wUIE5>

Parliament would, in effect channel this information to Members (and to anyone visiting the page), but not comment on it, vouch for it or endorse it. Parliament would simply make it accessible to members, just as a postal system does, but in a more scaleable, public way.

Such a tool could make Members more able to rapidly obtain a balanced range of commentary and evidence on parts of legislation, potentially making them less dependent on the one or two sources that have been able to grab their attention.

Such a tool would also be useful for non-members who simply want to understand the pros and cons of different parts of bills and amendments. Over time it could become a rich public resource for detailed policy analysis from diverse camps, all without Parliament having to increase the amount of analysis conducted itself.

This description is at the more adventurous end of what Parliament could add to its website. However we feel it is worth including to focus readers' minds on the fact that the website needs improving in more ways than just the most obvious.

Tools for the public

Different people care about different issues, and few people are interested in anything more than a minority of what goes through Parliament. It would be relatively straightforward to build alerting systems so that Parliament could notify members of the public when legislation was being considered that related to issues or geographic areas they were interested in.

Relentless change

The pace of change on the internet in the next five years is almost certain to continue at great speed. It will take major efforts simply to keep up with what is seen as normal. In the next section we discuss how Parliament can keep up with the pace, and resolve some of the problems identified above.

Section 3. Recommendations and rationale

Our recommendations

Having gathered a large amount of evidence, and carried out a wide ranging analysis, we present just two recommendations:

Recommendation 1. Establish a new Digital Office to bring together the management of all online and ICT services into a single organisation - an organisation driven by a mission to identify and meet the online needs of Members, parliamentary staff, and the public.

Recommendation 2. Appoint a Head of Digital to run the new Digital Office. This new position should be held publicly accountable for delivering measurably rising levels of satisfaction with Parliament's digital services from Members, parliamentary staff and the public. The postholder should be appointed based on a proven history of delivering popular, needs-focused services on the public internet.

These two recommendations are born of a technological world outside of Parliament that has changed at extraordinary, unforeseeable speed. In the remainder of this document, we describe that change, and why it leads us to the recommendations above.

Below we discuss the recommendations in more detail.

Merging the web and ICT functions

Parliament should establish a Digital Office, merging together both web and ICT into a new, unified body. Such restructuring must be justified, and in this case the justification arises from external technological change.

The justification is this: the debate as to which medium would be used to deliver significant computer applications and information services to users is over, and the internet has emerged as the winner. So separating 'the internet' from 'ICT' is now a division that serves only to increase friction and decrease the ability of Parliament to serve internal and external user needs.

Like many organisations, Parliament started working on online, internet-based services as an addendum to its core business of producing and publishing documents: an experiment started in the 1990s to keep up with the times. The early commissioners of the Parliamentary website could not have known that in a period of time of which was, by historic standards, extraordinarily brief, the internet would come to be the primary mechanism through which not just information but tools and services would be delivered to professional and amateur users alike.

The current structure of Parliament, with the Web and Intranet (WIS) team separated from the ICT team (PICT), reflects this legacy.

By 2014 this model - this separation of roles - is not only outdated in principle but has broken down in practice. The breakdown is most clearly apparent in the failure of parliamentary authorities to agree on a future strategy for Parliament's website.

Today, PICT remains the dominant force within parliamentary technology, with more staff, money and management power than WIS. But WIS, being the 'internet' part of the business, represents the future - a future in which almost everything that people do with computers will be delivered across the internet, and a future in which back office and front office services are merely different interfaces to the same underlying computer systems.

Rather than picking one existing entity and naming it as a 'winner', we believe that the consensual thing to do is to announce that Parliament recognises that the gap between the internet and ICT services has collapsed, and that leadership experience in this new environment is required to lead a new organisation, restructured around this challenging new reality.

In a unified digital organisation with a new mission, the project managers would not be separated from the technical staff who would be delivering projects. Instead they would work closely together, and the managers would have direct responsibility for their staff. More than one interviewee expressed the opinion that the PICT/WIS split was a mistake, and we concur.

Why user needs must come first

The mission of the Digital Office should be **to provide excellent digital services that meet user needs**. This user needs focus is one of the key differences between the web era of the last decade and the ICT era of the decades before.

Put simply, traditional ICT services are founded on the idea that organisations have needs that computer technologies can help meet. Modern digital services are founded on the idea that it is humans who have the needs, and that technologies should always bend around what humans find easy and intuitive to do. Where possible, training is reduced or eliminated by tools that guide their users.

The excellent modern devices and services that billions of people now use every day have, by and large, achieved that excellence due to a ruthless focus on user needs. The Digital Office should be established largely to help Parliament shift its focus towards meeting the needs of staff, members and the public.

It should be noted that an intense focus on meeting user needs does not come without tradeoffs. The most important of these is that Parliamentary staff must be willing to sacrifice

direct, day to day managerial control of the Digital Office in favour of the autonomy this office needs in order to meet user needs.

Why does the Office need this autonomy? The answer is that staff within any large organisation will regularly ask for changes to the website that meet their needs as employees, but will actually make the website less good at meeting the needs of other people, whether they are staff, members or the public. All digitally excellent modern organisations of any scale have processes in place to prevent the private needs of individual staffers from harming the wider needs of users. They have, in short, gatekeepers, who always have an eye on the bigger picture.

We detail below how Parliament should implement this autonomy, in order to protect the goal of serving user needs.

Why use the word 'Digital'?

This review was commissioned to look at online services, which is what we have done. However we are recommending the creation of a new organisation that uses the language of 'digital' not 'online'. Why is this?

The answer is the same as discussed above - the collapse of the internet and ICT services into a single activity. Increasingly, organisations use 'Digital' to signify that they have made this transition, and that they understand that there are no remaining computer services of note that will not ultimately be delivered over the internet.

Furthermore, digital is shorthand for 'we accept the internet values of usability, needs focus and agility'. This is important in a competitive labour market where Parliament has not always been successful in attracting the talent desired.

The role of the Head of Digital

The Head of Digital must personally own and embody the mission of the new office: to provide excellent digital services that meet user needs. The position should be powerful - the Head of Digital must be able to alter or cancel any digital project anywhere in Parliament, otherwise their drive will tend to be undermined by well-meaning projects that are delivered without being needs-focussed.

We recommend that the Head of Digital role is embodied in a single person, rather than a team or a board, because excellent, user-focused digital projects are extraordinarily difficult to deliver at the best of times, and even harder to deliver in an environment as complex as Parliament. Because such projects are tough to deliver, anything that prevents clear decision-making substantially increases the chance that projects will never see the light of day, or that they will be of unacceptably poor quality when they do.

With the appointment of an appropriately skilled and fully empowered Head of Digital, the speed of decision-making and delivery of projects should accelerate markedly, compared with the current situation.

However, with increased power comes increased responsibility. The key success metrics which describe whether the Digital Office is succeeding should be published on Parliament's website, in an automated and regularly updated basis. Those metrics should not be old-fashioned web metrics like 'hits' or 'visits'. Instead they should be human-centered satisfaction metrics based on users making it clear that their needs have been successfully met. The new Digital Office must also record success amongst more than one category of user - there should be metrics to show that the new Office is meeting the needs of staff, Members and the public. Successfully serving only one or two of these groups would still ultimately be a failure.

Running an organisation dedicated to meeting user needs via excellent digital services is a highly specialised skill. The person who takes up the mantle of Head of Digital will require all the following skills:

- The ability to motivate a team of web technologists, designers and content professionals to deliver excellent work in a demanding and high profile environment.
- The ability to speak the language of user-centered digital technology, as well as the language of large-organisation management, forming a bridge between digital experts and parliamentary process experts.
- A wide-ranging understanding of the technologies that compose the modern internet, how they interoperate, what their potential is, and what their limits are.
- Familiarity with user-centered-design techniques, the modern process by which the needs, wants, and limitations of end users of a product are given extensive attention at each stage of the design process.
- The strength of character to serve the needs of all users, not simply those who shout loudest.
- Skills at mediating tensions between parts of the business that will inevitably have to compromise, given resource constraints.
- An empathy for the experience of accessing Parliament as an outsider who is not an expert on Parliamentary process.
- A willingness to work in the open, making previously unseen performance data public.
- Skills at interpreting web analytics, offline survey results, user tests and focus groups.
- Familiarity with modern software engineering management processes, especially (but not exclusively) Agile.
- Hiring skills, to enable the new Digital Office to acquire the skills it needs today and will need in the future.
- Delegation skills, as some major tasks, such as telephones, printers and internal networking, should be almost entirely handed off to separate teams.

If the Head lacks more than a handful of these skills, there is a manifest danger of uneven leadership. For example, someone capable of delivering an excellent website but incapable

of communicating to colleagues internally would cause nearly as many problems as they might solve.

Hiring for such a role will be a challenge. However, London is one of the few global cities in which such candidates doubtless already reside, so the recruiting will be challenging, rather than impossible.

Structure and staffing of the new Digital Office

Due to our relative lack of familiarity with Parliamentary governance structures, we do not propose to describe a grade for the Head of Digital, or set out how the new Digital Office should fit within current management structures. Instead this document sets out to describe the skills and powers that the Head should have, leaving it for more experienced people to suggest formal positions.

We will also refrain from describing how the entire new Digital Office should be structured. This is because we believe that the Head of Digital should develop their own plan once appointed.

However, we do note that once the new Digital Office is created, it is likely that an internal subdivision would be established that reflects the difference in skills required to execute in each of these areas.

1. **Internet Technologies** - The Parliament website, the tools which are used to create and publish core parliamentary documents such as bills, and social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter.
2. **Hardware and Technical Support** - Printers, laptops, cabling, wireless networks, cameras, legacy software support.

Readers may ask why, if this split is still going to remain, PICT and WIS should be merged at all. The answer is that the overall management of both divisions should be guided by leadership which is unambiguously focused on meeting the online needs of staff, Members and the public. There needs to be an explicit and formal recognition that the business of providing printers, networks and support for legacy software is fundamentally secondary to the business of providing excellent services online. The Head of Digital needs to have ultimate managerial authority over these services so that none of the decisions made within these teams prevent online services from being excellent. Users of the website (including Members) should not be made to suffer because of a technical decision made by a team focused mostly on internal business.

As legacy, offline software tools are replaced by new online versions, and as hardware systems become more 'cloud managed', the second team should be able to shrink in size. However, the first team will need to be substantially bigger than WIS to succeed - we project that between 50 and 100 heads, possessing a mix of diverse skills, will ultimately be the required number.

Serving the needs of both Lords and Commons

There is a degree of tension between the Houses over the issue of how online services are delivered.

In our interviews, we heard repeatedly that staff within the Lords are worried that their House's needs for online services are not being met. For example:

“Both houses are unique, we want some autonomy because our needs are different.”

“Sometimes we feel like we’re being held back.”

It would be easy to interpret such comments as meaning that the constitutional split between the Houses makes it impossible to deliver successful online services through one entity. However, we believe this would be the wrong interpretation.

The Lords are dissatisfied with online services for the same reason that so many people we spoke to inside and outside Parliament are dissatisfied: because the delivery team is the wrong shape and the wrong size, as has been extensively detailed above.

Nevertheless, the founding of the Digital Office would be an ideal moment to acknowledge the Lords' concerns. This can best be done by getting the Lords and Commons to agree the mission, goals and metrics of the Digital Office, collaboratively. Our recommendations above outline what we believe the mission should be, but the more detailed objectives and performance indicators should be developed in conjunction with the Head of Digital, and agreed by staff from both Houses. These performance indicators should be set so that - if they are hit - then both the Commons and Lords will be satisfied with the operation of the new Office.

It is very important to note that the way that the Lords and Commons exert control over the Digital Office should be through long term goal setting, not through direct day to day managerial control. It is vital that both Houses understand why this is so important, and it is vital that they both formally sign up to a self-imposed constraint. The self-imposed, formal constraint is this: no single individual within either House should be given the ability to tell staff within the digital office to prioritise or de-prioritise digital tasks except the Head of Digital. Both houses should sign off on the new Digital Office with a clear understanding that it will be controlled by top level accountability, not by day to day interference.

The reason why both Houses should abrogate direct, day to day control is twofold. The first reason is that this will put to bed any notion that the digital team will be commandeered or run by one house or another. The second and much more important reason for relinquishing direct power over day to day prioritisation is that excellence in digital services always requires the ability to say 'no'. Digital services that truly meet users' needs require design

discipline that is as much about what is left out as about what is included. Without the power to say 'no', Parliament's online services will not improve at the dramatic rate which is required to keep pace with user expectations.

In conclusion, we believe that most of the current tensions between the Houses in relation to digital projects is because Parliament is not currently configured to deliver digital excellence. Once a new configuration is established, and once new goals are clearly set and agreed, we believe that both Houses will again conclude that the single, shared provider is the right model for Parliament.

A new, unified mission to drive a culture change

Good organisations tend to have clear goals, goals which, even if hugely hard to achieve, are clearly articulated.

Creating a new, unified digital organisation is a chance to shift and update the mission and culture of Parliament's digital teams. It is a chance to set a clear mission that unambiguously puts meeting user needs at the top of the agenda.

In our first recommendation we suggest that the mission of the new Digital Office should be to "identify and meet the online needs of Members, parliamentary staff, and the public". This places the imperative to meet the needs of users both inside and outside Parliament at the heart of the new team's mission.

In the second recommendation we argue that the Head of Digital, and by definition the whole of the new Digital Office, "should be held publicly accountable for delivering measurably rising levels of satisfaction with Parliament's digital services from Members, parliamentary staff and the public". This is to ensure that that progress against the mission is relatively easy to measure, and to ensure that Parliament does not under-invest in supporting one group whilst focusing on the needs of another. We suggest that these metrics be published online as a form of self-imposed discipline for the new body.

Resolving the planning deadlock

As many readers will doubtless be aware, current structures have contributed to a planning impasse: Parliament is currently lacking an agreed digital strategy due to a breakdown in negotiations between different internal bodies on the web policy board. The Houses have lacked an agreed digital plan for a considerable period because the board that is supposed to agree such decisions has been unable to agree, and there is nobody in a formal or informal position to break the deadlock.

Parliament cannot continue for long without a clear digital plan in place. Our recommendations above offer a way of getting such a plan delivered.

With a single, appropriately skilled Head of Digital in charge of the services currently provided by both PICT and WIS, we believe that a plan could be agreed quickly. We believe that a single figure would also be able to provide the reassurances that the House of Lords requires that their distinct voice and needs would not be ignored.

Merging the website and the intranet

Visit any major website today and you will find that both entirely public and entirely private information is all served from the same technology platform. Using what are known as 'permissions', modern websites expose different content and services dependent on what the logged-in user is entitled to see.

Parliament's website and intranet should, over time, follow this model, and the formal separation between website and intranet should be collapsed. This would save on doubled-up effort, prevent content from getting out of sync, and it would bring higher design and content-authoring standards to the intranet, increasing its usefulness for Parliamentary staff. It is not a major or an urgent change, but it is symbolic of how in 2014 'everything is the internet', and represents why structures should change to follow suit.

Next Steps

We would like to meet to discuss the implications of this report.