



The Speaker

The House of Commons and the pandemic:

How the House kept on functioning
in the face of Covid-19



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Foreword from the Speaker



Colleagues from across the House rose to the challenge to ensure the House could continue to function.

The onset of the pandemic not only overturned a way of working that has kept the House of Commons functioning for more than 700 years – but in many ways, it forced the organisation to become more resilient.

As the country went into lockdown in March 2020, House authorities worked around the clock to ensure that the Commons could continue to function while still ensuring social distancing was maintained and minimising the need for large number of people to be on the Estate.

I am just so impressed at how everyone rose to this challenge. With great ingenuity, the in-house Broadcasting Unit, working with the Clerks, introduced hybrid proceedings, which allowed most MPs to join by video link, with only 50 people allowed in the Chamber under social distancing rules. The Parliamentary Digital Service worked flat out on the development of remote voting – which helped the House through the height of the initial crisis – before we moved to the current system of pass-reader voting. While no-one could have anticipated the changes that have had to be made to our lives and ways of working to see the House through this pandemic, the one positive that can be taken away is that the organisation is better prepared for an emergency of this type than ever before.

It is still too early to know what the long-term impact of the pandemic will be on our procedures but I want to pay an enormous tribute to everyone in the Parliamentary village who ensured we kept the show on the road throughout these tremendously difficult and challenging times.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Hodge'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'A' and 'H'.



Introduction: Setting the scene

The House of Commons is at the very heart of the country’s political and democratic life. It is far more than just a collection of buildings – it is a living, breathing, vibrant community where decisions are made that impact upon the whole nation. Colleagues in all areas of work, from procedural experts to caterers, from mechanics to politicians plays a key role to ensure it functions. At its peak there can be well over 3,000 people in and around the Estate at any one time.



The House of Commons at full, lively, capacity, just weeks before the country was plunged into lockdown.

Just as it was for the rest of the country, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic was a shock to the system like no other. Thursday 23 January, shortly before 11:30 am, was when the word “coronavirus” is first recorded

in Hansard as being spoken in the Commons. Exactly two months later the “stay at home” announcement was made, and the House passed emergency legislation for the country to deal with the rapidly deepening public health crisis.

The House of Commons Chamber is a relatively small space which at key moments – including during many of the preceding three years – is packed to the rafters. So the sudden handbrake turn towards ensuring the Chamber was socially distanced, while also ensuring it could scrutinise an issue of such unprecedented gravity, was a huge logistical and procedural challenge.



The initial response

The advent of the pandemic meant that the UK Parliament, along with other legislatures all over the world, had fundamentally to re-assess its working practices and the procedures that underpin them.

As coronavirus became a daily part of the national conversation a Covid working group of officials was quickly established, bringing together representatives from teams across Parliament – from HR to in-house services, and from procedural teams to communications teams. Parliament has a well-established Incident Management Team system in place, so this was a relatively smooth process, notwithstanding the unprecedented nature of the challenge.

The scale of the pandemic was becoming clear by March 2020, and its impact was brought home to us when a Member of the House, who is also a health minister, tested positive for the virus.

At the heart of all discussions in the early stages of the pandemic, the key question was: “How to keep Parliamentary business running?” On 9 March, a joint statement was made from the Commissions of both Houses confirming that Parliament would not be suspended, and that Parliament would continue to follow the advice of Public Health England.

This approach was re-iterated by the Health Secretary who told the House on 11 March:

“We have resolved that we will keep Parliament open... the ability to hold the Government to account and to legislate is as vital in a time of emergency as in normal times. Our democracy is the foundation of our way of life.”

Although all were in agreement with the need to ensure the Commons continued to function, there was an intense debate about how to achieve this goal safely, which developed as the scientific advice evolved.

To ensure the safety of all those who had to be on the Estate, on 16 March the Speaker announced a ban on virtually all external visitors to the Estate.



A range of signs were put up across the parliamentary estate to ensure social distancing could be maintained.

For staff, home working became the norm for many people and there are numerous colleagues who, due to home working, have not been on the Estate since mid-March 2020. However for many colleagues involved in keeping Parliament running, home working has simply not been an option. From catering teams to maintenance teams, security to our broadcasting team, table clerks to cleaning staff, as well as many other people, coming on to the Estate has remained part of the daily routine.

On 18th March 2020, observers of the Chamber would have noted that attendance for Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) was significantly below normal numbers. Mr Speaker held discussions with the so-called “usual channels” (representatives of the main political parties) about ways in which the numbers of people in the Chamber could be limited, to ensure

maximum safety. A series of interim physical measures were put in place to reduce the risk to Members and House staff, including reducing the number of Members present in the Chamber to about 50, and avoiding divisions. These changes were agreed between the House authorities, Speaker and the political parties on the basis of consensus without the need for formal changes to House procedures. Meanwhile, sittings in the secondary Chamber, Westminster Hall, were suspended until further notice.

A week later and the House rose for its Easter recess. And so begun an operation to oversee what was described as the greatest procedural changes for more than 700 years.

Over the space of just a few weeks a huge amount of work went on to establish the hybrid Chamber, not least the installation of TV screens in the Chamber to ensure virtual contributions could be properly seen and heard. Rehearsals also took place ahead of “launch” date, with staff beaming in to test remote proceedings, as well as a rehearsal involving the Leader of the House and Members. Procedural changes, outlined in more detail below, had to be established as well, such as the invention of the “call-list” system, and the way in which voting took place.



The procedural changes – an overview

The pandemic sparked some of the greatest procedural innovations in 750 years of the House of Commons. It is an area where the House – and Parliament as a whole – led the way, even advising and supporting other legislatures across the globe in adapting to the challenges presented by Covid-19.

The changes to procedure can be best summarised by three key strands:



Development of the hybrid Chamber, including remote participation by MPs, the creation of the Virtual Chamber Administration Team and the introduction of “call lists” (published speaking lists) to manage debates.



Social distancing in the Chamber, and the evolution of Covid-secure voting arrangements.



Growth of virtual select committee sessions.

As coronavirus spread across the UK, it became clear in March that a crowded House of Commons Chamber was no longer an option. Following initial discussions between the Speaker of the House, the Procedure

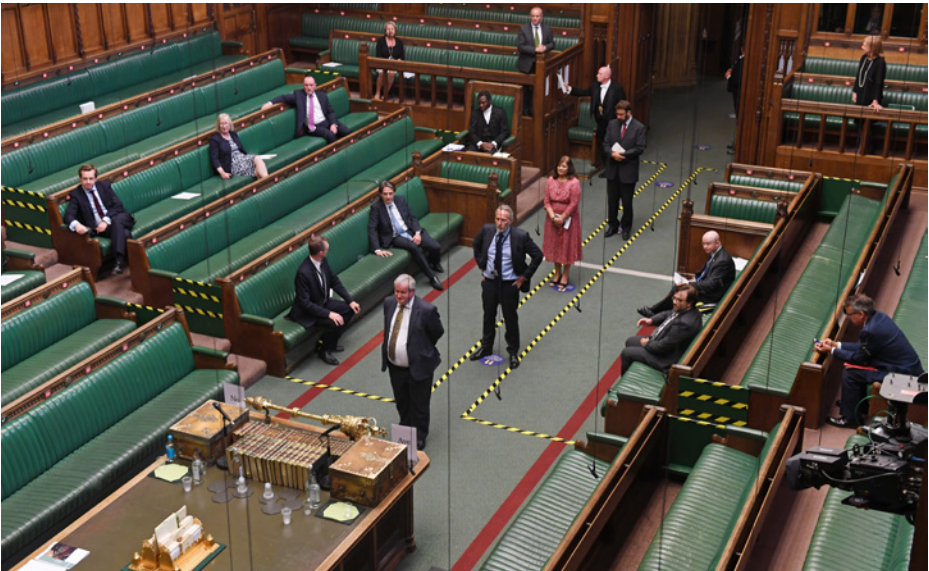
Committee – chaired by Karen Bradley MP – and senior Clerks in the House of Commons, proposals were drawn up to ensure that the Commons could continue to function and hold the Government to account on their response to the pandemic.

The House Service worked at pace to make the necessary changes to our broadcasting arrangements and Standing Orders, and to prepare the resolution required to allow select committees to sit virtually. The House approved this resolution on 24 March, and the first remote oral evidence session was held by the Health and Social Care Committee on 26 March, as they began the task of scrutinising and maintaining checks and balances on the Government.

Politics is a sociable and gregarious vocation, not a calling compatible with Covid-19. The final PMQs before the Easter recess in 2020 was a big test, and the first time Parliament had to maintain a Covid-secure Chamber. To ensure effective social distancing in the Commons Chamber, the Speaker worked closely with House authorities and political parties to limit the number of MPs attending in person was very low, and this helped reduce the risk of infection. As Government guidance continued to develop, many Members were shielding, and House staff worked from home where possible in line with the guidance, leaving only a skeleton staff on the Estate.

The Speaker of the House, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, was clear from the beginning that the priority must be to scrutinise the executive during these unprecedented times. The first Chamber proceedings to be held virtually were the scrutiny proceedings – such as oral questions and ministerial statements – allowing Members to question and hold Ministers to account. The challenge of managing question sessions at first was immense, similar to operating the Commons Chamber as host to a major UK wide outside broadcast – with 650 guests broadcasting in from all over the country. But the establishment of a remote contribution hub, a Virtual Chamber Administration Team (or VCAT), and the introduction of call lists for questions, allowed the Speaker and House

administration to manage question sessions efficiently and effectively. The first virtual questions session was with the Secretary of State for Wales, followed by a historic first ever virtual PMQs, on 22 April 2020. Despite a few all-too-relatable technical glitches – from Members on mute to WIFI dropouts – the adaptation was a huge success, and ensured effective scrutiny could continue remotely. From June 2020 until December 2020 hybrid participation covered questions, urgent questions and ministerial statements, before being rolled out to most other types of Chamber procedure following a motion passed by the House on 30th December 2020.



For a while during the pandemic a socially-distanced queuing system was used for voting purposes.

As the House Service continued to innovate and adapt behind the scenes, it wasn't long before the House approved the first ever hybrid legislative proceedings. For the House to consider and make decisions on legislation, and other major issues, it was essential that Members were empowered to vote in a safe and secure manner. After extensive testing, the House Service

and Parliamentary Digital Service were able to develop and optimise a virtual remote voting platform called MemberHub.

Ultimately, Covid-secure voting in the House of Commons was a story of evolution rather than revolution. After the motion on remote voting lapsed, a system of voting in lengthy, but socially-distanced, queues (dubbed the “Conga” by the British media) was briefly necessary before the House agreed to a new system, utilising pass-readers in the traditional voting lobbies. This meant Members could record votes in a much more Covid-secure way with, for example, no requirement for Clerks to be stationed in the lobbies. To further reduce the need for large numbers of Members to be present in the lobbies a significant extension of the existing proxy voting scheme was agreed to.

In December 2020, as Members faced the twin pressures of a rise in Covid cases and the need to vote on urgent legislation relating to the end of the Brexit transition period, the House extended hybrid arrangements from hybrid scrutiny – where remote participation was only permitted in questions to Ministers – to all proceedings. While many Members are passionate about maintaining the heritage and tradition of Parliament’s procedures, others have seen the pandemic as an opportunity for permanent change and modernisation. Ultimately any decisions about permanent changes to the procedures of the House will – as ever – be for MPs to decide.



The Speaker's Office

As the interface for many Members between the Chamber and the House service, the work of the Speaker's Office played an even more crucial role than normal during the course of the pandemic, overseeing a number of ceremonial and administrative changes to ensure Members can carry out their duties as safely and effectively as possible.

The Speaker undertakes a number of ceremonial duties, one of the most high-profile being the daily Speaker's procession where the Mace is carried into the Chamber ahead of each sitting day. This procession, featuring Mr Speaker, the Speaker's Chaplain, Speaker's Secretary, Speaker's Trainbearer and Serjeant-at-Arms, was made single file, and with all participants wearing masks.



The daily Speaker's procession also had to adapt to the pandemic.

The start of each sitting begins with prayers and although this centuries-old tradition has continued, the Speaker's Chaplain stood in a different location to do prayers in a Covid-secure way.

Throughout the course of the day there were regular suspensions of around three minutes between items of business to ensure the safe movement of Members in and out of the Chamber, and to allow the historic Despatch boxes to be carefully cleaned. Viewers of the Chamber also noticed that Perspex screens had been installed around the seats of the Speaker, Serjeant-at-Arms, Clerks and Speaker's Secretary. The Speaker's Secretary no longer stood beside the Speaker, and sat on the Bench (in a seat historically used by the opposition whips), with a headset on, to keep in constant touch with the virtual Chamber control centre to ensure the smooth running of virtual participation, and to keep the Speaker abreast of any last minute changes to participation.



The Speaker's Secretary and assistants were given headsets to keep in touch with the virtual Chamber control centre.

New speaking seats were added in the under gallery to ensure more Members could speak from the Chamber, whilst ensuring social distancing measures were respected. The choreography of the Chamber had to be altered as well - one of the most noticeable differences being the introduction of published “call lists”, so Members knew when, approximately, they would be speaking. This assisted in maintaining safe numbers in the Chamber. It also reduced the process of “catching the Speaker’s eye”, although Members participating physically could still intervene on another Member participating physically. The production of call lists for every item of business took a vast amount of work from the Speaker’s Office, Table Office and Vote Office to ensure the lists were collated and published in good time before the House sat each day.

A long-standing convention in the Commons Chamber has been that Members who wish to participate in a debate have to be in the Chamber for the first two speeches and should stay for at least the speech after theirs; and return for the closing speeches of the debate. To reduce the number of Members in the Chamber at any one time, this convention had been suspended – in fact participants were actively encouraged to leave as soon as they had asked their question or spoken.

Away from the Chamber, Mr Speaker’s varied programme of interparliamentary activities carried on, albeit with many events moved online. For example, a number of meetings with Ambassadors and High Representatives took place virtually.



Select committees

The Easter Recess is traditionally a time for MPs to continue their work supporting constituents more locally, while House staff focus on more long-term projects ranging from maintenance of the Estate or public engagement campaigns to administrative tasks that simply aren't possible when the House is sitting. However during the 2020 Easter recess, staff across the House Service worked around the clock to transform the virtual and broadcast capability of the Commons. All while broadcasting 13 oral evidence select committee hearings, with more than 20 select committee meetings taking place virtually across the 'recess'. It was the busiest Easter recess in the history of Commons Select Committees. It was this adaptability that was essential in the coming months as Parliament scrambled to ensure effective scrutiny and democratic accountability could continue in the face of the challenges of Covid-19.

The introduction of virtual committees in the Commons can be split into three distinct periods:

1. The **first phase** took place immediately before and following the imposition of the nationwide lockdown, when committees were effectively unable to conduct business due to procedural, practical and technical limitations. Up to that point, committee procedures required all Members physically to be present in order to participate – and while evidence could be taken from witnesses dialling in by video link – this facility was relatively rarely used and (unsurprisingly, given the procedural constraints) there were no technical facilities in

place to allow Members formally to participate in meetings remotely. Initially two rooms were configured to support virtual and limited hybrid meetings (the Wilson and Thatcher rooms in Portcullis House). This approach ensured not only that Members and witnesses could participate virtually but that the media were offered continued access to live coverage of committee meetings and audio was recorded for transcription purposes.

2. The **second phase** of delivering virtual committees began as initial lockdown restrictions eased and Members started returning to Westminster for ‘hybrid’ proceedings. The technology put in place immediately following the lockdown only allowed for the Chair (and one member of staff) to be in the room and did not allow for a witness to attend in the room. In order to deliver hybrid meeting capability, committee rooms were upgraded to allow for simultaneous conference calls containing virtual witnesses, virtual Members, physical witnesses and physical Members. This required additional equipment to be installed in each room, and for the rooms to be reconfigured.

3. The **third phase** involved transitioning the new system into a more resilient ‘business as usual’ process. Virtual committee management and administrative roles that had been assumed a necessity by broadcasting colleagues at the height of the crisis were now being taken on by committee teams, allowing for more meeting capacity and greater flexibility around when meetings can take place. During this phase, the number of evidence-taking sessions by select committees sometimes exceeded the average number of such meetings in the pre-pandemic period, which demonstrates the scale of the achievement.



Broadcasting and digital support

On the evening of 30 March 2020, as a result of the pandemic, the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit was asked if it could support hybrid sittings in the House of Commons Chamber. This was a daunting challenge for the unit, which is normally responsible for live televised coverage of Chambers and committees in both Houses, made available to BBC Parliament and other media organisations, as well as Parliament's online video service, [parliamentlive.tv](https://www.parliamentlive.tv).



Video screens were installed in the Chamber to ensure Members could participate remotely.

However, the team had recently succeeded in broadcasting the first public select committee using Zoom – the Health and Social Care Committee (HSCC) on 26 March. It was partly due to the success of those two back-to-back HSCC sessions that there was the confidence to crack on with the challenge of a hybrid Chamber. As the House was determined to sit in hybrid rather than virtual mode, the challenge for the broadcasting team, working with the Estates team and external contractors, was to set up a “virtual hub” capable of managing contributions from any part of the country and integrate it with the Commons TV gallery and Chamber sound system in the space of 2 weeks. Throughout this period the broadcasting team worked closely with the clerks to ensure delivery by 22 April.

On the eve of the first hybrid sitting the team was in no doubt about the importance of getting it right. Members, both in the Chamber and in their constituencies, had to be able to see and hear each other clearly. The public also expected to be able to see the House at work through televised coverage and Hansard would be relying on good sound quality for transcription purposes while broadcasters were reliant on our output.

By 21 April, a system had been devised and tested by which Members could join proceedings by video link. The broadcasting team, and their contractors including NEP Bow Tie TV, were able to dovetail the output from the Zoom video-conferencing platform into the existing broadcast feed from the Chamber. The team also worked with Members and witnesses to ensure that they were suitably framed in the picture, well lit and audible to other Members on the call and in the Chamber as well on the broadcast feed. Alongside this the Parliamentary Digital Service advised on how to improve Members’ connectivity as they struggled to adapt to virtual working in “lockdown”.

At the same time, the Broadcasting team working with the Estates’ team arranged for the placement of 8 large TV screens in the Chamber so the Speaker and other Members could see the “virtual” Members. It was also vital to work out how to ensure effective liaison between the broadcasting hub, based in one of the outbuildings, the “remote”

Members and the Speaker in the Chamber. New support roles were quickly invented and recruited from volunteers right across the House service to ensure the smooth running of this new procedure.



The first day of virtual participation in the Chamber took place on 22 April 2020.

Between April and December 2020, MPs made over 3500 remote contributions to proceedings in the Chamber. 22 April will go down in history as the date of the first ever hybrid sitting with both the first virtual ministerial answer from Minister Simon Hart and follow up question from Marco Longhi MP. Then on 18 November, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson became the first ever Prime Minister to participate in PMQs via video link.

To add to the complexity, a planned move of the Commons and Lords TV galleries had to go ahead over August – this represented the biggest change in broadcast arrangements since 2002 and took place mid-pandemic.

Since May 2020 work was ongoing to improve the underlying technology of the hybrid Chambers. The switch to this new technology happened over the autumn period and among other things removed the cap on the number of Members who could participate.

As the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, Parliament’s digital team (PDS) launched a major project of works to manage the transition to safe and effective home working. To enable Members and staff to work productively when not on the Estate, PDS took the decision to rollout out Microsoft Teams, and in just over four weeks, more than 9,000 Parliamentary users had been migrated to the new tool.



The development of virtual participation took place alongside the opening of a brand new control centre for Parliament’s broadcasting unit.

PDS worked closely with the Broadcasting Unit to assess the different technical options that could deliver the ability for remote contributions to Parliamentary proceedings. PDS also played a crucial role in the management of the online platforms used and ensuring robust cybersecurity policies were in place.

In early April 2020, the PDS Software Engineering team was asked by the House of Commons to build a secure remote voting application, to ensure Members had a means of casting their votes without having to be physically in the House. Over the course of a few frantic weeks, colleagues

in the Parliamentary Digital Service worked with the Clerk of Divisions to devise a secure and user-friendly system, building on MemberHub, an existing digital platform used by Members for tabling questions. The solution they arrived at meant Members could vote using any device that was connected to the Parliamentary website, as long as they went through the required two-factor authentication.

A huge amount of testing took place, first with staff and then with Members. Eventually over 600 Members took part in at least one test, with some of them tweeting enthusiastically about the experience. The motion for remote voting lapsed after a relatively short period of time, and PDS was then focused on developing a system of voting based on parliamentary identity passes.

PDS also developed a remote equivalent to the annunciators so that Members and the public could keep in touch, see progress of business, and be notified when Divisions were taking place. Launched in the early summer of 2020, ParliamentNow is available as an Android and an Apple iOS app and via the web.



Hansard reporters continued to operate throughout the pandemic, ensuring the business of Parliament was recorded for the outside world.



Keeping the House running



A range of enhanced cleaning procedures took place to ensure Parliament remained Covid-secure.

Behind the scenes, there is a hard-working army of In-House Services and Estates staff who keep the Houses of Parliament running, so that the work of both Houses can continue without disruption. These include cleaners, caterers, security officers, project delivery specialists, those in charge of fire safety, visitor assistants, heritage teams and office managers.

During the pandemic the vast majority of these teams needed to remain on site, and some were faced with the challenge of having to assess and then modify the entire Estate almost overnight, to make sure it was a completely safe and Covid-secure place to work and visit.

Keeping the Chambers, committee rooms and other spaces operational to allow the business of each House to continue was a huge challenge due to Covid. The Serjeant at Arms and his team had to implement a wide variety of measures, from rearranging the seating in the Chambers, to moving the despatch boxes, creating one-way routes for politicians and looking at how voting systems in the Commons could adapt, as well as having responsibility for measures to ensure the Estate remained a Covid-secure workplace.

The cleaning teams were tasked with making sure the entire Estate, not just the Palace, was compliant to Covid-secure standards and thoroughly sanitised at greater frequency. Dedicated teams sanitised touch points across the whole of the Parliamentary Estate daily. This included cleaning door handles, lift buttons, finger plates and key entry pads and entry pods. The teams also increased their routine cleaning of particularly busy areas. Service Delivery arranged for hand sanitiser at all entrances and ensured it was available in offices, rooms and spaces across the whole Estate.

The accommodation and workspace teams were put to the test immediately as they were required to calculate social distancing implications and how their practical application was going to work across the Estate. Every space on the Estate came under scrutiny to ensure everyone could keep the required distance from each other, and that furniture was rearranged if necessary.

The Parliamentary maintenance team, working alongside colleagues in both Houses, were instrumental in making sure that a host of measures were put in place to keep people safe. These included the installation of Perspex screens, setting out and installing social distancing marking and the replacement of hand dryers across the Parliamentary Estate with paper towel dispensers. The team also helped with the adaptation of Parliamentary business by supporting the installation of the ‘hybrid parliament’ (eg TV screens) in the Chambers and the use of Members’ security passes for voting in the lobbies.



Parliament's range of skilled mechanics and engineers ensured vital work behind the scenes could continue.

The catering team continued to serve food and drink for essential workers on the Parliamentary Estate, in a Covid-secure way. This involved major changes, such as recruiting marshals at queuing points, spacing out tables and chairs, regular sanitising as well as more detailed tweaks such as removing items like cutlery and condiments and using disposable alternatives. The team had to become as flexible and adaptable as possible, while introducing innovations such as a new take-away service from one of the restaurants and transforming a traditional dining room for Members into a caf  teria.

Another vitally important part of the work carried out by Parliament was the care and security of its significant heritage collections including artworks, historic furniture, and decorative art objects. During the pandemic, the Collections team had to adapt to delivering this care, with limited presence on site. It resulted in an innovative collaboration with other teams who had more site presence to carry out security and visual

checks, as a way of supplementing the intermittent inspections that the specialist staff were allowed to make.

During the last year, the Project Delivery team worked tirelessly to ensure that improvement works to the Palace and new accommodation for all House staff continued in a Covid-secure way while minimising the impact on the operation of Parliament. These works include the completion of the encaustic tiles project, the cast iron roofs project, Elizabeth Tower restoration and conservation project, the fit out of 64 Victoria Street, the refurbishment of Derby Gate, completion of the fire protection programme and many more projects essential to the continuation of the operation of the Estate. The team were supported by many colleagues including architects, engineers and other design and technical specialists.



Cleaning teams ensured the Members' message boards were cleaned as part of the work to ensure Parliament could run as safely and efficiently as possible.

Of course, keeping the Houses of Parliament running does not just rely on these dedicated teams and those physically on the Estate. Countless others worked diligently to keep the home of our democracy running, from the digital teams to the contractors working on projects, from

the fire safety team keeping a watchful eye on everyone's safety to the Portfolio Management Office and Finance Teams ensuring the back office systems and commercial support are in place. Moreover, the effort required to ensure hundreds of staff could switch from office working to working from home, with all the correct equipment and support, was another huge undertaking and key to the continued smooth running of Parliament.

Everyone within In-House Services and Estates played a part to make sure that the important work of Parliament could continue as smoothly and as efficiently as possible in this difficult and testing period.

Colleagues from the Parliamentary Security Department also played their part, with a range of safe working practices implemented across teams that have remained onsite to maintain security standards and service levels. These have included the introduction of flexible working patterns to reduce travel onto the Parliamentary Estate. Meanwhile, office-based colleagues adapted well to maintain a business-as-usual service while working from home. A key highlight for the security teams was working collaboratively to ensure a Covid-secure State Opening of Parliament could take place on 11th May 2021.



Communications

To ensure that Members and staff were fully aware of the rules and guidance in place to keep people safe, we continued to improve signage previously installed along the Palace of Westminster's three miles of corridors.



The design team produced a range of banners and signs to ensure social distancing was possible across the estate.

The atmosphere and numbers in the Chamber were not the only aspect to change along the iconic green benches of the Commons. New signage showing where MPs could and could not sit to follow social distancing rules replaced the traditional prayer cards on the green benches, while yellow tape set out walking lines and closed off some sections of seating in the debating Chamber. Perspex screens flanked the

clerks at the table so they could continue to dispense essential procedural advice during debates.

The atmosphere across the wider Estate changed too. From the corridors and lobbies to the cafes and restaurants – once bustling with MPs, staff, visitors and journalists, the pandemic meant they were almost deserted. The majority of House staff moved to working from home, and many MPs contributed to Parliamentary proceedings remotely by video-link.



Signs clearly showed where MPs could – and could not – sit on the Commons’ green benches.

With most House staff working from home it became more important than ever to ensure they were as fully informed as possible. A coronavirus intranet hub was established, providing Members and staff with a central resource hosting all relevant information and guidance around Parliament, covering everything from HR issues and catering opening hours, to access information and digital guidance.

The Communications Team quickly stepped up the amount of email bulletins being produced, with tailored messages for Members, House staff and Members' staff. To make the content as engaging and interactive as possible the internal communications team also produced a series of videos from members of the Management Board. Senior Parliamentary leaders talked about successes in their teams, how they have adapted in response to Covid-19 and provided tips and guidance to staff on working from home.

In recent years the team has run a number of all staff "town halls", where House staff could hear from and question members of the Commons Executive Board. These were continued, but moved to an online format. The Clerk and Director General sent letters to Parliamentary staff by email to provide a more personalised overview of the circumstances, thanking staff for their work and helping to boost morale. Similar communications were sent to Members and their staff from the Speaker of the House of Commons.



Mr Speaker held team meetings with colleagues from across the House, using remote technology.

As working from home became the norm for most Parliamentary staff and a large number of Members and their staff, both Houses placed an increased emphasis on helping people to stay connected and work effectively remotely. Celebrating our people has been increasingly important, with the inaugural awards ceremony for staff taking place virtually in December. A special newsletter highlighted the work that has been done by colleagues to keep Parliament running during a time of enormous change. Regular wellbeing bulletins have also been issued, to remind colleagues of the support on offer to them, at home or on the Estate. Many Managing Directors ran regular open Q and A sessions on Microsoft Teams. Two staff surveys were undertaken to ensure the House could capture how best they could be supported during such challenging times.



Explaining the changes outside Parliament

The Commons Communications Office maintained a 24/7 media and external communications operation throughout the pandemic. Just two months before the pandemic took hold, the media team started running a series of weekly procedural media briefings, providing a run through of the Order Paper (the document listing the business of the day). Moving these online in fact led to an increase in the number of participants, with people attending from both Westminster lobby outlets, but also a range of regional and international media outlets.

In addition to the weekly briefings, the team also held a number of bespoke media events to explain various procedural changes necessitated by the move to hybrid proceedings. Delivered in collaboration with senior Commons clerks, these briefings were attended by over 80 journalists and meant media outlets were able to produce accurate reports for the public, based on impartial and authoritative information directly from Parliamentary staff. These were accompanied by a series of factual briefing notes sent out to journalists, and helped to mitigate the fact that incoming media enquiries hit record levels, with over 300 during March 2020 alone.

While access to the Parliamentary Estate has, for obvious reasons, been limited, the media team has worked to ensure that national broadcasters could still carry out their important work of reporting on Parliamentary business. Access to the Reporters' Gallery was maintained, albeit with

strict social distancing guidelines, and the filming points around the Estate remained operational. The team worked closely with the office of the Serjeant at Arms to ensure workable solutions were in place that allowed news reporting on the Estate to continue, while ensuring social distancing rules were respected.

Given the historic nature of the move to hybrid proceedings, the media team facilitated broadcast packages for all major media outlets. This included inviting cameras into the Chamber to record and report on virtual proceedings on a pooled basis. The team also facilitated various special behind-the-scenes reports looking at the work of teams who helped to keep the Palace running, including the procedural clerks, heritage cleaning teams and the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit.

Our photographer was on the Estate for much of the pandemic, capturing the behind the scenes preparation for changes taking place, as well as historic events including the first virtual Prime Minister’s Questions.



The House of Commons social media accounts were used to make the business of Parliament clear and accessible.

The output on social media has also provided a key avenue for explaining how the House has adapted to the pandemic. The digital team have used platforms including Twitter, Facebook and, increasingly, Instagram, to tell the story through innovative content. This has included everything from videos explaining the introduction of hybrid proceedings to behind the scenes photos of the cleaning and catering teams at work under social distanced conditions.

Parliament's Participation team, in normal times a provider of a range of 'face-to-face' public engagement activities, was also quick to adapt to the challenges presented by the pandemic. With tours of the Palace of Westminster and visits to Parliament's Education Centre no longer possible, digital equivalents were created, tested and launched in a matter of weeks – and have proved tremendously popular. By April 2021, Participation's online learning workshops had reached 75,000 schoolchildren from over 2000 schools around the UK. In the same time period, just under 30,000 free tickets were booked for virtual guided tours of Parliament.



Timeline

(based on a briefing from the House of Commons Library)¹

23 January 2020



The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care makes a statement in the House of Commons, informing the House about the outbreak of a new virus in China, the first time that “coronavirus” is mentioned in the House.

9 March

Commissions of both Houses issue joint statement announcing Parliament will not be suspended, that they continue to follow advice from Public Health England and the situation is under constant review.

11 March



Chair of Procedure Committee, Karen Bradley, writes to Speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle concerning contingency arrangements and the first changes to procedure. The Speaker responds confirming close work with the Government and Public Health England, and confirming contingency planning is well underway with clerks preparing proposals for the House.

¹ commonslibrary.parliament.uk/house-of-commons-coronavirus-timeline/

16 March

Clerk of the House provides memorandum for Procedure Committee outlining possible changes to procedure, including remote Select Committee proposals.

Speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle makes announcement in Chamber, cancelling all non-essential access to the Estate.

18 March



First social distancing measures in the Commons Chamber.

19 March

Westminster Hall sittings suspended with effect from 20 March.

23 March



Speaker announces closures of some services, reduced access to Estate for all but essential staff and changes to procedures including socially distanced divisions.

24 March

House approves the first motion to allow virtual sittings of Select Committees.

25 March



The House holds an extended session of questions to the Prime Minister, and the first informal Select Committee meetings are held virtually.

The House rises for ‘recess’ a week early – limiting face to face business on the Estate, but Select Committees continue to sit virtually as House staff prepare work towards a ‘virtual Parliament’.

26 March

Health and Social Care Committee holds the first remote oral evidence session with all – bar the Chair Jeremy Hunt – contributing virtually.

6 April



House of Commons Commission approves a proposal from the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit to enable hybrid sittings and work commences to build a “virtual hub” in 7 Millbank.

10 April

Procedure Committee launches inquiry into procedure under coronavirus restrictions.

14 April

Speaker writes to MPs to inform them of his approval of a 'draft operating model' developed to allow Parliament to continue sitting virtually after the House returns from recess.

21 April



Commons returns from recess, the House approves motions on proceedings during the pandemic and hybrid scrutiny proceedings, allowing for the first virtual elements to take place in the Chamber such as oral questions.

22 April

The House agrees temporary orders to allow remote voting. The First oral questions take place to the Secretary of State for Wales. Marco Longhi becomes the first MP (Member of Parliament) to ask a virtual question.

27 April



First time a bill is considered using hybrid proceedings as the Finance Bill has its second reading.

5 May

Karen Bradley, Chair of the Procedure Committee, writes to the Speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle, endorsing the use of the UK Parliament Now App for voting purposes. The app – developed by Parliamentary staff and the Parliamentary Digital Service in a matter of weeks – was the first of its kind in the world developed in response to the pandemic.

12 May



Remote divisions implemented for the first time. First remote division takes place on a general debate – “that this House has considered Covid-19”.

13 May

Remote votes for the first time on legislation – the Agriculture Bill.

20 May



The Government allows the motion for hybrid proceedings to lapse. The Leader of the House, Jacob Rees-Mogg, calls for Members to return to Parliament (observing social distancing) after the upcoming recess, and for hybrid voting to take place (replacing remote voting). The Speaker releases a press statement setting out a new temporary socially distanced voting system so Parliament can continue to have its say.

2 June



House recalled to meet at the earlier time of 11:30 am to allow time for House to make a decision on divisions. Members vote to approve a motion to end remote voting.

4 June

House agrees a motion to extend proxy voting to Members who cannot attend Parliament for medical or public health reasons related to the pandemic. Motion allows for Members to participate virtually in Questions, Urgent Questions and Ministerial Statements, with call lists for questions being reintroduced on 8 June.

16 June



New division system involving the use of pass-readers introduced.

9 July

Petitions Committee announces plans to hold “e-petitions sessions” so MPs across the House can debate key petitions relating to coronavirus. This is to address a backlog of petitions debates to be held due to the suspension of Westminster Hall sittings and a lack of parliamentary time. The first session is held a week later on 15 July – debating the easing of lockdown restrictions.

17 July



The Procedure Committee endorses plans to extend proxy voting to support the voting system – allowing MPs to use the system when they are prevented from coming to Westminster for reasons relating to the pandemic.

10 September

Procedure Committee formally recommends that remote voting returns on temporary basis.

23 September



The Commons agrees to restart Westminster Hall sittings from 5 October.

5 October

Westminster Hall debates resume – with new limits of 25 people in the room.

13 October



House of Commons asks MPs to limit their staff on the Estate to two each.

3 November

Proxy voting scheme extended to allow MPs to vote by proxy while on the Estate.

30 December



House agrees to extend hybrid participation to debates and legislation.

4 January 2021

New national lockdown measures announced across England.

11 January



House of Commons Commission recommends MPs and staff in Commons Chamber wear masks, except when speaking.

13 January

House agrees to temporarily suspend Westminster Hall debates and business relating to Private Members' Bills.

2 February



Launch of on-site testing on the Parliamentary Estate.

8 March

First hybrid Westminster Hall debates start to take place.
House of Commons Commission approves Commons roadmap out of lockdown.

12 March



First hybrid sitting Friday takes place, to debate Private Members' Bills.

11 May

State Opening of Parliament marks the start of the 2021-22 session.

22 July

Motions on hybrid and virtual proceedings lapse.

18 August



House recalled to debate Afghanistan, all contributions made physically.

6 September

House returns from summer recess, sitting in an all-physical form.

