



Speaker's House House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

## The Speaker

14 April 2020

Dear Karen,

Thank you for your letter of 6 April about possible adaptations to the House's procedures and practices in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and thanks also to your Committee for their expression of support for the measures I outlined on 27 March to reduce the number of Members required in the Chamber. I welcome your Committee's intention to continue to evaluate proposals for temporary procedural modifications and as a first step I look forward to the Committee's comments on current proposals for Members to participate remotely in questions and statements. I will respond in turn to each of the issues you set out in your letter. My letter to colleagues of 14 April is also relevant to some of the issues you have raised.

### *Accountability during adjournment (recesses)*

I am sympathetic to your proposal that Members should be able to table written questions to Ministers, and receive answers, during adjournments (recesses), and made this clear in my letter to the Leader of the House of 1 April. The Leader has now responded to say that he "will certainly keep under review any future need to bring forward measures to ensure that members are able to table written questions after 21 April, in what I hope is the unlikely event that the House needs to adjourn further for any significant period".

As you note, in the same letter, I also proposed to the Government that a forum for MPs, perhaps via select committee chairs, could be established to question senior representative of the Government at set times. The first of these proposals would require a relatively simple change to Standing Orders, modelled on the previous provision for written questions in the September recess. The second would be for the Government to implement in whichever way it saw fit.

### *Presence of Members in the Chamber*

I note the concern highlighted in your letter that any arrangements for remote participation by Members in our proceedings should not be made to the disadvantage of Members who are willing and able to be present in the Chamber. My overriding concern is to ensure the safety of the whole House of Commons community: Members, their staff, staff of the House and the Parliamentary Digital Service (PDS), contractors, and all those who contribute to the work of the House. Any arrangements that are put in place must address this concern, while ensuring the House is still able to discharge its constitutional duties. To this end, as well as commissioning work from the House Service and PDS to allow for Members to participate remotely, I have asked that stringent arrangements are put in place to ensure the maximum possible social distancing is observed in the Chamber, including limiting the number of Members present at any one time, should the House wish to adopt this approach. I have also asked the House Authorities to consult Public Health England on our arrangements for maintaining social distancing and any protective measures required in the Chamber. As you will have noted in my letter to colleagues of 13 April, there is no intention that Members will be disadvantaged, whichever method of participation is adopted.

### *Legislation and other votable business*

In my letter to colleagues of 13 April I note that I have commissioned preparatory work on a system which would enable Members to participate remotely in divisions, should the House wish to approve this course. If adopted, this would reduce or eliminate the need for an extension of proxy voting, as you suggest. I am aware that any change from the House's longstanding arrangements for voting would be controversial among some colleagues, and it would be for the House to take the decision to change them. Your Committee is already examining the existing proxy voting system; I would welcome the Committee's thoughts on other changes to our voting arrangements once more detailed proposals are available.

I note your suggestion that more delegated legislation could be debated on the floor of the House, rather than in multiple dedicated Delegated Legislation Committees as is currently the case for most such legislation. Although this could reduce the need for Members to attend just for these meetings and would, I understand, reduce the number of House staff who need to attend at any one time, I am concerned that moving more legislation – including statutory instruments and bills – to the floor of the House could increase the incentive for more Members to attend in the Chamber, making proper social distancing there more difficult. A balance would need to be struck between encouraging more Members to attend in the Chamber (which would make social distancing more difficult) and ensuring separate DL Committees could be resourced adequately while keeping staff and Members safe.

### *Elections for positions in the House*

I note your recommendation that work be commissioned urgently on a system to allow a form of remote voting in elections for select committee chairs during the current crisis. You will be pleased to learn that House and PDS staff, with the assistance of an external partner, are working at great speed to put such arrangements in place to allow an election to proceed for the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee once the House returns. It will be necessary for the House to agree the required procedural changes to allow this to go ahead, and I hope that the necessary motion will be put to the House for its agreement next week.

### *Future arrangements*

I am grateful to the Committee for supporting my suggestion of a working group to learn lessons from our experience and to examine how to increase the resilience of the House's procedures against future emergencies. I agree that one issue it could usefully examine is how other parliaments have managed the introduction of temporary procedural changes in such circumstances. Colleagues in the House Service and PDS are already in close touch with legislatures in the UK and overseas to share their experience.

Finally, I should like to echo your Committee's appreciation for the very hard work of the House Service and the Parliamentary Digital Service, in responding to the urgent need for the House to adopt new ways of discharging its responsibilities. In a few short weeks, colleagues have devised and implemented an entirely new way for select committees to operate and are now well advanced with plans for further innovation in Chamber business. Their achievements are the result of some great teamwork, bringing together staff in the broadcasting team, the Digital Service, the Chamber and Committees team and many others. I am grateful to them all.

Warm regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lindsay Hoyle', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle  
Speaker of the House of Commons