



Session 4 (a) — Engaging the Public

Session Aims:

This session aims to help delegates consider ways in which parliament's engagement with the public can be made more effective. In particular, the session will provide delegates with a deeper understanding of social media, the ways in which this might be utilised to good effect by committees, some of the pitfalls involved with social media and the impact that such engagement mechanisms have on committee procedure and practice.

Context:

As the opening to this session will demonstrate, there is significant variation in the general public's knowledge and understanding of their parliament and parliamentarians, and the work that they do. Therefore, it is not surprising that there also seems to be a quite low level of knowledge and understanding of the work of parliamentary committees. These factors necessarily impact upon the level of engagement of the general public with parliament. In turn, the level of public engagement must be affected by the ways in which parliaments attempt to inform the community of their role and current work, and to seek their input into processes such as committee inquiries. Furthermore, the traditional means of engaging with the community through methods such as advertising for submissions are no longer particularly effective.

Social media and the social networks they provide are fast becoming the means of communication favoured by an entire generation. Case studies and current market intelligence presented in this session will provide insight into how various brands use social media, what works well and what pitfalls might be encountered.

As parliaments begin to use different means of engaging the public to both receive and disseminate information it is important to consider the way to ensure this is as effective an engagement as possible. It is also important to consider the procedural issues that may arise and the impact this engagement via other mechanisms might have on committee management.

Questions/issues for consideration:

- Do PACs want to promote awareness of issues (i.e. government accountability over finances) or awareness of the committees themselves and what they do, or both?
- How could new media be utilised by PACs to better engage the public?
- How can PACs make their inquiries more accessible to the wider public?
- Are PACs ready for greater public involvement?

- Members of Parliament are especially well placed to tap into the general community. Do committees maximise their Members' significant position within their communities in order to promote public engagement?
- Could PACs use ICT to include those who would otherwise be excluded from political debate/engagement? For example, the UK Parliament runs online consultations as part of their committee inquiries.