

RED REPORT: DEMOCRACY

Part 1: Connecting MPs and the public

**Part 2: Ten practical things every MP can do
to rebuild democracy in their constituency**

www.designcouncil.org.uk/RED/democracy

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Part 1: Connecting MPs and the public

What could MPs do differently in their constituency to rebuild our democracy and public faith in it?

Public trust in politics is falling fast. Much has been done to renew our democracy through big solutions like electoral reform, devolution or reform of the House of Lords, but we wanted to look at the problem from a local and practical perspective. Our aim was to transform the public's experience of their local constituency MP.

In this short project we carried out two weeks of user research with the public, ran a design workshop with 15 MPs, and spent an intensive week working alongside one MP's constituency office in Doncaster. We used an approach called 'transformation design' to tackle this complex problem.



Design workshop with Parliamentary Design Group, Westminster

“Good-for-nothing seat polishers who went to Oxford and stuff”



Glen, Sunderland

So. Politicians are rubbish, right? That’s the view we heard, and in a way expected to hear, when we started talking to the public about their experience of politics and how they interact with their local MPs.

Even though MPs are working harder and harder for their constituency and doing a better job, the public are still very negative. Hardly surprising given the media rarely portrays political figures in a positive light.

Because all politics is ultimately about the power of ‘acting for others’, the public legitimacy of our representatives is especially important. Yet it’s exactly that popular sense of legitimacy that is eroding.

By almost every measure, public confidence and trust in politicians and political institutions is declining.

“MPs should be people you can go to for anything, but they’re untouchable”

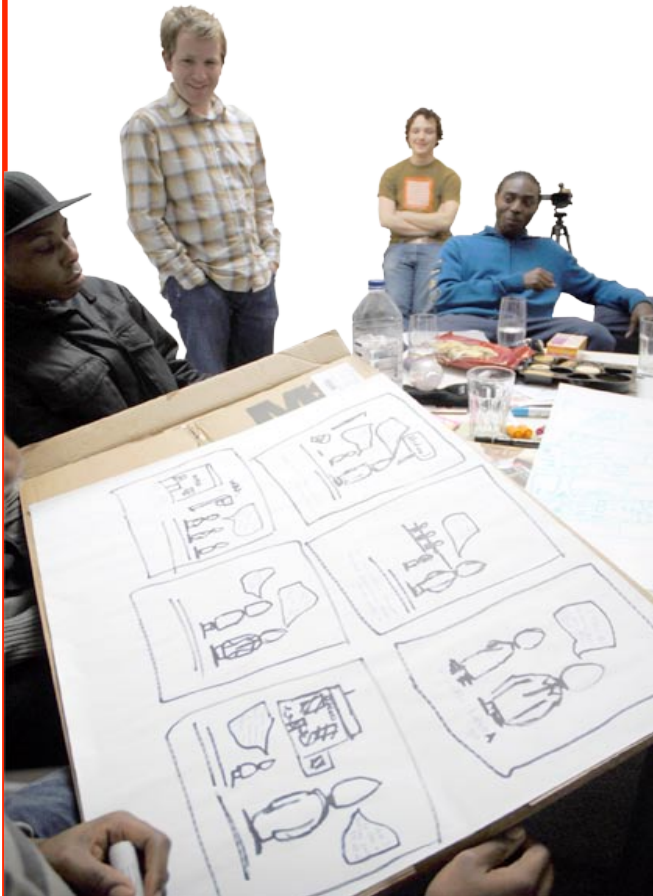
Of course, if you’re interested in the future of our democracy and improving the relationship between citizens and the state, it helps if you leave London. That future doesn’t live in Whitehall and Westminster.

Back in the constituency we discovered a politics far removed from the grandeur of Westminster. Tight budgets dictate that an MP’s local headquarters are often little more than a warren of offices tucked above a high street shop: out of sight and largely out of mind.



Jane & Mason, Whitney

“You only see them at voting time”



Livework team in design workshop, Brixton

We met a public that feels largely estranged from their representatives, and MPs who themselves are unsure how they can better access those they represent.

Lack of money restricts the way MPs communicate with the public in their constituency. Their office budget usually allows them one piece of direct mail each year. So it is not surprising that getting in the local paper is so important. Some MPs have invested heavily in websites and blogs.

Still, public opinion about the efficacy and accessibility of politicians continues to decline.

“I’m not sure I can handle much more engagement”

Long serving MP



Yet, it's not as though MPs or their staff aren't busy. In fact, in constituency offices across the UK business is booming.

Less deferential citizens are proving ever more ready to complain to their MP about anything to do with government, which in the minds of many people means almost anything.

Public complaints about government services – both local and national – represent an interesting but potentially hazardous temptation for MPs.

Intervene and the MP can at once help solve a genuine problem and impress a potential voter. Intervene too often and the MP is likely to create unrealistic public expectations, get swamped by cases, and potentially disadvantage constituents who will not come to talk to him/her.

“We were seen as the last resort... increasingly we are much more the first resort”

Kate Hoey MP, debating this project with Hilary Cottam on the Today Programme, 21 July 2006



Bridget Prentice MP being interviewed by RED at her surgery

It can lead to a vicious cycle where the MP, at once trying to be both visible and helpful, risks becoming a public dogsbody; the perennial fixer where everything but the regular business of politics gets discussed.

Many MPs, once told about a problem, are reluctant to direct that constituent elsewhere, even when it might be more appropriate. The reason is simple: politicians are the last people who want to be seen passing the buck. Yet their own resources are limited. It isn't long before local staff get overrun by casework and the backlog starts to build...

We weren't surprised then, that many MPs feel they just don't have the time to be more proactive in engaging their voters. They're too busy staffing what's become a local help desk.



Expectation is up



Performance is up



Cynicism is up

So here's the catch: we live in a time when public expectations of politicians have rarely been as high, and when their performance -- that is, their accountability and responsiveness -- has actually been as good. And yet, public cynicism continues to increase.

Seemingly, no matter how hard MPs try or however many local problems they solve, they are still not connecting with the public in meaningful ways...

In today's democracy constituents...

...are unclear about the role, relevance and accessibility of MPs.

...are uncomfortable with partisanship and inclined to mistrust politicians.

...do not feel heard by politicians or well-represented in the political process.



In today's democracy MPs...

...are pulled in different directions by conflicting demands that stretch time and budgets.

...are at risk of becoming a front door to government services – talented but harried fixers rather than legislators, representatives or convenors.

...work alone, and do not share or discuss with their colleagues innovations in constituency practice.



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Part 2:

Ten practical things every MP can do to
rebuild democracy in their constituency

1

Set out your objectives for your constituency

I know what my MP is trying to achieve because his objectives are written on the sign outside his office.

I don't know what my MP does.



Many of your constituents don't really know what you are trying to achieve in your constituency.

Take every opportunity to make your local objectives visible.

Focus on issues that mean something to local people rather than vague national topics like 'education' or 'public transport'. Report any progress that you make.

- Print your objectives on business cards for you and your team
- Use them on your stationery and newsletters
- Print them on the side of your car
- Print them on your office sign

2

Build the public profile of your local team

I understand that my MP runs a small skilled team who are better experienced to help than the MP himself.

I must speak to my MP - he's the only one who can help.



Many of your constituents do not know how many people work for you or what they do. (Some people we met thought their MP's local office had 50 staff).

Making your team more visible to the public would correct these misconceptions.

Make it clear to the public that your office staff are often the best people to help them.

- Send newsletters from the team and MP, rather than MP alone
- Feature pictures of the team on communications
- Ensure that constituents know who is the best person to speak to to solve a particular problem
- Assign job titles that emphasise your team's abilities and expertise

3

Make your hard work visible

I know how hard my MP works for our local area.

Only see them at elections and the House of Commons is always empty!



Your constituents don't know how hard you work. When we told them what you really do they were often impressed.

Use your newsletter, website and other communications to remind them of the role and function of an MP.

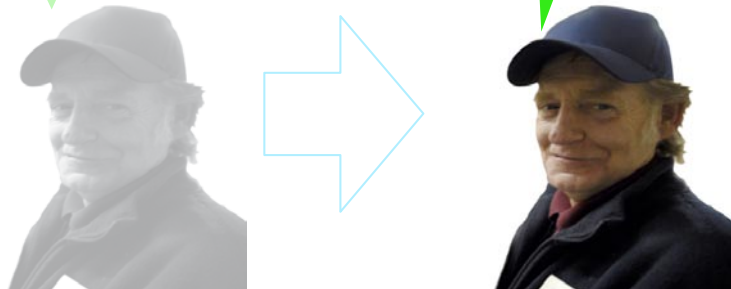
- Publish a complete diary of your team, not just the highlights
- Create a day-in-the-life of your MP photo story or short film
- In your newsletter and online, publish a running list of the initiatives you've been involved in and helped start
- Show a monthly graph online that details issues dealt with and things that you've agreed to do this week.

4

Harness the power of groups

I am not alone and I want my MP to help me sort out my problem for myself.

It's me against the system, and I want my MP to sort it out for me.



Some people feel very uncomfortable speaking up in public or approaching their MP for help. Encourage people to meet you as a group of friends or neighbours rather than alone.

Where possible, try tackling common problems like housing and immigration through 'group surgeries' where constituents can help one another and learn with one another.

Working with groups rather than individuals can be both more effective and efficient.

5

Help your constituents to help themselves

My MP and his team can support me in making things happen.

What are MPs for unless they sort things out for us?



Work with the energy of your constituents to help make their ideas happen:

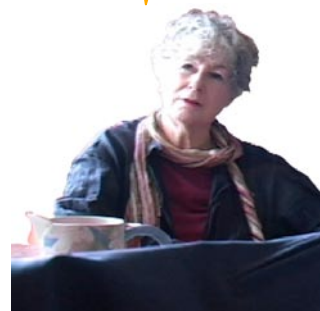
- Provide know-how on issues such as funding
- Connect constituents who together can make things happen
- Facilitate creative sessions to find ways to make constituents' ideas happen
- Lend your support to something that is already happening in your community and is in line with your objectives

6

Meet your constituents on their own turf

I wish my MP could listen to some of the conversations I have with my neighbours.

No one listens to me – but then again I don't like speaking up in public or making a fuss.



Create opportunities for constituents to meet with you on their own turf – where they will be more comfortable and more likely to voice their ideas, concerns and opinions.

- Run street-by-street surgeries where constituents can invite you to knock on their door and chat
- Advertise for constituents to invite you into their space and talk over a beer, a coffee or a game of pool



7

Audit the time your office spends providing different types of services...

I know that my MP does a whole range of things - he's there in times of need - but also interested in hearing my ideas

Why would I talk to my MP?
I haven't got a problem



- Services that will help solve problems for groups of people e.g. group surgeries on popular topics like housing, immigration, or benefit claims
- Services that support constituents to make things happen for themselves e.g. bringing people together to make an idea happen or helping local campaigners find funding
- Listening services where constituents can voice their concerns, ideas and opinions
- Information services that communicate the role and work of the MP and constituency office such as newsletters, websites and postcards
- Services that support individuals who need help with problems such as phone line advice, 1:1 surgeries, and letter writing

8

Campaign for a 'New Hansard' for constituents

MPs have Hansard to report on the proceedings in the House of Commons. We think constituents deserve an online 'Constituency Hansard' to report on the proceedings of their local MP.

The Constituency Hansard would include for all MPs:

- A job description for the MP as they define it
- Their constituency priorities and results to date
- A list of services offered by the MP
- When he or she has been in town
- A synopsis of their diary
- An account of meetings and events attended
- A breakdown of requests received, including petitions and letters concerning current affairs
- A profile that explains the MP's background and how they became an MP
- Profiles of local and Westminster staff



9

Campaign for a 'Constitupedia' for MPs

MPs and their constituency offices tend to work alone. We came across little sharing of best practice between MPs, even within parties. Don't let party rivalry prevent better ways of 'doing democracy'.

Innovation in constituency practice is happening, but it is seldom shared.

We think, for the public good of democracy, there is a need for a 'Constitupedia' – an online and open source resource to share best constituency practice between MPs and across parties.

CONSTITUPEDIA

AN OPEN SOURCE RESOURCE OF CONSTITUENCY PRACTICE

10

Campaign for democracy officers

As it stands, with MPs representing nearly 80,000 constituents, a part-time staff of three or four seems miserly.

We think that MPs' budgets for constituency work should be doubled. But not to fund more of the same. Instead we think that the extra money should be used to fund new ways for the public to engage with MPs.

We'd like to see MPs working more closely with public engagement staff in local Councils.

We think that MP's should have control over a proportion of the Council's budget for public engagement. This budget should fund Democracy Officers who will engage the public on local and national issues on behalf of the Council, the MP and Parliament.

Tomorrow's constituency MP

If you want to rebuild your relationship with your electorate, your local office needs to be more than a fast track for housing, benefit, or immigration applications. You must avoid becoming another branch of the Citizen's Advice Bureau.

To achieve this, your constituency office should provide a range of services that foster local democracy. After all, your constituency office is the only local branch of Parliament.

Some MPs are prioritising more time and money on their work as a local 'social entrepreneur', bringing people and organizations together, hosting public conversations and acting as a hub for local political and civic action.

Tomorrow's citizen



I am listened to and feel listened to

I vote

I belong to organisations that have power and influence including political parties

I trust our democratic institutions

I get involved in things that I care about

I know how I can improve my own life and the vitality of my community

I believe our democracy is improving

More?

For more about this project including: a film, a presentation of the process and the findings of our qualitative research see:

www.designcouncil.org.uk/RED/democracy

RED creates future services with and for the public.

RED is a 'do tank' that develops new thinking and practice through design-led innovation. We design new services, systems, and products that address social and economic problems.

To learn more about our projects in public services, including citizenship, health, energy and ageing, visit:

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The Doncaster North constituency office

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