



# Response to the Inquiry on Voting by proxy in the House of Commons

Written evidence submitted by mySociety, 28 February 2018

Contact: [hello@mysociety.org](mailto:hello@mysociety.org), tel 020 3239 0725

## 1. Executive summary

- TheyWorkForYou.com is a website, run by the charity mySociety, which aims to make Parliament easier for the layperson to understand. It presents such information as how MPs have voted, when they have spoken in debates, and Written Questions they have submitted; it also sends emails out to users who have subscribed to their MP's activity or to specific topics. It relies on the Open Data output by Parliament in order to fulfil these purposes.
- TheyWorkForYou strongly supports the introduction of a formalised proxy voting system, if it can bring consistency to the voting activity of MPs during significant life events such as becoming a parent, and minimise confusion in the public perception around members' leaves of absence.
- An essential part of any system introduced will be the provision by Parliament of a reliable data source recording when a proxy voting arrangement has been put in place. This would not only ensure that TheyWorkForYou could provide better context when MPs are on leaves of absence: it would also be of use to many other citizen-facing digital democracy projects, including Parliament's own website. The net result would be better-informed citizens and a decrease in misplaced blame on MPs for being apparently 'inactive'.

## 2. About mySociety and TheyWorkForYou.com

2.1 mySociety is an international not-for-profit social enterprise based in the UK, where we run a number of projects designed to give people the power to get things changed. We invent and popularise digital tools, many in the field of democracy. As one of the first Civic Technology organisations to be established, we are committed

to building the Civic Technology community and undertaking rigorous research that tests our actions, assumptions and impacts. Our global research work into digital development, civic technology and user-centred design has positioned mySociety as a leading authority in digital civic engagement and participation.

2.2 TheyWorkForYou.com is one of mySociety's longest-standing UK civic services, having been launched in 2004. Its primary aim is to make it as simple as possible for the layperson to follow key aspects of what goes on in the UK's parliaments and assemblies. Some of its functions include: the publication of the daily Hansard record in an accessible, searchable format; the ability for users to input their postcode to discover who their MP, MSP or MLA is; MP pages listing how each representative has voted, what positions they have held, when they have spoken, and more. The vast majority of this content is sourced from Parliament's own Open Data outputs, presented in a format that makes it easy to navigate and comprehend. TheyWorkForYou is used by around 150,000 people monthly (approximately 1,200 of them from Parliament itself), with a peak of 460,000 visitors during the most recent General Election. It sends out tens of thousands of emails on a daily basis to users who have requested alerts when a specific topic is mentioned in Parliament, or when their MP contributes to a debate.

### 3. Relevance of the inquiry to TheyWorkForYou

3.1 As noted, TheyWorkForYou is a largely automated website. It is coded such that it can retrieve Parliament's Open Data outputs on a daily basis and then re-present these in its own format.

This system also allows for simple automated calculations, such as the number of times an MP has spoken or voted in the last year; or the number of their written questions which have received a response. Many of these are presented within the Numerology section of an MP's page, an example of which can be seen here:

[https://www.theyworkforyou.com/mp/25667/lloyd\\_russell-moyle/brighton%2C\\_kemptown#numerology](https://www.theyworkforyou.com/mp/25667/lloyd_russell-moyle/brighton%2C_kemptown#numerology)

## Numerology

Please note that numbers do not measure quality. Also, representatives may do other things not currently covered by this site. [More about this](#)

Has spoken in **42 debates** since joining Parliament — above average amongst MPs. [See all Lloyd Russell-Moyle's speeches](#)

Has received answers to **55 written questions** since joining Parliament — above average amongst MPs.

Has voted in **85.48% of votes** in this Parliament with this affiliation — below average amongst MPs. (From Public Whip)

These analyses are shown so that a visitor to the site can put their representative's activity into context: several data points also note whether the activity recorded is above or below average among MPs.

We are aware that when MPs take a leave of absence, for example for parental leave or due to longterm illness, figures on voting or speaking become misleading: an MP may appear to be underperforming because their activity levels dip during their absence. A number of MPs have been in touch to ask us to reflect periods of absence on the site; in the debate of 1st February, Emma Reynolds MP mentioned our failure to do so as a particular point of contention.

A formal system of proxy voting may help to assuage this issue, and would be particularly helpful if it was accompanied by an Open Data output that:

- Noted which MP was on a leave of absence
- Included the dates for which this arrangement began and was due to end, or had ended
- Noted the reason for the leave of absence: this could simply be one of a number of set categories such as parental leave, sickness, etc.
- Perhaps listed which MP was voting on behalf of the absent MP
- Was output as a distinct data stream, and also as part of the data provided on each vote affected.

3.2 As far as we are aware, and as has been corroborated by our contacts in Parliament, no record currently exists which would allow for a data output to note when an MP is on leave of absence.

## 4. How a vote by proxy ought to be recorded

4.1 We strongly recommend that records be kept in a consistent digital format which can easily be added to the rest of Parliament's Open Data output. The Parliamentary Digital Service will be well placed to comment on what is required to allow them to put such data in place.

4.2 While TheyWorkForYou can be updated manually with information such as an MP's leave of absence, a consistent, automated solution is much preferred for the following reasons:

- A reliable data source coming from Parliament is more credible and more reliable than the addition of ad hoc manual annotations to our site.
- Such manual additions would rely on Members of Parliament informing us when they were about to go on leave of absence. It is unlikely that all MPs will remember to inform us, or prioritise doing so — especially since a leave of absence, by its nature, suggests that they have more important matters to worry about — so the records are likely to be inconsistent.
- If one MP notifies us of a leave of absence but another doesn't, it leads to inequality over how fairly we present representatives' activity.
- Proxy voting data would not only be useful for TheyWorkForYou, but could be used more widely by researchers, academics and many other digital democracy projects — including Parliament's own website.

## 5. Under what circumstances an MP ought to be entitled to appoint a proxy

5.1 We have received requests from MPs that we record not only parental ('baby') leave, but also extended periods of leave due to serious illness. We would encourage the inquiry to consider both these, and any other regularly-submitted reasons for extended absence.

6. Whether proxy voting should be confined to the Chamber or whether it should be available for use in other House bodies (such as general committees or select committees) and/or for House elections via written ballot

6.1 We would appreciate this data being as comprehensive as possible, so we would support its rollout across all bodies.

7. How the appointment of a proxy might be (a) registered and (b) transparently communicated to the House and the public

7.1 Pairing is currently an ad hoc and unrecorded process. The lack of transparency that this approach engenders makes for misconceptions in the mind of the public, who may regard the two representatives involved as having failed to vote. Whether this is attributed to apathy or more accurately to absence due to, for example, baby leave, the net effect is the same: unfounded damage to the MP's perceived suitability for the job.

7.2 Making this information available as Open Data is vital for Parliament's commitment to transparency and for its efforts to make it easier for the public to understand what goes on in Parliament. TheyWorkForYou and other sites which use Parliament's data output are one important mechanism that allows for public engagement with the democratic process.

## 8. Recommendations

8.1 We recommend the following:

- That the system of proxy voting is formalised; that in doing so, means are put in place for all details to be digitally recorded and shared as Open Data; and that these digital outputs are considered a vital part of setting up the system.

- That formal systems put in place to record leaves of absence should cover not just parental leave but also longterm sickness, compassionate leave and any other reason for extended departure.
- That these records include the name of the MP on leave of absence, the start date and end date of the arrangement, the name of the proxy voter, and the category into which the reason for a leave of absence falls.
- That the resulting data is provided on a daily basis in a format compatible with Parliament's current Open Data output, as recommended by the Parliamentary Digital Service, both as a standalone feed and as part of the data on each affected vote.