



Making MPs more digital: mentoring, technology and democracy

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Introduction

We believe that digital skills can help in almost every walk of life. And we have been concerned for a while that some of our leaders and legislators aren't as digitally skilled and informed as they need to be to make decisions about the world we live in and the world that's coming.

So we wanted to see if we could make a difference and help a particular group of people - MPs - get more out of internet-era technologies. To that end, we recruited four digitally savvy mentors and placed them in the offices of four volunteer MPs to see what difference they could make.

It seemed to work. Our MPs and their staff felt they'd benefited from the process, our partners at the Parliamentary Digital Service are keen to see if we can scale it up and we've gathered a ton of learning in this report.

What we did

Between May and July 2016, our four mentors worked with Yvette Cooper MP (Labour), Calum Kerr MP (SNP), Norman Lamb MP (Liberal Democrat) and Matt Warman MP (Conservative).

The mentors worked in both Parliamentary and constituency offices and blogged about the things they learned during their placements.



Our MPs and their mentors. From top left: Calum Kerr MP, Yvette Cooper MP, Matt Warman MP, Norman Lamb MP. From bottom left: Jono Ellis, Leah Bae, Laura Dunn, Jonny Bottomley.

We consulted more widely and met constituents, campaigners, other MPs, political party representatives and software suppliers. We found out where MPs, their staff and constituents felt they could use the most help and drew up a list of their user needs. We found some ways to use technology to address some of these issues. These 'quick wins' (PDF) focused on four main themes: engagement, collaboration, security and delivering Parliamentary work.

What happened

We saw an increase in the levels of engagement with constituents via social media. One of our MPs saw his Facebook posts go from a reach of 3,000 to 10,000 views after including a video for the first time, while another had more than 2,700 responses when he tried online polling.

MPs' staff told us their confidence in their own digital skills had increased and more of them they thought digital technology could help them save time. Their security practices improved, they were more aware of tools they could use to serve their constituents better, and they were more confident about choosing the right technology tools.

In their final interviews, the four MPs agreed their staff had benefitted and told us their own digital skills had also improved.

'As MPs we should collectively take on the challenge of dispelling the myths surrounding politics. Technology is only one part of meeting this challenge. It can help dispel apathy and disengagement and positively encourage political debate - all trends which we have seen over the course of this programme.'

- Matt Warman MP

'MPs struggle to have time to keep up with new apps, programmes or technology - and that means our offices become out of date too and the danger is that democracy gets left behind in a digital world.'

- Yvette Cooper MP

What's next

We're convinced that this kind of direct, involved mentoring is an effective tool for MPs and people like them. We think it should be rolled out to the remaining 646 MPs and to other groups such as local councillors and charity leaders. We're talking with potential partners to see if we can make that happen.

We couldn't have done the project without supplementary funding from the Parliamentary Digital Service and the four MPs who took part. We were also supported by a whole range of committed people whom we would like to thank.

If you have any questions or would like to get in touch, please email digitalmps@doteveryone.org.uk

Part one

Helping MPs and their constituents to understand each other better

Communication and understanding

Digital technologies can make it easier for constituents to reach their MP and find out about their work, and can help MPs to understand their constituents better.

Public trust in elected representatives is low. We found that many constituents want more information about what their MP does and to know when their MP can help them. MPs are keen to keep their constituents informed. They want it to be easy for their constituents to reach them and they want to know more about what their constituents think.

There is an opportunity to use digital technologies to help MPs and their constituents understand each other better.

What constituents said

MPs do not do well in surveys of trust. In recent opinion polls, only 36% of people (PDF) trusted their local MP to tell the truth, less than a quarter trusted them to represent them in Parliament and three-quarters thought MPs have too much time off.

We interviewed constituents and our MPs shared a survey with their followers to understand more about constituent views of the MP.

We found that constituents wanted to:

- know how their MP can help them,
- be able to contact their MP in a way they feel comfortable with,
- understand their MP's views on different issues, and
- make sure their MP understands local issues so they they are well represented.

What MPs said

An average constituency has over 70,000 residents but only a small number of constituents make contact with their MP. Around half of those getting in touch needed help with a specific problem.

Our MPs told us they wanted to:

- increase their reach and make sure they are offering help to a broad range of constituents,
- be able to show their constituents how they are representing them,
- keep constituents informed about what they are doing on their behalf, and
- get help using technology to understand what constituents think on different issues.

We used what MPs and constituents told us to create a set of user needs to inform our work and focused on keeping constituents informed and able to find the right help, as well as taking constituents' views into account.



Around 7% of an MP's constituents make contact with their MP, and half of these need help with a specific problem (* average constituency size ** approximation based on our MPs)

Keeping constituents informed and able to find the right help

MPs' websites

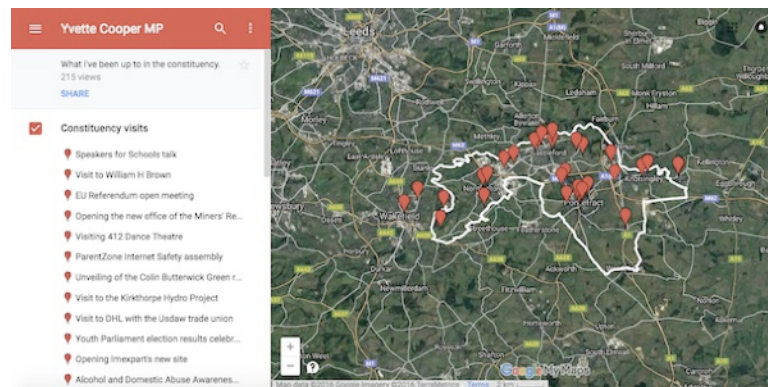
The MP's website acts as a "one-stop shop" for constituents to learn about and reach their MP and was the most common way to find MP contact details among the constituents we surveyed.

It is important that the website is clear, simple and transparent for users. It needs to explain the role of the MP, show how they can help and point constituents in the right direction.

Data and visualisation tools can help constituents understand what MPs do but we found that most MPs' websites don't take advantage of this.

We explored different ways of publishing information about what MPs are doing, including sharing data about correspondence and building a Google map of an MP's activity over a month.

Constituents also want to know where to turn when they need help and what their MP can do for them.



We mapped Yvette Cooper MP's recent visits to show the potential of data visualisation

MPs want to help constituents in need and are often reluctant to discourage people from contacting them.

But MPs receive many requests for help which could be better handled by other organisations. This takes up MPs' staff time processing the requests and creates delays in getting help to constituents.

We wanted to show MPs how their website could signpost constituents to the right source of help, while still giving them the opportunity to contact their MP.

A screen from our prototype

We created a prototype which uses different online forms to share the MP's views on different issues, point people to a better first point of contact (eg their local authority) or, ultimately, provides the MP's contact details.

Social media

Social media has enormous potential for engaging with a broad range of constituents, but MPs are not making the most of it. Our 2015 survey suggested 84% of MPs have a Twitter account but only 54% of them had a Facebook presence. We think those without are missing an opportunity.

But it is not enough to create an account - MPs need to use these tools effectively.

Our mentors audited the four MPs' current use of social media and used analytics to understand what types of content worked well. Then they ran tutorials for Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and created some top tips posters for MPs' teams. They also provided guidance on dealing with trolls, which we'll touch on later.

Facebook statistics clearly showed that politicised posts focusing on other parties' failings were far less effective than positive messages around local issues.

Personal messages were particularly successful. A posting of a family photo on Facebook by one of the MPs saw a reach of over 12,200 users, 342 likes and 89 comments (compared to typical non-personal posts that reach 1,500 - 2,500 users).

And we showed Norman Lamb MP how to use Periscope for the first time for a live EU Referendum Q&A session. The broadcast had 882 live views and has since had 1,800 views.

Email newsletters

A regular email newsletter can be a great way to keep constituents informed and engage them with an MP's activities in Parliament and in the constituency.

Our MPs were already using email newsletters to communicate with their constituents but not regularly or effectively, so we provided practical tips to improve them by working on structure, content, personalisation, images, call to action techniques and promotion on social media.

Taking constituent views into account

MPs work hard to understand local feeling on the issues that affect their constituents but our digital mentors found social media was an underused method of capturing public opinion.

Although some MPs were already using online polls and surveys, they were not doing so extensively or systematically.

We helped Matt Warman MP set up a Conservative party leadership poll on his Facebook page. This provided useful information about his constituents' views, generated online debate about the candidates and built interaction between Matt and his Facebook audience.

We also showed our MPs how they could use data from their own social media accounts to gauge opinion, as well as identify key contributors to debates and local campaigning groups they might want to work with.

This kind of data can also provide valuable geographic and demographic information. MPs can use this to help identify locations affected by a particular issue or areas within the constituency which are less digitally engaged.

Part two

Allowing MP teams to work more efficiently

Assessment and improvement

Digital technologies can help MPs and their teams to manage their inbox and their time more effectively freeing up time for more constituency and Parliamentary work.

MPs and their staff work hard, juggle multiple roles and have to co-ordinate their work between Parliament and the constituency. Digital technology can make this easier.

We wanted to help the teams respond better to their constituents' inquiries and free up resources for constituency and Parliamentary work.

Our mentors mapped the workload of our MPs' offices and focused on ways to improve dealing with correspondence, which was taking up the majority of staff time.

We also focused a lot of effort on helping staff manage casework.

We found lots of small, basic improvements in the way staff used digital technology could add up to a much more efficient operation overall.

Managing the digital postbag

The most common way for people to get in touch with our four MPs is by email, then by letter. Only a small number of constituents use social media.

Better use of social media would allow MPs to be approachable by a broader range of constituents. But staff require good digital skills as well as clear strategies and processes to manage these sources and ensure that important messages are not missed.

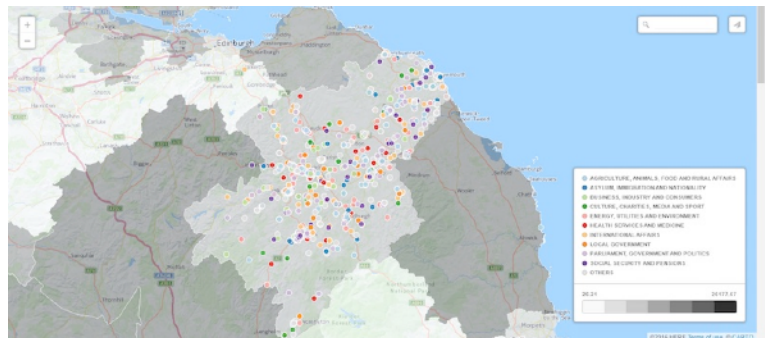
Since May 2015, one of our MPs received 177 private messages on his Facebook page. Thirty-one of these were cases which required investigation. It's important that staff are able to handle this communication effectively so constituents receive the help they need.

Managing campaign emails

Campaign emails are an important way people can engage with MPs and take part in the democratic process by raising concerns over local, national or international issues.

But the volume of emails and postcards to MPs generated by campaign groups such as change.org and 38Degrees is significant. In his first year of office, 56% of contacts with Calum Kerr MP came from lobbying emails (2021 out of 3572 cases between 1 Oct 2015 and 19 July 2016).

During the project, we spoke to 38 Degrees who advised us on what campaigners expect from their MPs. We recommended ways of dealing with campaign emails, depending on whether MPs want to create an automated response, reply with a form response, or send a personalised response to every email they receive.



A map showing the incidence of casework across Calum Kerr MP's constituency

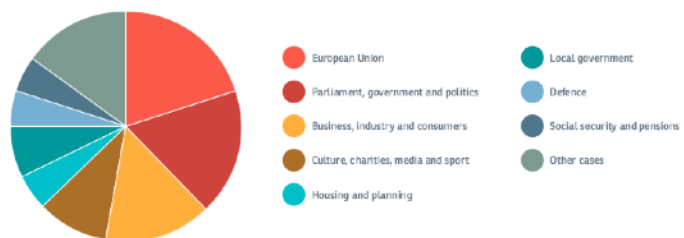
Managing casework

Helping constituents who are facing difficulties sits at the heart of an MP's work. They employ skilled caseworkers to help them do this and these dedicated staff need the right tools to manage these cases effectively.

Casework is everything we want to be doing. We can't always help people but when we do, it's what brings us to work.

– Caseworker

MPs' staff typically manage 2,000 - 3,000 cases a year. These cases range from complex and long-term cases to straightforward work and vary greatly.



The typical breakdown of casework in a month in Norman Lamb MP's office

The graphic above shows a typical breakdown of MP cases handled in a month in one of our MP's offices.

We spent time understanding how each of our MPs organise their casework and mapped the processes to help MPs' staff understand how systems could be improved. See an example of how an MP handles a case.

Although each office used different mechanisms to handle the work, this exercise highlighted that all four teams faced challenges in how to file cases and how they deal with third-party organisations.

There are digital tools to help address these issues.

Firstly, our mentors felt each office needs good customer relationship management (CRM) software to manage the work - eCasework and Caseworker.mp are two examples. This software pulls together documents, emails and letters and allows different members of staff to access them, making it easier to delegate within the team. Other MPs offices reported that introducing an effective system had dramatically improved their workflow.

Secondly, staff need to know how to file or 'tag' their work so cases do not get lost. Some teams we worked with had over 3,000 tags in their CRM, far too many to be useful. We created a set of tags they - and others - can use.

Finally, casework often requires letters and emails to be sent to other organisations such as local authorities or ministries. These organisations usually have three weeks to respond and it is easy for staff to forget to chase them up. We used software such as Outlook Tasks and Evernote to integrate reminders into the process to prevent delays.

As well as improving the day-to-day management of casework, staff can use these systems to analyse trends in the kinds of cases they are working on. This information helps MPs identify broader issues within the constituency and feed this knowledge into local campaigns.

Some systems are better than others. We have asked the Parliamentary Digital Service to help MPs identify the best software for casework and help staff gain the skills to use it.

Helping staff work better together

MPs and staff are 'time poor' and are spread between Parliament and the constituency, so it is important they prioritise their work and know how to communicate well with each other.

'Using technology makes our life easier because it makes us react to things quicker. Constituent concerns are addressed more readily, and actually it gives us resource to be able to work out where the best place would be to spend our efforts.'

– Caseworker

Each MP's team faces different challenges depending on their constituency, but we found ways to help staff save time and effort that we think others could also use.

For example, an online task management tool helped one MP prioritise and delegate tasks across the team, saving time and effort.

Skype for Business and Google Hangout can help constituency and Parliamentary teams co-ordinate, while OneDrive makes it easier to access and share documents between the offices.

Two of our MPs' teams adopted WhatsApp to improve communication, reporting that it helped bring staff closer and bridge the gaps between Westminster and the constituency.

Lots of simple changes can add up to a big time saving - for example, we worked out ways to digitise business cards to save time and effort searching for contacts. We even fixed a constituency office phone system so calls could be forwarded and avoid staff moving around the office to pick up the phone!

Part three

What needs to be in place

Awareness and skills

We found that skills and systems need to be in place for MPs to make the best use of available technologies.

New technologies can improve how our MPs work for us - but they cannot use them unless they know about them.

Most importantly, staff need the skills to put technology into practice and the digital security to keep their own, and their constituents', information safe.

Knowing what is out there

We set out imagining we might need to build a new solution to solve the problems we found, but we discovered there are enough existing digital tools to satisfy the needs of MPs and staff - they just did not know it.

We're struggling to use technology that is two years old let alone understand what new technology we can use.

– One of our participating MPs

The image (right) illustrates the typical technology tools that were being used by the MPs we worked with and what we have introduced. All of these are already available and often at no or very low cost to use.

Tools MPs are already using		Tools we introduced	
NationBuilder		Website/CMS	SQUARESPACE
Caseworker.mp Digital by design	Computing for Labour	Casework/Task management	Wunderlist
PRU			
skype		Internal communication	Messenger Google Hangouts To go to business WhatsApp
		Collaboration & storage	GoogleDrive OneDrive
Twitter Facebook	Social media/Ads/Campaigning	buffer	PicScope TweetDeck GO LIVE
Outlook	Email	MailChimp	
Infographic maker/ Data visualisation		Pictochart	Canva + a b l e a u
Polling		doopoll	

MPs are already using a number of digital tools, and we introduced a few more that are useful

Giving staff the skills they need

At the start of our project, 15 out of 19 staff members said a lack of digital skills prevented them doing more online.

Our digital mentors showed them how their work could change once they acquired those skills. Now we think digital skills should be part of every future job description.

We looked at the last 40 job adverts for MP-related staff posts on the job website W4MP - including researchers, caseworkers and Parliamentary assistants. Seventeen of them made no mention of any digital or IT skills.

Of course, not everyone will need to update the website or manage the Twitter account. But our mentors found that by giving the whole team at least basic digital skills they began working more effectively together.

If all new job descriptions include digital skills, over time MPs teams will find it easier to embed digital ways of working.

We have created some digital skills criteria with a focus on practical digital experience that we think should be used within MP staff job descriptions on websites.

Keeping information safe

No MP or member of staff wants to have their casework, email or social media accounts hacked. The consequences range from mere embarrassment to putting vulnerable people at risk by revealing sensitive information.

For us as an office, it's about keeping our constituents' personal information safe. We have a duty to protect our constituents and help them as much as we can.

– MP staff member

Our digital mentors found that staff were unsure about what potential security breaches they faced. We helped them understand what is secure and where the threats lie.

Many of the teams were not taking basic security steps such as using two-factor authentication or making sure their existing software was safe. The mentors introduced these practices and encouraged their teams to only use their Parliamentary email accounts.

Staff felt they faced potential risks from some of the clients they deal with through casework. MPs have also been subject to online trolling and have received threatening messages. We showed staff how to prevent opening themselves up to unnecessary risk through their online presence, made sure they had systems in place to deal with trolls and ensured threats were reported to the police and Parliamentary authorities.

We have outlined the work we did to keep systems secure and recommend staff work with the Parliamentary Digital Service who run useful security health checks.

Part four

What's next?

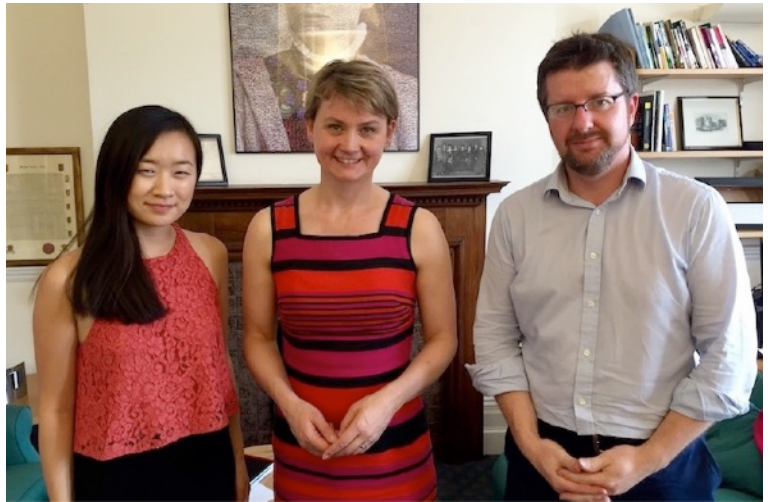
Reaching more MPs

We found opportunities to use digital technologies to improve the way MPs engage with their constituents. We'd like our findings to reach more MPs and others who represent us to improve democracy for everyone.

Over two months our digital mentors helped change the way our four MPs and their teams work, including the way they engage with the public and manage their work with constituents. And we think there is potential for MPs to apply their digital understanding to other areas of their work too.

Now we want to reach more MPs, and in the future, digital mentors could help more people working across our democratic institutions.

If we can improve digital skills, confidence and understanding more widely, we think this could make our democracy work better for citizens and their representatives.



Our mentors with their MPs and staff

What we learned

At the end of our project, the teams we worked with reported more confidence in their digital skills. The majority of staff also thought digital technologies could save them time. The changes they reported are included in our research findings.

There are many benefits to having a digital mentor in the office. Hand on heart, I would say don't be afraid of it. Actually welcome it. It's very handy having somebody in the office who's got a better idea of technology. It was great to see products that are out there, and have the reassuring guidance of somebody that knew about them, rather than us taking a punt at something.

– Caseworker

Our mentors helped MPs communicate better with their constituents. They also helped constituents understand better what MPs can do for them.

The mentors saw how teams were able to use available technologies to overcome the challenges of working on multiple projects across different teams with limited resources and time.

They saw how the skills and security systems they need to make these important changes.

During the two months our mentors were in the MPs' offices they focused on day-to-day constituency work, but there are other areas of an MP's role which would benefit from improved digital understanding.

We started to explore some of these areas - such as use of data and digital for campaigning - and looked at how we can scale the experience with other MPs and democratic representatives.

Understanding data

MPs need to be able to understand data to know what impact policies will have on their constituents.

For example, knowing about changes in town populations is important for assessing the impact of changes to local services or who will be affected by a factory closure.

Our MPs told us they wanted the tools to understand these trends so they can represent their constituents effectively.

MPs already have access to data through the House of Commons Library, external sources such as data.parliament.uk and the Key Facts About Your Constituency document issued to all MPs by Lloyds Banking Group.

But, there is a lack of intelligence in combining these different data sources.

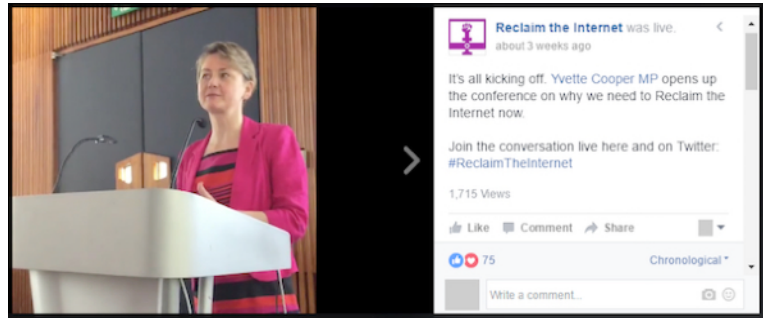
Researchers and data suppliers can use tools to visualise data to make it more easily understood and we created initial guidance on how MPs can make good use of available data.

Using digital for better campaigning

Campaigning on local and national issues is an important part of what MPs do. For many of them, it is what got them into politics in the first place.

Digital has the potential to change the way we campaign. Technology can provide the insight needed to create highly targeted campaigns and engage the public more effectively.

During the project we explored some different ways of applying digital approaches to campaigning.

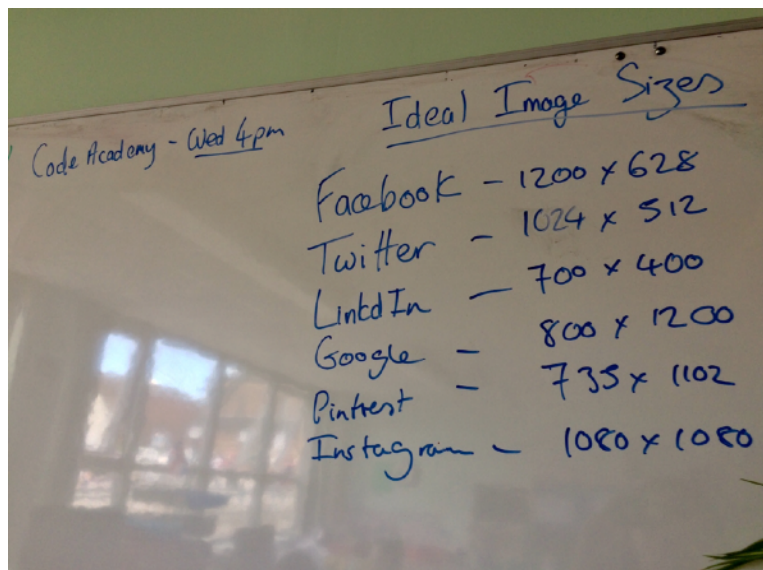


We helped Yvette Cooper MP to use Facebook Live for her Reclaim the Internet campaign

For example, we helped Yvette Cooper MP and the all-party Reclaim the Internet campaign broadcast their conference using Facebook Live. Different campaigns resonate with different audiences. We have captured the lessons from this work and created guidance.

Spreading the benefits

Our mentors worked with a range of groups that cross paths with MPs to explore how digital skills can support others. They helped local councillors with digital campaigning, an all-party Parliamentary group to share information and collaborate better, and a constituency office team start setting up a coding class for constituents.



We helped a constituency team set up their own coding lessons

Scaling up

We want more MPs to get the skills they need to overcome the Digital Deficit. If they don't take advantage of digital technologies, they are not representing the electorate as well as they could.

We have shared our findings with the Parliamentary Digital Service, the House of Commons Board and the House of Commons Administration Committee about the project and want to find the best way to scale up digital mentoring for all MPs.

The work Doteveryone has done offers enormous value and benefit in understanding how all MPs and Parliament need to change to make us all efficient, secure and responsive to those that we represent.

– Norman Lamb MP

To make mentoring work, MPs will need a tailored approach to meet differing needs, based on an evaluation of their team's existing digital skills. There will need to be sufficient time to build trust and change habits, and a regional approach with training taken to staff in constituency offices. We've outlined how we found our mentors, as the right people will be needed.

Each MP's office needs a Digital Lead to champion new ways of working across constituency and Parliamentary offices. And it is important to create online and offline communities to help share good practice and guidance among people facing similar issues.

Our MPs have suggested that other MPs should self-select for mentoring, making it available to all and used by those with a desire to embrace digital for change.

In the future, we think the mentoring model can work for other groups of leaders. These include working peers, police and crime commissioners, GPs, NHS commissioners, NHS Trust CEOs, local authority CEOs, councillors and leaders within devolved administrations. We are keen to hear from other groups who are interested.

In the meantime there are practical steps we believe all MPs can take immediately to improve digital skills. MPs should:

- assign a staff member to act a Digital Lead to champion new ways of working across constituency and Parliamentary offices, supported by guidance communities of practice,
- use advice in this report to start using digital tools already available,
- use our digital skills criteria when advertising new staff posts, and
- work with the Parliamentary Digital Service to check the security of their systems.