

Training MPs for the job: a baseline curriculum with published completion

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Paper 11	Democracy	3,900 words	Rev. B · Aug 2026

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Asked in 2023 which training its members must take, the House of Commons replied that they are not its employees and operate 'similarly to 650 self-employed persons', and that for that reason it cannot mandate training to them. The House of Lords had answered the same question for itself three years earlier.

By **Darach Ó Braonáin**

AUG 2026 · 3,900 WORDS

THE ASK

That the House of Commons adopt a baseline training programme, taken at the start of each parliament with a shorter refresh each year. Every module would aim at a member who can tell when a question has gone beyond what they can judge and knows where to take it. Ethics and security would aim higher, at a member who can spot a compromising approach, or recognise an interest they have to declare, without help. Each member's completion status would be published on their own page on the parliamentary website, alongside the register of interests. Completion would be recorded as done or not done, and the published record would be the whole of the consequence.

In Dec 2025 Parliament legislated that a councillor in England may not vote on a planning application without a valid certificate of training, and that the council must publish on its website which of its members hold one. The Secretary of State has still to make the regulations that switch the requirement on.^[1] Members of the House of Lords have been required since 2021, under a Code change their House agreed in Nov 2020, to complete the training the House established on bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct, with non-completion a breach of the Code of Conduct.^[2] The House of Commons requires nothing of its members about the work itself. Asked in 2023 which training its members must take, the House replied that Members "are not employed by the House of Commons, and operate similarly to 650 self-employed persons", and that "for that reason, we cannot mandate training to them".^[3]

That answer describes a choice the Commons has made, and no legal barrier stands behind it. Peers are not employees of their House either, and their House mandated training anyway, through its own Code.

Britain sets almost no threshold for entry to the Commons. A candidate must be eighteen, must be a British, Irish, or qualifying Commonwealth citizen, must not be bankrupt or serving a sentence of more than a year, and must not hold one of the offices that disqualify.^[4] Nothing asks for a qualification or an assessment, and that is right. A test of competence for elected office is a test administered by somebody, and whoever administers it decides which citizens may stand. The argument here begins after the count.

It touches what happens after. Training a member is worth doing for two reasons, and they are different in kind. The first is that the job asks for judgement across a range no individual can be expert in, and a member needs to know when a question has gone past what they can read. The second is that a member without training in ethics, employment and security is exposed, to liability they carry themselves and to approaches designed to compromise them.

The proposal is a baseline programme at the start of every parliament with a shorter refresh each year, and each member's completion status published on their own page on the parliamentary website, alongside the register of interests. Completion is recorded as done or not done, and the record is the whole of it. The Commons already publishes exactly this kind of record for one seminar.

What the job asks

In a single sitting week a backbencher may vote on the reliability of forensic evidence, question a regulator about capital adequacy, sit on a bill committee redrafting a duty of care, and read casework on immigration status, special educational needs, and housing disrepair. Events choose the subjects. Nobody can be expert across them.

The volume is substantial. Around 3,500 statutory instruments are made each year, of which roughly a thousand come before Parliament in some form, with primary legislation and committee work on top.^[5] The House supports all of it. The Commons Library produces briefings and answers confidential inquiries, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology advises on scientific questions, and the Scrutiny Unit supplies financial expertise.^[6] A member still has to learn that a claim needs checking, and learn which of those services will check it.

The only competence that has been measured is quantitative. In late 2011 Ipsos MORI put a two-step probability question to 125 MPs; 97 answered, 40 per cent correctly, and 77 per cent of the sample said they were confident dealing with numbers.^[7] The Royal Statistical Society repeated the exercise with 101 MPs a decade later. The same question improved to 52 per cent. On a question about what can be concluded from a diagnostic test with a known false-positive rate, where the answer is that there is not enough information to say, 16 per cent got there.^[8] Both samples are about a hundred, both consist of members who agreed to be surveyed, and the two surveys are not strictly comparable. About one in six answered correctly the one item that maps onto real decisions, where a positive test result has to be read against a base rate. Screening programmes, risk-based policing, fraud detection, and algorithmic triage all turn on that reasoning.

What a member is exposed to

The second reason is personal. Members are employers. In Jul 2023 there were 3,672 staff registered with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, turnover ran at roughly a hundred a month, and the staffing allowance each member controlled in 2024-25 was £268,550 for London-area constituencies and £250,820 elsewhere.^[9] The Speaker's Conference on the employment conditions of members' staff found that many members "have no prior experience employing staff or of managing a team", that training on employment is offered at induction, and that "there is limited take up of the ongoing training currently available".^[10] A claim goes against the member personally, and the member conducts the defence. The training that would prevent it is offered once, at induction, to people who have just arrived and are not yet employing anyone.

Members are also intelligence targets, and the state has said so. The National Cyber Security Centre classes elected representatives, candidates, and members' staff as high-risk individuals. In Dec 2023 the United Kingdom attributed to Russia's Federal Security Service the targeting of parliamentarians from multiple parties, largely by spear-phishing, running from at least 2015 to 2023, and the United Kingdom and the United States sanctioned two individuals for it.^[11] The following year a social-engineering campaign reached a string of men working in politics, and one member gave a stranger the telephone numbers of fellow members after being blackmailed with intimate images.^[12]

The defences exist and are voluntary. The Centre offers account registration and personal internet protection services to every candidate and elected official, and by its own count roughly 600 high-risk individuals across the whole country use them, a population that takes in Cabinet ministers, journalists, and academics as well as members.^[13] The state has built the defence and pays for it. Whether a member uses it depends on whether that member happens to know it exists, which is what a required module and a published record would change.

Turnover makes all of this recur. The 2024 general election returned 335 members who had never been MPs before, the largest such intake since 1945.^[14] A welcome and orientation package has run since 2010, a broader induction programme followed it and was scaled back from 2015, and the snap elections of 2017 and 2019 left too little time to plan a full one.^[15] The Committee on Standards said in 2024 that "it is an issue for the House to decide how far it can collectively require its individual Members to participate in such learning and professional development", and recorded that the compressed timetable before the election had stopped it making the fuller recommendations on induction it had intended.^[16]

Parliament has written this rule twice, for other people

Both precedents were set by the Parliament that exempts itself, one in statute for councillors and one in the Lords' own Code.

The Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 received Royal Assent on 18 Dec 2025, and its section 53 commenced on 18 Feb 2026. It gives the Secretary of State power to make regulations on the training of members of local planning authorities in England. Those regulations must provide for satisfactory completion to be evidenced by a certificate valid for a prescribed period. A member without a valid certificate is prohibited from exercising the prescribed planning functions. The regulations must also require the authority to publish on its website which of its members hold valid certificates.^[17] The section carries four things: a certificate, an expiry, a prohibition, and a publication duty. The scheme proposed here takes the record, the expiry, and the publication, and leaves the prohibition where Parliament put it.

The Lords supplies the second precedent, inside Parliament. In 2020 its Conduct Committee reported that 47.8 per cent of members had attended the Valuing Everyone training by the end of the summer recess, short of the 50 per cent target it had set, and noted that the names of attenders were already published. It recommended making attendance a requirement of the Code, with failure by 1 Apr 2021 a breach, and new members required to attend within three months. The House agreed on 3 Nov 2020.^[18] The Lords answered for itself in 2020 whether a House can mandate training of members who are not its employees.

The Commons already holds most of the parts. It publishes a named list of which MPs have and have not attended the Behaviour Code seminar. As at 30 Apr 2026, 637 had attended, seven had not and six were on the waiting list, with 1,222 members' staff having completed it since the 2024 election. The page says members "are expected to attend", which stops short of requiring it.^[19] The approved list of sanctions in conduct cases already includes a requirement to attend training.^[20] The Members' Services Team took on members' staff training in Nov 2022, and its Members' HR Advice Service was supporting between 100 and 120 members a month by Apr 2023.^[21] A register, a curriculum-setting body, delivery capacity and a sanction all exist. They cover conduct, they leave the substance of the job untouched, and a constituent cannot see any of them in the place they would look.

The Senedd's Code tells members that they and their staff "are also expected to undertake training", including refresher courses, and that non-attendance may be considered relevant in matters brought before the standards process.^[22] Nothing equivalent was found in the Scottish Parliament's Code or the Northern Ireland Assembly's. No legislature anywhere was found that publishes each member's completion of a substantive curriculum, so the Commons would be breaking new ground.

Two standards, and where a member acts alone

The minimum ambition across every module is a member who can tell when a question has gone past what they can judge, and who knows where to take it. On most subjects that is enough, since the Library, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology and the Scrutiny Unit exist to be asked. Two subjects need more, because they turn on recognising something in the moment when there is nobody to consult. A message designed to compromise a member has to

be spotted while it is being read. An interest that ought to be declared has to be recognised when it is offered. On ethics and on security the programme aims at a member who can do the thing themselves, and the curriculum is built backwards from that.

Published where constituents look

Each member's page on the parliamentary website carries a plain list of the modules in the current programme, showing for each whether the member has completed it and on what date, sitting alongside the register of interests. The entry is a date against a module title. Completion requires attendance at the full session plus a short written exercise marked only as done or not done, so the record stands for more than presence in a room.

A programme sized to the parliamentary calendar

A foundation programme runs in the first months of each parliament for new members and those returning after an absence, sized in days. Continuing members take a shorter bridging version. A refresh follows each year for everybody, sized in hours, covering what has changed and rotating through the core competences. Members arriving at by-elections take the foundation programme within three months, which is the rule the Lords already applies. Ministers take it too. A Secretary of State who has never had base rates explained matters more

than a backbencher in the same position.

Parliament picks the experts and publishes the pick

The House already chooses who briefs it, through select committee witnesses and specialist advisers, and it can choose here on the same footing. The syllabus and the people delivering it are published in full before adoption. Any member may file a written objection to a module, published alongside the syllabus and beside that member's own completion record, so a member who declines on principle says why in public.

The record is the whole of the consequence

A member who completes nothing remains the member for their constituency until their constituents decide otherwise. The Lords route, which makes non-completion a Code breach enforceable through restricted access to House facilities, stops short of the planning prohibition and remains available to the House if publication alone produces nothing over a full parliament. Restricting facilities falls unevenly, hardest on a disabled member, a member with caring responsibilities, or a member with a distant marginal seat, and the cost of that lands on constituents.

What it would cost

No costing exists. The shape of one is a few contact days for 650 members at the start of a parliament plus a few hours a year, programme staff inside the House service, and external provider fees. The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, a bicameral undertaking of roughly comparable ambition, ran on £1.87 million in 2023-24 including external services and staffing, which indicates an order of magnitude.^[23] Parliamentary time is the scarcer input. The Speaker's Conference recorded that the whips "welcome the idea of providing more time for support and training for new Members at the start of a Parliament".^[24]

Publication is the only enforcement available

An MP cannot be dismissed, and recall requires a specified trigger that professional development neither has nor should have. The electorate is the only body that can remove a member, so an accountability mechanism here either reaches the constituent or reaches nobody.

The Commons already runs the experiment on a small scale, publishing attendance at one seminar on an expectation with no sanction attached, and 637 of 650 members have attended. That is one short seminar on a subject where non-attendance reads badly, and it does not generalise to ten modules and an annual cycle. The Lords case is the better guide to the harder version and points the other way, since publication of attenders' names was already in place while attendance sat below half, and the House had to amend its Code before attendance moved. The proposal therefore publishes take-up and leaves the harder question to the evidence.

Refusal is informative in two places. A member who declines the ethics module declines an afternoon that would have produced a public record of exactly the thing their declarations already claim. A member who declines the security module is declining a briefing the state already pays to give them, on a threat the state has already attributed in public.

Objections

Members are elected, not employed, and cannot be required to do anything. This is the House's own stated position, and the House of Lords does not share it, having required training of members who are equally not employees since 2021. A direct mandate is a reason the electorate should be able to see the record, not a reason to withhold it. The proposal touches nothing a member does in the chamber.

The government or the whips will capture the curriculum. Parliament selects the experts who brief it on everything else, from select committee witnesses to specialist advisers, and nobody argues that those choices hand a government control of what the House hears. The syllabus is published before adoption, the providers are named, and a member who thinks a module has strayed from method into policy says so on the record.

The whips will use the record as another lever. Getting 650 people into rooms is work the whips will end up doing, attendance can be traded, and a member who defies the whip acquires a public gap in their record. The published objection route lets a member put their reason next to the gap. The House service delivers the programme, so scheduling sits outside party offices, and the record shows dates, so a party completing in a block is visible. Under the current arrangements the whips already know privately who has attended what. Publication removes their monopoly on it.

Members are experienced adults and this treats them as pupils. Many members arrive from professions where continuing professional development is routine and unremarkable, and the House already asks members to attend a behaviour code seminar without anyone treating that as an insult. The programme aims at the parts of the job nobody arrives having done, which for most members is casework safeguarding, employment law, and the specific ways parliamentarians are targeted.

The register becomes a campaign weapon. It will be used in campaigns, as the register of interests and voting records are. The answer is that the record is factual and short, carries no score, and sits beside the objection a member chose to file. A member with a reason has somewhere to put it.

The Library and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology already exist. They do, and they are the reason most modules aim at knowing when to ask instead of knowing the answer. What they do not close is a member who does not know a question needs asking, which is what the distance between members' confidence and their scores points to, and neither service touches ethics or security at all.

Better-informed backbenchers change nothing, because the payroll vote and the whip decide outcomes. Whipped divisions are not where this bites. Select committees, bill committees, delegated legislation committees, and constituency casework are, and none of them is whipped in the same way. A member reading a regulator's evidence, or a constituent's tribunal papers, is working alone.

Training would not have caught the failures that mattered most. Most conduct scandals were failures of will. Ethics training aims at a different and more common failure, the member who does not recognise that an offer engages the rule at all, and the same distinction holds for security.

No evidence exists that training legislators improves anything. No jurisdiction has measured whether mandatory training changes the quality of scrutiny, none was found that publishes per-member completion of a substantive curriculum, and such a measurement would be hard to make cleanly. Set against that, the numeracy findings are specific and were reproduced a decade apart, the Lords, the Senedd, and Parliament itself for planning authorities have each judged the same problem worth addressing, and the cost of finding out is a few days per parliament. A course handing a member a technique without its limits would widen the gap between what they think they can read and what they can. The programme should be evaluated, and the House should be willing to stop it.

Where this lands

The Commons can do this without legislation, and it already owns most of the machinery. What it does not own is the decision, which the Committee on Standards left open in 2024 and nobody has taken since.

The smallest useful version is one parliament of the foundation programme with completion published, evaluated at the end of it. That answers the evidence objection with evidence rather than argument, and it costs a few days per member. If publication alone moves nothing over a full parliament, the House has the Lords route in front of it and can take it knowing what it costs.

The councillor voting on a housing application will hold a certificate, with an expiry, and their council will publish whether they have it. Parliament decided that in Dec 2025. The member who wrote it requires nothing of themselves.

Annexe A: a baseline curriculum

Each module is given by title, followed by the ground it covers. Every module aims at least at a member who can tell when a question has gone beyond what they can judge, and who knows where to take it. The ethics and security modules aim higher, and are set out as what a member should be able to recognise and do without help, because both turn on acting in the moment.

Foundation programme.

Reading numbers in public debate. Base rates and conditional probability, real against nominal, stocks and flows, rates and levels, sampling error and confidence intervals, what these methods cannot establish as well as what they can, and the presentation choices that mislead, worked from real parliamentary and campaign material.

Public finance. What the Budget documents contain, what an Office for Budget Responsibility forecast is and is not, the difference between the deficit and the debt stock, departmental limits and annually managed expenditure, and how a costing is produced.

How law gets made and what it does. Primary and delegated legislation, what a statutory instrument can and cannot achieve, commencement, the difference between a duty and a power, and how a court will read the words the House passes.

The machinery of government. Which decisions sit with ministers, which with regulators under statutory duties, which with arm's-length bodies and which with local authorities, and what a minister can and cannot direct.

Scrutiny in practice. Select committee questioning, using the Library and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, reading a departmental annual report, and what the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee produce.

Ethics, declarations and conflicts. Recognising an interest that has to be declared at the moment it arises, and declaring it. Recognising an approach that has to be reported rather than handled quietly, and reporting it. Judging what a gift, a piece of hospitality, an outside engagement or a

funded trip obliges a member to do, and doing it before anyone asks. Worked through real scenarios against the Code of Conduct, the Nolan principles, the registration and lobbying rules and the treatment of all-party parliamentary groups, as the Committee on Standards has recommended.

Employment and management. Legal duties as an employer, recruitment, contracts, performance, and grievance handling, and the support the Members' Services Team provides.

Casework and safeguarding. Handling disclosures, the limits of an MP's role, referral routes, and the psychological load carried by caseworkers.

Security and where a member is exposed. Spotting a message built to compromise a member while it is being read, and not acting on it. Recognising an approach, an invitation or a relationship that is being cultivated, and reporting it. Securing accounts and devices, and enrolling in the National Cyber Security Centre services open to members. Knowing what to do and whom to tell in the hour after something has gone wrong, set against an account of who targets parliamentarians and what the targeting is for.

Information and data handling. Constituency casework as personal data, the duties that attach to holding it, what may be shared with a caseworker, a party or a department, retention and disposal, and the specific exposure created by personal devices and personal email accounts.

Annual refresh. The refresh runs to a few hours and covers what has changed in the machinery, two rotating core modules, an ethics refresher and a security update. The last of those has the shortest shelf life, since the techniques used against members change faster than anything else on the list.

SOURCES

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Pinpoint the sections against the Electoral Commission's current candidate guidance before publication. ↵
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9. Institute for Government, as above. The staff figure is the number registered with IPSA as reported in Jul 2023, quoted here alongside 2024-25 allowance figures. ↵
10. Speaker's Conference on the employment conditions of Members' staff, second report, HC 1714, 17 Jul 2023, para 83. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmspeak/1714/report.html> ↵
11. National Cyber Security Centre and partner agencies, advisory on Star Blizzard, 7 Dec 2023, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office statement of the same date. <https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/news/star-blizzard-continues-spear-phishing-campaigns> ↵
12. BBC News, "Police refer Westminster 'honeytrap' to prosecutors", 12 Dec 2024, reporting that a man was arrested in Jun 2024 on suspicion of offences under the Online Safety Act and of harassment, that he remained under investigation, and that the Metropolitan Police had passed the file to prosecutors. The outcome after that date has not been established here. No inference is drawn about any member's conduct beyond what was stated publicly at the time. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn7rx6z1g2vo> ↵

13. National Cyber Security Centre, *Defending democracy: guidance for high-risk individuals*, and its annual review account of the account registration and personal internet protection services.
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14. House of Commons Library, *General election 2024: results and analysis*, CBP-10009.
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10009/> ↗
15. Institute for Government, *What support are MPs given to do their jobs?*, as above. ↗
16. Committee on Standards, HC 247, paras 2 and 205. ↗
17. Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, s. 53, as above. The publication duty at inserted s. 319ZZA(5) has no counterpart in inserted s. 319ZZB, which covers mayors. ↗
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19. House of Commons, *Members who have completed behaviour code training*, page published 30 Apr 2026. The linked comma-separated values file gives every member by name against one of three statuses, attended, not attended or waitlisted, so non-attendance is published as plainly as attendance. <https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/freedom-of-information/information-we-already-publish/house-of-commons-publication-scheme/human-resources/members-who-have-completed-behaviour-code-training/> ↗
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23. Committee on Standards, HC 247, para 40. ↗
24. Speaker's Conference, HC 1714, para 113. ↗

CHANGE HISTORY

Rev. B, 29 Aug 2026. Restructured and cut by two fifths. The case now rests on two reasons rather than one: the job asks for judgement across a range nobody can be expert in, and a member without training in ethics, employment and security is personally exposed. The second was in the curriculum and not in the argument. A section on the statistics environment was removed as a deviation, a comparison with company directors and doctors was removed, the precedent sections were consolidated, the objections cut from eleven to seven, and a closing section added.