



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Administration Committee

Oral evidence: General Election Planning and Services - 06 03 23, HC 209

Monday 6 March 2023

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Members present: Sir Charles Walker (Chair); John Cryer; Michael Fabricant; Mrs Pauline Latham; Mark Tami; Giles Watling.

Questions 95-127

Witnesses

I: Kate Emms, Director of Member Engagement, and Chris Sear, Director of the Members' Services Team, House of Commons.

II: Steven Bonnar MP, Dave Doogan MP, Chris Loder MP and Sarah Owen MP.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kate Emms and Chris Sear.

Q95 **Chair:** Thank you for coming to give evidence. Today's evidence session is on general election planning and services. The two of you are the great brains behind the induction courses that new Members will—I won't say be subjected to—embrace when they arrive.

Just to warm up, what did it look like in 2005, 2010, and 2019, and what is it going to look like next year in 2024? I think that is a good starter for 10 that allows you to canter through the ongoing improvements that have been made over the past 14 years.

Chris Sear: Thank you, Chair. I have been involved in election planning, on the general election planning group, since 2007, so I have seen most of those elections. I was not directly involved in the 2005 election, but I did a review of it at the time. Certainly, in 2005, Members turned up and the great and the good of the House Service stood in the Attlee suite in Portcullis House to welcome them. There was very little else beyond that. Those of you who were elected in 2005 will remember that there was not a great deal of connection with House Services at the start. But we did have people on stalls and so on, to say what the services were, and you also got a pack of information that was in the region of 130 different documents covering everything that the House offered—you were handed that when you arrived.

The 2010 election was slightly more awkward, not because of the election itself but because IPSA had just started. IPSA were on the first floor of Portcullis House. We inducted new Members, and we also had to induct all returning Members into IPSA and how they operated. Fundamentally, 650 MPs were expected to turn up on the first floor of Portcullis House and find out what we do, if they were new, while everybody had to find out what IPSA did and sign up with them.

The first big change came in 2015, when we introduced a whole new system of buddying for Members when they arrived. I was one of the team involved in planning that system. We found something in the region of 130 House staff who were available after the 2015 election to meet up with new Members and take them around the new Members' reception area, introduce them to the different House and IPSA services, sign up for their pass and so on. The big difference between 2015 and the previous one was that it was all geared up to what you, as Members, needed and wanted, because the Administration Committee in the previous Parliament had put a lot of effort into telling us what was appropriate. It was very much streamlined—there was nowhere near as many papers or documents handed out to Members as before—and there was a whole lot more support available to you.



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We also had a Chamber briefing in 2015, as we did in 2017 and 2019. There was a whole series of training set up post election in 2015, which wasn't well attended. That, traditionally, is an issue for us as a House service post election: once you, as Members, are doing the work that you are doing, finding time to meet up with you.

Q96 **Chair:** Do you think that the word "training" puts people off, and that there might a better way of packaging it, such as "advice"?

Chris Sear: Yes, I think it does. I think if we called it Members' professional development, for example, or something along those lines, Members will arrive and think that this is something that will be relevant to them for the whole time, not just for that particular election.

We refined a lot in 2015, and repeated that, mainly through circumstance, in 2017 and 2019, because we didn't have a lot of time to prepare, so we sort of rolled on the same thing. I will just summarise very quickly the last election. New Members were given initial contact from our contact centre; they arrived and met their buddy, and were taken round and assigned their laptops and passes, given a talk about security and met IPSA, and so on; there was a Chamber briefing and induction sessions—I believe, Chair, you took part in one of those—done on a party basis, covering setting up your office, security standards, health and wellbeing and so on.

In 2019, we also ran what was called Valuing Everyone training, which will be called the Behaviour Code and Why It Matters for future versions. You also have publications such as the Members' handbook. That is what we did last time.

Q97 **Chair:** I think one of the issues is that there is a lot to take in. I understand you ran your own evidence sessions and interviews, Chris, and that the majority of the 22 people you spoke to—a good sample—said that there was just a lot to take in in a very short amount of time.

Chris Sear: Absolutely.

Q98 **Chair:** I am going to bring other colleagues in. You're elected on Thursday night or Friday morning, and you are handed an envelope as a new Member of Parliament. There is an overwhelming sense of relief, surprise and fear, to be perfectly honest, because you've spent your whole life—or part of it—trying to become an MP, and suddenly you're there, and it all becomes very real. Because of the nature of our democratic system, there is no two-month period while one Administration leaves and the next one comes in, so you arrive in Parliament on Monday. You haven't got an office, a computer or any staff—all understandable. But then you get given a computer very quickly and you find that your email address has been up and running and you have thousands of emails and nobody to help you answer them.

I just think we need to think this through. I totally believe in democratic accountability, but switching on an MP's email address literally before anybody has had time to think, understand how this place works or hire any staff inundates them with work and puts them on the back foot from



the moment they walk through the door.

I think we need to think about a cooling-off period. It might only be a few days until people are sworn in, for crying out loud, but if you are a new Member you swear in at the end. It would just give you time to gather your thoughts.

Chris Sear: I do not disagree with the sentiment. It's not something I can commit to; it's certainly something we can go away and consider. And we have a Digital colleague in the room who will have heard that as well.

May I just make one comment about what you said about Members arriving on Monday? Actually, we found in the last election in particular that something like 70 or 80 new Members actually turned up over the weekend. There's an awful lot going on and then suddenly you elect the Speaker, you want to think about your maiden speech and so on. The amount of demands on a new Member when they arrive is massive.

The report that we have done—the work that we did—has, as you said Chair, said how confusing that can be and how there is just too much. We know even from conversations with Members from that time that three months later they have forgotten everything they've been told, as indeed any of us would in that circumstance.

Q99 **Chair:** There obviously needs to be fantastic IT support, but there also needs to be really good HR support. I know, Chris and Kate, that you have spent a huge amount of time building the HR function in the House, and it's really important. Wrong decisions made early in a parliamentary career—I am talking in the first few days or weeks—can really sour your first few years here. It is really important that we help new Members to make the right decisions for them.

Chris Sear: I completely agree. May I just say, very briefly, that that was one of the questions that came out as well in the work that we did with the new Members? Engaging staff, bringing them on board and managing them is something that they want early training on and that we will definitely be doing at the next election.

Kate Emms: I was going to add to Chris's really useful run-through of elections we have known that in 2015, apart from the fact that we introduced a buddy system and all sorts of things that we hadn't done before in order to help Members arrive and get off to a very good start, we also had for the first time a general election plan. One of the workstreams in that plan was liaison with the parties, which has been my workstream consistently since 2015.

On your point, Chair, about the switching on of email accounts, a cool-off period, and so on, that is something for negotiation and it requires agreement across the piece. As you very well know, I'm sure, the point is that this work strand, this liaison function between the House Service and the parties, has come on in leaps and bounds since the 2019 general election, when Chris's HR team was put into place and my post came into existence.



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Between 2019 and now, we've been making great strides in terms of the House Service's connection more generally with Members of Parliament individually, with Whips Offices and with the parties. I have quite high hopes of being able to put heads together on what you have just described, because there is a political balance to be struck between not responding to emails for a period of time after you have been elected and getting that relative peace—

Chair: To be honest, you wouldn't have the emails; if you don't have an email address, they cannot be sent to you. That's the point. It's not about not responding but about creating a system whereby people will literally be overwhelmed, because it's designed to overwhelm them.

Q100 **Mrs Latham:** I suspect it is even more overwhelming than when I came to the House in 2010. In 2010, I don't think we came straight in—I think we had a few days at home before we were asked to come in. Then we had a week of induction; each party did their own.

Because there was such a number of new Conservatives, we had it in Westminster Hall and we were talked at for a week. If you have never worked in this place, if you have never really followed how it works—well, I sat there, it was very hot and I wanted to go to sleep a lot of the time, because it was so hot and tight, and we were very uncomfortable on these chairs, sitting in Westminster Hall. It was completely overwhelming.

I would have liked to have done that and then gone back and done it about three months later, once I'd got my head round this place. In the first hour, I got totally lost. I couldn't get out and I had to ask somebody who was lurking in the corridor how to get out, because I had not been here. I had been into Central Lobby and to different events, but I had not walked about on my own in the place.

As a new person, if you are not London-centric, it is quite difficult to just come in here and start your job, with the emails and having no staff. The hot desking was quite helpful because there were people around who had more experience, because they had worked for MPs, so they understood the system better. I didn't have a clue. They helped a lot of people going through, so I think the hot desking upstairs was really good, but I do think it is completely overwhelming to come in here.

Chair: Kate, do you want to respond?

Kate Emms: I absolutely take those points. I know, Chair, that in the Committee's inquiry into general elections, we have been learning quite a lot over the last 18 months, two years, from by-election candidates and by-election winners coming in. We have done individual inductions for them, so we are learning a lot. It is not as if we do it every five years; we do keep that on board. We have learned this in the last few months. New Members could get no information whatsoever on their first day; they are still overwhelmed because there is just a lot going on. We are encouraging teams in the House service to follow up with those new Members of Parliament a few weeks later when they have their feet under the desk—if



they have a desk—they have employed some people, and they can have conversations about where to go from here.

Q101 Giles Watling: The first thing I would like to say is that the buddy system is perfect. It was really superb to walk through the doors at 9 o'clock on that Monday morning and have someone come up to you and say, "Are you Giles Watling?" I thought about it for a moment—yes, I was. I had this wonderful young person who said "Right, you need to go here. You'll get this. Here's your laptop" and all of that. I thought that was a great system—long may it last—but then we got abandoned, and I am coming to my question, to our parties.

In my case, it was not too bad. I was in the 2017 intake, and there were not a huge number of us. We went into the Boothroyd Room and had people like Sir Charles come and tell us what it is all about. I remember Eddie Hughes and I sitting there and most of it going over our heads, but we were able to concentrate, and we finally found our way. The question is simply this: do you think we leave too much to the parties? If one was a Member of a smaller party—the Green party—how would that work? I think perhaps we do. There might need to be some sort of delineation between the two efforts that go on. Do you think that is the case, Chris?

Chris Sear: That is a really important point. Going back to 2015, as I was saying, we found then that there was quite a lot of overlap between what the parties were doing and what the House was delivering. Because Kate's role was not in place at the time, we ended up in a situation where we were almost expecting Members to be in two places at once, because we were doing something and they were doing something. I think we have moved away from that, largely because of Kate's work, but also other work we have done over the last few years to say, "Actually, the parties need to be aware of what we are doing, and we need to be aware of what they are doing to make sure that we line things up properly." That work is certainly ongoing. We speak to the parties regularly and say, "This is what we are going to do", and we will continue to do so.

Giles Watling: Good, thank you.

Chris Sear: Chair, can I come back briefly to Pauline's point? Just to talk a bit about that overwhelming nature, I think the report we have done shows that that is very true. It applied as much in 2010 as it did in 2019. One of the ideas that came from Members was about running the Chamber session on a regular basis, so that anybody—it does not have to be newly elected Members, but any Member—could come along and have a refresher at that later stage when they have their head round being here and are getting used to the place, finding their way around, doing their maiden speech and so on. That is something we are looking firmly at, so I think that is a really important point.

Kate Emms: Just in case I don't get another chance to mention this, when we are arranging the learning for Members of Parliament coming in—the essentials we need to teach them—we always make sure that it is Members of Parliament who are talking to them—people who actually have



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the experience of what they are talking about. Whether it is setting up your office or whatever it happens to be, we involve people like your good self to talk to new Members of Parliament about the experience that you have had, so that they know it is not just us talking from a lack of experience.

Chair: I think that is very important. Pauline, do you want to come back?

Mrs Latham: Not on that. I want to come on to accommodation when you are ready to do that.

Chair: I will bring Michael back in. Is your question on this subject?

Q102 **Michael Fabricant:** I suppose it is. I was going to ask whether you are liaising with the parties, and you said you are, which is good. I came in in 1992, and I don't think we even got a welcome from the party leader. All we got was a harangue from a junior Whip, who is now in the House of Lords—I won't say his name because I don't want to embarrass him—about the consequences of missing a three-line Whip. I am looking at Mark and John, but from a party point of view, apart from a welcome from the party leader and that sort of the thing—I am sure the Whips from both parties explain to their own people how the whipping works and that sort of thing—everything else could indeed be left to the House authorities, because it doesn't vary between the parties. Of course, every Member of Parliament has their own way of working, but there is no particular Conservative way of working and no particular Labour, Liberal or SNP way of working. I suppose my question, after all that, is this. Following on from the Chairman's question, do you imagine that in the future—2024—the House will be doing even more and the parties even less?

Kate Emms: I think we are going to make sure the right organisation is doing the right pieces of training. For example, the parties might be quite keen to deliver their own media training. The approach that one would take would vary depending on whether it is the party of Government or the party in opposition. Similarly—

Q103 **Michael Fabricant:** Sorry to interrupt, Kate. Could you do media training? I would actually question what you are saying. The message would obviously vary between the Labour party and the Conservative party, but I am not sure the techniques of doing media vary at all between the parties.

Kate Emms: I don't disagree with you. There just may be views in political parties that they would like to deliver their own training on media handling to their own Members.

Q104 **Michael Fabricant:** Have you sounded that out?

Kate Emms: I haven't yet. Obviously, I will take views. I am not assuming anything at all. The other thing that I was going to say on that was—I had a point and I've lost it now.



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In terms of liaising with parties, yes. Social media, for example, is attached to websites. Websites tend to be an individual matter, and a matter for parties, so there is an association with them in my head. Of course, we can do a lot of training. A lot of the training isn't media training. For example, Select Committee Chairs have been offered training in—what do we call it?

Chris Sear: It is just being a Select Committee Chair, asking the right questions and that sort of thing.

Kate Emms: There are all sorts of things that we offer. In each general election, depending on the scenario, the delineation can vary. In answer to your question, I don't think it is a one size fits all.

Q105 **Michael Fabricant:** I want to pursue that. Broadcasting and social media are growing elements of all this. Of course, you are absolutely right that the Conservative party offers a website deal, not that I use it—my own view is you should try to ignore what your own party tells you to do at the best of times, as far as campaigning is concerned, and you might win—and I am sure the Labour party does a similar thing.

For even things like Twitter and whatever, of course there will be different messages by party. The Whips will be saying one thing, and CCHQ and the Labour party will have their own thing separately to what the Whips do—it is the party organisation, rather than the Whips' office. There are certain techniques, however, that are common to all, whether it is how to deal with an interviewer, how to make a tweet attractive, how to use Instagram at its best, or how to use Facebook at its best. These things are not in themselves party political. There is a technique to maximising audience and to being attractive—or unattractive—on television, and I would have thought that the House authorities, if you set your minds to it, could be better at it than the parties.

Kate Emms: I don't disagree with you. I don't want to give you an impression that we have made our minds up on anything at all, because we certainly have not and we are here to be guided by the Committee. I think we should keep a very close eye on the last general election and the next general election because, as you say, Mr Fabricant, things move on very quickly in these spheres. Approaches, technologies and all sorts of other things move on quickly. Of course, there are some acquirable skills that anyone could deliver; it is really a question of preference and balance between the House service and the parties, so it is up for discussion.

Chair: Pauline, last question, unless anyone else has another question.

Q106 **Mrs Latham:** I want to ask a question about the changeover of accommodation. Some of the frustration of new Members is that they don't get their office quickly enough. Actually, I think that can be a benefit because, as was said, using the hot desking worked really well, because you learnt a lot very early on. Having said that, with an outgoing Member of Parliament, such as Sir Charles, who has said he is going to retire, is there is no possibility that he could spend the election—



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assuming he is not steeped in helping his successor every single day of the campaign—clearing his office so that you have got some offices clear? He knows what is going to happen. Those who lose obviously can't do that because they are too busy campaigning, but quite a few Members have already said they are going to retire. We are not allowed in at all. I can understand why that would be if we were standing again, but if we are not, is there any way that could be waived so that Sir Charles and those who have said they are retiring can come in and clear stuff, so that you have some desks and offices ready?

Chris Sear: I have a feeling that we might already be able to do that. I think Dominic was behind me a little while ago—it is certainly something that James will be able to pick up on and make sure that we put that forward as something we can do. I think we might already be able to do it—

Q107 **Mrs Latham:** Would you be able to get back to us on that?

Chris Sear: Absolutely, and the more we can speed it up the better. The recommendation within the report is that we should look at who does that. I don't think the parties are going to give up their hands on the accommodation at the moment.

Q108 **Mrs Latham:** No, but you would have some offices you could offer quite early on.

Chris Sear: Absolutely, and I think about 38 Members have already said that. The more we can do to help them at this point, and in the next however long it is, to sort their affairs out and make sure their offices are as clear as possible, the better.

Chair: The longer that colleagues who know they are going can be given, and the more access rights to Parliament during the campaign, the better. I can't see why there would be any difficulty in letting retiring MPs be here as much as they like, to be honest, if it would help speed up the process. Mark, this really is the last question.

Q109 **Mark Tami:** On that, if you have indicated that you are off, you should look to strip out your office. But having done office accommodation for donkey's years, it is not as straightforward as people leaving and people coming in, and then you allocate the rooms. You have to do a calculation about who has got to give up offices and what standard of offices they are, and then you have got to juggle the people who are here who might want a better office, or the people who were at the top but are now on the way down; part of that process may be making sure they have an office they are happy with. So it is not quite as straightforward as people think it is.

Mrs Latham: It does give the Whips' department a little bit more flexibility to start the shuffling, which is quite a logistical issue. Sir Charles probably has a very grand office—

Mark Tami: It is very grand.



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Chair: Not grand enough.

Mark Tami: The other point I was going to make is that people get offices now a darn sight quicker than they used to.

Chair: With that said, I will conclude and thank you. We might have to get you back because this is going to be an emerging training and induction programme. When new colleagues get here, it is really important that they are not overwhelmed with 10,000 emails because somebody has taken it upon themselves to switch on their email account before they have got a computer and sorted themselves out properly; that they get really good HR advice, so they don't just hire the first person who pops up in front of them but hire the right people first time; and that they are given good security advice about how to keep themselves, their staff and their families safe. I know you have got them, but I think we need to go through the headings to ensure that they are right. The Committee would like to be reassured that the advice given to Members of Parliament will be thematic and logical, and, as Pauline said, not just thrown at them on days one and two. As you know, Kate and Chris, we have got to have a really good, focused induction programme for the first two or three months.

Chris Sear: I hope the report has been useful, and I thank Nitin for leading on it.

Chair: It has been useful. We are lucky to have you both. We look forward to seeing you soon—maybe in the summer for an update. Thank you.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Steven Bonnar MP, Dave Doogan MP, Chris Loder MP and Sarah Owen MP.

Q110 **Chair:** Chris, Dave, Steven and Sarah, thank you very much for coming to our inquiry. We are looking at general election planning. You were all elected in 2019, and we would like to know what worked for you, and, ultimately, what did not work for you, because the House wants to improve that. Can we work our way down the panel for introductory statements, and you can briefly get off your chest what worked and what did not work? We have got 55 minutes; I appreciate you have got lots of pressures on your time every day, so it is really kind of you to give up your time.

Chris Loder: Good afternoon, everybody. I am Chris Loder, the Conservative Member of Parliament for West Dorset, first elected in 2019. I would like to say first that the things that did work, worked very well. I was returned properly about 4.45 am on Friday 13 December. I went to bed for a few hours, and then I came up here that afternoon, arriving at 4 pm. I was welcomed at the door by someone who recognised me and said, "Come this way." The induction, the presentation of things you needed—your pass, laptop and so on—and the tour were excellent. That initial welcome, and the buddy mechanism—we had a member of staff be our



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buddy for the first three or four days—for me worked brilliantly and I would commend it to you.

After Christmas, my experience was that it was as though all that sort of stuff disappeared. When we came back, which I think was on 9 January 2020, we were really finding our own way. That was very difficult. Bear in mind that we were elected and then here for a week before Christmas—it was literally like going to school again. Afterwards, you really felt the pressure. Actually, for those of us who were elected for the first time, not knowing quite what to expect, a lot of the real pressure was over the Christmas period, where we had hundreds of people wanting to get in touch. An email system without any due process attached to it was quite tough going.

I was very fortunate in that my predecessor's constituency secretary was very happy to come and work for me, so I had some continuity of knowledge. But I am very aware that a lot of my colleagues did not have that, especially where there was a political change in seats. The reality was that a number of people came here and did not have their own staff for probably six weeks, if not longer.

I would summarise by saying that the first week was great, but you were left to your own devices after that, which was very difficult and stressful.

Chair: Challenging. Dave?

Dave Doogan: My experience after being returned was similar, Chair. In my election there was a change of MP and a change of party. I got a very good phone call over the weekend from somebody who knew all about my election and wanted to make sure I had got all my travel sorted out. It was totally unsolicited and unexpected; I thought I would have to make my own way to London and take it from there.

As Chris points out, you walk through the door into Portcullis House, and somebody recognises you somehow and ushers you into a very productive and professional comprehensive meeting with colleagues from Digital Services, who sort you all out with your IT. That all went really well. I was buddied up with an extraordinary member of parliamentary staff called Emma Davies, who looked after me really well. It kind of went downhill from there. There appeared to be no cognisance that you would have political activities to undertake as a brand-new MP, consistent with your party, and you were ushered off to do things. That is when the tour around Parliament fell over, never to be picked up again. I am still finding my way around Parliament after three years, one and a half of which was during covid.

There was an understanding from IPSA—I don't know if colleagues remember this—that there was a real hard stop about getting signed up to get paid in December. All MPs are different. I was self-employed as a candidate; I really needed to be paid in December. I know there is not a lot of sympathy for MPs, and it was only a couple of weeks' pay anyway, but it was very important for me to get that signed. I had group meetings



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to attend in those first couple of days. Everything fell apart at that stage, not to be picked up again.

The worst of it all was IPSA. They were as bad on day one as they have proved to be ever since. I picked up a member of staff quite quickly from an SNP MP who had lost his seat in that election and I do not know what I would have done if I had never had him, in terms of navigating the IPSA landscape. I never got an office until nearly into March, which I think is completely unacceptable. I was listening to how difficult it is to allocate offices, and I can tell you that it is really difficult to be a brand-new MP sitting like a lemon in the Members' Lobby and opening your mail on the green benches there because you do not have anywhere to go. That is difficult.

Steven Bonnar: I would echo a lot of what has been said by the two previous speakers. When we first arrived, I arrived with my letter—my golden ticket—at Portcullis House. As somebody who came through the security industry, I was quite surprised that we bypassed any security and were taken straight through to Portcullis. Even in the first instance, we should have gone through the security scanners like every other normal person. If I had a wrong mind, I could have turned up to Parliament that day and done something, so I think we should have gone through security as normal members of the public in the first instance. After that, I found it very seamless to get through the different departments set up within Portcullis House. Like Dave, my bank details were taken off me almost immediately. I was issued with my laptop and my mobile phone, and I had an excellent member of staff in Marie Warburton, who was on hand. Unfortunately, I have not seen Marie since I no longer needed her services in that first week. It would have been nice to say thank you, which I did via email.

Of course, there was such an overwhelming abundance of information, requirements and deadlines that we had to meet, which was quite intimidating. I was lucky that I had a member of staff who I employed straight away, who had previously worked for a different MP, which I found to be quite helpful in terms of setting up the immediate stuff about IPSA and other relevant information. The office situation was difficult. You will know that when you first come in, the amount of mail that you have is overwhelming. Not having a good office space to go through that, and to work through it accordingly, meant that for the first few months we were always chasing our tail just getting initial correspondence addressed. I felt that the office situation did not do anything to assist with that.

Sarah Owen: Like everybody else who has spoken, I came in after the 2019 election. I was seven and a half months pregnant when I stepped foot through these doors, so there was a sense of urgency for me already, knowing that I needed to get my office set up as quickly as possible and that I needed reliable staff who could be trusted while I was having a baby. But one of the things that was a real issue was, as Stephen said, about mail. I came into this job with eyes wide open.



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I knew what was expected of me and I knew some of the parliamentary processes that we would be working within. I understood all those, and I think anybody who puts themselves forward for this job should have some understanding of that already. What I did not have was any of the tools that enable MPs to do those jobs. Particularly when you first come in, you know that there will be constituents who need your support and help. You have no one to help you go through any of those emails—and it is not just emails; people expect you to be able to answer all your social media content, and to be up and running.

There is a mismatch between the reality of what happens when somebody gets elected to be an MP and what the public expect. They think we are furnished with grand offices—some, Sir Charles, might have one. They also think that we have a suite of people to help us, service us and work with us, but from day one we do not have that. You are trying to do all of these different things while also suddenly learning how to be a manager and a good employer, while reeling from the fact that you have just gone through an election.

The support that we had was great from the Whips—I am not just saying that because mine is sat there—and the PLP offered Chamber dates; there was training on how to operate in the Chamber, and on parliamentary language and those sorts of things, which was really helpful and really good. The security we had was almost immediate. I remember being bombarded with security information, and it was pretty hard going. It was, “You will receive death threats. This is what will happen. You will receive rape threats. This is what will happen.”

Having been an MP for three years and given the changing landscape of things, what would be really useful to add is information on how we can stay safe online, and avoid phishing—technological attacks and cyber-attacks—and on how we work and who we go to if we are worried about covert intelligence and commercial lobbying. Those sorts of things were not given to us. It was about the very hard and quite scary truth of public life, which was what we needed, but we could develop that a lot further into what we actually face in our day-to-day life.

Q111 **Chair:** Can I ask a question before I open it to the floor? I think all of you mentioned that you had a good House buddy—somebody from the House staff who worked with you. Would you have benefited from having that buddy stick around for six months—someone you could just call?

Sarah Owen: I think I would have benefited from having a political buddy, not just a logistical buddy, which is what we got—and they were fantastic.

Q112 **Chair:** Would you have liked both?

Sarah Owen: I would have liked both; the more friends the better.

Dave Doogan: If I remember rightly, I don’t think there was a door-slammings scenario. I think you could get back in touch with them, but given the treadmill and the stuff coming at you from all angles, that was



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not a priority. Not knowing your way around the parliamentary estate is not a problem until it's too late. You only know how much you don't know your way around when you realise how often you get lost. That is a problem. It should be a wee bit more formal: these are the boxes that your buddy and you together have to tick, and until you have ticked them all your buddy will be getting back in touch with you to make sure that is done—because they probably know better than you.

Chair: Thank you for those introductory opening statements. Pauline?

Q113 **Mrs Latham:** I think, Dave, it was you who said that you had a problem with IPSA from day one. I have had a problem with IPSA from day one since 2010. Do you think there was anything that could have been done by IPSA or the House authorities to make it much easier for you and help you through that absolute minefield that continues the whole time you are here?

Dave Doogan: I think it will be difficult to come up with a satisfactory induction for the IPSA regime. It is one of those regimes where you have to get a few black eyes and some scars before you really get to grips with what a dreadful situation it is. But I remember—in answer to your question—one particularly appalling thing. IPSA had a box to tick. You needed to sit down with an IPSA person, and the IPSA person went through a machine gun of screenshots that showed different screengrabs of the various dysfunctional parts of their website, and that was it ticked. They said some fairly straightforward things that you had to agree you understood, and that was you qualified to navigate IPSA. It's a joke. As I say, if I never got somebody who was literate in IPSA Online as my office manager within a couple of weeks, I genuinely do not know what would have happened.

Chair: Okay. Giles, do you want to come in briefly on this?

Q114 **Giles Watling:** Very quickly. My experience when I came in in 2017 was that I was assigned an IPSA person—I still have problems with IPSA, by the way—who was a lovely lady called Heather, who held my hand through the whole process. You, I understand, did not get that. She told me what was going on and she was on the end of the phone if I needed her at any moment. If I was looking at a website and saying, "I don't get this", she would answer. It was quite a positive experience, so I am surprised and shocked.

Chris Loder: I am very happy to respond to that. My experience was exactly that. The worst point for me was later in 2020—I would say it was June time—when I was personally owed by IPSA just under £10,000. The real issue around this is the total inability to be able to escalate within IPSA to get support.

The only way I could actually get a solution over the summer was to write to the chief executive, with a copy to the Speaker and the Chief Whip. When the outgoing chief executive rang me on receipt of that, he basically felt powerless to do anything. He said, "I am doing all I can, I am doing all I can", and I thought, "Goodness me. You are the chief executive of this



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organisation, which is arguably one of the most powerful organisations in the country.”

My experiences of IPSA now are much better and, as Dave said, I think the only reason we have got to that point is because we have been through a particularly turbulent and bumpy period. No one should have to experience the extent of how difficult it is—certainly to the extent that I did, where there is just a fundamental breakdown in the process where, because they were not being approved, you could not get that response.

On the ability to escalate, I think with IPSA you have an account manager now, which we did not have before, but even if that account manager is not able to fix your problem, there is nowhere else to go unless you go right to the top.

Q115 **Chair:** We have heard from Dave and Chris on IPSA. Sarah and Steven, what was your experience of IPSA when you arrived?

Steven Bonnar: Much like my two colleagues, I think when IPSA have a problem and they need you to fix it, they are very vocal and quick and they want it fixed straightaway, or they will be reporting you and they will be reporting that in the press and things like that.

However, when you have an issue that you need addressed, it is very difficult to get the right person on the phone. In the beginning, we had a personal relationship with the account manager, but there seems to be a high turnover of staff in IPSA. You are building up that relationship with your account manager, and a month or so later they are no longer employed by the company, and you have to start up again and go through everything again.

Obviously, you build up an understanding of things that you have coming across the line that your account manager may be aware of. When you get a fresh person on the phone, that can be difficult. You have to go back through it for them again and through the process again. I found that quite frustrating.

Sarah Owen: It is an incredibly frustrating process. Something that should be helping you to be able to do your job—and do it well and fairly, within the rules—is actually often a hindrance in terms of the level of communication and the way we communicate.

Quite often, if I have an issue regarding IPSA, I do not have a personal person whose number I can just phone up. You have to phone up a number or you book a timeslot and somebody calls you. If you, by chance, miss that or do not get your phone out of your bag quickly enough, that is it. You do not get a number to call back; they just leave a voicemail.

Q116 **Chair:** Is this still your experience?

Sarah Owen: It is still my experience. I do not feel it is a properly grown-up relationship in that respect. It is not something you would expect in any other professional working organisation.



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The other part of it is that I am quite technologically savvy, but the IPSA website and the backend of it is a minefield. It is a fully-fledged HR management system, which is not useful for our needs, to the extent that it does not even fit on the one page for me on my laptop. When you are now trying to navigate the backend of that system and how to input sick leave or see how much you have left in your staffing budget, for example, it is incredibly difficult to navigate.

I think we either need a direct line with somebody who can navigate that system for us, or we need a better system that is clearer for us to use.

Q117 John Cryer: In theory, every MP should have an account manager. From what you are saying, Sarah—the others have also indicated this—that system does not seem to be operating. Am I right?

Chris Loder: I think we are talking about the beginning—on coming in. The account management system is now in place. Whether it works or not is another matter. It works for me, but the point is that when it came in, it wasn't there and it still has its issues today.

Q118 John Cryer: So it works for you, but perhaps not—

Chris Loder: Broadly, it does, but the only reason it works for us is because we have had to tailor how we operate as an office to the issues that Sarah has just articulated. That shouldn't really be the case. If I am taking an urgent phone call and I miss a call from IPSA—in fairness, more recently, if I miss a call, they will ring back again, but only once. Then you have to go through the whole process again. If you have a problem, that's difficult.

Dave Doogan: As challenging as the IPSA regime is, many of us get into a sort of steady state—a steady drumbeat—of transactions, with the same transactions every month, so it isn't very problematic now; it is when something changes that things are problematic.

My experience over the last three years of staff changes and things like that is that they go pretty smoothly. But there is something about when you come in. I don't think IPSA should be sympathetic, but they should be understanding that you have no idea what they are talking about, and their system is, to say the least, clunky. It is certainly not intuitive. For a lot of brand new MPs, there is nobody to help with that—certainly not IPSA; they are not going to help. That is the challenge.

Chris Loder: One of the things that I think is probably improper in all this is that the complexity of the IPSA system really drives who you recruit, at the very beginning, based on their competence to use such an enormously complicated system, because you don't really have the time nor the space to have someone learn it. That shouldn't really happen. And if you miss some deadlines, particularly reporting deadlines, you yourself are in a very vulnerable position.

Chair: John, I am not going to cut you off; I noticed that Sarah nodded in agreement with Chris, and Steven wants to come in on this, before we



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move on.

Sarah Owen: That is a very good point. If IPSA are not going to equip MPs with the tools to be able to do this, they should at least equip staff to be able to. I didn't get elected to become a HR manager, and that is essentially what you do from day one, and what IPSA expects you to do, and to be able to function in. There needs to be much more training for staff, parliamentary-wise, otherwise we will be in the situation that Chris just explained—whichever understands the workings of IPSA will be at the front of the queue when it comes to hiring, and that shouldn't be a criteria that cuts other people out.

Steven Bonnar: To put it in context, the amount of information we get as new MPs when you come in the door adds to the problem. You need such a detailed understanding of the IPSA portal and how to operate it. When you are getting the information from IPSA about that, you are also getting information from the House services and the Speaker's Office on how you conduct yourself in the Chamber—there is so much information coming forward that the real important stuff is being lost at the beginning. That is why you end up chasing your tail with IPSA. They may have given you the information, but it is one line of information among trails and trails of information we are receiving.

Mark Tami: I've been here 20-odd years and I find it still problematical now. The whole IPSA system must be very difficult when you first come, with everything else.

The fundamental problem with it is—somebody in IPSA who I won't name explained this—that it is actually a system that someone who does people's expenses would use; it is not a system that you would expect individuals to fill out their expenses in, because it is so complex. That is one of the fundamental problems with it. And it does not have any flexibility. I do not see the relevance of some of the questions they ask you, but you have to fill them out, otherwise it fires it back at you. All this, on top of everything else when you come in as a new MP, must just be, well—

Q119 **Chair:** Before I bring Michael in, can I just ask—because it is very important that we are fair to organisations that are not here to answer for themselves—whether you think anything has improved in the IPSA service during the three years you have been here? I will start with Sarah and quickly rattle down the line.

Sarah Owen: I wish you had come to me last, because unfortunately I cannot think of anything at the moment.

Steven Bonnar: My knowledge of navigating the scheme has improved, but I think that is only my experience of using it.

Dave Doogan: No, I don't think anything has improved, but I would like to underline—given that we have been quite critical of IPSA—that every time I speak to a person in IPSA, they certainly try to help. It is a flawed organisation staffed by good people.



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Chris Loder: IPSA has improved in that there are account managers and payroll contacts available. We didn't have those before and I have always found them to work. But I do think it is rather unhelpful that even today, for example, we do not really understand the extent of how FOI-able IPSA is. That is one example, but there are lots of other things; there are lots of surprises with IPSA that you do not know about. That is the area that has not got better. We do not quite know what to expect from them in terms of the information they share and the sorts of things they need. If we had that, that would help us a lot.

Q120 **Michael Fabricant:** I am fascinated by this discussion about IPSA. I remember that historically they started off with a paper-based system. Then they rather rapidly moved to a computer-based system and bought an off-the-shelf Dutch software package, because they felt that if they tried to make it themselves, it would not work properly and might not be ready for two or three years. Before I get on to IPSA and staffing and HR, Dave, when you said that IPSA isn't working, did you mean the organisation of IPSA or the interface that we all have to deal with—namely this ruddy website package that they bought, which I think you'll agree is reasonably okay for making claims for your business expenses, but is not at all suitable, even with loads of workarounds that they suggest, to extract the data you need if you're going to be an HR manager? Is it mainly the website that is the problem?

Dave Doogan: Well it is, but there is always a trade-off between trying to develop a bespoke system, and the cost and risk that goes with that, and buying an off-the-shelf system that is proven but does not fit very well. They have gone with the latter. For all we know, that was the right decision. We could be talking about a dysfunctional system that they have generated themselves, but we are not; we are talking about a clunky system that has a whole heap of functionality that you do not actually need, and it is very difficult to navigate the distinct bits of it that you do actually need. That is just the reality of it.

I think we would be naive to think IPSA is the only organisation so afflicted. Plenty of organisations have made a similar judgment. It does what it does. Sooner or later, you cut your teeth on it and you just get on with it. I do not wake up worrying about IPSA and its functionality, and I haven't for a long time, but it was a trauma at the start; there's no two ways about that. IPSA don't accept that. They might now, but they didn't at the time. They did not accept that this was a really challenging thing to get to grips with. It is like, "Here's a few screenshots. That's you qualified—off you go."

Q121 **Michael Fabricant:** Yes, that never works; I know.

Sarah talked about staffing and how difficult it was to get staff, and quite rightly pointed out that we are not employed to be HR managers. Do you, Sarah—then maybe the rest of you might want to chip in—think there is a HR role for the House officers or the House authorities either in finding staff, drawing up contracts that would meet IPSA requirements, or helping with budgeting of staff? I don't know.



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Sarah Owen: I don't think necessarily with finding staff, because it is really important that you choose a team that fits you, your way of working and other members of staff. But I don't think the HR functionality—putting somebody's sick leave or holiday in, or possibly some training—necessarily has to be done by an MP. I don't think our constituents expect—

Q122 **Michael Fabricant:** If it's not done by a member of the MP's staff, like a chief of staff—because you could argue that it's not their job either—

Sarah Owen: You could.

Michael Fabricant: Do you think it could or should be done by House officers?

Sarah Owen: I don't know what you mean by "House officers".

Q123 **Michael Fabricant:** I mean instead of it being IPSA. We all work in the Palace of Westminster and on the estate. We all interact with the House authorities, if you like, such as the Clerks. Do you think there should be a department that assists Members of Parliament with the HR function?

Chair: We have that, but we could extend it to incorporate what you are suggesting.

Michael Fabricant: That's right. What the HR function does at the moment is usually where there's a conflict; it is not in the everyday running of the thing. Do you think we should have that? Would it be useful?

Sarah Owen: I think different ways have to be explored, absolutely, because this is not how a modern, functioning place of work would be designed. Also, times have changed and expectations have changed. I'm talking about what your constituents would expect you to be working on and how quickly you are expected to turn things around. I remember speaking to an MP who stepped down in 2010. They said they had gone from having a two-week turnaround because people wrote letters and a letter had to be delivered and then opened and then a response had to be returned; sometimes now, if a constituent doesn't hear from you in two hours, you will get a chaser.

I think there is definitely a way of modernising our working practices, streamlining them and ensuring that there is proper, efficient use of MP time, and also staff time, to properly serve your constituents. I do not know what that would look like, but what I wouldn't want is another replication of some of the flaws that we have seen with IPSA—the us and them mentality—when actually we should all be working together. How do we work together best to serve the people we all represent?

I want to come back, Sir Charles, if I may, with a positive point about IPSA—because I did think of one. There is quite a low bar, but it is a positive one, and there are examples of where there has been a real, genuine personal touch. When I had my miscarriage last year, IPSA held back on some of the things that only I could clear, gave leeway on those



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and extended some of the deadlines for them, and I am grateful for that, but it is what we should expect, I think, in a humane workplace. But there are positive personal examples of interactions we have had with IPSA.

Q124 Chair: Can I build on Michael's question? We do have an HR function here. It is small. I am looking at our officers behind Sarah and they're nodding. It is small, but the advice tends to be good. They can advise you on HR law, disciplinary matters, redundancy matters and hiring matters, and help you with an interview. Ultimately it is a small function, but it is a good function, and I am quite keen on enlarging good functions if you can maintain that overall level of service. Remember: if you increase the House HR function, it is not a regulator. IPSA is a regulator: it is the organisation that pays us, but also regulates us. Could you see a reasonable and a persuasive argument being made to the Speaker to increase the size of the HR function in the House?

Sarah Owen: I could, but that would have to be done with full consultation of existing staff, because the people who are going to be impacted most by this are not actually going to be MPs; they will be the staff who work with us. We would also have to have due consideration for the staff who work in constituencies, because I wouldn't want to see parliamentary staff given something or access to something that those in our constituencies are not. That would further increase the two tiers that we have as between, say, parliamentary assistants and caseworkers.

Q125 Mrs Latham: I think it was you, Dave, who said that when you came in, finance was a problem. Did anybody else experience that? You were probably all leaving jobs to come to do a new job, and it's not the same as giving notice and walking into your next job in a timely fashion. What were the issues, and how could they be better served?

Chris Loder: I outlined what was probably an extreme situation that I faced personally. At the beginning, we faced a very short period of time in which to report our register of interests with the registrar and to get registered on IPSA systems and understand how that works. In fairness, the initial pay for MPs was one of the more streamlined things, so I do not think pay was so much an issue; it was more about the financial liabilities that we had to incur during that period of time. Unless you are particularly well off, you find that incredibly difficult.

It is important to clear some things up. The fact is that for all of us who were elected in 2019 the reality is that different clauses in the IPSA scheme apply to us than apply to those who were elected previously. Pre-2017, you can employ a connected person—your wife, partner or whoever—but that is not something we can do. I personally do not want to do that, but the reality is that that is a difference that many would say is an unfairness, because we are either going to do that or we are not. It is inappropriate for part of Parliament to be able to do that and part of Parliament not to be able to do it. It goes back to some of the financial issues: if you have a family unit to take care of and look after, they are considerations. That should be considered.



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If I may, I would like to come back briefly to the wider HR point. Personally, I have found the very small HR department here, led by Kim McGrath, to be excellent, without question, every single time that I have needed their advice. If you were to compare the size of the HR team for Members to the HR team for the parliamentary staff—the authorities, as we call them—you will find that the size is completely non-comparable. The few people we have compared with the considerable size of the House of Commons HR team—there is a huge difference. That was exacerbated by, for example, the situation with the lying in state, when we saw a very clear difference in how staff who work for the House of Commons were treated versus those who work for Members. The size of the HR team is reflective of that.

Finally, the thing that is often not considered in all this is that as employers we MPs are responsible to the employee in terms of how their personal data is treated. We have to share their information with IPSA, but that is another organisation. The House authorities have their personal data; in effect, that is another organisation. There is a question mark as to the propriety of how private staff information and details are shared. I suspect that is a position of vulnerability that we should look to sort out. Perhaps we should consider how the HR department can grow and maybe look after certain things to protect that.

Q126 Chair: Time is moving on, so I want to ask each of you—again, going down the line—what you think a good induction programme for new Members looks like. I do mean not what you got but what you think it would look like, drawing on your experiences. Also, over what period of time should that be delivered?

Sarah Owen: In terms of the period of time, support should be ongoing for however long a Member needs it. It would not be good to have a dead cut-off, because there will be some people who just get it straight away and others who will need ongoing support. That should be built into whatever induction we have.

We really need to ensure that there is a proper induction and support in respect of IPSA. In an ideal world, I would love it if we had a very simple interface—a much more simplified system that we can use—and one person we can speak to. That should continue for at least six months. We have account managers, but mine changes consistently. There is no point having an account manager if we constantly get someone else.

On training for security, it would be really good if we could have a named person to speak to about security and security issues. We all experience potential threats to our safety in a different way, particularly if you are a woman or a person of colour. It would be really good if you could have a trusted relationship, so that it is not just training but someone you can speak to in those first six months to know how this job will potentially impact yourself and the safety of your family, your friends, those close around and your staff—how to keep them safe.



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I think we need security training for technology. Lots of things are issued at the moment about whether TikTok is okay or not, but it would be great to get definitive information and guidance on social media and emerging platforms, and for that to be constantly updated. By the time the next intake comes in, what we use—Instagram—will be old news; it will be something else. So whatever we have needs to be updated constantly.

Steven Bonnar: When we come in, I would like the information we receive to be compartmentalised—perhaps in week one, you deal with your personal security and safety around the estate, for example, moving on to week two and HR, and in week three moving on to the Chamber. That would give us a lot more time to digest and understand the information.

Can I make a point about the finances? This is an important case for people who come here. Not many people come here from a background like mine—I come from a highly deprived constituency, and I consider myself to be a product of that community. For example, the week before I was elected to this place, I was a universal credit claimant as a single parent. Then, when you come here, on your first day there is so much outlay—so much money that you have to outlay, even if it's just to get from A to B in London, and of course your colleagues are inviting you to here and there. It is very embarrassing if you do not have money in your pocket to fully integrate yourself, as your colleagues are doing. We have loans for flats—for deposits—but I wonder if that is something that can be looked at for people who come from a highly deprived background into such an intimidating place.

Chair: It used to be the case that you could get a start-up loan. I am not sure what the situation is now.

Steven Bonnar: That certainly wasn't available to me in 2019—I probably would have taken that up, Chair. I just think that having that peace of mind is really important.

Chair: That is a really good point. Dave?

Dave Doogan: To build on that point, I don't think that sufficient cognisance is taken by the House authorities that we all come from very different backgrounds and circumstances. There is no such thing as "an MP"; we are a varied bunch of people. Nowhere is that exposed more than when we are coming in the door for the first time.

I want to be positive, as I said when I first spoke in this session, and the first day of being an MP could not have been any slicker or more helpful. But it just went downhill rapidly from there. As Sarah said earlier, why we are doing this with new MPs needs to be more defined—what interventions are we making, and what is the output of that? It is not about putting some stuff on the table, and some of it will be taken and some will not; you have to make sure that there is a purpose, and that the loop is closed in a strategic—if you want—induction process.



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I want to say one more thing if these are the last words on this issue. The reason why I agreed to come along today is that the accommodation situation was lamentable and unforgivable. You cannot treat employees like that. I know we operate on this hybrid—that we are not really employees—but we actually are employees. In any event, we are people with a job of work to do, and it is very difficult to do a job of work when you do not have the tools at your disposal. If you are an MP, having an office to sit down in is a fairly fundamental tool—you need to do your job.

I get that this is delegated to the Whips of the various groups, but Parliament should have oversight, and the Whips should be working to a timetable that is agreed between all the main parties, to say that you must have accommodation, even of some description. We were put into 1 Parliament Street—the SNP, anyway, and Labour too, I think—but that got shut before we all had offices. That is unacceptable. Someone needs to understand why that disconnect can happen.

I have one final point on security, because we did not really say enough about that. When we got here, I think it was all done on political groupings. I certainly remember the head of security coming to speak to the SNP group, and through his whole presentation I thought, “Doesn’t apply to me,” “Doesn’t apply to me,” “Doesn’t apply to me,” and I wasn’t really interested in taking up all the things that were there—until the very last minute when he said, “And do remember: this isn’t all about you. It’s about your neighbours, your staff and other constituents who might be in the vicinity, and it’s about your family.” That really hits home why security for MPs is important.

For me, a straight, white, Christian, Scottish man, I don’t get all the dreadful trolling that women—particularly women of colour—get. I do not get any of that, but it’s still a security issue to be borne in mind. These threats don’t exist in a linear fashion; they are random and we should be aware of that. I would not have been aware if the head of security hadn’t been so candid about the effect it has on other people rather than just on the Member themselves. That is really important and it should be systemic.

Chair: Thank you very much. Chris?

Chris Loder: I do not think that in the wider world you would expect anybody to go into a job such as this without a proper training programme. The only structured training that I can remember was on our first Monday morning, which was a four-hour scheme called Valuing Everyone, which I thought was patronising at best, frankly. That was the structured training that was offered and that was it.

There is a considerable workstream to do so that, after the next general election, we are very clear about what new Members of Parliament can be given in terms of the toolkit and briefing. If I recall correctly, last time we probably had three days before Parliament actually sat, which I think was on the Thursday. I think there was an election of the Speaker on the



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Wednesday afternoon, the Queen's Speech on the Thursday and the first day of real business on the Friday. Then we broke for Christmas.

Those three days are the opportunity we have. The reality is that being in this place, the pace, the pressure and the volume all take over, but there could be a Monday lunchtime fixed training session about something that would be of value. I could talk all day about the sorts of things that are valuable, but the one priority here is security, particularly cyber-security, but personal security as well. The reality is that even today there are some considerable gaps in that, but maybe we'll relay them later.

There also needs to be a training provision not just for new Members of Parliament but for new members of staff, because although we are quite limited in what we can offer as individual MPs it is important to offer them a level of training.

Chair: I can provide you with some reassurance on that, because one of the work strands that I am involved with is looking at a really proper, comprehensive training programme for staff. I think that has improved over the last three years and will continue to improve.

Giles Watling: I will just very quickly move on to another question.

Chair: Last question, and then we can let the panel get on with their jobs.

Q127 **Giles Watling:** I have a DL in seven minutes so I have to race anyway. Sarah, you mentioned that you were pregnant when you came here and that you had had other problems since; how well did Parliament wrap its arms around you to help you, as a person who was pregnant on arriving, with all the issues that you might face? Was there any assistance at all?

Sarah Owen: Not massively, apart from my Whips. Most people would look at you like you had two heads, because you were walking around here pregnant and they didn't know who you were. Then they saw that you were a new MP and they couldn't quite compute that somebody has just gone through an election process looking like a tiny planet.

I worked all the way through, up until two days before I gave birth—two working days before I gave birth. In retrospect, I probably wouldn't have done that; I would have slept for some of it. It was my Whips who saw me walking through the corridor and said, "Should you really be here?"—nobody from Parliament. It was very obvious that I was pregnant, and quite some way along. It was my Whips who said, "Should you really be here?" They explained the proxy voting system for me, which was welcome.

Pauline, you mentioned the pay when you came in here, and whether there was a difference. It was not necessarily an issue of pay for me. I left a job where I would have got a year's maternity leave, and I knew that I would not have any maternity leave when I came here, if I got elected. I think there is something to be looked at there. This is not just about a pay difference when you come into Parliament, or a class one; it is also a terms-and-conditions one.



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Mrs Latham: You get six months now, I think.

Giles Watling: Forgive me, Sarah, for asking a question and then running.

Sarah Owen: Go for it. Don't annoy your Whips: do not be late for that DL!

I think there was something to be said about the fact that we went into lockdown five weeks after I gave birth, which actually enabled me to come back to work six weeks afterwards because the technology meant that I could be at home to breastfeed, to recover from a C-section and to manage all the things that a new parent would manage, while also being able to input and represent my constituents in the way that I wanted to.

I initially had a plan, which was to come back to work and do constituency work after the six weeks and then eventually come back here but rely on the proxy system. I think that would have been okay, but actually we have seen a completely different way of working that enables MPs who are either very sick or pregnant to be able to input in a different way should they wish to. We have the technology there; I think it is worth exploring because I was able to get back to work so much quicker in a way that I wanted to, while also not missing out on any of the things that I did not want to miss out on and that you can never get back. That is really important, and I think there are lessons to be learned.

I have been pregnant twice in this place, and the last time I was pregnant was last year. For me, the last three months of pregnancy is a walk in the park. It does not look it, but it is. The worst time is the first three months, when you can't tell anyone, particularly when you have had previous miscarriages or difficulty getting pregnant. The worst time for a pregnant woman is those first three months: you are as sick as a dog, you are worried, you are tired, you cannot tell anyone. I think there should be some movement around proxy voting at any stage of pregnancy, because I think I am right in understanding that, if you take your maternity leave earlier, that is the year for the six months for the proxy voting for you. The clock starts ticking, but actually that is not always the most difficult part of pregnancy for women, particularly where you have long hours. I know that Whips accommodate and help where they can, but if we are talking about a new intake of people, they do not know that is necessarily how it works. I would not want anyone to be put off becoming an MP because they want to raise a family or they are struggling to.

We could learn the lessons from the pandemic with technology, and also accessibility in this place. When she was five weeks, I did not want to miss one of the Health and Social Care Committee planning sessions that dictated what we were going to be working on for the year. We had no idea that it was going to be covid at that stage. We had this grand plan for lots of different issues to talk about, including health inequalities. I took her here in a pram, and to get from one place to another in this building is so difficult. We had to squeeze into little service lifts in some areas. This



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place is completely inaccessible for people who are disabled or anyone with a pram—just the worst building I have ever tried to navigate.

Chair: Some of that is slightly outside our gift, but we will certainly ensure that the Chair of the Procedure Committee—the Committee that held the brief for maternity and paternity leave—receives a copy of your evidence for review.

As for access and moving around the estate, that is for restoration and renewal and, if you are here for 40 years, Sarah, you might see that completed. We are going to move into private for five minutes to talk about security, but we do not tend to do that on camera.