

Administration Committee

Oral evidence: [Health and Wellbeing](#), HC 937

Tuesday 2 December 2025

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Members present: Nick Smith (Chair); Bambos Charalambous; Mary Glindon; Carolyn Harris; Navendu Mishra; Kirsteen Sullivan.

Questions 1 - 23

Witnesses

[I](#): Kim Leadbeater MP; Hannah Short, Members staff; Jo Tanner, Director, Rud Pedersen UK, and Organiser of Women's Parliamentary Football Team; and Chris Bryant MP.

[II](#): Laura Biggs, CEO, Menopause Mandate.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kim Leadbeater, Hannah Short, Jo Tanner and Chris Bryant.

Q1 Chair: Welcome, everybody, to the Committee's third session on health and wellbeing. Our first panel are colleagues from Parliament who will talk about the gym and their experiences of health and wellbeing across this place. I am Nick Smith, Chair of the Administration Committee. Thank you for coming to our session. With the first panel we will look at how the Westminster gym supports the physical and mental health of the parliamentary community, including a specific focus on encouraging more women to participate in physical exercise and team sport. With the second panel, we will look at the House's menopause policy and at what more can be done to support women in the workplace who are experiencing the menopause. We welcome our witnesses, Kim Leadbeater MP, Chris Bryant MP, Hannah Short and Jo Tanner. I invite them to introduce themselves.

Jo Tanner: I am here in my capacity as the founder of the Women's Parliamentary Football Team. I do not necessarily look like a footballer, but it is kind of all about challenging the stereotypes. I have been involved in Westminster through advising MPs and as a lobbyist for about 25 years. Some eight years ago, I decided to set up a football team—against all the odds and the advice that I was given, I decided to get that off the ground. I am here to talk about what we have done and how we have done it, I think.

Chair: Smashing, thank you.

Kim Leadbeater: Morning, Nick and panel. I am the now menopausal and very unhealthy Member of Parliament for Spen Valley—full disclosure. I have been in that role for the last four and a half years, but prior to that a lot of my career was spent working in health, fitness and wellbeing. I was a lecturer at local colleges, my degree is in health-related exercise and fitness, and I ran my own business teaching exercise classes. Cheesy '80s aerobics was my speciality, but I also taught boxercise, circuit training, and legs, bums and tums—all that sort of stuff. I also worked as a personal trainer, one-to-one with clients, but very much took a holistic approach to health and wellbeing, including physical health, mental health, social health, connection, tackling loneliness and all those sorts of things. I have tried to bring some of that experience into Parliament. I have failed miserably on a personal level, but I am very keen to look at how I can help with this inquiry into what more we can do in Parliament to make it a happier, healthier place of work.

Hannah Short: I am the senior parliamentary assistant to Kim Leadbeater and also a member of the UK Women's Parliamentary Football Team. We play matches on a Monday night and train on a Wednesday morning. I am also a volunteer at the Labour Women's Parliamentary Staff Network. We have had Kim come and do exercise classes for female



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members across the estate, doing her cheesy '80s aerobics on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings.

Chris Bryant: I am here, I guess, because I am the longest-standing MP member of the parliamentary gym, since the time of Queen Victoria—she was never in the gym. I have never had the gene for catching the ball, throwing the ball, kicking the ball, so I have never been very good at team sports of any kind—I cannot even do table tennis or tennis. However, I believe in the old Latin tag “Mens sana in corpore sano”—a healthy mind in a healthy body. In particular when I had cancer, it was really important to me to be able to use the gym. The vast majority of people who use the gym are not MPs; they are lots of other people who work on the parliamentary estate. I guess there are around 8,000 to 9,000 people who could use the gym if they wanted. Most of the time I see researchers, police officers, and staff who work in catering in there, so I think it is an important part of making sure that we have a healthy offering for all the staff who work here.

Chair: Thank you all for your introductions.

Q2 **Carolyn Harris:** Chris, can you tell the Committee about your experience of using the gym and what is on offer there to support your personal health and wellbeing?

Chris Bryant: There is a spin room: it used to be the John Bercow Spin Room, but he objected to the idea that he span anything, so his name was taken off it. There are a series of weight machines and a large room that can be used for classes. I have never done any classes in there; I just do my own, mostly aerobic, workout. I often have political conversations in the changing room—sometimes with political opponents, which has been very useful to me. I also learn a bit about what is going on with other people on the parliamentary estate. What is important to me is that I can physically get to a gym during the parliamentary week.

One other thing that is about to come up, which the Committee needs to look at very closely, is that historically the gym has been run by the Jubilee Hall Trust, and there are various other Jubilee Hall sites in London, the most notable of which is Jubilee Hall in Soho, so if you are an MP and you are in London on a Sunday, and you want to go to a gym, you can use Jubilee Hall. That is stopping from today, because Jubilee Hall itself will now be run by a different organisation. It would be really useful if the Committee, or Parliament, could have some discussions about making sure that there is some ongoing relationship with Jubilee Hall.

Q3 **Carolyn Harris:** Would you say that the gym actually meets your needs?

Chris Bryant: Well, some of them. It is quite grim down there, particularly the changing rooms and the showers. I don't think the showers have ever not had filthy, dirty floors—well, not dirty floors; it is just that it is difficult for cleaners to keep them clean because there are regular leaks and, consequently, they are always a bit of a mess. It has needed an upgrade for a very long time, but most of us do not moan about it very much.



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One of the other difficulties is that if any piece of equipment is out of service, it takes a very long time for it to be mended, because there needs to be special permission from the Speaker or something to allow somebody to get a pass to come in and mend it, and so on. Staff are often a bit frustrated by that.

Broadly speaking, it is a great service, and it is great that it is on site. There is an argument that there are not enough gyms in the vicinity. Some Government Departments have them. There is a gym in the bottom of the Treasury, which is considerably worse, and it also serves DCMS and some other Departments. I think the MOD has a gym for its staff. Quite a lot of the commercially available gyms in the area have closed down and are no longer available. I wonder whether Parliament should be having some kind of relationship with some of the commercial gyms that are on offer in the area—not so much for MPs, but for the whole parliamentary estate.

Q4 Carolyn Harris: You have talked about the aesthetics of the gym, which we have heard about before, but apart from that, what else would you like to see the gym offer? If it were a completely new gym and the showers were all fixed, and everything looked nice and it were a nice environment, what would you personally gain from having in that gym?

Chris Bryant: I think you probably need a bit more of an aerobic offer than what is currently available. There are some bikes and some cross trainers and stuff, and a couple of running machines. Other people use more of the classes. I remember the Division Belles—the tap-dancing group of women MPs led by Caroline Flint and various others—used to rehearse in there. It was one of the few spaces that was suitable for them. You could do Zumba classes and other things, I guess. It is true of many gyms in that it feels very male. I think three quarters of the people who use the gym are male. I have not seen many female MPs. Incidentally, I saw some figures in the *Daily Mail* following your inquiry, which suggested that only 10 MPs have been there this year. That is patently untrue, because I could name at least three dozen MPs who have been in the gym this year.

Q5 Carolyn Harris: Chris, what thoughts do you have about integrating what the gym offers with the health and wellbeing holistic approach? How do you think we can achieve that successfully?

Chris Bryant: I think we could promote the gym more. The thing is that it can get pretty busy and full pretty quickly, because it is a rather small space and it is in a basement. It was closed for quite a period of time when that building was being redone. There is an argument to say that, when we have been doing up some of the other buildings—and there will be more restoration and renewal of the Palace and the whole estate over the next few years—we should be making sure we have a 21st century gym rather than a slightly forgotten basement version, because a lot more people would use it, and that is in the interests of the mental and physical health of the thousands of people who work here.



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I suppose the other thing is that it is only open on certain days of the week. It is not open on Saturdays and Sundays, and I am not sure how much it is open on Fridays—obviously, MPs are not here much on Fridays, so I do not particularly know. Again, there is an argument to say that, if you had a facility that was maybe on site but open to more people from elsewhere in Whitehall, that might be a more commercially viable operation.

I do not think that any of us is looking for something that is heavily subsidised; we pay our own way as Members. Obviously, if you are a Member of Parliament, or a member of staff for that matter, and you have to join that gym during the week and another gym at the weekend, it ends up being really quite expensive for lots of people, both Members and ordinary people, who make up the vast majority of people who use the gym, including journalists—I see journalists in there a lot.

Q6 Carolyn Harris: You have said that you are not a team sport person.

Chris Bryant: I have played rugby—well, it would be a gross exaggeration to say that I have played rugby. I have been on a rugby pitch.

Q7 Carolyn Harris: Indeed, me neither; I have never played the game. Do you see the mental health benefits in the comradeship, social interaction and being part of a team?

Chris Bryant: Oh, completely. I have had another thought: quite a lot of MPs and members of the parliamentary community go running, and there are some quite good running courses. I cannot run at the moment, because I am waiting for a new hip, but I used to run from here down to Tower bridge, and I would go across and then come back the other side. It is an absolutely brilliant run; it is beautiful and stunning, although there are too many tourists in the way. It is a great run, and I am also crossing hardly any roads during that. There are running clubs, and I think you have been involved, Kim.

Kim Leadbeater: There is the APPG, which is a cross-party running group, and that is strong.

Chris Bryant: Which is really important. The gym is the core for that, because where else are you going to change so that you can go for a run and come back? That is an important part of the mixture as well.

Chair: Thank you for those good, crisp answers and wide-ranging responses. Chris, I know you need to get away at 10.30 am, so whenever you need to get away, you are of course excused.

Chris Bryant: That is very kind. This is not because I am a man and my questions have to be taken first—I just want to make that absolutely clear.

Carolyn Harris: It is because you are Welsh, Chris.

Chris Bryant: Thank you very much.



Chair: No one thought that for a moment. Thank you again, Chris.

Q8 Bambos Charalambous: My questions are to Kim and Hannah. At the last evidence session—Chris alluded to this—we heard that female usage of the gym is only 26%. Can you tell us whether you use the gym and in what capacity? If so, does the gym meet your needs?

Hannah Short: I am a member of the gym. I am actually very interested in what Chris just said; I did not know that the Jubilee Hall Trust is no longer going to be the sponsor of the gym. As he was saying, there is a very strange work environment here in that we are often in the office on Monday to Thursday, but we are elsewhere on a Friday, and then we obviously have the weekend. I can use the external ones across London, and if that is no longer to be an option, that is quite a significant issue in that you would probably have to pay for two gym memberships.

Yes, I use the gym in a personal capacity. There is also the Betty Boothroyd Studio, where Kim does her exercise classes for female staff across the estate. The membership is heavily male-dominated, but those classes are exceptionally popular among women. We probably get about 20 to 25 women who come and participate in the classes, and they are definitely a lot more popular than the female membership of the gym itself.

Kim Leadbeater: I have to confess I am not a member of the gym—I have failed miserably in that regard. I have tried to keep healthy since having this job, but it is difficult. A big part of that is the lack of routine, which is something that needs to be acknowledged in the offer of facilities that is available to people. A key part of staying healthy is the routine, which we do not really have.

Some of the other stuff I have done has been helpful, including being a member of the Parliamentary Women's Football Team. There is a set time for training, so you know when you are going, and you know that there are going to be other people there—it is a commitment to other people, as well as yourself. The research that I did on women's health and wellbeing showed that we tend to put ourselves at the bottom of a very long list of other priorities. If we think that we are going to let somebody else down, there is a stronger chance that we will go and participate, rather than if it is just about us.

I am a member of the football team, and I also am involved in the tennis APPG—another example, where MPs and staff have an opportunity to play tennis. Something interesting that Chris said was that that happens on a cross-party basis. It is helpful from a political point of view, because you build friendships and associations across parties, which is a very healthy thing.

In terms of the gym itself, again, I have thought to myself, "Why have I not joined the gym?". It is my own failing, but it is also the fact that I really struggle with the time to go. Whenever I have looked, I have thought, "Well, what would work for me?". If we think about it from a



female perspective, then classes tend to be very popular. A lot of women would rather go to an exercise class, partly for some of the reasons that I have already alluded to, including the social aspect and that you are meeting somebody else and do not want to let the instructor down.

There are lots of other reasons why you would go to an exercise class. I think having a wider variety of classes would be good to get more women in. Having particular times would also help. An early morning class is often the way that people like to start the day. They think that they will go and get their exercise done, get it out of the way and then crack on. Alternatively, something in the evening and at the end of the day often helps.

I would also look at different types of membership. At some of the gyms that I have previously worked in you could have a classes-only membership because you might not ever want to go into the weights section; you might just want to do classes. You can sell blocks of classes, so there is no pressure on time. You buy a block of 10 classes, and you might have to use them in six months. You could do things like that. Different types of membership would be good. We also need to ask which audience we are targeting, because the facility on site here is targeting MPs, their staff and the people who work across the estate. There should probably be a slightly different offer depending on who you are targeting and maybe you need to think about that.

Better engagement from the gym would also be good in terms of a regular update, maybe a monthly email as to what is going on—not just for members, but for other people as well. It would say “We are here and this is what is happening this month.” Also, there could be targeted events and activities. That is what Hannah was saying about the sessions that I have done, which have worked. We did something specifically around International Women’s Day, so there was a hook to get people in. How about something around Mental Health Awareness Week, International Men’s Day or Christmas? What are the hooks that we can use to get people in? We could maybe do that in partnership with charities. You could also do it as a little fundraiser as well to raise money for some good causes.

There are lots of different ideas and I am very happy to help with that going forward. I guess that I have given you a few options. Also, maybe there could be a monthly draw where you could win a free session in the gym or with a personal trainer. I do not know what the level of support is from instructors in the gym. From a female perspective, it also helps to feel that you can turn up without knowing what the heck you are doing and know that there is someone there to help you and guide you through it. Those are just a few ideas. Again, taking that holistic approach and saying that this is not just about being super fit, but about your mental health, the social connection and that side of it as well.

Q9 Bambos Charalambous: You have answered my next question about what more the gym could do to engage with women. Hannah, do you have anything to add?



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Hannah Short: One thing that could be beneficial, which Kim touched on, is that the gym in Parliament is very weights focused. As Chris alluded to, the cardio aspect of the gym is very limited. Women in general tend to focus more on cardio rather than weightlifting. There are a lot of benefits to weightlifting that women should be able to access as well as men. It would be good to have more women trainers on site to help women and show them how to use the machines. I am generalising here a little, but women do tend to be more self-conscious about whether they are getting the form right or whether they are being judged for getting it wrong. If you had someone there that was able to guide them through it and say, "This is what you can do to use some of the weight machines," that would be beneficial.

Across London a lot of gyms are starting to do female-only spaces or times where women go to the gym, and it is a little safer and a nice environment for them. When we do the classes with Kim it is female-only, which is just to have that nice, safe space for women to come and have that social connection and feel safe to exercise. The women's football team is obviously women-only as well, which is just a nice team environment and atmosphere. I do not know whether the gym could look into having some times or classes specifically for women, but it might be a hook to get more involved.

As Kim said, a lot of women do tend to prefer classes to solo activity. Could we have more classes specifically targeted to women's needs? Women have different peaks and troughs in their physical ability depending on their hormones. If there were different classes targeting or specifically tailored to that, it might be beneficial.

We have printed off the gym class timetable. It would be good to have a bit more variety of classes going on in the morning or the evening, because this is a very strange work environment and when you can sneak away often is not going to be 12.15 pm on a Wednesday for obvious reasons. We could have a bit more flexibility or just different ideas. There are so many different avenues that you could explore to get women to go to the gym more. That could include having female-only classes or even external trainers that could come in and do specific themes. As we were saying, we did stuff for International Women's Day. There are so many different options that you could explore.

Kim Leadbeater: No, I don't think so. I will just pick up on what Chris said about the physical facility. Is there a world in which we would love to have a brand spanking new fancy modern gym that was three times the size and had all the facilities that we would want? Yes, of course there is, but we are not in that world just yet. I would push to work towards that, depending on what the plans are for the estate and the buildings that are here, but I also think it is really important that we do not just moan about some of the limitations of the current facility, and we talk about what we can do within that facility.

I have worked at various different gyms during my career, including tiny gyms that do not have the best facilities in the world and big fancy flash



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gyms, and actually, sometimes I prefer the small cosy ones because they are a bit more welcoming and less intimidating. I think we should make the most of what we have got, and there are ways of doing that, some of which we have discussed today, but as a longer-term investment for the wellbeing of everybody on the estate, as Chris said, it would be fantastic to think there was a plan in place to have something that was more modern, a bit fancier and a bit bigger.

Q10 Mary Glendon: Jo, you said that it was about eight years ago that you decided to set up the parliamentary women's football team? Could you explain a little bit more about how that came about and how it was set up?

Jo Tanner: There has been a men's football team for quite a long time. I think the Chair might have even played in it in the past.

Chair: No, I am a runner, not a footballer.

Jo Tanner: Oh, I thought I might have seen you at a match once. Anyway, there has been a men's team for many years, and the company that I founded was asked about sponsorship of that team to help with games at party conferences and things, and it struck me—why did we not have a women's team? As a women-founded business, it seemed very odd that we were supporting the men's team but had not considered a female team. When I spoke to a few former Members of Parliament, including the likes of Tracey Crouch, the former Sports Minister, and our current Sports Minister, Steph Peacock, we had a discussion about the fact that it would be really nice to have a team, but people said, "Oh, it's really hard. When would you train? How would we do it? There aren't enough Members of Parliament to take part." All I got was a series of problems rather than solutions as to how we could do it.

I had a conversation with the Football Association, and they very kindly brought in the FA Cup. We hired out a room and put out the word to journalists, staffers and MPs and said, "If you're interested in the idea of a women's football team—we have no idea how it's going to work—just come and talk to us." I think we had about 30 or 40 expressions of interest just from that. The idea of the team was that it was open to MPs and peers, and also to journalists, staffers and other officials that work in the palace. I also said that if people in and around Westminster—people who work for charities and things—wanted to join, we just wanted to build a bit of a community.

When I started it, I had never kicked a ball apart from once having a bit of practice with my son who was in goal, and I could barely kick it in the right direction, but I just thought, why not try it? We had some help from the FA, who put us in touch with Chelsea football club, who gave us a trainer. Next year, we will have been going for nine years; the same guy who turned out for one of our first training sessions still turns out on a Wednesday morning to train us. He is amazing. He is a guy called Josh, and he is fabulous. To be honest, he said that our ability during our first session was about on par with a group of six-year-olds. We all ran after the ball, we couldn't kick straight, we didn't call to each other when we



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wanted the ball—we didn't know what we were doing, but my gosh did we have fun. We really loved it. We were all exhausted, because unlike the bit in the back of an exercise class where you slow down a bit or ease up, we were determined. I couldn't believe how competitive everyone was. I don't know why I underestimated the competitiveness of people in Westminster.

Over the years we got support from Barclays, who were supporting the Women's super league—they sponsored the team—and we now have Aviva, who have been sponsoring the team for some time. The reason we have sponsorship, quite frankly, is because of some of the issues that were talked about: things like the cost, particularly for staffers, to have a kit. Being able to turn out to play once a week is challenging—and then twice a week, because we decided to join a league. On a Monday night, we play in a five-a-side league against people like the Bank of England and the Treasury—they are all part of the league that we play against, and I am proud to say that we have beaten them both. We also train on a Wednesday morning; it used to be a Tuesday, but because we clashed with the time of, I think, a shadow Cabinet meeting, we moved it. Even facilities for a football team are an issue. It is really hard to find a pitch where you can train safely. We had one in Waterloo that was actually quite dangerous—there was a huge rip in the middle of the pitch. After some negotiation with the owners, we finally got it completely resurfaced, but for a while we all used to dodge the centre circle because it was pretty dangerous.

I am a menopausal woman as well, but I had no idea—and I am quite emotional about this—how important the community we created was. During Brexit, we had to cancel matches because of votes. I had people working cross-party to try to reschedule a match. I even had a group who were very naughty and went into the Chamber and had their picture taken in their football shirts, because they wanted a picture to say they were sorry to the team that we had to cancel because of a big Brexit vote. They got a bit of a telling-off because they also kicked a ball in there, but that wasn't anything to do with me. The idea behind the team was very much that we were creating a community.

I was really proud—and still am—that we have had people as young as 22 or 23 and as old as 52 join and be in the team, and the people who joined all that time ago are still involved. Some can barely come to training any more—some have injuries, some have family commitments, and many have been so successful that they now have big ministerial jobs and can't get to events as often as they would like. What has been amazing is that in that community—I don't know if you can ever recreate this in a gym—we have had people who have wanted to change jobs, people have had a problem with the MP they have worked with and not known how to handle a difficult conversation, people have gone through divorce, and people have gone through losing elections or come back because they have won elections. We had a member of the team who lost her election and resigned from the team, and we were devastated and said, "Please come back." We were delighted when she got re-elected and wanted to be part of the team again.

During covid, Kim was running aerobic exercises via Zoom for us, and we had people organising quizzes. It is really easy to think about the exercise aspect. I agree that the facilities can be a challenge in all sorts of walks of life, but we just had a football and sometimes a few cones or a fluorescent bib. It is amazing what you can get a group of women to do when you say "Right, you've now got to try this exercise." None of them have done it before, but they will have a really good go. The point about not wanting to let each other down has been a really big part of the reason that we have been so successful. Fortunately, thanks to the support we have had from the likes of Aviva and from great MPs who have been willing to turn out and be supportive to the other members, we have been going for nearly nine years.

Chair: Smashing.

Q11 **Mary Glendon:** Thank you, Jo. You have touched on the next question, which is for all three of you. What have been the greatest benefits from the team and access to team sport for those in Parliament?

Kim Leadbeater: My background, as well as being in the health side of physical activity and movement, is also in sport. I played hockey for 35 years—that was my sport, and I miss it dearly. Everything that Jo has just said really resonates with me. You will often get people in life who are either gym bunnies or sportspeople. Chris sort of alluded to that; he said he is not a sporty person, but he is very much a gym person—one or the other. I have always been both; I love going to the gym and doing independent exercise on my own, but I also love being part of a group and a team.

When I became an MP and joined the women's parliamentary football team, it probably kind of saved me in my first few years, particularly in terms of my mental health and wellbeing, because this quite an intimidating place to work and it is a scary and stressful job. The friendships that I made through that team, including with Hannah and Jo, have really helped me get through the last few years. There is something really powerful about sport and team things that is different from going to the gym and just putting your headphones on and doing your independent exercise. The good thing is that there is a place for all those things, depending on who you are and your personality.

The tennis APPG is another one; we have a brilliant relationship with the LTA, who have driven that and got cross-party MPs playing tennis throughout the summer months. The APPG for running is really good as well, as is the Parkrun APPG that Nick runs—that is fantastic. Some of that probably needs to be communicated a bit more clearly to colleagues. There needs to be the MP version of that, and then the staff version of it. Some MPs I know are more comfortable exercising in an environment where it is just MP colleagues; others are not bothered and think, "Let's get the staff and everybody else in." It needs to be communicated a bit more clearly. I wonder if there is a world where we have a monthly event, so that each APPG puts something on, whatever that might be. We have got APPGs for all different sports. That might be something we could do.



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We have other MPs who have a background in health and wellbeing. We have a yoga instructor on the Labour Benches now, we have people who work in outdoor activities, and we have runners. There is a world where we can organise a lot more than we currently do, but I fully appreciate the difficulties in terms of time and the business of Parliament. I am not entirely sure what it looks like, but I think there is more that could be done, both through health, fitness and wellbeing in the gym, and through the sport lens.

- Q12 **Kirsteen Sullivan:** You have pretty much answered my next question, Kim, which is about what more could be done to engage the parliamentary community. I think that communicating better and giving visibility to the different APPGs is important. Would anyone else like to add to that?

Hannah Short: From a staff perspective, Westminster is a strange place to work, in that there is no central body that you go to to understand all the different facilities or opportunities that can be accessed here. It can often be quite a lonely environment: there are maybe one or two parliamentary assistants in your office; you can be in an office on your own, the MP can be in the Chamber all day, and it can be quite isolating. You do not realise that there are so many other people—staff members and MPs—working here.

If you can tap into different teams or opportunities, that can be really important. Finding the football team was very much me doing my own research on this. There is a volunteer who runs the Working for an MP website; she does that completely off her own back, by herself. She listed me as a contact for the women's football team on there. Some people get in touch with me and ask to join, but that is dependent on them doing their own research and finding out about the football team. There is no central body that you can go to and find out, "Here's the gym, and here are all the different memberships," or "Here's the APPG for tennis." For example, there is an MP tennis session on Tuesday, but there are staff classes on a Thursday that not many people know about. With the women's football team, we try to get the word out there as much as we can, but it is very dependent on Jo doing the advertising, and then I try to push it as much as I can in the different staff networks that we have.

I do not know what a central information bank would look like. I know there is ParliNet, which people use for information, but I would like to have more of a central place that people can go and realise all the different opportunities that there are here, because there are so many fantastic opportunities. That would be good.

- Q13 **Kirsteen Sullivan:** So just something to give a bit more visibility to what is going on. You have all spoken about the need to encourage more women to take part, and you have mentioned different ways that that could be done, whether through tying it in with campaigns or through particular events in the year. Is there anything you would like to add about how we can get women to take part in health initiatives more broadly?



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Kim Leadbeater: The other really important thing, which we shouldn't forget, is that we have got to make it fun. There is a place for competitive sport, and I have loved competing in sport throughout my life, but, particularly in a stressful working environment like this one, we should focus more on the fun side and the enjoyment of physical activity, sport and movement more generally. It is about marketing it as being an enjoyable thing to do, rather than saying, "You're not healthy enough. You need to get more exercise," which we probably all know. Making something fun and enjoyable is really important.

Themes are good. In the run-up to Christmas, we are going to do some Christmas aerobics in the gym, so put your Christmas deely boppers on—gosh, that is such an '80s word. But come along and let's just enjoy it. The good thing about that is that you do not even realise that you are exercising, because you are just having a good time and making social connections as well. Putting things through a lens of needing to be more active and healthier is fine in one respect, but this is about social connection, enjoyment and fun. That is why the football team worked so well.

Jo Tanner: That is definitely the first thing everyone says when we say there is a match on a Monday, or somebody joins as a new member. They say, "Oh, but I'm not very good." Our response has always been—

Kim Leadbeater: "None of us are."

Jo Tanner: "You should turn up and see what you see." Generally, the line has always been, "We take all abilities, and you will get better from coming."

I have been talking to someone who wants to set up a netball team for Parliament. They approached me as part of the football team and asked if they could talk to me about what that involves. If there is some sort of blueprint that could be created about how to do this—because you do have to make it up as you go along, and hope you are not breaking any rules. You push a door to see if it is open. I do not think there is any advice or guidance on how to do some of this stuff, so you are feeling your way.

You could encourage or even give people—not me, but perhaps other people in Parliament—some sort of status that if they are running something, they are given tools to use. Perhaps that is information about how to do it—the blueprint or toolkit. Perhaps someone like me, and others who run community groups, could give some advice on what we did and the mistakes we made, so that they can avoid doing the same thing. Those things could be really helpful.

It has been pretty lonely for me. I have been doing it on my own. I don't get paid for it; I just do it because I love it and because I am really committed to the group that are involved. If we could recreate lots of those people—you need 100 Kims who will get you out of bed in the morning to go and do something. I am not necessarily the most



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motivating, but I try. I think that is all part of it. If you can see it, you believe you can try it. The role modelling is really important.

- Q14 **Chair:** Smashing. Do you think there are any gaps in the current offering for Members and staff that need to be filled? You talk about the importance of blueprints and communication tools. Is there anything else that you think would add to the overall offer here?

Hannah Short: I think we have spoken about the fact that some MPs do prefer to have MP-only spaces when it comes to exercise, and to have the staff separate. It would be great to have as many opportunities as possible for staff to get involved in different sports or activities. As we always say, there is a sport for everyone. There is always something that you would want to be involved in, or something that you would want to do.

I know that the all-party parliamentary group on running is very much MPs-only, and that is completely understandable. If there were other opportunities that someone was interested in, as Jo was saying—for example, if they really wanted to set up a run club—how could they go about doing that?

Jo Tanner: I probably come from the opposite end of the spectrum, in that I have never had an MP say to me, “I just want a training session for MPs” or “I just want a match for MPs”. I was shocked at how many MPs had never spoken to a journalist. They would walk past each other in the corridor, and yet after I set up the football team I would see an MP go and give a journalist a hug because they had played in a match the night before. The community aspect is quite important—understanding that as a staffer, you could also be an MP one day. With the greatest respect, you are special but not that special, in the sense that we are all human beings. Being able to collide at the edge of a fence at a match, or both be running for the ball at the same time—we are all human, and dispelling the myths about who is here, what we do and why we do everything is a really big part of the community spirit that we foster.

Hannah Short: That was definitely the best part of the football team: it gets rid of the deference between staffers and MPs. It was absolutely terrifying when I first came and started to work here at 21, but when I joined the football team, that was when I first met Kim. I think on our first match, I ran you into a wall and tripped you over—

Kim Leadbeater: You did, yes. Thanks for that.

Hannah Short: You realise that when you are playing a sport, that deference completely goes. The aim of the game is just to win, and that is the whole point. It is just really great at fostering those friendships.

Kim Leadbeater: I suppose the only thing I would add is: is there a world where we have a steering group or a committee that looks at health and wellbeing within Parliament? You guys are doing some work on that, and I would imagine other people are probably doing some work on that, but is there something where that could all be pulled together? It could bring together all the APPGs that are doing things, and all the work that is going

on in the gym. We could go more broadly in terms of health and wellbeing, looking at the nutrition side of things and looking at what offers are made in the canteens and restaurants. That feeds into the work of the organisation—what is it called?—that looks at Parliament overall, including sitting times, hours of work and all those sorts of things. Something definitely needs to look at this as a place of work, and at the limitations around health and wellbeing and what more could be done.

Chair: Thank you. What a lovely session. There is bags of enthusiasm here—you are all promoting wellbeing and getting involved yourself—and there is also a lovely friendship thing going on, which is lovely to appreciate. Thank you for your evidence this morning. That concludes the first panel of this session.

Jo Tanner: You're all welcome, if anyone ever wants to come and kick a ball.

Examination of witness

Witness: Laura Biggs.

Chair: I welcome our witness in our second panel, Laura Biggs, who is the chief executive officer of Menopause Mandate. Hey, Laura. Good to see you.

Laura Biggs: Hello. Thank you.

Chair: We have five or six questions for you, if that is okay. A member of the Committee is a strong supporter of you, so we thought we would start with Carolyn kicking us off.

Q15 **Carolyn Harris:** For the record, I declare an interest as a very proud patron of Menopause Mandate. Laura, will you introduce yourself and tell us a little about Menopause Mandate?

Laura Biggs: Thank you, Carolyn, and I thank the Committee for inviting me here. My name is Laura. I am the one of the co-founders of Menopause Mandate, which was initially set up to push through on the one prescription fee that Carolyn had got quite frustrated about. We started off as a group, we gathered some well-known patrons—Mariella Frostrup is our chair—and we have been running ever since.

Our aim is to keep menopause high on the media, corporate and political agenda, across the parties, and to make sure that no woman walks into midlife uneducated about menopause. We give impartial advice—scientifically proven advice, although we are not doctors—we have some excellent advocates and experts on our committee, and we share advice and support with women.

We also set up an advice line, and we brought the nurses into Portcullis House a little while ago. It is a free service where we have dedicated British Menopause Society-accredited trained nurses who run free appointments. So far, I think we have had over 3,000 appointments with

women. It is a free, 15-minute service, sponsored by Holland & Barrett. That is what we mainly do.

- Q16 Carolyn Harris:** Recent EHRC guidance said that menopausal symptoms can be serious and can have substantial and long-term adverse effects on a woman's ability to carry out a normal day's activities. It goes on to say that in some cases that could be treated as a disability. How should workplaces be interpreting that guidance and supporting women in the workplace? What practical adjustments can be made?

Laura Biggs: It would be a sad case for any employer if you got to the stage where you were having a discussion about menopause being viewed as a disability, because we should really seek intervention a lot earlier than that—really, it is about simple, practical things that any employer can put in place. No one should be getting to that point. It sounds scary, but I do not think it should be. Don't wait for it to be a legal problem; act early and focus on the reasonable adjustments, which are simple: be flexible about start and finishing times, and have some home working if that is appropriate, and have cooler working environments, a relaxed dress code and access to fans where needed. Lots of people who work here will have to wear a uniform, so really consider the female uniforms and whether they can be a little bit looser or 100% cotton, natural fibres. Also, if someone is having a day where they feel that they cannot have that front-facing role, what else can you do to support those women? These are simple, practical steps that any employer can take. That is what we would advise.

- Q17 Carolyn Harris:** The Government recently announced that questions about the menopause should be included in the NHS over-40s health check for the first time. I hope that this will raise awareness and give confidence to the women who are seeking help. How do you see that health check helping women to better manage the symptoms of menopause at work?

Laura Biggs: I'm with you, Carolyn—I cannot believe that it was not included. We will be back here in a few years' time wondering why that was. At Menopause Mandate, we speak to women a lot through our surveys. We have had more than 40,000 respondents to our surveys over three years. It is quite easy to be in an echo chamber because we talk about it all the time, but there are people joining the menopause or perimenopause club daily, and they do not know that they have joined it. They are not familiar with the symptoms or are not aware that those symptoms are the menopause. For every woman going into a 40-plus health check, menopause should be mentioned. That is all we are asking: that menopause is mentioned and that someone will say, "During this decade, you will start to experience some changes to your menstrual cycle, and when you do, you need to be more aware of the menopause." There is no doubt that it really is a game changer. It is such a little thing but such a big thing, because women will then understand that there are going to be changes.



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The myth is that menopause is when your periods stop, which can be 55, but your perimenopausal symptoms can start a lot earlier. If you have premature ovarian insufficiency, which you would not necessarily know unless you had had challenges to get pregnant, you can have those symptoms in your mid to late-30s. It is a really big deal, and it will help women enormously just for it to be in the back of their mind that, "In this decade, I'm going to start to experience changes." We can also help to educate GPs, who we know have not been trained in this period of life, to understand that this is a symptom that can happen from 40 onwards.

- Q18 **Carolyn Harris:** Can I just add a little extra to that? This is about women who are not aware that they are menopausal. What would you say is the most prescribed medication for women who have not been offered HRT because nobody has recognised that it is the menopause?

Laura Biggs: The most prescribed one is antidepressants. That is the first line that people are offered.

- Q19 **Mary Glendon:** The House introduced its own menopause policy a year ago, in March 2024. Do you feel that it meets the needs of women working here in Parliament?

Laura Biggs: First, you should be commended, because many organisations do not have a menopause policy. It is great that you do have one, that it is for all staff, and that it is recommended that all managers and people who work here review the policy. I think, however, with any policy, it is as good as the culture. If it just sits on the intranet or pinned to a noticeboard but is not lived and breathed, that is an issue. For any policy to be successful, especially a menopause policy, it needs to be constantly moving. You also need to be constantly talking to your workforce, because people will be joining at different stages of their life, and they need to know that they can talk to their manager and that their line manager will have an understanding. I think it is a great start. I could not access the side parts of the policy where you could go off on to the action plans, so I did not have the chance to read that, but the fact that you have one is great. You have to keep talking about it.

It is also great to get feedback from your employees on how they feel about the policy. Does it cover what they need within the policy, and do they feel that they are listened to and heard? It is also really good to start managing and tracking, because we know that women take time off work because of menopause symptoms. They should be encouraged to share that they are taking time off, so that we can track that and whether you have attrition. We know that one in 10 women will consider leaving their jobs because of menopause symptoms, and that is a travesty for any organisation, because as a menopausal woman, I would say that I am in my prime and that you would not want to lose me from your organisation. How do we stop that attrition before it happens, and how we do measure it and see whether you are making progress because you have a menopause policy in place?

- Q20 **Mary Glendon:** You have said quite a lot about what can be done to



support women. Is there anything else that you think would improve support for women going through the menopause? Can more be done to increase awareness?

Laura Biggs: You have some great champions here—I know that Carolyn is one, and Caroline Nokes is another huge champion. It is really great that people can see it and be it. It is great to have that open conversation. Not so many years ago, it was a taboo word that you never mentioned or talked about. It is so brilliant that I am even here today to talk about it—I think that is a significant step forward. From Menopause Mandate's point of view, there are easy wins that we can help with. We can make sure that the nurses helpline is promoted more. That is a free service that anybody can use, so we could absolutely help to support you by promoting it. Across our channel, we have Let's all Talk Menopause, which has monthly live sessions that anyone can join. Those could be offered to your staff as well. There are quick, easy ways that you can get access to experts.

Just keep those conversations going. It is really important—and I know that we have seen you, Nick, at some of our Menopause Mandate drop-ins—that men are part of this conversation, too. You are likely to be a line manager, a colleague, a partner, or a co-worker and it is really important that this is not just a women's issue. It is a societal issue and not a niche issue; it is a big deal for 51% of the population.

Q21 **Mary Glindon:** As employers, MPs could have staff here and also have staff in our constituencies. What could we do to help those staff with awareness and signposting, especially if they are away from Westminster?

Laura Biggs: It can be quite lonely if you are out in the field and in an office on your own. It is important that you feel that you can get trusted information. I would definitely signpost those staff to Menopause Mandate; it is a great, trusted resource and you will get trusted information. We have a monthly newsletter that people can sign up to. It is just about making sure that those conversations do not happen in isolation, that there is not just a piece of paper on an intranet, and that there is a constant conversation. I know that you have menopause champions. I do not know how active they are, but they are important so that people feel that they can access people and have that conversation about the symptoms that they might be having.

Sharing case studies is important. I know that Carolyn talks very openly about her experience and how she was misdiagnosed in the beginning. That is so important: to have high-profile women who can share their stories. One of the most powerful stories—I think that Carolyn would agree—was when we went into the Old Bailey. A judge called Nigel spoke about his experience of his wife. He wanted to support her because she was going to leave her job as a top barrister because she could not remember people's names when she was in court. That story was so powerful. If you have high-profile men and women who are happy to talk about that, we now have the intranet and we can put stuff on social media, even if it is a short video that you can share around. It is so

powerful to share stories and experiences and then signpost to where you can get support and help.

- Q22 **Kirsteen Sullivan:** Earlier you mentioned Menopause Mandate's annual survey. I am aware that this year's survey asked quite a lot about workplace support. Can you tell us more about the feedback from the key points of this year's survey, and the issues that women raised most around workplace support?

Laura Biggs: This year we had 15,000 responses from women, and 10,000 of them were in the workplace. Sadly, eight in 10 of those women said they were negatively impacted by their symptoms at work—that is higher than for the impact on relationships, so it is significant. It is across the private and public sectors, and across all different jobs. It does not matter if you are the CEO of an organisation or you are working at the checkout in Waitrose, it has an impact on your daily role.

Forty per cent of the women who filled in our survey said they had considered changing or quitting their job due to menopause, and one in 20 had quit. One in 10 said they had changed their job due to the symptoms. It is having a significant effect, and we hear verbatim that women stop going for promotion. Their male counterparts in the same age group progress while the women seem to flatline, which is possibly why we do not have so many female CEOs.

Two in 10 women take time off due to their symptoms, so it is a productivity issue. If we keep this conversation high on the agenda, we could improve retention and productivity, so it is an economic issue as well.

Thirty-seven per cent of women said their employer has menopause training, and 35% said their employer has a menopause policy. That still means the majority, nearly 70%, do not have a policy. But 60% of women said that having a menopause policy makes them recommend their employer, so it is a really good thing for employers to do because it makes women recommend them as a great place to work. Having a menopause policy has great benefits for employers.

The biggest symptoms, which we were quite surprised about—and they came up time and again—are brain fog, anxiety and sleep problems. Those three things, which often come at the same time, can have a significant impact on your ability to do your job.

- Q23 **Bambos Charalambous:** Laura, that leads quite nicely to my question. What more can male staff, especially managers and Members, do to approach sensitive conversations with staff about menopause?

Laura Biggs: It's a difficult place to be. First, you have to acknowledge that you cannot imagine how they are feeling, because you do not have the symptoms. And definitely do not talk about the "male menopause", which is something not to touch on.



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It is a difficult situation to be in, because I do not think anyone should ever go up to anybody and ask, "Could it be menopause?" You have to be understanding and make sure you are aware of menopause and the myriad symptoms. We do not expect anyone to be a doctor, but they should understand that the symptoms can be exhausting. Just have a general awareness, and just have empathy, be sympathetic and say, "I am here if you need to talk."

It is also important to say that we need men to be part of these conversations. It should not just be a female conversation. Everyone has a daughter, a mother or a partner, and you can talk about that experience so that people feel it is approachable and that they can talk about this subject. It is just about having that broad understanding of the symptoms and how menopause can impact people.

Chair: Brilliant. Thank you, Laura. You have covered this important topic really well and provided a very sympathetic understanding. You have helped to inform us about how we can try to take this issue forward. Thank you very much for your evidence.

A big thank you to all our witnesses for talking to us today and answering our questions. That concludes the session.