

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Gender-sensitive Parliament, HC 131

Wednesday 15 September 2021

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Alex Davies-Jones; Kate Osborne; Bell Ribeiro-Addy; Nicola Richards.

Questions 152 - 200

Witnesses

I: Amanda Colledge, Business Case Director, Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body; Ian Todd, Chief Executive Officer, Parliamentary Standards Authority.

II: Dr John Benger, Clerk of the House of Commons; Marianne Cwynarski OBE, Director General, House of Commons; Sarah Davies, Clerk Assistant and Managing Director, Chamber and Participation Team, House of Commons; Sarah Petit, Cultural Transformation Director, House of Commons.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr John Benger, Marianne Cwynarski OBE, Sarah Davies and Sarah Petit.

Q152 **Chair:** Good afternoon. Can I thank our second panel in our final evidence session of our inquiry on a gender-sensitive Parliament? We have this afternoon Sarah Davies, Marianne Cwynarski, Dr John Benger and Sarah Petit.

I wanted to start with some of the institutional focus around a gender-sensitive Parliament. We have heard in evidence previously received by the Committee that sometimes Members of Parliament themselves do not necessarily understand about the governance of the House, how the Commission works and the structure of the Commission. Could I just ask each witness in turn, starting with Sarah, if you would like to make any comment about how the organisational structure of the House could or does support a gender-sensitive Parliament?

Sarah Davies: Perhaps I will start by talking about the House of Commons executive board, of which I am a member, on which Marianne sits and of which John is the chair. That is the administrative decision-making body, working to the House of Commons Commission. I am very pleased over recent years that the gender balance on that board is actually more women than men, so there is a very strong voice in terms of reflecting gender aspects of policy throughout the board's decision-making. Perhaps I will pass to Marianne and then John to explain how the Commons executive board then fits into those wider decision-making bodies, like the other House Committees and the House of Commons Commission.

Marianne Cwynarski: I have been a member of the House of Commons executive board for about a year now. We are a predominantly female board. I think we are up to nine women.

Dr Benger: I think it is eight women and three men at the moment.

Marianne Cwynarski: It is eight women and three men, so we have extremely good gender stats. In terms of ethnicity representation, we are also well represented there. We have very open conversations in that board about ethnicity, gender and disability, and I set up a workplace equality network myself, ParliREACH, in 2014. I have always felt that we are receptive and inclusive on that board, so I have had a very good experience on the Commons executive board, which John chairs. I will pass over to John neatly at the point.

Dr Benger: I would point to one or two of the challenges, which some of your other witnesses have mentioned, in that we have what the textbooks call a distributed governance model. By "distributed" it means that there is a bit here and a bit there, and it is not always very clear, as



you say—not just for Members but for staff colleagues as well—where the power and the levers are, because the levers can be in lots of different places. They can be in the House itself; they can be on the Commons executive board; they can be on the Commission.

One good thing is that both the director general ops, Marianne, and myself, following the Straw Committee, are members of that Commission, so we do part of the joining up. Another good thing is that this is a Parliament, so it is full of voices, experts and people challenging for change and reform, so those ideas are very live. On the other hand, if we were, say, a private company, it would be much simpler to effect institutional change, because you have all the levers in one place.

Q153 Chair: Can I just pick you up on that? It is a Parliament where there are lots of voices for change, reform and progress. There are also quite a lot of voices opposed to that. How do you balance that?

Dr Bengier: You are absolutely right, and that presents absolute challenges for us, because sometimes as a board, if we want to do what we think of as the right thing, we can get criticised by Members under parliamentary privilege, so there is that challenge.

A good example of that has been the Valuing Everyone training. All my colleagues are expected to do the Valuing Everyone training. It is one of our essentials. Over 90% of Members have done that Valuing Everyone training. It has been very well received, and very well received by the great majority of Members who have done it. It is very important. It was one of the Cox recommendations that it should happen, but there are a minority of Members in both Houses who have been very vocal in criticising that.

We could step back and say, “Oh my goodness, they don’t all like it. Oh dear, we need to change it or we need to drop it,” or whatever. We do not want to do that, but it is just a typical example of how we might get very rapid challenge. We just have to work around that as best we can.

Sarah Petit: I just want to add, following on from what John was saying, one of the things that we tried to do when we did the gender-sensitive Parliament audit in 2018, which I was responsible for setting up. Often, we hear either the very strong voices for change or the voices the other way, but in working with the Speaker on deciding which Members of both Houses to invite to that, we deliberately selected people who we knew had different viewpoints. If you look at the recommendations of that report, they were perhaps, some might say, more balanced—some might say less radical—but it felt like there was consensus behind them, perhaps in a way that we had not achieved through some other mechanisms.

Although one can argue about how effective that process was and what it led to, there are ways of bringing people together. It was Members, but it was also staff from different parts of the institution of Parliament, being



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brought into a room with different views and coming up with some kind of consensus.

Q154 **Chair:** Is there ever a challenge around that: that if you deliberately go out and seek the opposing views you might actually miss the ones in the middle, which might be where the majority sit?

Sarah Petit: I would argue that they probably were in the middle. We could have probably been braver if we wanted to hear the voices at either end. There were some perhaps moderate voices. When I was supporting the Commons Reference Group, when we were working on the proposals that eventually led to the proxy voting scheme, we talked to a range of women MPs, and some men, who had been in the House a long time and actually had quite different views on their experience. That did influence the proposals that we put to the Procedure Committee that then went to the House.

Q155 **Chair:** I have a specific question for John about your dual role as chief adviser to the House on procedure and privilege and being head of the House of Commons Service. Does that conflict? How does it conflict if it does, and how do you resolve it?

Dr Bengier: It does not normally conflict. The job of any Clerk in giving procedural advice is to give objective and impartial advice, so that does not sit within the political currents at all. Another advantage of my role is that I have very regular meetings with not only the Speaker, but also the Leader, the shadow Leader, the Government Chief Whip, the Opposition Chief Whip, the SNP Whip, the Liberal Democrat Whip and so on, so I am seeing a lot of the participants. I have found them to be very receptive and generally very helpful when I say we have an institutional issue here, where there is a potential tension between things going on in the House and things that the executive board is doing or maybe the Commission is doing. On the whole, I have felt that that double role has played quite usefully within the wider organisation.

Q156 **Chair:** Can I go back to Sarah Petit, please? I just wanted to ask about the *Good Parliament* report and how progress is monitored against that. How would I, as a Member of Parliament, find out whether we were making progress and how would a member of the public find out?

Sarah Petit: As you know, the Commons Reference Group was established specifically to look at the recommendations of that report. During the time that the group met, we published a progress update on our website. Once that group finished operating, that then moved into the gender-sensitive Parliament audit process, which I described. We published a report that had quite a lot of data and included an update against some of the recommendations. The Commission has since then reviewed the actions that it said it would take in response. As you may know, the Commission publishes some of the outcomes.

Part of the challenge is that the *Good Parliament* report was never formally adopted by the House. It was not commissioned by the House



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and it was not formally adopted by the House. While there are some really great recommendations in there, some of which we have implemented and some of which we would be keen to do more work on, given that a lot of them need political consensus and the House has not adopted it, we will track those recommendations that relate to the House Service and the Commission will track those that relate to it. It could indeed, as your Committee is doing, ask others for their views on progress, but there is no one place where it sits because it does not have that formal status.

Q157 **Chair:** Should there be a regular audit? The last audit was 2018. Should we be doing it regularly? If so, how often?

Sarah Petit: It was a pretty big exercise. There is the intention of having a one-year progress report where you would collect the stats and look at them and then potentially—I do not know; I am slightly speaking off the top of my head—every three to five years you might have a fuller audit. It could be put within the remit of a Committee such as yours that is established by the House and has that formal status to do the interrogation, as you are doing now. We would be very happy to provide the data that we use—the various numbers, the audit facilities and so forth. You could commission that data from us and then interrogate it in the same way that you are doing through this inquiry. That would be my thought.

Dr Bengier: I completely agree with that. There is the institutional framework of the IPU as well in gender-sensitive Parliament, so that provides a framework. Who does it and who commissions it is a very typical challenge of the sort I mentioned before. It is not for me to tell your Committee what to do—Committees are of course autonomous—but that would give it the heft and the connectedness to the wider House. We would be happy to support that not just in terms of providing data, but it is quite a big undertaking and I know that your secretariat supports a very busy programme anyway. We have expert statisticians in the Library and so on, so we would be more than happy to support that process if that was thought helpful.

Q158 **Chair:** We have heard evidence that there is no systematic and comprehensive approach to how you go about achieving a gender-sensitive Parliament. Should there be? If we were looking to put such a process in place in terms of how this place could drive forward change to make itself more gender-sensitive, how do you think we should go about doing that? Shall I start with John?

Dr Bengier: That IPU framework is a very good place to start, because that is giving you objective measures and also allowing you to compare against other Parliaments. That is comparing like with like, which is quite important.

I have wrestled a bit with what the best driver for that would be. I know Sarah Childs a little bit. I read a draft of the *Good Parliament* report and I



have done an interview with her recently. I am very supportive of her work. I happen not particularly to agree with the Speaker's Reference Group as an effective driver for change, partly for the reasons that Sarah said. To me, it stimulated the debate. It was a very good catalyst for debate about the concept. I am doubtful that you can have a standing informal committee not endorsed by the House, not making recommendations to the House and yet still expect it to be effective.

Interestingly, in Sweden, where they still do have this body, they do not have an Equalities Committee, so far as I know. You should not really have both. It would be more effective if your Committee felt that it could own this work rather than an informal group, which, as we saw with the reference group, became subject to political currents and eventually ended. That would be my view. Should it be coherent? That IPU framework gives it coherence.

Q159 Chair: Fundamentally, it should be this Committee to seize on the work to make this a more gender-sensitive Parliament and not for strange offshoots. We have the ability to publish reports.

Dr Bengler: You are elected. You can make recommendations. You can call for evidence. You can appoint specialist advisers. You have an expert secretariat.

Q160 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Thank you, panel. I wanted to ask some questions about management of Covid in the House. What do you think are the key challenges for gender sensitivity in the House of Commons now as a result of the pandemic?

Marianne Cwynarski: The priority has very much been keeping people on the estate safe and we are largely continuing to achieve that. We have not had any major outbreaks or anything like that. I am going to focus here on Members' staff, because Members have worked successfully remotely. It has been much more challenging for Members' staff and, to a degree, staff of the House, because there are communities that are not set up to work from home. Although we have provided Teams and some kit, there has been a real mixture of experience. We know this is going to continue, so there is going to be an ongoing need for us to provide support for people who are working remotely and for the challenges of working as a woman at home. It is well documented that women are doing the majority of childcare, managing a home and doing their day job.

We have a team called the Members' Services team, which is located in our HR function. They are a relatively new team and they provide services through Health Assured, so there is mental health support. They also meet with office managers to give them advice about how they could be supporting staff who are working remotely.

We are also planning events. Covid happened quite soon after the 2019 election, so we are very aware that there are a lot of Members and



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Members' staff who do not necessarily know what the House Service offers. They do not know how we can support them in what they do, so we are planning an event on 18 October.

Sarah Davies: Yes, the week after conference recess.

Marianne Cwynarski: I was going to use the word "freshers' fair", but that is the wrong thing, because that involves alcohol, doesn't it? It is like a trade fair in the Attlee Suite, where people can come along and talk to colleagues who provide key services here. There are a range of things that we are doing to support them.

Q161 **Nicola Richards:** By the time this event takes place, does that mean the requirement or the suggestion that MPs' staff should work from home will end?

Marianne Cwynarski: No. It is a decision for the Commission to say that all Members' staff are able to return to the estate. At the moment, we are still encouraging as many people as possible to work from home, but, ultimately, if there is a business need for Members' staff to be on the estate, they can bring them in.

Q162 **Nicola Richards:** Are you not concerned that there will be quite a few staff who will miss out on this event because the suggestion is that they should work from home?

Marianne Cwynarski: No. There is a business need for them to come in and see what we are doing, so they are absolutely able to come in for that event.

Q163 **Nicola Richards:** Outside of Covid, though, do you think there is a business need for MPs' staff to be in Parliament at all?

Marianne Cwynarski: It is such an individual thing for a manager and an individual employer to decide what shape their support takes. It is dependent on the role that that person fulfils. That is too personal for me to comment on.

Q164 **Nicola Richards:** Do you think it is too personal for the Commission to make the decision on, then?

Marianne Cwynarski: When there are safety considerations, the Commission has to make those decisions. We have to remain Covid-secure here. If we have, for example, an outbreak or linked cases of Covid, then we have to bear down on numbers on the estate, but we are in the fortunate position that we have not had an outbreak—touch lots of wood.

Q165 **Nicola Richards:** If an event can take place with 100 people at a black-tie dinner, which happened on the estate last week—there will be many more events happening this week—how is that safer than a Member's staff coming into the office?



Marianne Cwynarski: Those banqueting events that you are talking about are largely contained within a particular part of the Palace and, although that is a lot of people, we stagger their entrance times, so that they are not mingling with large amounts of people. There are lots of different safety measures that we put in place in order to facilitate that activity going on. The catering staff who support banqueting events have not been working for many months and they want to work, but we are not putting anybody in harm's way. We take advice. We have Public Health England in to make sure what we are doing is safe and those managed events are quite contained.

Q166 **Nicola Richards:** Is there a greater business need for, say, a black-tie dinner than an MP's staff coming into the office?

Marianne Cwynarski: Members' staff can come into the office. We are not saying you cannot come in. We are just saying, "Think about it. Can that job be done successfully at home? If it cannot, please come into work."

Q167 **Chair:** Thank you for that. That is a really interesting analysis, because at lunchtime today I went downstairs to one of the dining rooms. There was a notionally managed event. People were coming and going—Members, Members' staff and outside organisations. It was incredibly busy and tightly packed, with no social distancing, no Covid-secure measures and very few masks. Do you really think that that holds water: that the events that are bringing in an income to the Palace are being carefully managed?

Marianne Cwynarski: My understanding is that they are being managed. It is very difficult at the moment, because we are balancing what happens in the community outside. People do not come in and suddenly adhere to the rules that we want them to. If they are not wearing a facemask on the tube, they are probably not going to want to wear a facemask when they are transitioning through the estate, but the rules about wearing face coverings are not unique to Parliament. We do not mandate the wearing of face coverings, for example. We do for our own staff, but we cannot for Members.

We are in really tricky territory here and we are doing our very best. Opening up banqueting over these three sitting weeks has been an experiment and we will take a view at the end of that period to see if we are going to continue this into the autumn. We are also going to balance it with what the Covid numbers are and what the flu situation is, and make a decision as to whether we are just going to open up fully in the next three months up until the Christmas period. We are going to look at that.

Q168 **Kate Osborne:** On the same subject of having people on the estate, how do you balance or argue that people can come on to the estate as a visitor if they pay, but we could not, for example, as MPs invite non-official guests on to the estate?



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Marianne Cwynarski: Members are allowed to bring non-passholders on to the estate.

Kate Osborne: As official visitors.

Sarah Davies: For business reasons.

Marianne Cwynarski: Only for business reasons, yes.

Q169 **Kate Osborne:** For example, if my parents wanted to come and have a tour round Parliament, my understanding is that they could buy a ticket, come on to the estate and have a tour, but if I want to invite them on to give them a tour round the estate, currently the advice or the instruction is that that is not possible. How do you square that circle?

Marianne Cwynarski: Again, it is a bit like the banqueting situation, where they are self-contained activities. Those visitors on to the estate that have paid for a ticket to go on a tour are contained within the line of route and are not wandering free range across the estate and mingling with Members.

Q170 **Kate Osborne:** I am sorry; I am struggling with this. I do not see how an official taking a couple of people or a group of people around the estate is safer than me or an individual escorting a couple of people or a small group round an estate. How is the former safer?

Sarah Davies: Can I come in quickly, just because the Chamber and Participation Team that I lead includes some of the tours? There were a limited number of paid-for tours that operated during the summer recess. Since the House came back in September, there have been a limited number of what we would call democratic access tours, so not paid-for tours but running on a couple of weekday mornings before the House sits.

The logic is that those tours are timed. We have a set number of people coming in at certain times over a certain route, so we can plan the capacity in advance. Marianne will correct me if I am wrong, but the judgment there was that, if you can plan exactly what numbers of people are coming in and what time and know about it, that is an easier thing to keep Covid-secure than if you are opening the line of route to people with guests and perhaps having quite a lot of people come at once.

Dr Bengier: There is no perfect balance. I can guarantee we will not please everybody on this. The Speaker and, indeed, the Commission are assailed on all sides with competing and often contradictory requests.

If I may, sparing her blushes, Marianne has done an amazing job leading the House's response to Covid-19 and maintaining a Covid-19-secure environment right through this pandemic, but she and the Commission at every stage, usually on a daily basis, are advised by Public Health England. We know this is a highly visible institution. It is central to the nation, but we are getting that Public Health England advice at a very



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high and expert level, and I promise you we are following it. It does not always cohere logically—I can see that.

Chair: I might make an effort to drag Committee members back to the issue of gender sensitivity while discussing the Covid measures.

Q171 **Nicola Richards:** Was it Public Health England's advice to not let Members' staff let in guests on behalf of the Member of Parliament, because in this instance over the last few weeks what it has meant is, if a Member has a child that is being brought into Parliament by the carer to, say, breastfeed the child, that Member's staff have not been allowed to bring them in on the estate, which creates quite a difficulty. First, was that Public Health England's advice? If not, whose advice was it? Secondly, what equality assessments do you make before you make decisions like that?

Marianne Cwynarski: I had heard about that situation and I know that our security director, Alison Giles, is looking into that specifically, because, clearly, that is something that should not have happened.

We are open in many ways, and I know that we are saying that there are limits to who can come on to the estate and why, but clearly there is a reason for that carer to come on to the estate. In the same way that Members need to bring in people for business reasons, we would not stop something like that happening. It is a very unfortunate and regrettable situation, but the specifics of that would not be something that I would talk to Public Health England on; it is the broader access rules and our approach that we talk to them on.

Q172 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I wanted to ask—I promise I will go back to gender sensitivity—how we could possibly be Covid-secure without restrictions, and that is for everybody.

Marianne Cwynarski: We have a risk assessment that we publish on the intranet and the website, which says that we are Covid-secure. We still have many measures that we have kept in place. I know it feels very different because the signage has gone.

Q173 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** There is no social distancing. There are no masks.

Marianne Cwynarski: We still have testing. We still have a very active test and trace function. If a Member tests positive, we are watching the footage in the Chamber and tracking down all the people who they have had close contact with. All of these things are still happening. In terms of bodies on the estate, we are still very much encouraging our staff to continue working from home to keep the numbers down. There are lots of things that we are doing.

Q174 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Just on that, in terms of Members and Covid, we are aware of a Member who contracted Covid and obviously had to stay at home; that is the law. They were not entitled to a proxy vote and that is really unfortunate, given that they were complying with the law. How is



that acceptable? Is there anything that can be done about that situation?

Dr Bengier: I will take that, if I may, because, essentially, that touches on a procedural basis. The creation and the endorsement by the House of proxy voting for new parents, around adoption and specifically around miscarriage as well, was one of the big wins from the *Good Parliament* report.

It is an open question and part of a debate that you as a Committee can influence and make recommendations on—or even deliberate with the Procedure Committee on, which ultimately, I guess, will make the recommendations about it—whether or not you think, and whether or not the House thinks, ultimately, that one of the lessons of Covid is to extend the range of people eligible for proxy voting, but that has to be a decision by the House. It is not one that officials can take a view on.

Q175 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Even though staying at home when you have Covid and staying at home when you have been in contact with someone with Covid is the law, it is still only a matter that we can influence as MPs and nothing else.

Dr Bengier: Yes, I think that is right. We have seen various iterations of proxy voting, proxy rules and rules about divisions. I think we have had six different systems for divisions since Covid started. It has been a very contested area. I have been struck as well by people who are seriously ill. Another big issue and challenge for the House is whether or not it wants to extend those proxy voting rights to a wider group of Members.

We can give you technical advice on what it would involve but we cannot enter into the argument, because there are differences of views within the House, as you know. It is probably not appropriate for me or colleagues to express a view.

Q176 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** What are the overall benefits of how the House was able to adapt to the pandemic, and how, if in any way, will these be retained?

Dr Bengier: That is quite a wide question. Let me do my best. It is much easier to answer from the perspective of the House Service than it is from that of the wider Parliament and the House. From the perspective of the House Service, first, we have shown ourselves to be a remarkably agile and adaptable organisation, able to cope with a huge crisis in a way that has been widely praised. I have had endless compliments from your colleagues and from others, and from colleagues in other Parliaments, about the speed of response.

We were the first hybrid Parliament in the world. We have kept a Covid-secure environment throughout. We introduced electronic voting within a week of the request coming in, and so on and so forth. There is a very long list. As a service, we very rapidly adapted to remote and hybrid working, and there is tremendous potential legacy for us as a House Service in having a more blended approach to the workplace. We can



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potentially be a more attractive employer, and we can potentially reach out and employ people who would not think of coming to work in SW1A for a whole host of reasons.

That is the easy bit to describe. The hard bit to describe is which, if any, of the procedures that were introduced in response to the pandemic should be sustained. The Procedure Committee has said it wants to review that in the cold light of day, once we have moved on from the immediate crisis, and then make recommendations. The Procedure Committee has gone on the record as saying that it thinks things should revert and changes should only be made in a conscious and deliberate way, not by happenstance. I cannot say more on that.

Sarah Davies: From my perspective as a managing director of a relatively large team—nearly 600 staff, overall—we continue to be in a period of adjustment at the moment. It speaks to one of the things you said earlier. We know that we need to be really thoughtful about how the next few months play out, as people either continue to work at home or return to the workplace, looking at the opportunities that they experience and whether people feel that they are missing out in some way as an employee by not being on the estate.

We are continuing conversations about that through what we are calling a hybrid working trial, which we are discussing with all House Service employees at the moment. We have particularly built into that review points at each six-month mark so that we can actually look at some of the feedback we are getting, particularly by different protected characteristics as well, about how this is affecting different groups of people.

I am particularly aware of colleagues who are newer to the organisation and colleagues who are perhaps in shared accommodation, for whom the last 18 months has been really miserable. We are very mindful of that balance, as Marianne has described, about the central importance of ensuring that this place is a Covid-secure environment while also ensuring that, as we go through the next few months, hopefully as the public health situation improves, those people who then choose to work in a more blended way at home are reassured that we are still a good employer for them, and they are not missing out on opportunities.

Sarah Petit: Just to add from a cultural perspective, following on from Sarah's comments, one of the things we have done well as a House Service during the pandemic is to encourage our managers to check in with their staff and see what they need. I mention that in a gender-sensitive Parliament inquiry because that includes checking in on women and men with caring responsibilities. It includes trying to raise some awareness of the signs of domestic violence and so forth. We hope to maintain those techniques and that more inclusive approach, however we end up working in the future.



Although I speak specifically about House staff, I, in my role, work really closely with the Members' Services team, which John mentioned, that is set up to support Members and Members' staff. A lot of the stuff we are trying to do, in terms of wellbeing and encouraging good management, we are trying to move into that space so that we offer that support to MPs and MPs' staff as well.

Q177 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: You touched on electronic voting and hybrid participation. At the moment, there is only electronic voting for peers, and they are allowed to do it as long as they are on the estate, whereas Members of Parliament have to walk through the Lobby in their hundreds. We obviously have no more hybrid participation at all. What effect do you think the removal of hybrid participation has had on MPs with caring responsibilities, the majority of whom are women?

Dr Bengier: That is a very difficult question for us to answer, frankly. We have not surveyed members. We are much more comfortable and knowledgeable about our own staff. If it stays as it is, one area where we can point to good potential for Parliament is in terms of witness diversity. The facility for witness participation remotely, which was always there but which is much more easily facilitated by the technology and is much more familiar, potentially could expand the opportunities for witnesses with caring responsibilities, for example, to come in. That balance in Members' lives and the decisions the House has taken about what to permit in terms of electronic voting or hybrid participation really are decisions for the House. We do not have detailed knowledge or information into the impact on caring responsibilities for Members.

We can ask the Members' Services team to do some research on that, to start asking some questions as part of the next iteration. They do regularly check in with Members on the service provision we have here, but it is quite difficult for us if it gets into the area of the House determining what presence means, what sitting hours are and so on. That is not something we as officials can influence.

Q178 Chair: You said you were not surveying Members. The stark reality is that nobody is surveying Members. Who should be?

Dr Bengier: That is a really good question. You are not a single body, but we have only recently created the Members' Services team, and that was partly in response to the Gemma White report, which was one of the three reports into unacceptable cultures in Parliament. The Members' Services team and the work that Kate Emms and others have been doing have been really well received by Members. It is part of a wider effort we are making to connect more with all aspects of your role, most notably the constituency aspect, for example, where in recent years, both in terms of security and the digital offering, we have made much more effort to reach out and connect with you.

I would be really happy to take that as an action and ask the Members' Services team at least to do an exploratory survey, particularly to see if it



can impact on any of the service provision that we offer. We can also talk to IPSA about that, because it may have a view as well. I am very happy to undertake to do the survey, but some of the actions may even be for parties.

Q179 Chair: Some of the actions may be for parties and some of the actions may be for IPSA. I sound like a lawyer now, but I would put it to you that you, the House, might get a more honest answer from Members than IPSA—we are all terrified they are going to publish our every word—and the party Whips, who hold our careers in their hands.

Dr Bengier: You have sold it; there we are. I am really happy to take that away. It is an interesting suggestion. You will appreciate this has been an extraordinarily frantic and busy time for the House Service, just as I am sure it has been for all of you. The question is when the right moment is to access what the balance is and how this is impacting, first, on your working lives, and, secondly, on that of your staff. Our Members' Services team are very focused on your staff. They are one of the resources.

This is relatively recent. The funding is not enormous. I am quite keen that we expand this area. This is a growth area for us, and the very positive response we have had from Members encourages me that there is more we can do here. I will undertake to commission that survey work as an honest broker.

Q180 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: My last question is about diversity of witnesses and hybrid participation.

Dr Bengier: I have some less rosy news on that. I came expecting to be cautiously positive about that, and in my memorandum I said, wrongly, as it turned out—not wrongly altogether—that anecdotal evidence suggested we were pushing up now at that 40% mark for discretionary witnesses that I think the Liaison Committee set in 2018. We have just had a real push to get the raw data ready for this Committee today; disappointingly, it is in more or less exactly the same place as it was the last time we looked—i.e. nearly at 40% but not at 40%. It is still at thirty-nine-point-something per cent.

The notion that, all of a sudden, with people able to come in remotely, we have liberated lots of witnesses who would not otherwise have a voice has simply not proven true. It is of course quite a limited data set, but I have to say that I am disappointed, and it has prompted me to wonder what more we, and indeed you and your fellow Chairs and so on, could do. The House Service can do a certain amount. Excellent specialists, such as your own, can put forward the names of potential witnesses, but ultimately it is the Committees who decide this. You can see quite large disparities between the proportion in different Committees, with your Committee doing extremely well in terms of having women as witnesses.



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I have had a little look. The BBC is not an organisation that always prompts a unanimity of view across Parliament, but the BBC has been working really hard in this area. It has something called a 50:50 initiative, which started with an individual news team in, I think, 2016. It is doing very similar things to what we are doing. It is looking at the data and constantly refreshing the data, but I think it is doing it a bit more persistently with a view to effecting change. Since it introduced that policy, as I say, with a single news team on a single programme in 2016, it has completely mushroomed. It now covers 500 separate bits of the BBC, looking at all the content. It has effected quite a dramatic shift in representation, far more significant than we have managed, albeit in a shorter period.

I just wonder whether you as a Committee at some stage might want to talk to the people behind that initiative to see whether there are lessons that we could learn from that.

Q181 Chair: I will have a bunch of questions on that. First, this Committee does take very seriously trying to get a diversity of witnesses to come and appear in front of us. When considering witnesses, we will always ask, "Why do we only have men coming today?", or, "Why do we have an all-white panel?" That is a really important question. When you look at data from different Select Committees, do you remove Ministers as witnesses?

Dr Bengler: Yes.

Sarah Davies: Back in 2018, I was one of the Principal Clerks in the Committee Office. I was actually responsible for drafting that report. The distinction here is between discretionary and non-discretionary witnesses. If a Committee wants to hear from a particular office-holder, that is not a choice. You have to hear from that particular person with that authority. What we are talking about here is the discretionary items, where there is a choice.

Dr Bengler: The BBC does exactly the same. One of its principles of 50:50 is, "Measure what you can control."

Q182 Chair: Do you publish those statistics by Committee?

Dr Bengler: I know we do the analysis. I think we publish it. I know the Liaison Committee gets it. I think it is published. I would have to check that.

Q183 Chair: How regularly is it published?

Dr Bengler: I think it is done on a sessional basis.

Sarah Davies: It is on a sessional basis. I believe there are sometimes updates more regularly. We can look at that and let you know exactly what current practice is.



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Dr Bengler: My impression is that that feedback loop is much more persistent within the BBC. It is not, "We have had another year. Let us look back at what we have done." It is doing those things in real time much more persistently.

Q184 **Chair:** That is a driver of change, is it not? If you are publishing that regularly, one would like to think that would then incentivise Committees to be much more rigorous in making sure that they were getting a balance of witnesses.

Dr Bengler: Its headline on that is, "Collect data to drive change," which is a valid principle.

Chair: Yes, absolutely.

Q185 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I have a last thing on that particular part of the question. You were talking about diversity. I expect that in that you were thinking of protected characteristics. As part of the survey, could you look geographically as well, because that is a major issue? We are meant to work for the entire country, but we are very London-based and London-centric, and I say that as a London MP.

Dr Bengler: You are right.

Sarah Petit: I completed a form because I was coming to this Committee, and it asked me where I lived. I presume that that is going somewhere.

Q186 **Chair:** This Committee certainly works very hard to make sure that we get voices from around the country. It may be, now that we have all got used to taking evidence from people remotely, that we will find it easier to get witnesses from different parts of the United Kingdom to come to give evidence, because we are not dragging them all into London.

Dr Bengler: I would also like to get staff from a wider geographical area. One of the attractions of a higher element of remote working is that, in terms of the incredibly high house and rental prices in London that would deter many people from considering a career in Parliament, we may be able to work around that.

Q187 **Chair:** I just wanted to follow up on the whole BBC issue, because I feel it would be remiss of me not to put this on the record while I have the opportunity. When it is collecting data about gender, presumably ethnicity and other protected characteristics, is that being disaggregated? My question is driven by this: is the BBC still in a position where, like many other broadcasters, it is hiding data? I am specifically focusing on age, where they are much more likely to use older men and younger women. Do we know if there is any breakdown where older women, for example, are being removed from our screens?

Dr Bengler: I do not know the answer to that question. We have someone on our workforce who will. Our very recently recruited head of diversity for the House Service worked here a while ago, then went off



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and worked for Sony, and then worked at a very senior level in this area at the BBC. She has just come back to us, which we are very delighted about. She will know.

From the reading around that I have done, all I can say is that they have gone from a very narrow focus, which is women in content. By "content", they may mean playing in an orchestra rather than just a talking head on a news programme, for example. They have gone from a narrow focus to a much wider range of protected characteristics. I know they have widened the lens, but I do not know the degree of disaggregation they do and the extent to which they unpack it. I am sure they would be more than happy to tell you.

Chair: I am sure they would not.

Q188 **Kate Osborne:** I am going to focus some questions on buildings and facilities that support a gender-sensitive Parliament. Do you think that the buildings that make up the parliamentary estate provide an inclusive environment for women or parents to work in or visit?

Marianne Cwynarski: I became the director general of operations in July, so I am very much wrapping my head around this vast and complex estate at the moment. The picture in terms of inclusive buildings is better when it comes to new and refurbished buildings. We have inclusive building guidelines that we work to. We ensure that those spaces have multi-faith rooms, baby care facilities, gender-neutral toilets and are accessible. We aim for 100%, and we get close to that in those areas.

In terms of the Palace, the picture is different. We have some facilities; I am sure the Committee is aware they are quite limited. I am delighted to report we have eight gender-neutral toilets in the Palace, but I am going to admit here that we have not communicated that very successfully. I do not know how well known that is. We have a baby-care room, a family room and a baby changing room. I think it is fair to say that, although we have those spaces, there is room for improvement in those spaces. As we are going to be here for a while still before R&R, I would be happy if the Committee said that there needs to be improvement in those spaces. I would take that on.

Q189 **Kate Osborne:** On our first panel, we heard about the make-up of the building in respect of steps and the fact that that causes a certain problem, particularly with accessing the nursery, etc. What are the other challenges with the buildings and the facilities here?

Marianne Cwynarski: In terms of accessibility specifically, we have a lot of lifts that do not work or that are not big enough to be fully accessible and useful. We have a big programme to do work on. We have something like 150 to 200 lifts, and we have a big investment programme going on. We are trying to address and make improvements where we can in that area, but in terms of providing new things, our ability to do that is limited. It is refurbish and improve, but unfortunately it is very limited.



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Dr Bengler: Can I make another point? The image of the building, from an inclusive aspect, is potentially a problem. This was a building, as you know, created after an enormous fire in the 1830s and then built over a period of 20 years or so in a Gothic style. You can see that, and you can see that in the imagery everywhere. This was built, in a way, recreating a medieval palace.

It was built for an exclusively male Parliament, and everything about it supports that. I know there are lots of statistics on the total aggregate number of women MPs ever, and if you set that against the total aggregate number of male MPs ever, there would be a really strong imbalance. There is a real challenge in the image of the building. That happens for staff as well, particularly disabled staff. Our figures on disability are strikingly bad as an employer. They are far worse than anything on gender or ethnicity, where we have quite a good story to tell. We still have a very bad story to tell on disability; there is no getting around that. Potentially, it is a very off-putting building.

I will give you a specific example of how problematic this area can be. In the *Good Parliament* report, Professor Childs says that, while you were all sitting, crammed on those benches together, within touching distance, all huddled together, in her view, that is not a very inclusive or friendly environment. Some people will be put off by that degree of physical contact. I am fairly confident that, if a motion went to the House saying that we would like to have individual seats for every Member, so we are either going to scrap Barry's Chamber altogether or you are going to lose, say, 30% of your capacity so you have little arm rests, that motion might struggle to get through the House.

Ultimately, it is up to you. That is just a typical example of the sort of problems the building might cause you.

Q190 **Kate Osborne:** Thank you for that. My next question was around what could be improved, but you have pretty much touched on that. John, in relation to restoration and renewal, where you attend sponsor body meetings as well as being a member of the Commission, what is your view on the best way of embedding gender equality in the R&R programme from here?

Dr Bengler: That is a really good and tricky question. R&R exemplifies how challenging it is to get governance in this environment. In enacting the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act, the House has handed over the client role to the sponsor body and the builder role to the delivery authority. The key thing is to influence the sponsor body so that so that it is an intelligent client.

Within the House Service and in relation to the sponsor body—I am part of that relationship for the reasons you say; I sit on that board and I am part of a small group with my counterpart in the Lords, and Sarah Johnson, the CEO of the sponsor body—we recently reviewed all of our internal governance arrangements to make sure that all the various



committees and knowledge groups are designed in a very coherent way, so that the House Service can interact really well with the sponsor body.

The really big challenge—we are only some of the way down the road at the moment—is how the sponsor body can capture not just the views of the Commission but the views of Members. That is a statutory obligation for them under that Act, and that is the journey we need to go on. That is the area where I see both opportunity and risk.

Q191 Alex Davies-Jones: You mentioned making the building and infrastructure here more amenable to women MPs in particular and those with caring responsibilities and with children. In the last Parliament, only four MPs used the on-site nursery facility, and the latest figures we have show that only 10 MPs use the current nursery. Do you think that is because it closes at 7.30 pm, and last night we were voting past 8.30 pm?

Marianne Cwynarski: Sarah might be a good person to answer this. You trialled something, did you not?

Sarah Petit: I do not know specifically the answer to that question, but, as Marianne said, as part of my work to support the reference group, I was responsible for trialling some provisions where MPs could access childcare on a more ad hoc basis, for example a creche. We did quite a lot of work with potential providers of off-site or on-site creches. We looked at different rooms. We worked with LEYF, the nursery provider, on whether it could incorporate that into its provision.

We did trial, for a couple of years, a contract, whereby MPs could contract ad hoc childcare facilities. It was not on the estate. The real challenge was that MPs' childcare needs are so different and so specific, and, in comparative terms, fairly small. We would say to a provider, "We want to invest in this. We think this is incredibly important," but they said, "We cannot get staff who will be prepared to just sit there for the numbers that you are talking about," or "You do not have the space." It was incredibly hard to find a solution that would work for enough people that would make it viable beyond, as I say, the financial.

We talk to the nursery provider often and would be prepared to explore other options, because it is something that has been quite important to us to look at over the last few years. It is certainly not through a lack of will or money. It is more just trying to find a solution that works.

Q192 Alex Davies-Jones: What would be your suggestion to MPs with young children, like myself, last night? I have a two-year-old. The creche closed at 7.30 pm but I was voting at 8.30 pm? What was I meant to do with my child?

Sarah Petit: As I say, there is not a lack of will. I am not unsympathetic to that, but if we are working with childcare providers and they are telling us that it is very hard to provide a solution, it is quite hard to know.



Q193 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Can you see why that would be incredibly discouraging for mothers who might want to become MPs?

Sarah Petit: Of course. Yes, indeed.

Q194 **Kate Osborne:** I will move on to culture and behaviour. Sarah Petit, in 2018, Dame Laura Cox's report into bullying and harassment of House of Commons staff identified a clear gender dimension to the cases she considered. She said that women were targeted for sexual harassment and bullying. What are the key indicators for measuring progress with regards to culture change?

Sarah Petit: I will start by talking specifically about bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct, which, as you say, was the main driver of our current culture work. In the short term, we are looking for an improvement in individuals working in Parliament in whatever capacity being aware of the ICGS and feeling confident to use it. We are also looking for an improvement in individuals feeling able to deal with low-level poor behaviour themselves in the moment, to de-escalate it. We measure that through surveys, ICGS call stats and the two reviews that we have commissioned of the ICGS, which I can talk more about if that is helpful. In the longer term, we would be looking for an actual reduction in the incidence of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct, but we know from experiences of other organisations that just takes a bit longer to effect.

Given the nature of the inquiry, I will move to talk about gender diversity. We also have an indicator in our programme, whereby everyone should be able to thrive at the House Service regardless of their role, position or background. Within background, we would include protected characteristics, including gender. We track that through the number of women who we are able to attract and retain in the organisation, the pay gap and those kinds of figures. We would also look across our survey data. We break that down and say, "Are women reporting a particular issue on bullying, on workload?" etc., which would indicate more of an inclusion issue and would potentially affect longer-term retention. We would then see how we could intervene in those cases.

Q195 **Kate Osborne:** How do you ensure that work on specific issues, such as hostile cultures to women, are balanced with wider cultural change?

Sarah Petit: I will answer that in two parts. First, we believe a lot of the work that we are trying to do on culture more broadly will have a positive impact on gender. I know Sarah Childs has talked to you about a diversity-sensitive Parliament, which captures that concept. The sorts of things that we would do in that are setting expectations of behaviours through the behaviour code and setting work boundaries. We are doing that with our own staff, but also Members' Services is preparing support for Members and Members' office managers on how to set effective work



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boundaries, which should help with being more open to flexible working, work/life balance for family life, etc.

There is also the issue of inclusive access. We have talked about the estate not necessarily being a welcoming place. We did a big review of the rules, about who should be able to go into different parts of the estate, trying to open them up and make them more related to business need. Again, that is so not just women, but everyone should feel that they are welcome and that they are meant to be in Parliament. As I say, some of that is broadly inclusive, which should help from a gender perspective too.

In answer to your question about how we prioritise, we look at both the hard data and also at what Members' staff and our staff are telling us about what the issues are and what the priorities should be. We make specific gender interventions. One example for Members is the issue of online and physical security. Earlier this year we ran a specific "Report it to sort it" campaign, targeted at the issues that women MPs face, trying to engage you in how to keep yourself safe and how to report problems. That is one example, and we will be repeating that campaign shortly.

From a broader parliamentary community perspective, with the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, we believe we are the only Parliament in the world that offers dedicated specialist support to victims of sexual misconduct. We are really proud of that, and we are doing quite a lot to try to tackle sexual harassment. Those are just a couple of examples.

Q196 Kate Osborne: Sarah Davies, witnesses at the first oral evidence session described a huge change that had taken place as a result of new policies and initiatives in Parliament, which is obviously really good news. What is your assessment of progress on changing harmful behaviour, including sexual misconduct and gendered bullying since the establishment of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme in 2018?

Sarah Davies: It is good to hear, and it has been good to read the positive evidence that has been given to your Committee about how far we have come. There is a way to go on the ICGS. As Sarah said, it is a unique scheme across Parliaments, and it is complex. It enables access for all members of the parliamentary community to independent advice and guidance. That establishment has involved a lot of bicameral work and a lot of work with outside experts, and the independence of it also has a whole series of contracting organisations around it that carry out the inquiries.

I have a particular role in the ICGS. For the first time ever, the Clerk Assistants to the House of Lords and the House of Commons are both women. At board level, we champion and represent the ICGS scheme, and we work very closely with Jo Willows, the ICGS director.



If I am to describe the purpose of the ICGS at its heart, I think back to before the Cox review and talking to colleagues who were affected or involved in some of those cases. At its heart, the ICGS answers a question—a question that perhaps we hope do not face in our working lives: “What do I do if this happens to me, and where do I go?” All the way through this evidence session, we have already noted how complicated an institution this can be and how many people can be affected by things that happen here. The ICGS answers the question, in a simple form, of, “Where do I go for help and advice, and what are the systems in that?” In its creation of that single scheme, the ICGS has achieved the answer to that question.

In terms of the processes around the ICGS, you said it was established in July 2018. We have had two independent reviews of the system since then, both conducted by the same reviewer, Alison Stanley, an outside expert. We are at the moment implementing the recommendations from her second review, which was published in February 2021. She noted the good work that had happened but noted too that there were things that we needed to do to speed up the process, to make it simpler, to get the advice better and to simplify the policies. There were multiple policies that were really complicated, clunky and capable of different interpretations. You cannot have that in a scheme that is so important.

New policies and procedures were agreed by the House, after having been agreed by the Commission at the end of April this year. They were really important because having that agreed wording is critical with cases like this. The communications are better. There is now a single ICGS hub that people can go to for advice online, which, again, is really important. We are working closely with the Members’ Services team to make sure that Members’ staff and Members are aware of the services that this provides.

We are along the way, but there is more to do. There is more to do on the process and we want to get the cases resolved more quickly. Those are the key points on where we are on ICGS.

Q197 **Kate Osborne:** At the beginning of this session, John said that the Valuing Everyone training has been well received, although criticised by some. What evidence is there that the training is meeting its objectives in supporting the ICGS?

Sarah Davies: I will pass to Sarah Petit on that one, if I may, because she has been doing work on that particularly.

Sarah Petit: In my answer to your earlier question, I mentioned that there is a bit of a lag between when you will see a reduction in poor behaviour once you start this programme. However, there are a couple of things I could say. First, one of the key aims of Valuing Everyone is to get people to reflect on their own behaviour and then hopefully behave well. We do some evaluation. For example, some time last year we asked MPs who had done their training what impact it had had on them, to help



them think about themselves, and we had incredibly positive feedback. Some 90% of the MPs who completed the survey gave very positive feedback on how it helped them to think about their role as a manager and a member of the parliamentary community. That is a positive indicator, though, as I say, it will take longer to see what that means in terms of overall levels of bullying and harassment.

One of the key aims of the Valuing Everyone training is to raise awareness of the support that is available if you need it. Alison Stanley found in her most recent review, which would have been undertaken after a lot more people had done the training than during her first review, that the level of confidence had increased. The level of awareness was very high—I think it was 95%—for the bullying and harassment policy, but confidence in using it had increased from 17% to 38%. That is still pretty low—we are starting from a low base—but it is quite a significant uplift. We cannot say that that was just a result of the Valuing Everyone training, but we think that it is having some kind of impact.

Q198 Kate Osborne: There are concerns about gaps in the system, particularly around dealing with complaints of harmful behaviour. Witnesses have told us of examples. I will give you an example where a Member of Parliament under investigation for sexual misconduct cannot be excluded from the parliamentary estate as a protective measure, and those who have been sanctioned by the Independent Expert Panel cannot face a recall petition. What action can you take to protect other Members, staff or visitors in those circumstances?

Dr Bengier: It is quite likely that there will be a motion to remove the differential treatments of Members suspended for 10 days or more under IEP sanction and ordinary standards cases. That distinction may disappear if the House agrees that motion. At the moment, we have to conduct a risk assessment. The key people involved in that from a House Service perspective are Speaker's Counsel, who is our senior lawyer, and our head of HR, Mandy Eddolls. There is quite a bit they can do.

It is not straightforward. Sometimes people talk about a workplace in Parliament. It is not a workplace. You have 650 separate workplaces. You employ your staff; I do not employ your staff. We then have the House of Lords, the House of Commons, the Digital Service and so on. In that risk assessment, we will be looking at the nature of the conduct. We will be looking at any risk analysis that the IEP itself has included in that report. Remember that the IEP can recommend expulsion of a Member. They may well give us useful guidelines in determining what actions we can take.

We will assess whether alcohol is a factor. We can restrict access to the bars. Drinking in the bars is not an essential part of your democratic responsibilities. We can look at people who might be particularly vulnerable and at risk from a particular type of conduct. Certainly within some limits, we can brief them about known risks. We can look at whether there are any safeguarding issues, and we have a safeguarding



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lead. There are a range of measures that we can take. It is not perfect and I will not pretend it is, but we are trying to mitigate the risk the best that we can.

Kate Osborne: I imagine banning people from bars may go some way to helping in some cases.

Dr Bengler: It touches on quite an important point, if I may say so. The Commission has agreed that we can restrict services. That is a huge breakthrough. That does not just apply to IEP cases. That does not have to go through the full formality of an ICGS complaint. We can simply refuse. We are backed by the Commission and by the Speaker in refusing to offer services outside the area of core democratic functions—the role that you as office-holders are constitutionally sent here to do.

Even in that role, we can take certain mitigation measures. For example, if we had a Member who was routinely highly abusive in the Table Office, we could insist that they e-tabled their questions and that they were not entitled to enter the Table Office. That is quite fundamental, but we can go that far, and the Commission has endorsed that approach. By the way, I am not saying that that is a routine occurrence.

Q199 **Kate Osborne:** It is quite heartening to hear that there are some steps that you could take, but would I be right in saying that there are limitations under the current rules?

Dr Bengler: There are lots of limitations. There are also limitations in wider society. For example, I am notified if a Member is arrested. That is under the Speaker's protocol. I would not necessarily know that a member of staff had been charged with an offence, for example. I am afraid it is quite complicated. I do not determine whether someone is remanded. It is quite a jigsaw here.

You are the employers of your staff. Again, we may not have any visibility at all of a local dispute between a Member's staff if it sits outside of the ICGS proceedings. As its title suggests, the ICGS is an independent and confidential service. You are quite right that there are a number of limitations. We can only work with what we have and we do our best to mitigate. I would stress that it is not a perfect system, and there is not a simple, perfect solution to that problem that you are outlining.

Q200 **Chair:** Thank you for your evidence this afternoon. That has been highly informative and really useful. You will have noticed that you suddenly provoked a lot of questions from all Members that perhaps went off on tangents slightly. If there is anything else that we would like to follow up in writing, are you happy that we should do so?

Sarah Davies: Yes, of course.

Dr Bengler: Of course, yes. We would be delighted to.

Alex Davies-Jones: Thank you. We really appreciate it.



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Chair: Thank you very much. I will draw the meeting to a close.