



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall, HC 1062

Monday 7 March 2022

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Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Aaron Bell; Jack Brereton; Chris Elmore; Patrick Grady; James Gray; Gary Sambrook; James Sunderland.

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Witness

[I](#): Alicia Kearns MP.

Examination of witness

Witness: Alicia Kearns.

Q1 Chair: Thank you so much for coming to join the Procedure Committee today as a witness for our inquiry around the issue of babies in the Chamber. Before I go any further, I wanted to make sure that everyone was aware that last week the Women and Equalities Committee produced an excellent report about a gender-sensitive House of Commons, which includes a number of points around more general issues about the treatment of parents, among other groups, in Parliament. There are some very interesting recommendations in there.

We are very much looking at, as we have been asked to by Mr Speaker, the issue of babies in the Chamber, and whether they should be allowed in the Chamber and Westminster Hall. Our inquiry does not even go as far as whether babies should be allowed to come into Select Committees, so this is a very narrowly focused session. I know, Alicia, that you have experience of being a new parent while being an MP, and we are very keen to hear from you, but perhaps you wish to make some comments before we kick off with questions.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you so much for having me today. I have to say that I did not come into politics to talk about my personal life or childcare, and I have to admit that I feel quite a lot of pressure to represent the views of many colleagues who have come to me to express their views privately. I hope that I do them the service that they deserve. I respect that there are different views on this. I think that you can be two very strong feminists who agree completely on this, but I worry that this debate is ultimately focused on the cosmetic rather than the meaningful, and that it is actually a distraction from some of the more meaningful recommendations that, for example, that report has made. I think it is also being represented as somehow emblematic of a wider form of discrimination against mothers, and fathers seem to be missing from the debate altogether.

I would like to see us move on from this, because I do not think that babies have any place in the House of Commons, for reasons that I am very happy to discuss with you in detail. If I am honest, I think that it is fundamentally counterproductive to women's rights. We have fought so hard for women to have equal treatment, and it is still not where it should be within the workforce, but to now say that women should somehow have to go to work and then on their laps balance their babies at the same time, while advocating for their constituents and debating the law of these lands, is not a fair expectation of women. Again, where is the question of fathers in this? Are we expecting fathers to do the same thing? I very much look forward to taking your questions. Hopefully I can represent well.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. Perhaps I can start with an open question. What have your experiences been of being a parent and a Member of



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Parliament?

Alicia Kearns: I think I'm making it work. I cannot say that I have cracked it. I am pretty sure that every parent in Parliament, and I know that many of you around this table are parents, would say that they probably felt guilt at times, as I think every parent in every workplace does. Stay-at-home mums do as well. We all feel guilt. Do I think that it is harder to be an MP and a mum than it was when I was self-employed and a mum? Without question. It is difficult sometimes for people who are not in Parliament to understand how our days work, but it is almost like being back at school. You get your morning text saying, "Are you on the estate? Are you in the building?" You are not allowed to leave the building unless you have permission from the headteacher, essentially. You do not determine your hours. There is no shift time, so you cannot even rely on that. Your diary is determined by what is happening in the Chamber. When there is suddenly an urgent question or a point of order, or a debate runs short or runs over, you do not determine what time you are home every night. That puts a lot of demands on your family that I think other jobs do not, necessarily.

There are also, obviously, the threats against our children. I would say that I have had more threats against my children than I have had against me since I was elected. I think that is a unique pressure that parents in Parliament face. But there are also some positives, and I cannot praise Speaker Lindsay Hoyle enough. He has been incredible since I was elected. All the Deputies have been incredibly supportive, as have a lot of my colleagues. Also, as a parent in Parliament, you get to fight for other parents. My Lone Births Campaign sought to make sure that no one gave birth on their own. I was also fighting to make sure that children under five did not count in covid regulations. There are great things about being a parent in Parliament, but there are also a lot of problems.

Q3 **Aaron Bell:** Thank you, Ms Kearns, for coming in today. I want to pick up on something you said in your opening statement about this being counterproductive to women's rights. Is that on the basis that if one woman does it, it would put pressure on other women to do the same?

Alicia Kearns: I think there is that point. This is all about choice. As a Conservative, it will be shocking that I believe in respecting choice, opportunity and freedoms for women. When I was on maternity leave, I had absolute choice. I was on full pay, which none of my constituents get to have, although some of them do now, because businesses are stepping up to the fore. Where Parliament has led, we now see businesses following. But I have also seen people put enormous pressures on me, expecting me to behave in some way or another. I remember getting colleagues commenting to me that I was doing too much work while I was on maternity leave. I had colleagues saying, "Why are you coming in and speaking in debates? You're putting pressure on other mums to do the same." First, that is a thoroughly Conservative view. Secondly, what we have in Parliament is ultimate choice. I could participate when I needed to do so for constituents. I could participate when it mattered deeply to me because it was a campaign that I was leading on, but I was also able,



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through the proxy voting system, to spend the time I needed with my baby to look after her.

- Q4 **Aaron Bell:** I know colleagues will talk about the specifics of our practice and rules in the Chamber, but do you think comparing what we do as Members with the experiences of our constituents is helpful and informative? Within that, do you think the House should be seeking to mirror wider society or to lead wider society?

Alicia Kearns: We should always seek to lead wherever we can, but we should lead when it is meaningful and will make a genuine difference, and particularly when it will help our constituents. It is important that we compare our situation with the circumstances of constituents, because why should I as an MP have more rights than my constituents? The best comparison I have been able to think of is a barrister going to court. When a barrister goes to court, they are debating the laws of the land. They are advocating for an individual, and the outcomes matter. They matter in terms of national security, in terms of safety and in terms of opportunities. If you went to court and your barrister was sat there with a baby on their lap or was breastfeeding while advocating for you, I cannot say that you would feel, with complete confidence, that they were fully focused on the job—not because they did not want to be, but because it is impossible. As a mother, at all times that your baby is on your chest—I would say the same with fathers—you would always be worrying about your baby. You would always be having that slight moment.

There is also the fear of disruption. When you start taking your baby to restaurants for the first time, you are terrified that your baby is going to lose the plot, that you will be embarrassed in front of everyone and that you will have to leave and flee the restaurant. Look at the seriousness of the topics we discuss—the Afghanistan debate is probably the best example. I remember that I was technically still on leave of absence, and we were all on recess. I arranged for my husband to provide childcare with my mother-in-law while we had the Afghanistan debate, because if I had brought my baby—she would have been about eight months—into the Chamber and she had disrupted the speeches of any of my colleagues, particularly those who had served and were talking about trauma, it would have been so disrespectful and inappropriate, and I would have been thoroughly ashamed. I have been very lucky, because my babies are generally very quiet, happy and content, but I would never have forgiven myself if my baby had interrupted my colleagues. That would have been truly wrong and inappropriate for the severity of the topic being discussed.

- Q5 **Aaron Bell:** Finally, I do not want to be divisive, and we do not have any London MPs on the Procedure Committee, but I have had it put to me that people who have their families down in London, either because they are London MPs or because that is how they have chosen to arrange themselves, are acting from a position of privilege compared with those of us who do not. Is that something you have sympathy with?

Alicia Kearns: That is something I have sympathy with. Actually, I would break it down beyond that. When I was applying to become an MP, I



specifically determined that I either wanted to be an inner-London MP or a completely-outside-of-London MP. The MPs who suffer most are actually those in outer London—Orpington, Newbury and places like that—because according to IPSA rules they are not allowed to have a second home. I know second homes sound exciting, and everyone gets very caught up in headlines about them, but it means that mothers and fathers of children in such places have to travel for an hour and a half to two and a half hours every single night. They are never making it home for bedtime. They will never make it in time to go to a parents evening or a medical appointment. They have it the most difficult.

In London, you are very fortunate. It is far easier. That is why I picked a constituency that I knew would allow me to better balance family life, because we live where most MPs live—I probably shouldn't say where it is. The reason we chose that is because we are in close proximity to Parliament. When we finish at 1.30 in the morning, as we did the other night and my husband had been struggling with a baby who still wakes every two hours to breastfeed throughout the night, it only took me 15 minutes walking to get home so that I could pick up some of the slack. There is a real difference in experience for MPs, but those in the outer London box find it most difficult.

Q6 James Sunderland: As you know, Ms Kearns, I play with a very straight bat. If I may, I think you are an excellent advocate for MPs in the House of Commons. You are a young mum; you have two young children; your husband works full time with a busy career. You are juggling motherhood with your constituency, a huge caseload and the list goes on. My point is that your evidence today is very welcome, and carries a lot of weight. My first question to you is, it is very unusual to see babies in the Chamber, or in Westminster Hall. In your view, is that because Members are aware of and following the guidance, or is there another reason?

Alicia Kearns: I suspect it is not based on the guidance. I suspect it is not based on reading what is not the most up-to-date guidance and rules. In essence, it is about the norms and values of this place. Ultimately, it is also based on the expectations that we have placed on ourselves as MPs. I have to say I did not read the rules.

When my baby was six weeks old, there was a debate on conversion therapy in the House. That was a Bill that I had been pushing and fighting for since I got elected, so I was not going to miss it. I did not even stop to look at what the rules were, because I knew I was going to be talking about a very sensitive case—something that I needed to have my full focus on. If my baby had been in that room, I would not have been able to fully focus. If she had needed to feed, I would have had to feed her. Instead, I spoke to my husband, and said, "I need you to leave work early." It was a 6.30 pm debate. Most people in the world would say, "Why are you asking your husband to leave work early for 6.30?" In our life, 6.30 is early for him, and most certainly for me.

He came to Parliament. I breastfed the baby; he then took the baby for an hour and a half and walked around Parliament. This is a really important



point for anyone not in Parliament: babies are so welcome on the estate. I am happy to talk more about that in a second. But there is a distinction between being on the estate and being in a meeting where you are advocating and livestreaming to the world on behalf of your constituents and having to fight to win their case and to change a difficult law.

At the end of the hour-and-a-half debate on conversion therapy, my husband was outside waiting. I fed her again, because at six weeks, she was feeding pretty much every hour and a half. No one would have noticed necessarily that I was a mum. I was a bit nervous, because I knew that if he needed me, he would have to come and get me. But I arranged the care I needed, and there was not really a question for me about looking into the guidance, because I just did not think it would be appropriate in any way, sense or form.

Q7 James Sunderland: The second question has two parts, so please bear with me. I want to divert slightly from babies in the Chamber. The introduction of proxy voting for parental absence was intended to assist Members to manage the early stages of parenthood. You refer to coming in when you should have been on maternity leave. Is flexibility rather than absence what parent MPs really need?

Alicia Kearns: I think flexibility is what every parent in the world desperately wants. You create your childcare and the dream is the most flexible childcare you can get in your life, because life changes and you have sickness, sudden medical appointments and all sorts of difficulties. Proxy voting is absolutely vital in my opinion, in the first four to seven months—I think under the rules you get seven months of proxy voting. I am not sure why; maybe it is six—who knows? It is six or seven months. Again, that shows that perhaps we do not always read the guidance as closely as we should.

In the first four to seven months of a baby's life, they just need to be held, loved and in a safe environment, and you as a mother need to recover. If it is your first, you need to get over the shock, and that takes some time. The other reason that proxy voting is so important is not just the ability to bond with the baby and to give them the support and care they need, but for the mothers to recover physically. I had an emergency C-section with my first, where I could not walk for a period of time. I then had to have a second surgery, six weeks after my first baby was born, due to some damage caused during the first, so it took about three or four months to recover in total. I also had post-natal depression for about eight or nine months. We have to remember that it is not like the movies, where it is the big, shocking, screaming affair, and then happiness, bubbles, delight and candyfloss. It takes time to recover. Proxy voting is so vital.

Let us not suggest that MPs on the proxy vote are just sat at home ignoring what is going on in this place. I was having arguments with my Whips about certain issues—I am sure that not everyone is as combative as I am, but I had some views—and you are not absenteeing yourself from this place. You are still working, you are still advocating, you are still



campaigning, you are still pushing, but you are able to do so without having to be here at 1.30 in the morning to walk through a Lobby.

Q8 James Sunderland: On the impact of decisions, do you think that enabling some Members to participate in proceedings while accompanied by babies or infants has the effect of, potentially, removing that choice from others?

Alicia Kearns: I think it risks it, because it places an expectation. I have had some interesting emails, when I was supposedly on maternity leave. I only took 36 hours of maternity leave for my baby when I was an MP, but that was because we were in a pandemic, and I had made the choice to have a baby during the pandemic. It just so happened that, just after I gave birth, we had an outbreak of covid in my prison, which meant that we had the highest rate of covid in the country. I am sure you will all remember that Rutland was a kind of safety place—we were in the lowest tier, surrounded by higher tiers. Constituents were really worried, so I was not just going to disappear.

I had to step forward, and I chose to step forward and I chose to do a lot of work. That was my choice, and the fact that I had that choice is so important—but my choice did not impact on anyone else's actions. It did not impact on someone else having a debate, on someone else sharing a sensitive story, on the ability of the Chamber to continue to function; everything I chose to do impacted solely on me and my decisions.

I would also make the point that some parents choose to work, and I am someone, given my first experience, who needs to go back to work. I was planning that within three months—clearly, that did not quite happen—for my mental health. So choice is important, but that has to be choice with personal responsibility, where you recognise that your actions are not impacting on others.

If I may, I will touch briefly on the impact on the child. In our home, we do not raise our voices. My children never see me shout or raise my voice—we do not do that. Ask anyone in this country what they see in the Chamber: they see jeering, shouting, mocking, and all the theatre that I have no time for and do not personally like. Why would you want your baby to be around that sort of hostility—that sort of hatred and offensive behaviour that we so often see, which is unbecoming of MPs but sadly, unfortunately, happens from time to time? I would argue that I do not want my baby in that environment.

Sometimes, there are emergencies, when you cannot get childcare or support, and there are things that we could look at to do then. Ultimately, therefore, this is a matter of, an argument about, childcare and childcare provision; it is not about rights, maternity leave or anything of that sort.

Q9 James Sunderland: I have a quick follow-up to that. Childcare provision is important. Some MPs use the excellent creche that is here. Surely, because we have the creche here—I believe that there are vacancies still—that should preclude the need for Members to want to take their children



into the Chamber.

Alicia Kearns: Obviously, it goes to the age of your child. Most people would not want to put their baby into a nursery. I do not think that the nursery takes babies below three months anyway, so for the first three months obviously you have to have support, but every single woman in the country—particularly the self-employed, which I was before—has to find childcare. You have to sort out childcare. Are we really saying to our constituents that MPs are incapable of arranging childcare themselves, that we somehow think that we should be special cases, or that we cannot do that? That is a real challenge.

Yes, there is a nursery in Parliament, and it is not subsidised—I know that is a rumour that goes around; it is a charity. Ultimately, it is about doing what is right and putting in place the right measures of support. There are other things in Parliament as well. For example, there is a family room. That is where I breastfeed my child every day. My baby comes into Parliament between 5 pm and 6 pm every day to be breastfed, because I have worked out that that is the soft spot, when you do not normally have votes and normally I am not debating at that time, but I have missed a vote because I was breastfeeding. I think colleagues were joking that they thought that I was drunk, because they saw me running towards the Chamber, dress undone, as the Doorkeepers slammed the door in my face, so I was too late to vote. I had misjudged the timing—it is difficult.

There is a family room in Parliament, and there are Speakers who never hold it against you when you go to them and say, as I did last week, “Nigel, I need to feed the baby. When is my speaking slot?”—it is a need, not a choice, if you are able to breastfeed. They always protect your speaking slot; they always make sure you know how long you have. Compared with my experience as a self-employed consultant, there are far more facilities in Parliament to support me as a parent than there were as someone working from home, running my own business, with no one to support me. And the staff love babies as well, and all offer to help in any way they can.

Q10 Chair: May I come in on a technical point around the proxy votes? Obviously, when you had your baby, we had covid proxy votes, which allowed for participation in the Chamber while on a proxy vote. The parental absence proxy vote was very specifically designed to preclude that, and it was done by the predecessor Committee, which made the recommendation to give some protection to new parents so that there was no obligation on them to come into the Chamber. In another inquiry on extending proxy votes to those with long-term sickness, we have heard arguments that allowing for parents to participate in the Chamber while still on a proxy vote may be suitable. Clearly, there is a balance here between the pressure on other parents who may not want to feel that they have to come into the Chamber and be present in debates, versus the flexibility that that would allow for others. Do you have any views on that?

Alicia Kearns: From my perspective, our job is like no other. We are office holders; we are not employees. We are elected because we are able



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to make the decisions about what our constituency and constituents need. That is something that we balance every single day, and that is what new mothers and fathers also have to balance. I think the best thing that we could do to uphold and protect democracy, and work for our constituents, is to maintain absolute flexibility where we can.

I can understand why people would argue that they would not want people to be able to come in and take part in debates but not have to vote, and that that should cancel you out for the day. I understand that argument, except for the fact that if a parent comes in off maternity leave to speak in a debate, that is because it is of such fundamental importance that they need to be there to participate in it. I have a lot of sympathy with saying that you should be able to come in and do your debate and then go home without voting. I do not think that is an unfair request, because you do not see mums and dads running around saying that they are going to do it to take the mick. Very serious consideration will be taken for every step that they take, so I do not think it is somehow absolving people of late nights to say, "You do not have to vote, but you can take part in debates." They will not come in every day from 9 to 5 and then go home—that is just not feasible.

Q11 Gary Sambrook: One of the suggestions in the written evidence is that, to enable flexibility, Members do not need to be there at the beginning or end of the debate, which may help because you can use the facilities on the estate, and then go and participate in the debate. What do you think about issuing more guidance so that people have a bit more clarity about that?

Alicia Kearns: I have to say that you should be there for the start and end of every debate. We are not here to create Facebook clips about our contributions in the Chamber. We are not here just to stand up, be a loudspeaker in the Chamber, have our say, and that is it. It really frustrates me when people in the Chamber repeat points that other people have made, do not listen or engage, or call on the Minister to do something that the Minister has already addressed. You are here to debate laws, and that is of great national importance. If you feel unable to stay for the whole debate, I would suggest that, as a mum or a dad, you are not yet in the place where you should be participating.

It is about maximum choice, but it is about choice within the realms of respecting the Chamber and colleagues, and of fully participating when you are participating. People may disagree with me on that but, for the Afghanistan debate and the conversion therapy debate, and when I took part in PQs remotely, I remained for the entire session—even if sometimes my camera was off because I was otherwise engaged.

Q12 Jack Brereton: As a parent, I certainly recognise a lot of what you have said. Certainly, a lot of the rules that we have been talking about are captured in guidance issued by the Speaker. Do you think that guidance is appropriate, or should it change, and if so, how?



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Alicia Kearns: I think the guidance is not necessarily written with the—when you read it, it doesn't necessarily read like it's been written by parents. That would probably be the way I would put it. I think that some reconsideration could be given to the manner in which it is written, and it would probably be one of my requests of Parliament that the people who write the guidance should be a contact point for any MP who needs support. At the moment, if I were looking for support, I don't really know where I would start. I would probably end up emailing a generic inbox, saying, "Please can someone help me to understand this guidance?", and I would get a very different answer from what another colleague would get, in the same way as we see with IPSA.

Q13 **Jack Brereton:** Have you also seen differences depending on who has been in the Chair?

Alicia Kearns: As in with the Speaker? No. All the Speakers have gone out of their way to do anything they can to support me. Maybe I'm being too optimistic about it because we have three or four fantastic Speakers who do everything they can to support us, but I have never had to even pause to think that they were being in any way unhelpful—in any way unkeen to support me. The Chair is what leads in Parliament, in terms of supporting mums and dads. There are perhaps other institutions within Parliament that could do better by learning from the Chair.

Q14 **Jack Brereton:** Other Parliaments have excluded infants of Members from the definition of "members of the public". Do you think that would be a sensible way of doing this?

Alicia Kearns: I think by all means—I have to put my hand up to not being a procedural expert in the way all of you are, so I would probably leave that to your determination. The key thing here is that Parliament itself, as an institution, is so family friendly. When you walk around Portcullis House, there are children running around all the time. I take my son through Parliament when I need to, and people bring their children into Parliament for dinner and so on, because otherwise they just wouldn't see them. I think we just need to draw that line, and whatever wording this Committee and its esteemed members recommend would be the correct wording.

Q15 **Jack Brereton:** I just want to ask another question. Obviously, we have seen examples of toddlers in the Chamber as well. Where do you think it should stop? We have seen instances in which it's not just babies who have been allowed in the Chamber. We have seen older children—children of different ages. Do you think that is appropriate?

Alicia Kearns: I would say two things about toddlers in the Chamber. First, that is my point when people say we should have children in the Chamber: at what age are they no longer allowed? Is it when they stop breastfeeding? You could adopt the Swedish or Indian model and be breastfeeding until your child is four. Or you might be unable to breastfeed at all, in which case your baby is not allowed from the moment they are born. Are we saying it's the age of one? What arbitrary deadline are we going to set for when children have to stop being in the Chamber?



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Secondly, there have been times when there have been toddlers there, and my argument, very respectfully, to my colleagues would be this: if you have to have your child with you because it's a sitting Friday or there is some sort of family emergency, then—respectfully—don't go into the Chamber. You have a choice. You don't need to go into the Chamber. You can be on the estate. Again, you can take your child through the voting Lobby. Lots of MPs do, in drastic states, because it's 11 o'clock at night and—the nursery, for example, actually sits until 10 pm if you need it to, because it knows that you can take your children through the Lobby but you can't take them into the Chamber. Again, I would argue that there should be a drop-in facility at the nursery, because I think it's a very exceptional nursery. Most people would not want to use a drop-in service for their children, because they don't have the relationships and so on. In our world, if you desperately need childcare, you desperately need it, but I would say this to colleagues: if you can't get that childcare, then—respectfully—you should step back and not go into the Chamber.

Q16 Jack Brereton: I just want to ask another procedural question. The codification in other Parliaments has generally been permissive in nature, although some Parliaments draw a distinction between presence and participation in or initiation of proceedings. Is such a distinction sensible?

Alicia Kearns: I would argue that we have a very permissive Parliament. The current rules we have in place do not stop you ultimately doing your core job. The core job of a parliamentarian is to vote on laws. It is not to take part in debates, to do casework and to do all the campaigns and other work we do; your core job is to vote. Under the current rules, you can take your child with you to vote. That is incredibly permissive. We are just saying that in the Chamber, where there is a debate going on, where it is a hostile environment, where it is livestreamed to the world, and where your choice or inability to secure the childcare you would wish to have would negatively impact on the ability of that Chamber to do its job, that is not appropriate. I would say that we are probably more permissive than most places. I do not know if other Parliaments allow their babies to come in for votes, and so on, but I do think that there are limits.

In the same way, if you went to your GP to say, "I'm having fertility problems," and they were sat there with their baby on their lap, it would be impossible for you to have that moment. People who work on tills: they can't bring their babies in. Soldiers: there was a woman who tweeted, this morning, a picture of her expressing on a military exercise, and that has upset the whole of the Twitter world—"How dare she have to express?"—but she couldn't bring her baby with her, and it would be completely inappropriate if we asked her to. I think that we have a very permissive environment; you can bring your child with you to vote, which means that there is never a question that your constituency is not going to have you doing your job, because you can just take your baby with you, if you need to, when voting.

Q17 Jack Brereton: You talked earlier about making that guidance clearer. Do you think that we should codify some of it more explicitly, and make clear where and when babies are allowed? You said about taking them through



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voting lobbies. Should that be much clearer, setting out “This is an appropriate location,” or “This is not an appropriate location”?

Alicia Kearns: I would like to think that it would not be necessary, but at a time when there are Members of Parliament threatening to take Parliament to court and waste taxpayers’ money on this, then yes. If it would prevent the waste of taxpayers’ money, and protect a currently very permissive and appropriate environment, then yes, I would say that you should.

Q18 **Chris Elmore:** Thank you for the evidence today. It is really valued and welcome. Just on nursery access—I should declare that I am a father of 13 months: a 13-month-old.

Alicia Kearns: I thought you were going to say, “13 children”!

Q19 **Chris Elmore:** I can say, on the record, Chair, that one is quite enough. The issue with the nursery, if this was to form part of a wider recommendation, is that if Members are sitting until 10 o’clock, you have to give quite considerable notice in order to access the service. That is a point when trying to work through how you work up childcare. You cannot say, “Right, this is a Monday; we are sitting on a Wednesday, certainly, until 10 o’clock”, because a programme motion delays the day. I do think that there is something around that and in how you access that.

I have just asked the Clerk about Divisions, and what the guidance says. I must confess that I have taken my child into the Division Lobby—and been told off for it in the process, I hasten to add. I wonder if it should be made clearer that that is allowed, because, actually, if you do get to the end of the day, and the nursery is shut, or you are unable to do it, it is a relatively straightforward process to carry the child through; that needs a bit of understanding.

My substantive question, Chair, is around what you touched on earlier, which is support for dads. I feel, as a new dad—and I am sorry if this offends the Twitter world—that we are completely ignored from this process. I have been taken aback, to put it politely, that the entire focus of this conversation has been about new mums, as if new dads face no anxiety on becoming fathers; I have had that quoted back at me by a colleague in this House, which I find extraordinary.

First, the Women and Equalities Committee has put forward a report on the idea of neutralising language in the House’s Standing Orders, because it can be that the father is the primary carer. I have a colleague—not a Member of Parliament, but a colleague—who works on the estate, who is taking paternity leave for six months and the mother has gone back to work. I think the language around that is actually quite important.

More substantively, whatever the Committee’s view comes to, do you agree that we need to get to the point where it is about all parents having access to services on the estate? Clearly, there is the substantive issue that fathers cannot breastfeed. I am not trying to downgrade or downplay the significant impact that this issue has on more mums than dads, but in this day and age, childcare is often shared quite significantly between both



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parents. It should be acknowledged that fathers have a role in that, which maybe they did not 20 years ago. I don't know and can't comment about that; I can only talk about the here and now.

Whether through standing orders, changes in guidance or acknowledging that fathers can have this engagement in the Chamber or the Lobby—or not, as the case may be—there needs to be a broader conversation about how this affects parents who are Members of Parliament, because the demographic of Members of Parliament has changed significantly since 1997. Both can now become parents and this could have a more significant impact on them than it would have done years before, when maybe either didn't have a career or chose to stay at home or whatever. It is a very broad-brush comment, but I think it needs to be put through, no matter how much I may annoy people by saying it.

Alicia Kearns: There is a fundamental issue within society that we consistently play down the roles of dads and partners. For example, look at the campaign I had to run. Dads and partners were locked out of the maternity suite because they were visitors. They are not visitors; they are parents and advocates. If my husband had not been in the room when I was giving birth to my son, my son would have died because he was the one who noticed that his heart rate had halved, and he pressed the emergency button.

Dads deserve full access. We should be talking about more dads being in Parliament. Will Quince's speech on baby loss transformed the conversation in this country. What we do here matters, and we need to talk more. Where families are fortunate and there are two parents, or more parents—who knows at this rate?—full support should be given to them. The language absolutely matters. We spend hours in this place arguing over commas and sentences and words, yet we are somehow suggesting that it is only mums who are the care givers.

My husband says that I am the primary care giver, but it is he who is the primary care giver. He is the hero, because he is the one who is there every single night at 7.30 pm to ensure there is someone to look after our kids. He is the one who puts up with five hours in a car every weekend up and back from my constituency, and he is the one who makes it happen.

It is very important that when we look at proposals going forward, we support parents who are going through miscarriage or baby loss. It should be mums and dads; it is not just the mum who suffers when a family loses a baby. In fact, it is the entire family and the wider village.

That goes to the whipping system as well. One of my big issues is that we have focused the conversation on the House and the Chamber, but the whipping system across all parties—I recognise that Chris is a Whip, so I tread carefully—needs to improve. Currently, if you were to go to your Whips and talk about a dying mother or something you are going through personally, they will almost certainly give you the support you need, but childcare is almost treated as something that just happens.



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We all have emergencies when it comes to childcare. Every constituent of ours has had a situation where they have had to go to their workplace and say, "Oh my God, this has gone wrong. I need this emergency help." There should be consideration given to the fact that people are parents, whether it is to take their child for the first day of school or to a medical appointment—I was not given a slip to take my child to a hospital appointment—all the way to offices. I have to feed my baby in the middle of Portcullis House because my office is so difficult to get to with a pram and is so far away from the Chamber, that if I were feeding in my office I could not get to the Chamber in time—it is impossible. Even if I ran at the speed of some health freak like Dr Luke Evans, I would still not make it.

We need to make sure that dads are in the language, that all parents are reflected in our language, and that we recognise that in this place we should be looking for more respect, opportunity and recognition of the importance of partners and parents. And there is the point about miscarriage and baby loss, which is fundamental.

Chair: Certainly, proxy votes recognise that, which I am pleased about, but you are absolutely right. I put on record my gratitude to my husband, because my children would not have got to 16 and 18, and me being an MP for 12 years, if he had not had to do everything he has had to do over the years. There are lots of our spouses and other halves who do an incredible amount of work, and they are the unsung heroes. I am sure my children would probably say that their father was the primary care giver with hindsight, which is very embarrassing from my point of view, but is a fact.

Q20 Patrick Grady: Thank you, Alicia, for the thought-provoking evidence. Bearing in mind the Chair's strictures that we are trying to keep this relatively narrowly focused, I just want to look a little at the wider institutional context, which has come up a couple of times, and not least the excellent report by the Women and Equalities Committee, which the Chair mentioned at the start. It rehearses various efforts that have been made in the past to make Parliament more accessible, particularly from a gender perspective.

It refers to "The Good Parliament" report from 2015. The report recommends that progress against those previous recommendations should be reviewed by the House of Commons Commission. You have spoken about the role of the Speakers, and you have also said there are other institutions, such as the Whips Offices, that could be better at some of this. What leadership is required to make progress on these issues, and where should it come from?

Alicia Kearns: I have to admit that as a new MP, I am still learning how this place works. I wish the guidebook was slightly easier than the gigantic books that I remember being given when we first arrived, which we definitely had no time to read. I think it should absolutely be the Commission.



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I wrote an open letter, which I published publicly, about this whole debate when it first started. In my view, the Speaker is the person who is best placed to lead, with the support of the Commission. But in the same way that I have mentioned other institutions, everyone should be taking responsibility. For example, we need a shake-up within IPSA. There should be one or two staff at IPSA who are solely the point persons for all parents or almost-parents across the estate, because you get fundamentally different advice when you go to IPSA—as you do on anything else, as we all know in this place—and that is not right. You are already trying to balance a very difficult job. In no other job in the world do you scramble around trying to work out what your rights are, what support you can get or anything else like that. IPSA needs to have two managers whose sole job is to make sure they do that.

There should also be a connection between IPSA and the Whips Office, so that when people become aware that someone is pregnant, perhaps IPSA could proactively reach out to them and help them to become aware of what their rights and responsibilities are. There is a bit too much in this place of, “If you know it.” For example, there are some MPs who have taken a full year of maternity leave. I did not know that was open to me. I would not have taken it, because it was not right for me. Clearly, I came back after 36 hours—I was not going to go and ask for a year—but there is a bit too much of, “If you happen to find out, you have those rights,” so there should be a point person, probably within every Whips Office, who is responsible for making sure that new parents are supported and who perhaps recognises the gravity of it.

My daughter had an incredibly serious operation when she was very small, and I am not necessarily sure that unless there is somebody working as a point person, they would recognise that there are implications for someone’s ability to work, to engage and everything else like that. Ultimately, it is down to the Speaker and the Commission, but surely every organisation in this place should be capable of taking accountability for what it can do to better support parents.

Patrick Grady: Finally, we have touched on—

Alicia Kearns: Oh, and children’s food. It would be great if there was some children’s food on the menu. I am just going to put that out there. I don’t want to order a full fish and chips.

- Q21 **Patrick Grady:** I just want to expand a little bit on any other changes that you would make to the way that the House works or to the services that are provided to make it easier for Members who are parents to participate fully. I am thinking particularly about the issue of whether or not you should take a child into the Chamber while you are participating. You said you think Members should be there, under the terms of the convention of practice, at the start, at the end and for the majority of the debate. If we had published call lists, like we did during the pandemic, or slightly more predictability about times and sittings, when votes are going to happen and so on, how do you think that would assist?



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Alicia Kearns: In terms of call lists, we all want to know roughly where we are coming in a debate—when we are speaking. I do not think that anyone could, hand on heart, say that wasn't the case, because you often have other meetings scheduled that you are having to push back and back. Again, with the Speakers, there is an informal understanding that if you go and ask them, "Look, can I disappear for 20 minutes to go and breastfeed?", they will say, "Actually, you were going to be called to speak, so do you want to stay, or shall I push you back and you can speak as soon as you get back?" We can operate here in an adult way.

There is something about not interfering with the liveliness of democracy. If we have call lists, I just think it takes away from some of the excitement and meaningfulness of the Chamber in terms of the way that you can really speak to each other. It would make my life easier if I had a call list but, at the same time, you are meant to be there for the whole of the debate anyway. I am not really convinced that a call list is that helpful unless you are operating a digital service where you are switching people's cameras on and off, because you should be there, you should be participating meaningfully, and you should be fully engaged at all times.

In terms of other recommendations, the Family Room is right next to the Chamber. It is perfectly located. Some people might want to talk about grotty toys, but my children don't care if the toys are grotty. There was a pirate ship that was broken. It is no longer broken. My son fixed it last week. It is a great size. It is right next to the Chamber. One of the issues is when, for example, you have a pass for someone who cares for your child to get into the building, so they can bring your child to you to breastfeed, but the pass does not allow them to use the lift to get up to the Family Room. That is a small thing that could be fixed very quickly. Please let my child get to me so that I can feed her.

We had a problem during the time when there were covid rules. I was told that my baby could not come on to the estate because it was not core parliamentary business, until I marched—and I do not march that often—to the security offices and told them in no uncertain terms that it was most certainly core parliamentary business so that I could get on with my job while having a child. We should look again at passes, so that people can get to where they need to. We should make sure that the entrance to the nursery works, because it is slightly broken. You cannot get a pram in properly, and it takes eight minutes if you want to.

The IPSA points I made earlier are areas we could meaningfully improve. I know this goes beyond the Chamber, but there is a point to be made around security. Currently, you can have security for yourself, but there are no security measures for our children, and that is wrong. Our children did not choose to go into this life. Neither of my children's names are publicly available. There are no pictures of my children anywhere on social media. That is a choice I made to protect them, but there should be full protection provided by the estate. I am not talking about the public and police. I am talking about panic alarms and such things.



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We touched on proxy voting for miscarriage and baby loss. I talked about the whipping system and the slips that could be improved to make sure we support parents with nursery drop-in hours and having the emergency function. At the same time, this is a business. Parliament will not necessarily be able to fully work around us, but it is difficult to give 48 hours' notice that you are staying until 1.30 am in the morning when you might not find that out yourself until 3 pm.

In terms of the Chamber, ultimately it sits with the Speaker and the Deputies. They could not be more accommodating or supportive. They have offered to wheel my baby around in a pram for me if I needed it. Within the Chamber, it is about recognising that we should not get more benefits than our constituents. We are office holders, not employees. Constitutionally, nobody else can represent us within the Chamber. If we are arguing that somebody else should, then there should be a by-election for that person to be able to represent us in the Chamber. It is not something you can replace. You vote for the individual, not the party. While we all know that that in practice is not necessarily how people vote, but that is how our constitution is created. We need to support parents in every way we can. Within the Chamber it is about appropriateness and not disrupting the Chamber. It is about making sure that parents do not feel that if they cannot get childcare or if something has gone wrong, they should not be bringing their child into that place.

Chair: Thank you very much. I know you need to be away, so I thank you for the evidence. You have been very open and frank with us, and I know that this is a difficult issue. It does create a lot of excitement on Twitter and other social media platforms, and I think your evidence has been reasonable and measured. I hope it will be reflected on the comments on social media that this is a matter we can all have an opinion on. We are here as a Committee to listen to the evidence, and we will make recommendations in due course. We are very grateful for you spending time with us and being as open and frank as you have been.