



House of Commons  
Women and Equalities  
Committee

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**Equality in the heart of  
democracy: A gender  
sensitive House of  
Commons: responses to  
the Committee's  
fifth report of  
session 2021-22**

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**Second Special Report of Session  
2022–23**

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## Women and Equalities Committee

The Women and Equalities Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

### Current membership

[Caroline Nokes MP](#) (*Conservative, Romsey and Southampton North*) (Chair)

[Theo Clarke MP](#) (*Conservative, Stafford*)

[Elliot Colburn MP](#) (*Conservative, Carshalton and Wallington*)

[Philip Davies MP](#) (*Conservative, Shipley*)

[Dame Caroline Dinenage MP](#) (*Conservative, Gosport, Stubbington, Lee on the Solent and Hill Head*)

[Jackie Doyle-Price MP](#) (*Conservative, Thurrock*)

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[Kate Osborne MP](#) (*Labour, Jarrow*)

[Ms Anum Quaisar MP](#) (*Scottish National Party, Airdrie and Shotts*)

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP](#) (*Labour, Streatham*)

### Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 152. These are available on the internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

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Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at [www.parliament.uk/womenandequalities](http://www.parliament.uk/womenandequalities) and in print by Order of the House.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Hasan Al-Habib (Committee Specialist), James Clarke (Committee Specialist), Chloë Cockett (Senior Committee Specialist), Mark Earl (Safeguarding and Witness Support Officer), Matthew Eaton (Committee Specialist), Radhika Handa (Second Clerk), Michelle Garratty (Committee Operations Officer), and Margaret McKinnon (Clerk).

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You can follow the Committee on Twitter using [@Commonswomequ](https://twitter.com/Commonswomequ).

## Second Special Report

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The Committee published its Fifth Report of Session 2021–22, [Equality in the heart of democracy: A gender sensitive House of Commons](#) (HC 131), on 2 March 2022. The Government response was received on 27 April 2022 and is appended below. A number of responses from other relevant bodies were also received and are appended below.

On 21 April, our Chair was copied in to a letter from [The Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP](#), Chair of the House of Commons Procedure Committee, to the President of the Trade Union Side and members of the Committee for the House of Commons workplace equality network, Parligender. The letter explained that, in line with a recommendation in our Report, the Procedure Committee had commissioned and received [a memorandum from the Clerk of the House of Commons](#) about constitutional and practical difficulties in implementing a mechanism by which Members of Parliament under investigation for sexual misconduct could be excluded from Parliament. In response to our recommendation (paragraph 111), the Procedure Committee decided not to conduct an inquiry.

## Appendix: Government Response

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### Foreword

The Government is grateful to the Women and Equalities Committee for its recent report 'Equality in the heart of democracy: A gender sensitive House of Commons'.

The Government agrees with the Women and Equalities Committee that there has been considerable progress towards making the House of Commons more sensitive to gender and diversity. We can be encouraged by the very real progress already made in recent years towards making Parliament a more family-friendly and inclusive working environment.

Further work to achieve this important objective is something which necessitates the involvement of a range of groups who each have a role to play in broadening access to our parliamentary democracy and supporting those who form part of this community. For that reason, this response focuses on the recommendations which relate to matters of Government policy and parliamentary procedures but does not address the recommendations aimed at the House Authorities, or IPSA and the ICGS which are necessarily independent of Parliament and Government. Here, we welcome the Committee's consideration of the work of these bodies and the proposed surveys and reviews recommended in this report.

Cross-party consensus is vital and I, on behalf of the Government, am committed to working through the House of Commons Commission to ensure that, as the Committee recommends, Parliament is focused on gender and diversity sensitivity.

The Government wants to ensure that all parts of our society feel connected and represented in politics and believes that our public institutions should operate in such a way that reflects this ambition. The Government remains committed to supporting efforts to make Parliament an exemplary institution which is accessible and gender sensitive both to Members of Parliament, staff and all those who access the Estate.

The Government shall consider the range of recommendations in this Committee's report. We await with interest the further surveys and consultations recommended by the Committee and referred to within the report and look forward to further debate on this matter.

**The Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP**  
**Leader Of The House Of Commons**

## **Equal representation in the House of Commons**

**We echo the The Good Parliament report, the UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018, our predecessor Committee and witnesses to our inquiry, including the Equality and Human Rights Commission, in recommending the Government enact without further delay section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 on diversity data of candidates. Greater transparency is likely to incentivise political parties to take steps to select parliamentary candidates who are representative of the communities they seek to serve and allow for clearer scrutiny of the parties' contributions to achieving a gender and diversity sensitive House of Commons. (Paragraph 22)**

The Government wants to ensure that all parts of the UK and society feel connected to politics and equally represented in politics, and believes that our public institutions, including Parliament, should operate in such a way that reflects this ambition. We have funded projects that aim to increase women's participation in politics, including training in political leadership in Bradford and Birmingham, and skills sessions in public speaking and media relations across the East Midlands, West Midlands and London.

The Government keeps any unimplemented provisions from the Equality Act 2010 under review and is clear that political parties are responsible for their candidate selection and therefore should lead the way in improving the diversity of representation.

It is therefore ultimately for political parties to diversify representation and to ensure that they select a diverse range of candidates; and that their selection processes are responsive to known barriers. The Government proposes to continue the process of engaging with the parties to ensure greater transparency on selected parliamentary candidates ahead of the next General Election, rather than imposing legislative requirements through section 106 of the Equality Act.

**We urge the Government to respond positively to the recommendations in the Report of the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill, including those in paragraphs 127 and 136 relating to the Law Commission's proposals for communications that contain threats of serious harm or that stir up hatred based on sex or gender. We further recommend the Government set out in its response to this Report its plans to monitor the effectiveness of its Draft Online Safety Bill and Elections Bill legislation specifically in protecting female parliamentary candidates and MPs, especially those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, from threatening and harmful online harassment and abuse. (Paragraph 32)**

Any threats of violence or intimidation are utterly unacceptable. The Government will uphold every member's right to express their views - it is a vital tenet of our democracy. Threats to that are being taken very seriously, and the Government is absolutely committed to protecting women's safety, both online and offline.

No one should have to fear for their safety either online or offline, or be subjected to torrents of abuse. The Government acknowledges the scale of online abuse is deeply concerning and evidence suggests it has a disproportionate impact on women and minorities.

Tackling intimidation in public life forms an important part of the Defending Democracy programme, a cross-government initiative. The Government is making progress in a variety of ways, including through primary legislation. This includes the Elections Bill which will provide for a new electoral sanction in response to intimidation and the Online Safety Bill will protect all users, but especially women, from abuse and hate.

The new electoral sanction contained in the Elections Bill will protect candidates, future candidates, campaigners and elected officeholders from intimidation by imposing a five-year ban from standing for or holding elected office, in addition to the punishment for the underlying criminal offence of an intimidatory nature. As with any primary legislation initiated by the Government, we are committed to monitoring the impact of the new sanction against the key policy objectives on a number of relevant indicators. This is reflected in the Impact Assessment published alongside the Bill.

The Government has also confirmed that it is accepting the Law Commission's recommended harmful communications, false communications and threatening communications offences which will be brought into law through the Online Safety Bill. We have accepted the cyberflashing offence and will be taking this forward through the Online Safety Bill. The Government is considering the remaining recommendations and will continue to assess these ahead of issuing a full response to the Law Commission in due course.

The Law Commission has led a separate review regarding the hate crime offences, which has been sponsored by the Home Office. The Law Commission published its final report in December and the Government will publish its interim response to the report in due course.

In addition, the Government has accepted the Joint Committee's recommendation to include the list of priority offences in primary legislation. This includes offences on hate crime, assisting or encouraging suicide and extreme pornography in the list of priority offences.

The Government introduced the Online Safety Bill to Parliament on 17 March 2022 and has formally responded to the Joint Committee's report. While the Bill is progressing through Parliament, we are working closely with Ofcom to ensure that the implementation of the new regulatory framework for online safety is as quick as possible, following passage of the legislation.

There are a number of measures in the Bill to ensure that the effectiveness of its measures is effectively monitored.

Under clause 149 of the Online Safety Bill the Secretary of State must undertake a review of the effectiveness of the regulatory framework 2-5 years after it comes into force, producing a report which will then be laid in Parliament.

Parliament will also have a role in approving a number of aspects of the regulatory framework through its scrutiny of both the primary and secondary legislation. This will include Ofcom's codes of practice that will set out measures which companies in scope can take to comply with their duties under the Bill.

The Secretary of State for DCMS is required to present Ofcom's annual report and accounts before both Houses as well as the devolved legislatures. Ofcom's officers are also required to appear before Select Committees to answer questions about its regulatory operations. In addition, subject to passage through both Houses, Ministers are considering the best way to provide post-legislative scrutiny of the Online Safety Bill following Royal Assent in a way which makes the most of the skills and expertise in both Houses.

## Support for parent and carer MPs

**The proxy voting scheme for parental absence is a huge step forward for gender sensitivity in the House of Commons. We strongly welcome the scheme as a permanent feature of the package of support for parent MPs. However, we note witnesses' concerns that the scheme does not mirror statutory maternity leave entitlements or best workplace practice, in which parents can choose to share up to 12 months of leave. It does not provide parity of cover for women and men, which entrenches assumptions about unequal gender roles in childcare. There is no explicit reference to arrangements for parents whose children are born through surrogacy. While the scheme's applicability to those who experience complications in childbirth is very welcome, its reference to "due date" in relation to the start of the period of proxy voting for biological mothers could have unintended negative effects on those who give birth prematurely or later than expected. Cover for complications, miscarriages and baby loss is welcome, but should be made explicit in the scheme. These anomalous features of the scheme should be rectified. We have written to the Chair of the House of Commons Procedure Committee asking her to consider them as part of her Committee's current inquiry into extending the scope of the proxy voting scheme. (Paragraph 40)**

The House of Commons should do all it can to meet the needs of both women and men and ensure greater participation in the democratic process by people from all backgrounds. The Government believes that supporting MPs who are parents is a vital way of ensuring a more representative House of Commons.

In September 2020, after a successful pilot, the House agreed Standing Order changes to make permanent the 'Voting by proxy for parental absence' Standing Order which provides that a proxy may be cast "by reason of absence from the precincts of the House for childcare or care of an infant or newly adopted child". In January 2021, the House endorsed a Government-proposed Standing Order change to expand the scheme to allow MPs who have had a baby or adopted a child to be entitled, but not required, to cast votes in the House by proxy. The Government is committed to ensuring that we do all we can to allow new parents to spend that vital early time with their infants. These changes were a

landmark moment in Parliament's history. The Government is grateful for the work of all of those who helped bring about this change, and particularly the Procedure Committee for its inquiry and recommendations.

The Government would welcome the Procedure Committee's consideration of whether the proxy voting scheme should be amended to address the anomalies suggested by the Committee within the current arrangements. We await the Procedure Committee's report with interest.

**We recommend that IPSA consult on extending the current support offered through the MP parental leave cover fund to biological fathers, partners and second adopters so that it is in line with best workplace practice and supports the objective of enabling women and men to share childcare responsibilities. IPSA should also make clear the arrangements for parents of children born through surrogacy. (Paragraph 55)**

IPSA is independent of Parliament and Government and responsible for the provision of salaries and financial support for Members of Parliament, including funding related to periods of parental leave, to ensure they are able to meet the needs of their local constituents. The Government welcomed IPSA launching the parental leave cover fund in April 2021 to allow Members to cover any additional staff resourcing and office cover costs in line with the normal rules on staffing. Further consultation on the support provided would be a matter for IPSA.

The Government recognises that this recommendation is a matter for IPSA which is independent of Parliament and Government and therefore it is not for the Government to respond to this recommendation.

**IPSA's working group on extended leave should take into account the results of the House of Commons Member Services Team's survey of MPs' experiences. (Paragraph 56)**

**We recommend that IPSA ensures the EIA is comprehensive and fully in line with the Equality and Human Rights Commission's guidance on complying with the Public Sector Equality Duty. We further recommend that IPSA consider as part of its 2024 Corporate Plan the case for conducting more frequent EIAs of the scheme as and when significant changes are made between comprehensive reviews. (Paragraph 57)**

**We recommend that IPSA make a transparent assessment of the impact of publishing additional costs associated with being a parent—including parental leave cover, and additional transport and accommodation costs in relation to dependent children—on the willingness of women and parent MPs to claim support. While we understand and support the imperative for transparency as a default, we believe, in the interest of gender sensitivity, that additional costs associated with childcare and parenthood should be published only at the aggregate, rather than individual MP, level, as is the case with costs associated with disability and security. (Paragraph 58)**

The Government recognises that these recommendations are a matter for the House Services and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) which are independent of Parliament and Government. It is not for the Government to respond to these recommendations.

## A gender-sensitive working environment

**We recommend the House of Commons' Head of Access and Services swiftly review the availability of ground level parking spaces close to the Chamber and, taking into account the needs of disabled Blue Badge holders, designate the maximum possible number for parent and child parking. We further recommend that the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body consider the provision of accessible car parking spaces as part of its Outline Business Base for Restoration and Renewal. (Paragraph 67)**

The Government continues to work with the House Authorities, through the House of Commons Commission, to make Parliament more accessible and ensure that its arrangements strike the right balance to ensure that the Palace of Westminster can continue to serve as the home of the UK Parliament in a way that is fit for the 21st century.

The project to restore the Palace provides a number of opportunities for improvements, including accessibility. The Palace of Westminster, as a site at the centre of our democratic life, must be accessible for Members, staff and visitors which ensures all of our constituents are able to speak to their elected representatives and observe debates in the Chamber and committee rooms.

**We recommend the Sponsor Body appoint an independent advisory panel of experts on gender and diversity sensitivity to advise on building design and facilities in the Outline Business Case for any temporary decant location and the restored and renewed Palace of Westminster. This panel should include specific expertise to support the Sponsor Body to comply with its legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 on sex and other protected characteristics. We also recommend that the Sponsor Body conduct and publish annual audits of its contribution to a gender sensitive House of Commons, drawing on the recommendations in The Good Parliament report and regular consultation with the parliamentary community, so that there can be transparent scrutiny by the public and this Committee. Its annual audit should include the diversity of the Sponsor Body itself, including its parliamentary membership. (Paragraph 80)**

Following the meeting of the House of Commons and House of Lords Commissions on 17th March, a revised mandate for the restoration and renewal works and changes to the sponsorship function will be sought from both Houses. It is for Parliament to decide a new approach that will preserve the Palace of Westminster for future generations. The Government will continue to work with members of the Commissions and other parliamentarians to support a new approach to the works that will deliver for all of those who work in and visit the Palace as well as the taxpayer.

**We recommend the House of Commons Member Services Team conduct a survey of MPs, to gather and understand their personal experiences and views about current working practices, facilities and provision, and the need for further reform in the interests of gender and wider diversity sensitivity. The survey should gather MPs' views on:**

- **the adequacy of childcare provision at different times of the day and evening;**
- **the adequacy of facilities including toilets and spaces for baby-changing, breastfeeding and expressing milk;**
- **access rules, including the rules on MPs' babies in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall;**
- **the extent to which the facilities of the House of Commons meet the needs and interests of those who are disabled or have long-term health conditions; and**
- **the House's working practices and their effects on participation in House of Commons proceedings by parents, carers, disabled people and those with long term health conditions.**

**The results should be disaggregated by sex and other protected characteristics, so far as is consistent with protecting the anonymity of respondents. We recommend this survey be completed within three months of publication of this Report. The results should be fed into the House of Commons Commission's gender sensitivity and diversity action plan, which we recommend at the end of this Report. (Paragraph 89)**

The Government recognises that Parliamentary facilities are matters for the House Authorities rather than the Government and whilst we support the principle that consideration should be given to further steps to make Parliament a more modern, family friendly and accessible workplace, it is not for the Government to respond to this recommendation.

## **Transforming culture and behaviour in the House of Commons**

**The recent changes to Standing Orders that are intended to allow the triggering of recall petitions in relation to MPs sanctioned by the Independent Expert Panel to suspensions from the House for the minimum duration set out in the Recall of MPs Act 2015 must now be seen to be effective in applicable cases; if not, the law must be changed for the avoidance of any uncertainty and to act as an effective deterrent to inappropriate and harmful behaviours. (Paragraph 104)**

When the House established the Independent Expert Panel (IEP) in November 2020, the House recognised the importance of ensuring the Panel's independence and we should continue to be guided by this fundamental principle. That is why, further to a period of engagement with the IEP, staff groups and the trade unions, the House of Commons agreed that the Standing Orders ought to be amended to enable recall to be triggered as a result of an IEP recommended sanction of suspension.

The simple and clear mechanism which allows for this objective to be achieved was approved by the House on 19 October 2020. Since then, there has not been a further situation where the IEP has recommended a sanction which, if approved, would now engage the Recall of MPs Act.

On that basis, the Government does not share the Committee's characterisation of this procedural change as an 'interim' measure. It is instead a legitimate and straightforward procedural solution which protects the independence of the process, the confidentiality of complainants and ensures consistent outcomes across different types of conduct cases.

What is imperative here is that we have a system which ensures parity in the effect of sanctions which, irrespective of their origins, will lead to a Recall petition. As the Chair of the IEP observed, it is this which will build confidence in the system and perhaps serve as the 'effective deterrent' as the Committee suggests. The Government is not of the view that a legislative amendment is necessary at this stage. Now that the rules are clear, the priority is driving forward cultural change to make clear that there is no place for bullying, harassment, or sexual harassment in Parliament. We will continue to work cross-party to ensure everyone working in Parliament is treated with dignity and respect.

**We recommend the House of Commons Procedure Committee seek fuller advice from the House's procedural and legal advisers on the issues around balancing protecting people, in Parliament and constituencies, from harm, and constituents' rights to political representation. The Procedure Committee should consider, in the light of this advice, whether to inquire into this matter further and bring forward recommendations, taking into account the need to:**

- **maintain confidentiality for complainants and respondents;**
- **maintain a presumption of innocence and ensure fair investigations; and**
- **mitigate any undue risk of vexatious allegations. (Paragraph 111)**

We note that the Procedure Committee has received advice from the Clerk of the House, which they have published on their website, and has subsequently decided not to conduct an inquiry into this matter.

MPs have a unique constitutional role as individuals directly elected by their constituents to represent them in Parliament. The employment relationships in the House of Commons and parliamentary constituencies are complex and the Government notes that exclusion of MPs from Parliament is not straightforward.

Ultimately, it would be for the House to decide whether or not to introduce any mechanism of this kind, recognising that any changes in this area need to be balanced against the implications such a policy could have for the right of the electorate to enjoy political representation.

**We recommend that the distinction of the circumstances in which the policies and procedures of the ICGS apply to the behaviour of MPs in House of Commons proceedings be clearly set out in updated guidance on the new ICGS Hub. We welcome the Committee on Standards' inclusion of this issue in its broader review and consultation on changes to the Code of Conduct, and its proposal that Mr Speaker should, in certain circumstances, particularly those related to alleged bullying,**

**harassment and sexual misconduct, have the option to refer MPs behaviour in the chamber and other proceedings to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards for investigation under ICGS policies and procedures. We encourage MPs, and staff, to submit their views on this to the Committee on Standards' consultation. (Paragraph 117)**

The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme was set up to improve the working culture of Parliament, and of course, it will evolve and improve over time. This Government has made clear that there is no place for bullying, harassment or sexual harassment in Parliament. It will continue to work cross-party to ensure this.

The Government considers it to be critical that all of those who interact with Parliament, be they elected officials, Peers, members of staff, visitors or select committee witnesses, are treated with respect and dignity.

Confidentiality sits at the heart of the ICGS and it is imperative that those who use the scheme can be confident that information they supply is always handled appropriately and that the guidance is clear for all users of the scheme; without this, participation in the scheme would be fundamentally eroded. That is why the Government, in response to the Committee on Standards' consultation on changes to the Code of Conduct, supported the principle of the recommendation that 'there should be an explicit rule in the Code that Members must not breach the requirements of confidentiality in ICGS cases.' It would be important that other ICGS stakeholders support the introduction of such a rule; if it is introduced, it would be necessary to clarify who Members could consult for personal support during an ICGS case.

In respect of the recommendation from the Committee on Standards on a referral role for the Speaker, the Government agrees that, in accordance with the fundamental principle of exclusive cognisance, the Speaker of the House of Commons has an established role to play in maintaining order in the Chamber. We support the preservation of these tried and tested arrangements where the Speaker is responsible for determining whether during debate the rules of the House have been complied with.

However, as this recommendation relates to behaviour that has the potential to result in an ICGS case, the Government notes that under the policies and procedures of the ICGS, incidents may only be reported by the individual affected and not by a third party. This position was confirmed by the 18-month review of the ICGS conducted by Alison Stanley in 2021. We consider that this requirement would make this recommendation challenging to implement.

Beyond ICGS cases, there are existing mechanisms by which Members are held to account when participating in parliamentary proceedings in a committee meeting or the division lobbies. Ensuring high standards of behaviour is also a matter for the political parties through their own Codes of Conduct and disciplinary processes.

The Government awaits with interest the final report from the Committee on Standards and looks forward to further debate on this matter to ensure that our system commands both the confidence of the public and Members on a cross-party basis. The Government is determined to play its part in the continuation and development of this work and drive forward reforms and the culture change that is needed.

## Maintaining institutional focus and driving further reforms

**We recommend, as a first step, the House of Commons Commission conduct a swift review of the implementation of recommendations in The Good Parliament report and the UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018, in line with best practice recommended by the InterParliamentary Union and Commonwealth Parliaments Association. We recommend this review be published within six months, together with the results of the Member Services Team's survey of MPs that we have recommended in this Report. We further recommend the Commission report annually to us on progress in any outstanding areas. Where necessary, we will hold annual oral evidence sessions to scrutinise progress and make further recommendations. (Paragraph 123)**

The House has continued to make progress in the areas highlighted by the Good Parliament report and the UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit. We can be encouraged by the very real progress already made in recent years towards making Parliament a more family-friendly place. Changes to sitting hours have reduced the number of late nights; there are additional child care facilities on the estate; and we have found ways to make greater use of technology helping us go about our business more effectively.

The Government is making progress tackling online threats and threats to physical security through primary legislation. This includes the Elections Bill which will provide for a new electoral sanction in response to intimidation and the Online Safety Bill will protect all users, but especially women, from abuse and hate.

The Government agrees with the Women and Equalities Committee that there is clearly no room for complacency. The Government believes that the House of Commons must maintain an institutional focus on gender and diversity sensitivity and the Government would welcome a review of this area by the House of Commons Commission.

The Government would also welcome collaboration between the Commission and the Women and Equalities Committee as suggested in the report. The Government will continue to engage with these recommendations, primarily through the Leader of the House of Commons' position on the House of Commons Commission. The Government acknowledges the need for cross-party consensus and collaboration on these issues.

## Appendix 2: House of Commons Commission Response

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May 2022

The House of Commons Commission agrees that it is important to monitor progress in a transparent way and would be happy to support this work. However, we do not believe it is appropriate for the Commission to report progress on recommendations outside its remit. In our 2019 response to the Gender Sensitive Parliament audit, we agreed for the House Service to prioritise action in areas which relate to three of the four necessary reforms cited by the Committee in paragraph 123 (support for parent and carer MPs; a gender and diversity sensitive workplace and working practices; and an inclusive culture in which inappropriate and harmful behaviour is no longer tolerated.)

Therefore, in response to the Committee's recommendation, we will report to the Committee in six months' time and thereafter annually on progress against recommendations made within our remit in the Good Parliament and Gender Sensitive Parliament reports. We will particularly focus on the three outstanding or ongoing priority areas we identified for action: MPs' security; responding to inquiries established to address bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct; and support for MPs with children and families.

**House of Commons Commission**

**May 2022**

## Appendix 3: Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme Response

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5 May 2022

Dear Caroline Nokes

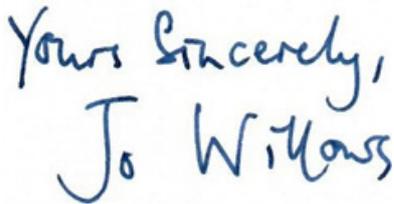
I am writing in response to the recommendation that specifically refers to the ICGS, in your Report, *Equality in the heart of democracy: A gender sensitive House of Commons*, published 23 February 2022.

Paragraph 117 recommended that the distinction on when the ICGS does and does not apply to proceedings in the House should be clearly set out in updated guidance on the new ICGS Hub.

The guidance was already on the ICGS Hub, in its own section under the heading "Find out how the ICGS works". Following the WEC's recommendation, it is now on the ICGS Hub's home page, under its own heading "Parliamentary privilege and the ICGS".

Please let me know if you would like further information about the ICGS.

Yours Sincerely,



Yours Sincerely,  
Jo Willows

**Josephine Willows**  
**Director**  
**Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS)**

## Appendix 4: Houses of Parliament Restoration and Renewal Sponsor Body Response

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27 April 2022

Dear Caroline,

### **Response to Women and Equalities Committee Report—‘Equality in the heart of democracy: A gender sensitive House of Commons’**

Thank you for providing the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body the opportunity to provide both oral and written evidence to the Committee's recent inquiry into ‘*A gender sensitive House of Commons*’.

The Committee's report noted, as set out in our evidence, that the R&R Programme has accessibility and inclusion as one of its strategic aims and has a small Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team. The Committee also welcomed the recent steps taken by the Sponsor Body to survey the experiences and needs of the parliamentary community, including MPs. Despite this, the Committee expressed concerns that there “continues to be insufficient institutionalised focus on, and expertise in, gender sensitivity, to support the programme”.

The Committee made two specific recommendations addressed to the Sponsor Body (paragraph 80), one relating to an independent advisory panel of experts, the other to annual audits:

*“We recommend the Sponsor Body appoint an independent advisory panel of experts on gender and diversity sensitivity to advise on building design and facilities in the Outline Business Case for any temporary decant location and the restored and renewed Palace of Westminster. This panel should include specific expertise to support the Sponsor Body to comply with its legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 on sex and other protected characteristics.*

*“We also recommend that the Sponsor Body conduct and publish annual audits of its contribution to a gender sensitive House of Commons, drawing on the recommendations in The Good Parliament report and regular consultation with the parliamentary community, so that there can be transparent scrutiny by the public and this Committee. Its annual audit should include the diversity of the Sponsor Body itself, including its parliamentary membership.”*

Before I address the specifics of these two recommendations I wish to ensure the Committee is aware of the significant changes currently underway regarding the scope, governance, and operating model of the R&R Programme. These developments have taken place since we gave evidence to the Committee in September and they affect the Sponsor Body's ability to respond to the Committee's recommendations.

## **Governance and scope changes to the R&R Programme**

The restoration programme is a highly complex undertaking and, to meet this challenge, the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act was passed in 2019 to establish an independent Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority. Since being established, the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority have made significant progress in developing the detailed plans for the restoration of the Palace.

In January 2022 the two House Commissions expressed concern over information provided by the Sponsor Body regarding the emerging costs and timescales of the existing approach to the R&R Programme, and programme governance. (The Sponsor Body subsequently published the information provided to the Commissions regarding the emerging costs and timescales).<sup>1</sup> As a result, the Commissions are exploring whether a new approach could enable R&R to be delivered in a different way, with a focus on affordability over time and securing a wider range of options or how works could be delivered.

On 18 March, the two House Commissions issued a joint statement setting out a new approach to the R&R Programme.<sup>2</sup> The two Commissions agreed to replace the statutory Sponsor Body and set out a number of new “parameters” to guide the new approach, including a “primary commitment to health and safety, including fire safety” and prioritising works to improve mechanical, electrical and other essential systems.

Subject to the agreement of both Commissions, a revised mandate for the works and changes to the sponsorship function will be sought from the two Houses, which is currently planned to take place prior to the start of the summer recess.

The exact implications of these changes for the Programme, and more specifically for the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority, are still unknown. It is clear, however, that both House Commissions have called for a change in the sponsorship function and a new approach to the works. As a result, the Sponsor Body has ceased all non-essential activity and paused all recruitment. Work on the Programme Business Case and the two Schemes that were being developed has also ceased.

In these circumstances, given the uncertainty about the future of the programme and the sponsorship function, the Sponsor Body is not in a position to be able to commit to meet the Committee's two recommendations. These will be matters for the new sponsorship department to consider and respond to.

Nevertheless, I have provided brief position statements on both recommendations below.

### **Independent advisory panel**

The R&R Programme had been progressing plans to set up an independent panel of technical experts relating to Accessibility and Inclusion (not limited only to gender matters). The intention was to remunerate panel members. This activity has now been paused until we have clearer direction regarding the scope of the Programme.

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1 [Essential\\_Scheme\\_Initial\\_Assessment\\_of\\_Cost\\_and\\_Schedule\\_and\\_Continued\\_Presence\\_Impact\\_Study\\_Final.pdf \(ctfassets.net\)](#)

2 [Joint statement from the House of Commons and House of Lords Commissions - Committees - UK Parliament](#)

## **Annual audits of contribution to gender sensitivity**

The R&R Programme has recently published, or will publish, several reports connected to equality and inclusion and gender issues:

- In September 2021 the R&R Programme published its first [Annual Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Report](#), which set out progress against the Public Sector Equality Duty commitment under the Equality Act 2010. This included diversity data across all organisations working on the Programme, including our suppliers such as BDP, Jacobs and Airwalk. This showed that compared to the infrastructure sector average of 21%, the Programme has a more progressive gender balance. Of those colleagues surveyed:
  - ◆ 56% identified as female and 40% as male;
  - ◆ 10% were senior leaders, with 7% of these identifying as female compared to 3% identifying as male;
  - ◆ 32% managed other colleagues, with 20% of these identifying as female compared to 12% identifying as male.
- This year's EDI report will break down the staffing figures further to show gender representation on both the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority Boards and the Executive Committee (in line with the Committee's recommendation).
- The Delivery Authority published a [gender pay gap report for 2020-2021](#) on 1 April 2022. The Sponsor Body's Annual Report and Accounts for 2021-22, which will be published in the early summer, will also contain gender pay gap information.

I hope this information is useful to the Committee.

Yours sincerely



**Sarah Johnson**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**Houses of Parliament Restoration and Renewal Sponsor Body**

## Appendix 5: Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority Response

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29 April 2022

Dear Caroline,

Thank you for advance copy of your now published inquiry into '*Equality in the heart of democracy: A gender sensitive House of Commons*'. We welcome the report and were very grateful for the opportunity given to our Chief Executive, Ian Todd, to address the Committee on this vital topic.

I wish to respond here to the recommendations made by the Committee insofar as they relate to IPSA. I also link [our response](#) to the Procedure Committee on the development of IPSA's support to MPs requiring staffing cover during an extended Westminster absence, and hope that this is helpful.

I was pleased to read that the Committee welcomed IPSA's MP parental leave and absence budget as a 'major step forward' in recent years. It has been a key priority for IPSA to ensure that our framework and wider support enable MPs to conduct their parliamentary duties whilst balancing their family life. This, in fact, forms part of our wider mission to ensure that being an MP is a viable option for people from all walks of life. In your report, the Committee recommended that support be extended to biological fathers, partners and second adopters on the grounds that the provision, "in mirroring the entitlements of the proxy voting scheme, [and] granting only two weeks leave cover for biological fathers, ... entrenches damaging gender assumptions about primary responsibility for childcare". The Committee also recommended that arrangements be clarified on surrogacy.

Since offering additional staffing support to MPs facing long-term absence (normally more than three months) from Westminster, the Committee is right to note that IPSA has sought to align

closely with the House of Commons' proxy voting scheme to provide a joined-up approach for MPs. It is for this reason that the standard period of staff cover under this Fund is usually seven months, but we recognise that there may be cases to extend it and have built discretion into the policy.

As you know, however, it is important to note that the proxy voting scheme and the IPSA MP parental leave and absence budget serve different, albeit connected, ends. Whilst both relate to an MP being away from Westminster, the proxy voting scheme serves to ensure that MPs can continue to register votes during Commons' proceedings whilst away for the birth or adoption of a child, whereas IPSA support is designed more widely to provide additional staffing resource in Westminster or the constituency, such as for casework, if an MP is absent for an extended period for parental or non-parental reasons, namely illness or hospitalisation.

In our [guidance](#), IPSA's position is flexible and its language neutral, noting that those MPs seeking a shared parental leave arrangement "should contact IPSA to discuss the next steps". In other words, it is not a matter for IPSA to prescribe how MPs choose to make their immediate domestic arrangements after welcoming a child or assuming a care responsibility. So long as they remain eligible under the wider provisions of the fund, IPSA would accordingly offer support to those MPs who are biological fathers, partners, and second adopters seeking staffing cover during extended time away to look after a child as part of shared leave or as principal at-home caregiver. This would also apply to MPs who have or adopt a child together. In the above situations, the MP is absent from Westminster for an extended period of time, and precisely for a responsibility covered by the IPSA MP parental leave and absence budget, and it is therefore for this reason that we invite MPs in any such circumstances to contact us to discuss next steps depending on the specifics of the case.

For IPSA, any MP seeking such cover could document this via the ordinary process of providing a MAT1B form, adoption certificate, surrogacy agreement, or confirmation of parental responsibility. As you will appreciate, the question as to whether the biological father, partner, or secondary adopter on shared leave or undertaking the primary caregiver role could access the proxy voting scheme is a matter for the House of Commons, and I understand a review of the scheme is soon due. We are happy to work collaboratively with your Committee and the Procedure Committee, but I hope that this letter provides immediate assurance that IPSA has provision in place for MPs potentially absent from Westminster for some time under shared/other parental arrangements and we urge MPs to discuss with us what may be desirable and feasible in their own circumstances.

It is also the case that our guidance explicitly refers to and includes MPs who welcome a child via surrogacy. Across other IPSA funding, we endeavour to ensure that the support is as accessible as possible and avoids gendered assumptions. For example, and as we reported to the Committee in a letter of 2 December 2021, 71% of those MPs receiving the dependant uplift for children to stay with them in Westminster were male as of 20 September 2021. As of April 2022, that figure is 72%.

The Committee further welcomed the extension of the MP parental leave and absence budget to cover a greater range of MPs' extended absences from Westminster, including for ill health and wider caring responsibilities. It also recommended that our future discussions with stakeholders "take into account the results of the House of Commons Member Services Team's survey of MPs' experiences", which is additionally suggested in chapter 5. I can confirm that we will pay close attention to any House survey of MPs' experiences and bear this in mind in the development of future policy, processes, and guidance. I am also pleased to say that we have now formalised the extension of the MP parental leave and absence budget in the [MPs' Scheme](#) of Business Costs at paragraph 10.14 and published [new guidance](#) on how MPs can quickly access support. A number of MPs have accessed this wider funding in different ways and for different reasons.

In addition, the Committee recommend that IPSA ensures that the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) that we have committed to conducting during our next fundamental review of the Scheme is *“comprehensive and fully in line with the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s guidance on complying with the Public Sector Equality Duty”*. The Committee further recommended that *“IPSA consider as part of its 2024 Corporate Plan the case for conducting more frequent EIAs of the scheme as and when significant changes are made between comprehensive reviews”*.

I confirm that IPSA will conduct a robust EIA when reviewing our entire regulatory model, including an EIA diagnostic early on and followed by a full assessment of possible changes we may make later on in that process. As part of these, we will consider best practice, including from the EHRC. IPSA has conducted two consultations in regards to the MP parental leave and absence budget first in [February 2021](#) and then [February 2022](#) alongside other Scheme changes. In the former, we invited comments on the concept of the fund, eligibility, and any other factors to be considered when determining the policy. In the latter, we sought views on expanding the Fund to become the ‘MP Absence and Parental Leave Fund’ and included an Equality Impact Assessment section.

We have also recently reformed our internal process for conducting Equality Impact Assessments to weave such important considerations more closely into our policymaking and change management processes. This includes prompts to consider and presumptions in favour of such assessments in proposals put to the Board and within internal business change requests impacting customers. I hope that this assures the Committee that we take our responsibilities under the Public Sector Equality Duty, a duty of substance rather than form, seriously and that we have put in place mechanisms to ensure that this is done robustly. If we propose formal, significant changes to the Scheme between now and the comprehensive review then we will of course ensure that equality considerations are at the forefront of our thinking, and will openly seek views to this effect.

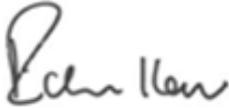
Finally, the Committee recommended IPSA *“make a transparent assessment of the impact of publishing additional costs associated with being a parent—including parental leave cover, and additional transport and accommodation costs in relation to dependent children—on the willingness of women and parent MPs to claim support”*. This was on the basis that publication may make MPs with children look “more expensive” than those without and could act as a “disincentive to claims”.

On parental leave cover, as well as other reasons for extended absence, we agree that this detail should not be published at the individual level and costs under this Fund should instead be published as an aggregate across all MPs. This was a decision made by the IPSA Board in October 2021, which we have since operationalised and reflected in our revised [Publication Policy](#). As Ian commented before your Committee, we are also open to reviewing other aspects of our approach to publication, including how we publish transport and accommodation claims relating to dependant children. This will form part of the wholesale review of our operating model which we plan to conduct this year.

We wish to explore how we may refine the support available and pilot new approaches to parental and other extended absence within the bounds of our constitutional and legal authority. In this vein, we will engage further with MPs, staff, House services, and subject matter experts, and would be very grateful for the opportunity to discuss with you as Chair.

If this would be of interest, my Chief of Staff is in contact with the secretariat for any further detail and can make appropriate arrangements.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Lloyd'.

**Richard Lloyd**  
**Chair**  
**Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority**