



House of Commons
Procedure Committee

Proxy voting and the presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall: Government Response to the Committee's First Report

First Special Report of Session
2022–23

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Procedure Committee

The Procedure Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of public business, and to make recommendations.

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Committee reports are published on the [Committee's website](#) and in print by Order of the House.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Paul Connolly (Media Relations Manager), Jim Lawford (Committee Operations Officer), Ffion Morgan (Second Clerk), Silas Scott (Senior Media Relations Officer) and Richard Ward (Clerk).

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You can follow the Committee on Twitter using [@CommonsProcCom](#)

First Special Report

The Procedure Committee published its First Report of Session 2022–23, [Proxy voting and the presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall](#) (HC 383), on 30 June 2022. The Government Response was received on 31 August 2022 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

The Government is grateful to the Procedure Committee for its report Proxy voting and the presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall.

The response to your conclusions and recommendations is set out below, taking each of these matters in turn.

Voting by proxy

The overwhelming balance of evidence we heard was in favour of an extension of proxy voting to include serious long-term illness: it remains to be seen if this view is shared in the House. (Paragraph 24)

If the House decides to extend the proxy voting system to include serious long-term illness, only the fact of a Member having exercised their right under Standing Order No. 39A should be published. Any extension to the proxy voting scheme would not affect the pairing and nodding through mechanisms, which would remain available to Members who wish to use them. (Paragraph 25)

We recommend that the Government schedules a debate before the House rises for the summer adjournment to allow the House to debate and express a view on the principle of whether the proxy voting scheme should be extended to include Members suffering from serious long-term illness. (Paragraph 26)

The Government agrees with the aim of creating a more inclusive culture and working environment in Parliament and welcomes the Procedure Committee's consideration of the range of opinions related to the extension of proxy voting to include long-term illness.

The Government has a responsibility to ensure that its legislative programme can be delivered through both Houses with adequate scrutiny and that the voting system retains the full confidence of the public. Therefore, any changes to voting procedures need to ensure that the process remains robust, is transparent and that the personal accountability of each member's vote is not lost.

When the system of proxy voting for baby leave was introduced, the House discussed the scope of the scheme in great detail. It was felt that, on balance, the anonymity of the slipping and pairing system was preferable for members who are ill or had caring

responsibilities, rather than declaring your personal circumstances to qualify for a proxy vote during a difficult time. Consequently, widening the scope of the scheme does need to be thought through carefully.

The Government agrees with the Committee that any expansion of the proxy voting scheme should not affect the pairing and nodding through mechanisms which would remain available to Members.

This is a complex matter which requires careful consideration. The Government has a great deal of sympathy for those suffering from serious or long-term illness and can see both sides of the argument. It is important that the House considers the matter in detail and reviews the evidence collected by the Procedure Committee. The Government will schedule a debate in due course to facilitate the House in taking a decision on whether the proposed pilot should be proceeded with or not.

Any extension to the proxy voting scheme to accommodate serious long-term illness should take place on the basis of a pilot scheme which we would subsequently review. (Paragraph 29)

As with the parental leave proxy voting scheme, should the House resolve in favour of an expansion of the scheme, the Government believes that a pilot and further review by the Procedure Committee would be a sensible approach.

The House could provide greater flexibility to Members with a proxy vote if it removed "absence from the precincts" from Standing Order No. 39A. This could, however, introduce pressure on Members to participate in proceedings at short notice and would be of most benefit to Members based relatively close to London who wished to participate in an Urgent Question or Statement, for which suspension of a proxy vote with notice is impossible. The House should consider these points carefully. (Paragraph 36)

The former Leader of the House of Commons asked the Committee to look into this matter. While there may be merit in making the scheme more flexible, we should be mindful of any unintended consequences new arrangements may have on Members. The Government agrees that the House should consider these points.

We endorse the Women and Equalities Committee's call for biological fathers to have equal opportunity to take advantage of the proxy voting scheme, and for provisions relating to complications, miscarriage and baby loss to be moved up within the text of the Standing Order. (Paragraph 39)

We have reservations however about extending the maximum duration of a proxy vote from seven to twelve months. While this would potentially bring the House's arrangements into line with statutory arrangements, we are concerned that it potentially limits constituents' representation in Parliament for a very long time. We also note the very favourable terms on which Members may take parental leave, and the high level of support made available by IPSA for enhanced cover of casework. (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 an important way of ensuring a more representative House of Commons. In respect of the maximum duration

of a proxy vote, this needs to be carefully reflected upon to ensure constituents are properly represented in parliamentary proceedings. The Government notes the views of the Committee and any proposed changes to the wording of the scheme will ultimately be for the House to determine.

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.

Babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall

The Government should ensure that a nominated member of staff of any Member exercising a proxy vote has access to any meetings, calls or briefings made generally available to Members of Parliament. (Paragraph 65)

The Government welcomes this recommendation and notes that issues were raised during your oral evidence sessions detailing the difficulties faced in maintaining continuity of service for constituents. Members exercising a proxy vote should have access to the right level of support. The Office of the Leader of the House of Commons will communicate this to all departments and encourage them to provide access, where appropriate, to briefings for a nominated member of staff of a Member exercising a proxy vote when it is requested.

The long-standing practice of the House, underpinned by Speaker's rulings and guidance to Members, is that babies should not be present in the Chamber and Westminster Hall. The extent to which Chairs have discretion to exercise is at present unclear. Regulating the matter by Standing Order (or the literal and consistent application of S.O. No. 161(1)) would reduce or eliminate the discretion available to Chairs to regulate proceedings: we do not believe this would benefit the House. (Paragraph 66)

In our view:

- (a) ***Members should not bring babies into the Chamber, Westminster Hall or general committees to observe, initiate, speak or intervene in proceedings;***
- (b) ***This should remain in guidance issued by the Speaker;***
- (c) ***Chairs will retain a degree of de facto discretion which should be exercised sparingly—the firm expectation should remain that Members do not participate in proceedings while caring for a baby; and***
- (d) ***The Liaison Committee should consider how far practice in select committees should mirror other settings and, if necessary, agree guidance which would cover both Members and witnesses.*** (Paragraph 67)

The Government welcomes the Committee's thoughts and notes that this is ultimately a matter for the House and the Speaker. It is important that Parliament takes appropriate steps to be an accessible workplace for parents of babies and young children, this includes the availability of facilities such as the nursery and family rooms.