



House of Commons
Women and Equalities
Committee

Equality in the heart of democracy: A gender sensitive House of Commons

Fifth Report of Session 2021–22

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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Women and Equalities Committee

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Summary

There has been considerable progress towards making the House of Commons more gender and diversity sensitive, but our inquiry has highlighted the need for further reforms in each of the key areas we considered: equal representation; support for MPs who are parents, carers, disabled or who have long-term health conditions; a gender and diversity sensitive working environment; and addressing bullying, harassment, and sexual misconduct. There is clearly no room for complacency.

The House of Commons needs to better understand the needs of its Members, particularly women, parents, carers, disabled people and those with long-term health conditions. It should survey MPs to gather and understand their personal experiences and views about current working practices, facilities and provision for diverse needs.

The House of Commons must revive and maintain an institutional focus on gender and diversity sensitivity. The House of Commons Commission should take the lead by conducting a swift review of implementation of *The Good Parliament* report and the *UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit*. It should report to us on progress annually thereafter.

Our other key recommendations include:

Equal representation

- Commencement, without delay, of section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, to incentivise political parties to make more effort to ensure they select diverse candidates for Parliament, and enable scrutiny.
- Action to address the intolerable rise of online abuse and harassment of female parliamentary candidates and MPs, including rape and death threats. Vicious misogynistic abuse must not be accepted as an inevitable facet of a woman's life in politics.

Support for parent and carer MPs

- Rectification of anomalous features of the House of Commons' proxy voting scheme and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority's (IPSA) MP parental leave cover fund, both of which should reflect best workplace practice and better support equal gender roles in childcare.
- Extension of IPSA's extended leave cover to a greater range of MPs' absences from Westminster, to support a more inclusive and family-friendly House of Commons.

A gender sensitive working environment

- Dedicated parent and child car parking provision.
- Appointment of an expert advisory panel to the Sponsor Body for the Restoration and Renewal Programme.

Transforming culture and behaviour

- Consideration by the Procedure Committee, subject to further advice from the House's procedural and legal advisers, of a balanced approach to the exclusion from Parliament of MPs accused of sexual misconduct.
- Greater clarity around the applicability of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme in the context of proceedings in the House.

1 Background and introduction

Background

1. It has been just over a century since the first women in the UK were able to vote and stand for election to Parliament. In that time, there have been several important firsts, including: in 1918, Constance Markiewicz was the first woman to be elected to Parliament (as a Sinn Féin Member, she did not take her seat); in 1919, Nancy Astor became the first elected woman to sit in Parliament; in 1924, Margaret Bondfield was the first female government minister and, in 1929, the first woman appointed to the Cabinet; in 1979, Margaret Thatcher became the first female Prime Minister; and Diane Abbott was the first Black woman to be elected to Parliament, in 1987.¹ A telling milestone was reached only five years ago. In December 2016, after the by-election victory of Dr Caroline Johnson, the total number of female MPs elected to the House of Commons in almost 100 years equalled the number of contemporaneously sitting male MPs for the first time.²

2. There has been substantial progress in women's representation in the House of Commons over the last 25 years, precipitated by a spike in the number of women MPs following the 1997 general election, when the percentage almost doubled from under 10% to just over 18%.³ After a slight regression from the high of 1997 in 2001, there has been a degree of progress towards women's equal representation after every general election from 2005. After the last general election in 2019, there were 220 female MPs, a new high. Of those MPs elected for the first time in 2019, 41% were women.⁴ After by-elections since 2019, there are now 224 female MPs, another all-time high and representing just over 34% of the House of Commons' 650 MPs.⁵

The current context

3. While there is still some way to go to achieve equal representation of women in the House of Commons, and in the wider political and public sphere, in recent decades the focus has broadened to encompass "gender sensitivity" in the House of Commons as a workplace. Steps have been taken to make the House a more welcoming and accommodating place for women. For example, there has been focus on its working hours and practices, and support for MPs who are parents.⁶ The planned restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster is an opportunity to design in greater accessibility and inclusion, for women and other underrepresented groups.⁷

4. Deeply troubling revelations about bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct, particularly affecting women at the hands of men, have led both Houses of Parliament to begin to address their cultures and behavioural standards.⁸

1 See, for example, British Council, *Women, Power, Politics: What's changed in 100 years?*, 2018

2 House of Commons Library, '[Female Members of Parliament](#)', accessed 19 January 2022

3 For, for example, UK Political Info, '[Women MPs & parliamentary candidates since 1945](#)', accessed 12 November 2021

4 Institute for Government, '[Gender balance in parliament](#)', accessed 12 November 2021

5 *Women Members of Parliament*, House of Commons Library, Research Briefing [6652](#), July 2021

6 See, for example, *Sitting Hours*, Briefing Paper [6380](#), House of Commons Library, November 2015; Procedure Committee, *Proxy voting and parental absence*, Fifth Report of Session 2017–19, HC 825

7 See, for example, Professor Sarah Childs, '[The Good Parliament](#)', July 2016, p. 2

8 See, for example, "[The new Clerk of the Commons on transforming Parliament's culture](#)", *The House*, 4 March 2019; UK Parliament, '[House of Lords Commission respond to Ellenbogen report](#)', accessed 15 November 2021

5. It is also important to note that our inquiry was held during a climate of intense public concern about the role of public institutions in addressing women's safety in the context of shocking cases of violence against women. Five years after the tragic murder of Jo Cox MP,⁹ fears about MPs' safety were heightened again after the senseless killing of our dedicated and respected colleague, Sir David Amess MP.¹⁰

Use of language: "gender sensitive" parliaments

6. The term gender sensitive parliament is employed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), a global organisation representing 179 national parliaments. In 2011, the IPU developed a toolkit for parliaments to assess their gender sensitivity.¹¹ The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) have produced guidelines for gender sensitising parliaments, drawing on internationally recognised human rights principals, including UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5, on gender equality; and SDG 16, on peace, justice and strong institutions).¹² During the pandemic, UN Women produced guidance for parliaments on gender sensitising their responses to Covid-19.¹³

7. We are acutely aware, not least through our recent inquiry into reform of the Gender Recognition Act, of the current debate around the implications of using the terms sex and gender interchangeably.¹⁴ Several witnesses raised concerns about our use of the term gender sensitive parliament from the perspective of support for women's sex-based rights.¹⁵ While taking note of and understanding these concerns, we decided to employ the term gender sensitive to align both with the framing and language used internationally by the IPU, CPA, the UN and others, and that of the *UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018* (see This inquiry and Report, below).¹⁶ For the purposes of this Report, our definition of a gender sensitive parliament aligns with that set out by the IPU. A gender sensitive parliament is:

A political institution that responds to the needs and interests of both women and men in terms of its structures, operations, methods and work.¹⁷

Additionally, while maintaining a central focus on equality for women, the definition of gender sensitivity should be intersectional; we want to see a House of Commons that is

9 See, for example, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, [Police response to violence against women and girls: Final inspection report](#), September 2021, which was commissioned by the Home Secretary in response to the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer.

10 See, for example, ["Priti Patel orders review of MPs' security after David Amess's death"](#), *The Guardian*, 15 October 2021

11 IPU, ['Evaluating the gender sensitivity of parliaments: A self-assessment toolkit'](#), accessed 12 November 2021 (latest version of toolkit published 2016)

12 CPA/CWP, [Gender Sensitising Parliaments guidelines: standards and a checklist for parliamentary change](#), October 2020

13 UN Women, [A primer for Parliamentary Action: Gender Sensitive Responses to Covid-19](#), June 2020

14 Women and Equalities Committee, ['Reform of the Gender Recognition Act'](#), accessed 12 November 2021

15 A member of the public (GSP0001); Julia Woodham-Smith (GSP0007); Lindsay (GSP0009)

16 See also, for example, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, [OECD Toolkit for Mainstreaming and Implementing Gender Equality: Implementing the 2015 OECD Recommendation on Gender Equality in Public Life](#), 2018; UK Parliament, [UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018](#), November 2018

17 CPA/CWP, [Gender Sensitising Parliaments guidelines: standards and a checklist for parliamentary change](#), October 2020

more responsive to the diverse needs and interests of women alongside men, while also conscious of needs and interests related to race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, disability and other characteristics.

This inquiry and Report

8. Our inquiry was, in part, conducted to follow up work started by our predecessor Committee in 2019. It held two oral evidence sessions but was unable to publish a Report before the last general election.

9. Our predecessor Committee's, and our, inquiry looked at progress since the publication of Professor Sarah Childs' *The Good Parliament* report in 2016 and the *UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018*.¹⁸ Our inquiry focused on the House of Commons, not Parliament as a whole, and predominantly, except for steps taken to address bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct, on the experiences of MPs rather than the broader House of Commons workforce and wider community. We considered changes to the House's buildings and facilities, and opportunities for greater gender sensitivity presented by the Restoration and Renewal Programme and the more flexible approach to House proceedings adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic.

10. We received written submissions from external organisations and researchers, and from MPs, including Chris Clarkson MP, Ellie Reeves MP and Chairs of relevant Select Committees, senior House of Commons officials, and the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, which is responsible for leading the Restoration and Renewal Programme. We heard oral evidence from Professor Sarah Childs; Dr Alexandra Meakin, an expert on the gendered effects of architecture and design on parliaments; Ken Gall, President of the House of Commons Trade Union Side, which represents the four staff unions recognised in the House of Commons; the Chairs of the House of Commons' Procedure, Standards and Administration Committees; The Leader and Shadow Leader of the House of Commons; the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and the Restoration and Renewal Sponsor Body; and the House of Commons' Clerk, Director General, Clerk Assistant and Director of Cultural Transformation. A full list of witnesses is included at the end of this Report. We are very grateful to everyone who contributed evidence and helped and advised us.

11. This Report is not a comprehensive gender sensitivity audit but it considers recent progress in some fundamental aspects of a gender sensitive House of Commons: increased women's representation among its 650 MPs (chapter 2); support for MPs who are parents (chapter 3); an inclusive workplace, including sensitive workplace design and facilities, the opportunities presented by Restoration and Renewal, and working practices, including lessons learned from arrangements adopted during the pandemic (chapter 4); and promotion of a more inclusive culture, which effectively tackles the culture of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct laid bare in Dame Laura Cox QC's independent report in 2018 (chapter 5).¹⁹ In chapter 6, we look at how the House as a whole can better embed an institutional focus on gender sensitivity and wider inclusion, and continue to drive forward necessary reforms.

18 Women and Equalities Committee, '[Gender Sensitive Parliament \(House of Commons\) inquiry](#)', accessed 12 November 2021

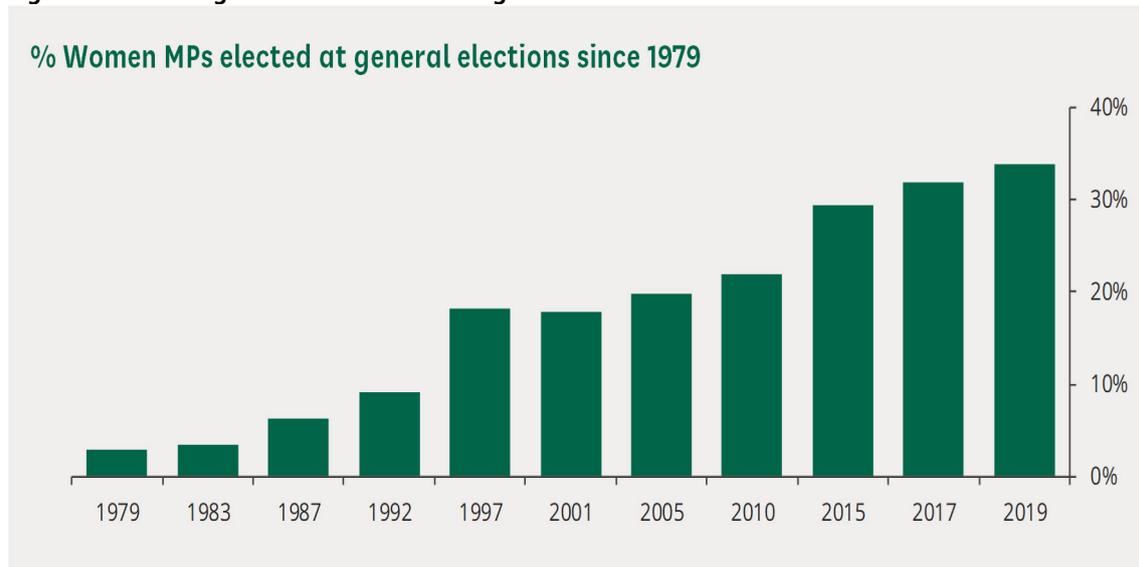
19 Dame Laura Cox DBE, '[The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff: independent inquiry report](#)', October 2018

2 Equal representation in the House of Commons

Progress towards equal representation of women

12. As noted above, there has been significant progress towards equal representation of women in the House of Commons, particularly since 1997. Nevertheless, there is still some way to go to achieve parity, with women's representation in the House currently standing at around 34%:

Figure 1: Percentage of women elected at general elections since 1979



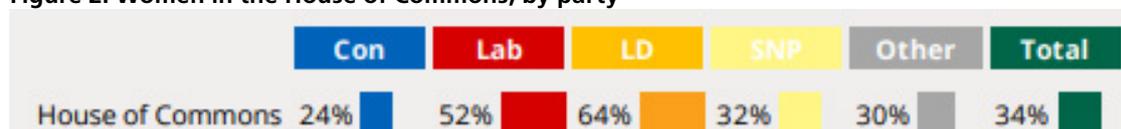
Source: *Women in politics and public life*, Briefing Paper [01250](#), House of Commons Library, March 2021

13. Representation of women in the House of Commons lags behind devolved parliaments and assemblies: 47% of Members of the Scottish Parliament; 40% of Members of the London Assembly; and 36% of Welsh Assembly Members are women. The European Parliament has 41% female membership. Globally, only three countries' lower or unicameral chambers have equal representation or a majority of female members: United Arab Emirates (50%); Cuba (53%); and Rwanda (61%). At 34%, the House of Commons ranks joint 38th internationally, alongside Cameroon, and below comparable western European nations such as Italy (36%), France (40%) and Spain (44%). The highest ranked European nation is Sweden (47%).²⁰

14. Representation of women in the House of Commons varies substantially across the political parties. After the last general election, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats had a majority of female MPs for the first time. Of the Labour Party's 202 seats, 104 (51%) were won by women. Women won 7 (64%) of the Liberal Democrats' 11 seats. Women remained under-represented among Conservative Party and Scottish National Party

(SNP) MPs. Women won 16 (34%) of the SNP's 48 seats.²¹ Of the Conservative Party's 365 seats, women won 87 (24%). The figure below, produced by the House of Commons Library, shows figures as at February 2021:

Figure 2: Women in the House of Commons, by party



Source: *Women in politics and public life*, Briefing Paper [01250](#), House of Commons Library, March 2021, p. 5

15. Selection of candidates for parliamentary seats is a matter for political parties, which have taken different approaches to increasing representation of women. For example, the Labour Party's use of all-women candidate shortlists since 1997 has helped its parliamentary party to reach parity of representation for women. The Conservative Party's Women2Win campaign, which provides support, training and encouragement to women thinking about standing for the party in Parliament, has helped to increase the number of female Conservative candidates, but its proportion of women MPs still lags substantially behind.²²

16. Internationally, many countries have adopted constitutional or legal electoral gender quotas, i.e. reserving a proportion of parliamentary seats for women or legislating for a minimum quota of female candidates.²³ Professor Childs was very clear that, while "not universally popular", gender quotas were "demonstrably a very effective and efficient way of getting more women into politics."²⁴ She emphasised that the top ranked parliaments for women's representation were predominantly in countries that had adopted quotas in one form or another, either constitutional, legal electoral or voluntarily adopted all-female candidate shortlists.²⁵

Ethnic minority women's representation

17. As noted above, in 1987, Dianne Abbot was the first Black woman elected to Parliament. Progress towards equal representation of ethnic minority women was slow in subsequent general elections. The first women from Asian ethnic backgrounds were not elected until 2010. In 2019, 37 ethnic minority women were elected as MPs, representing 5.7% of the House of Commons' 650 Members (for comparison, the estimated ethnic minority population of England and Wales is 14%, broadly evenly split between men and women across ethnic minority groups).²⁶ Ethnic minorities were well represented among the 220 women elected at the 2019 election. Of the 220 female MPs elected, 37 (nearly 17%) were from ethnic minorities. After the 2019 election, more than half (57%) of Parliament's 65 ethnic minority MPs were women (37 women and 28 men).²⁷

21 House of Commons Library, '[General Election 2019: full results and analysis](#)', accessed 16 November 2021; *Women in politics and public life*, Briefing Paper [01250](#), House of Commons Library, March 2021

22 "[How the Parliamentary Labour Party achieved gender parity and why the Conservatives still lag behind](#)", LSE blog post by Jens Wäckerle, 11 January 2021

23 Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, '[Gender Quotas Database](#)', accessed 22 November 2021

24 Q7

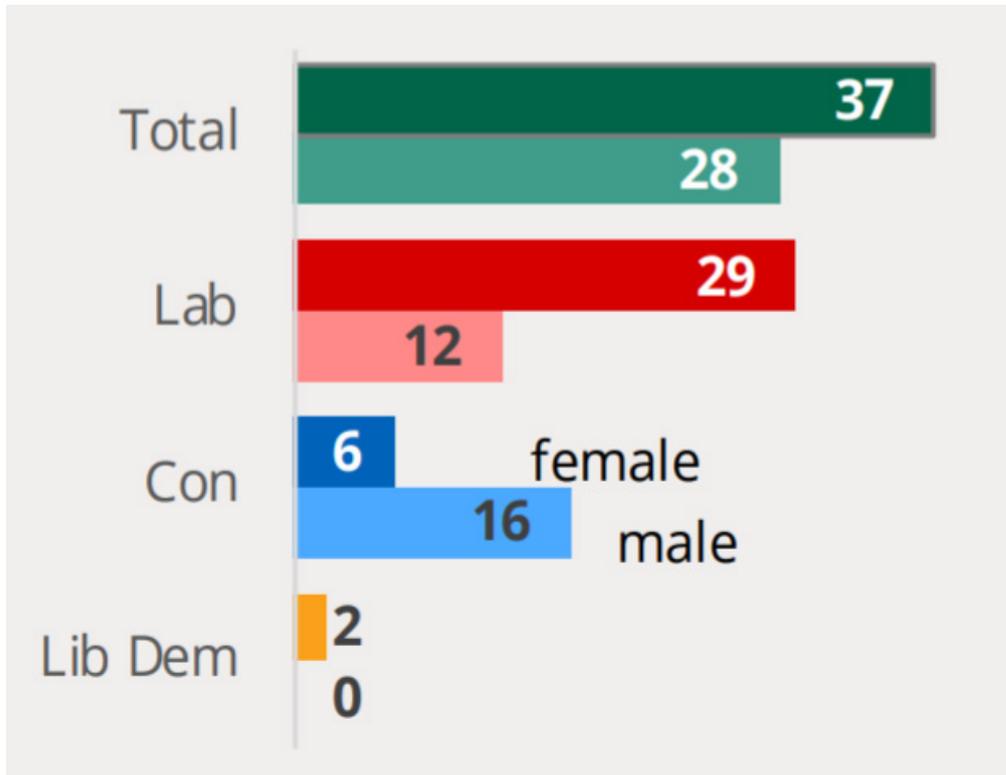
25 Q8

26 *Women in politics and public life*, Briefing Paper [01250](#), House of Commons Library, March 2021, p. 9; see also GOV.UK, '[Population of England and Wales](#)', section 3, by ethnicity, accessed 18 November 2021

27 *Women in politics and public life*, Briefing Paper [01250](#), House of Commons Library, March 2021, p. 9

18. Like for women generally, representation of ethnic minority women in the House of Commons varied considerably across the political parties in 2019: two (18%) of the Liberal Democrats 11 MPs; 29 (14%) of the Labour Party's 202 MPs; and six (2%) of the Conservative Party's 365 MPs:

Figure 3: Ethnic minority MPs elected in 2019 general election, by sex and party



Source: *Women in politics and public life*, Briefing Paper [01250](#), House of Commons Library, March 2021, p. 9

The role of the Government

19. Speaking for the Government, The Leader of the House of Commons, The Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, emphasised that equal representation of women in the House was “primarily a party matter”.²⁸ However, a range of witnesses agreed that the Government could further gender sensitivity and broader inclusion through existing legislation. Professor Childs, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Centenary Action Group, The Fawcett Society and others urged the Government to enact section 106 of the Equality Act 2010.²⁹ This, as yet uncommenced, section of the Act would require political parties to collect and publish diversity data relating to their parliamentary candidates.³⁰ Commencement of the section was recommended in *The Good Parliament* report in 2016.³¹ Our predecessor Committee made the same recommendation in 2017, concluding

28 Q64; see Conservative Party, ‘[Women2Win](#)’, accessed 18 November 2021

29 See, for example, Q7 [Professor Childs]; Centenary Action Group ([GSP0018](#)); The Fawcett Society ([GSP0020](#))

30 [Equality Act 2010, s106](#)

31 Professor Sarah Childs, [The Good Parliament](#), July 2016

that publication of diversity data was “vital for public and parliamentary scrutiny of the record of political parties in selecting a diverse slate of parliamentary candidates”.³² The *UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018* repeated the recommendation.³³

20. In evidence to our inquiry, Professor Childs argued that section 106 would:

enable the public to hold political parties to account for who they select in a timely fashion so that parties might respond to the potential of concern about how diverse they are and improve their candidate selection.

She “could not understand why” it had not been commenced since 2010. She believed commencement was the first thing the Government should do to advance a gender sensitive parliament.³⁴

21. Asked whether the Government would enact section 106, The Leader of the House would only say that it was, along with other uncommenced sections of the Equality Act 2010, “under review”.³⁵

22. There has been significant progress, particularly since 1997, towards women’s equal representation in the House of Commons. However, women still only make up just over a third of the House of Commons’ 650 MPs. There are considerable variations in women’s representation in the House across the political parties, which have taken different approaches to their selection of parliamentary candidates. There are also very considerable variations in representation of minority ethnic women across the parties. Lack of equal representation undermines our democracy and, while selection processes remain predominately a matter for the political parties, the Government should take steps to incentivise effective action on gender sensitive and inclusive selection processes across the board. 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.

Retention of female MPs and the effects of online abuse and harassment

23. Not only are there fewer women than men in the House of Commons, they also, on average, stay in the House for significantly shorter periods of time.³⁶ Key factors such as the need for more gender sensitive working practices and support for parent and carer MPs, a more inclusive culture and better behavioural standards, and gender sensitising buildings and facilities are examined later in this Report.

32 Women and Equalities Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2016–17, [Women in the House of Commons after the 2020 election](#), HC 630, paras 55–8

33 UK Parliament, [UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018](#), November 2018, conclusion and recommendation 14

34 Q7

35 Q66–7

36 Byrne, C. and Theakston, K., “[Leaving the House: The Experience of Former Members of Parliament Who Left the House of Commons in 2010](#)”, Parliamentary Affairs, vol 69(3) (2015), pp 696–7

24. Witnesses emphasised another key issue increasingly affecting female MPs. They noted that several female MPs stood down from Parliament at the 2019 general election citing intolerable online harassment, abuse, and threats of violence, including rape and death threats.³⁷ This issue had been recognised as a “great cause of concern” in the *UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018*.³⁸

25. We heard evidence that female candidates’ and MPs’ experiences of online harassment and abuse had worsened considerably. For example, Compassion in Politics reported survey evidence that the 2019 general election was the “nastiest” campaign ever. Threats via social media of physical violence against female MPs were now “commonplace”, with the “most persistent” abuse aimed at Black and minority ethnic women.³⁹ Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) analysis of online abuse of female MPs in the 2017 general election campaign found that Black and Asian women were subjected to 35% more abusive posts than their White counterparts. Parliament’s first Black woman MP, Diane Abbot, received nearly a third of all the online abuse recorded in the EHRC’s survey.⁴⁰

26. The Leader of the House of Commons acknowledged that online abuse was a “very serious problem” and that “male politicians simply do not get the level of violent and personal abuse that women get”. He emphasised that the Government’s Draft Online Safety Bill, pre-legislative scrutiny of which was being conducted by a Joint Committee of MPs and Peers, was intended to be “a way of protecting people”.⁴¹ The Draft Bill creates a new regulatory structure for online platforms, with a central role for Ofcom as the statutory Regulator.⁴² Mr Rees-Mogg believed that the pre-legislative scrutiny process was “really important, because it is going to be an opportunity for parliamentarians to say, ‘We need to improve the protections in this area.’”⁴³

27. The Leader of the House also noted that the Elections Bill, which is currently before the House of Lords, contained “a specific protection against intimidation and an electoral sanction against intimidation in elections.”⁴⁴

37 See, for example, Centenary Action Group ([GSP0018](#)), para 24; Fawcett Society ([GSP0020](#)), para 2.1; Institute for Government ([GSP0029](#)), para 20; “[Women MPs say abuse forcing them from politics](#)”, *BBC News*, 31 October 2019; see also, Butler, C., Campbell, R. and Hudson J. (2021), *Political Recruitment Under Pressure, Again: MPs and Candidates in the 2019 General Election*. In Ford, R et al, *The British General Election of 2019*, Palgrave Macmillan

38 UK Parliament, ‘[UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018](#)’, November 2018, para 82

39 Compassion in Politics ([GSP0019](#)), para 9

40 Equality and Human Rights Commission ([GSP0026](#)), para 8

41 Q72; see also, UK Parliament, ‘[Draft Online Safety Bill \(Joint Committee\)](#)’, accessed 22 November 2021

42 UK Parliament, ‘[Draft Online Safety Bill \(Joint Committee\)](#)’, accessed 22 November 2021

43 Q78

44 Q72; See also, UK Parliament, ‘[Elections Bill](#)’, accessed 22 November 2021

28. Witnesses, however, were concerned about a lack of focus, in either the Draft Online Safety Bill or the Elections Bill, specifically on protecting female candidates and MPs from online abuse and harassment.⁴⁵ The Impact Assessment of the Draft Online Safety Bill considers the impacts of intimidation of public figures, including MPs, and acknowledges that:

It is possible that online abuse may distort democratic and legal processes. Research from Amnesty International found that women—particularly black, Asian and minority ethnic women—experience more targeted abuse (such as gendered insults and greater incidence of threats).⁴⁶

The Equality Impact Assessment of the Elections Bill states:

By offering additional protection against intimidation and abuse, both online and in person, the new electoral sanction is expected to especially benefit women, individuals from ethnic minorities, individuals from religious minorities, and LGBT+ individuals. The new electoral sanction is intended to encourage these groups to participate in elections and contribute to public life, thereby advancing equality of opportunity.⁴⁷

29. Some witnesses supported additional, specific legislation to protect women, for example Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform and 50:50 Parliament called for legislation to make misogyny a hate crime.⁴⁸ The House of Lords recently voted in favour of an amendment to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill to this effect.⁴⁹ However, the Government does not intend to support the amendment in the Commons.⁵⁰ In December 2021, as part of a broader review, the Law Commission concluded that “the particular model of hate crime laws is unlikely to prove an effective response to misogynistic offending, and may prove more harmful than helpful.” Its view was that “reforms in other areas are more likely to result in tangible, positive results.”⁵¹ The Government has said it will publish a “refreshed” hate crime strategy.⁵²

30. The Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill published its Report on 14 December 2021. It supported the Law Commission’s proposals for new offences in relation to a range of online communications, including those that “contain threats of serious harm” and stir up “hatred on the grounds of sex or gender”. The Joint Committee recommended the Government “bring in the Law Commission’s proposed Communications and Hate Crime offences with the Online Safety Bill, if no faster legislative vehicle can be found.”⁵³

45 See, for example, Centenary Action Group ([GSP0018](#)); The Fawcett Society ([GSP0020](#)); see also, [Draft Online Safety Bill](#), CP 405, May 2021; [Online Safety Bill explanatory notes](#), May 2021; [Elections Bill](#), section 7 (4); [Elections Bill explanatory notes](#), para 218

46 [Online Safety Bill Impact Assessment](#), para 320

47 [Elections Bill Equality Impact Assessment](#), para 48

48 Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform ([GSP0011](#)); 50:50 Parliament ([GSP0024](#))

49 “Lords inflict multiple defeats on ministers with misogyny voted a hate crime”, *The Guardian*, 18 January 2022

50 “Government will vote against making misogyny a hate crime after House of Lords backs new law, Dominic Raab suggests”, *The Independent*, 19 January 2022

51 Law Commission, *Hate crime laws: Final report*, HC 942, December 2021, para 151 and chapter 5

52 HC Deb, 12 January 2022, Vol 706 [Commons Chamber]

53 Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill, Report of Session 2021–22, [Draft Online Safety Bill](#), HL Paper 129/HC 609, para 136

31. The rise of online abuse and harassment of female parliamentary candidates and MPs, including rape and death threats, is intolerable. It is unacceptable that such behaviour has become commonplace and contributed to female MPs standing down at the last general election. Vicious misogynistic abuse must not be accepted as an inevitable facet of a woman's life in politics. The Government points to the Draft Online Safety Bill and the Elections Bill as ways of addressing the issue. However, we are concerned that these pieces of legislation lack specific focus on the abuse currently being experienced by women, and particularly Black and minority ethnic women, in politics. It remains to be seen whether the Government's current legislative proposals will be sufficient given the sheer scale and severity of the problem.

32. *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. We will return to the issue of online harassment and abuse of female politicians, including the case for further, specific legislation and new offences, in our work on preventing violence against women and girls.*

3 Support for parent and carer MPs

33. *The Good Parliament* report and the *UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018* highlighted the challenges posed to family life by the way the House of Commons operates, for example its sitting hours and voting procedures, and its lack of conventional parental leave policies for MPs.⁵⁴ *The Good Parliament* report noted clear evidence of a “motherhood gap” in the House of Commons; mothers were much less likely to be MPs than fathers, and those mothers who did enter the House did not do so until their children were significantly older, when compared to MPs who were fathers.⁵⁵ Professor Childs has argued that “democracies cannot be considered fully democratic” where under-representation of women, as discussed in the last chapter, and a motherhood gap persist.⁵⁶ The *UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018* described balancing work in Parliament with family life as “fundamental” to the challenge.⁵⁷

34. There have been recent positive developments on proxy voting for new parent MPs (i.e. MPs nominating an MP colleague to vote on their behalf while they are away from Westminster caring for their children).⁵⁸ Conventional maternity, paternity and adoption leave for MPs is problematic because MPs are individually elected officeholders rather than employees, but there has been progress towards greater support for parent MPs through the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority’s (IPSA) Staffing and Business Costs Scheme.⁵⁹ Below we examine recent steps taken on proxy voting for parental absence and the financial support available to parent MPs through IPSA, and their contributions to a gender sensitive House of Commons.

Proxy voting for parental absence

35. On 1 February 2018, the House of Commons resolved to allow MPs absent from the House because of childbirth or adoption of a child to cast their vote in a division by proxy.⁶⁰ The House’s Procedure Committee then developed a scheme for proxy voting, which was set out in its May 2018 Report, *Proxy voting and parental absence*.⁶¹ A scheme was initially piloted for a year from January 2019, then twice extended, in January 2020 for a further six months and in July 2020 to a total of 20 months. The proxy voting scheme was made permanent for new parents in September 2020.⁶²

36. The scheme applies to MPs who are new mothers or fathers, including adoptive parents, and MPs “affected by complications in childbirth”. Biological mothers and primary or single adoptive parents may vote by proxy for a maximum period of seven months. This must be taken as a single continuous period, including times when the House is adjourned for recesses, prorogued at the end of a parliamentary session, or dissolved for a general

54 See, for example, Professor Sarah Childs, *The Good Parliament*, July 2016, recommendations 3; 11; 12; 13; 26; 29; 31; 32–4; UK Parliament, *UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018*, November 2018, concisions and recommendations 3(b); 12; and 18–26

55 See, for example, Professor Sarah Childs, *The Good Parliament*, July 2016, pp 18, 20, 27

56 Professor Sarah Childs and Dr Jessica C. Smith (GSP0012), appendix 1

57 UK Parliament, *UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018*, November 2018, conclusions and recommendations 3(b); 12; 18

58 UK Parliament, ‘[Proxy Voting Scheme](#)’, accessed 23 November 2021; House of Commons Library, ‘[Coronavirus timeline: End of hybrid proceedings in the House of Commons](#)’, accessed 23 November 2021

59 See IPSA, *Guidance on the Scheme of MPs’ Staffing and Business Costs 2021–22*, March 2021

60 *Proxy voting in divisions in the House*, House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper [08359](#), November 2020

61 Procedure Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2017–19, *Proxy voting and parental absence*, HC 825, May 2018

62 HC Deb, 23 September 2020, [cols 1057–75](#)

election. The period can commence up to one month before the baby's due date or child's adoption date. Biological fathers, partners of MPs giving birth and second adopters of children may vote by proxy for a maximum of two weeks, taken as a continuous period within six months of the baby's due date or child's adoption date. The scheme makes no explicit reference to arrangements for surrogacy.⁶³

37. The scheme was welcomed by campaigners as a very substantial step forward for gender sensitivity.⁶⁴ Professor Childs described the introduction of proxy voting for new parents as "one of the huge successes" for those who have campaigned for greater gender sensitivity in Parliament.⁶⁵ The Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP, Chair of the House of Commons Procedure Committee, welcomed the inclusion of MPs who had experienced complications such as miscarriages, describing this as "exactly the right thing to do".⁶⁶

38. Ellie Reeves MP described the effects of the scheme on her ability to balance parliamentary and family life:

it was the trial of Proxy Voting that has enabled us to have a second child. In most other professions, it is unusual to face barriers like this, with no formal provision for maternity leave before proxy voting was introduced.⁶⁷

39. However, Professor Childs and others argued that reform should go further. Ellie Reeves MP and the Equality and Human Rights Commission called for an entitlement of up to 12 months of proxy voting to align with standard workplace maternity and shared leave practice.⁶⁸ Several witnesses were concerned about the message conveyed by the vastly differential periods of proxy voting allowed for mothers (seven months) and fathers (two weeks).⁶⁹ Professor Childs believed the House of Commons ought to set a better example:

As an institution that I think should be a role model, Parliament should provide parity of leave for the mother and father MP. That is one thing I think should be considered as an additional reform, not to have an imbalance in the possibility of baby leave between male and female MPs, because that sends the wrong kind of signal. It sends a gender unequal signal to society about how the House thinks of women and men's role vis-à-vis caring for young children.⁷⁰

40. *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*

63 House of Commons, [Proxy Voting Scheme](#), updated 23 July 2021

64 See, for example, Centenary Action Group ([GSP0018](#))

65 Q3

66 Q49

67 Ellie Reeves MP ([GSP0016](#))

68 Ellie Reeves MP ([GSP0016](#)); Equality and Human Rights Commission ([GSP0026](#))

69 See, for example, Q12 [Professor Childs]; Northern Ireland Women's European Platform ([GSP0011](#)); Labour Women's Network ([GSP0015](#)); Ellie Reeves MP ([GSP0016](#))

70 Q12

*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.*⁷¹

Parental leave: MPs' business costs and expenses

41. The Maternity Allowances Act 2021 creates a power for the Prime Minister to grant government ministers six months of maternity leave on full ministerial pay. It also enables some senior members of the Official Opposition to take six months of paid maternity leave. The posts of paid ministers and senior members of the Opposition on maternity leave can be filled by replacements, without counting towards statutory limits on the number of paid posts.⁷²

42. The Fawcett Society, while welcoming the provision for frontbenchers, argued that it has "left a chasm between frontbench and backbench MPs with regards to maternity, paternity and adoption leave rights."⁷³ As noted above, backbench MPs are not entitled to parental leave in the conventional way because they are not employees. MPs continue to receive their full salaries when absent after the birth or adoption of a child and are entitled to vote by proxy, as set out above.

43. While taking time away from Westminster and their constituents to care for their children, MPs may incur additional costs, in particular additional staffing to cover some of their Westminster office and constituency-based duties. IPSA recently established a "MP parental leave cover fund" specifically for this purpose, as part of its broader Scheme of MPs' Staffing and Business Costs.⁷⁴

44. Researchers and witnesses to our inquiry have emphasised the lack of formal maternity leave arrangements for MPs as an historic driver of the "motherhood gap" in the House of Commons.⁷⁵ There is evidence that recent reforms to gender sensitise the House, particularly since *The Good Parliament* report and the *UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018*, have begun to close the motherhood gap between new male and female MPs, and an increasing number of younger women have entered the House. In her submission to IPSA's consultation on the establishment of the MP parental leave cover fund, Professor Childs wrote that:

We have only had data on parents in parliament since 2013, when myself and Prof. Rosie Campbell undertook the first survey. This found a significant

71 [Letter dated 30 November 2021 from the Chair of the Committee to The Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP, Chair of the House of Commons Procedure Committee](#)

72 *Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Bill 2019–2021*, Briefing Paper [CBP9133](#), House of Commons Library, March 2021. Constraints on the number of paid posts are legislated for in the Ministerial and Other Salaries Act 1975.

73 The Fawcett Society ([GSP0020](#)), para 3.10

74 IPSA, [The Scheme of MPs' Staffing and Business Costs 2021–22](#), March 2021, paras 10.12–10.15

75 See, for example, Centenary Action Group ([GSP0018](#)); Sarah Childs and Dr Jessica C. Smith ([GSP0012](#)), appendix 1

gap between women and men MPs' parental status. Making Parliament more gender sensitive was one means to reduce this gap. Between 2016–2020 a number of reforms benefiting the parent MPs have been introduced. We updated the parent survey in 2017, finding that new cohorts (2010 and after) had similar rates of parenthood. The presence of younger cohorts of women in today's House of Commons means that the institution has undeniably witnessed a step-change in its composition: there are now not only more elected women who are mothers than previously, there are also more women having babies whilst sitting as MPs. Seventeen have been born to women MPs since 2010.⁷⁶

45. IPSA's support for parent MPs is therefore key to sustaining gender sensitivity. The MP parental leave cover fund allows for up to seven months of additional office cover for biological mothers and primary adopters, and two weeks for biological fathers, partners or second adopters. Cover must be arranged within the normal rules on staffing costs set out in the broader scheme. Longer periods of leave cover or other alternative arrangements "may be agreed on a case-by-case basis".⁷⁷

46. Witnesses noted that gender equality is not embedded in the MP parental leave cover fund, mirroring the House's proxy voting for parental absence scheme with the same large differential in entitlements for mothers and fathers unless an *ad hoc* alternative arrangement can be agreed. Professor Childs called for explicit parity of leave for mother and father MPs where the father assumes the primary care role, both in the interests of fairness and to show the House of Commons as a role model of gender equality.⁷⁸ Similarly, Centenary Action Group told IPSA's consultation that:

Fathers and secondary carers should be given more than 2 weeks leave. This is not enough time to spend with a new baby, and also prevents their partner from going back to work if they wish to do so. We know that a case-by-case basis does not work and would therefore argue that the policy for fathers and secondary carers should be longer and uniform.⁷⁹

47. IPSA recently extended the leave cover fund to other absences. While not yet published in the full Scheme document, recently updated guidance makes clear that the fund can be used to cover absences such as "hospitalisation, physical or mental health, or other caring responsibilities." IPSA has committed to establishing a working group, which will "consider how we can further embed and improve this support as part of our commitment to an inclusive and family-friendly parliamentary environment." We understand that this will include consideration of making cover available for a wider range of potential longer-term absences from Parliament.⁸⁰

76 Sarah Childs and Dr Jessica C. Smith (GSP0012), appendix 1

77 IPSA, *The Scheme of MPs' Staffing and Business Costs 2021–22*, March 2021, paras 10.12–10.15

78 Sarah Childs and Dr Jessica C. Smith (GSP0012), appendix 1

79 Centenary Action Group submission to IPSA consultation on the MP parental leave cover fund, February 2021; see also, The Fawcett Society (GSP0020), para 3.10

80 IPSA, '[Leave & holidays](#)' (see 'What funding is available for cover?'), accessed 10 December 2021

48. IPSA’s publication of MPs staff and business costs means that parents’ and carers’ costs can look high compared with others. Witnesses believed this could be interpreted negatively by the public and could discourage claims.⁸¹ Sir Charles Walker, Chair of the House of Commons Administration Committee felt strongly that IPSA:

should stop publishing the support available to parents via IPSA. You have parents who are afraid to take on larger accommodation to stay with their children because it makes them look bad and then they are subject to abuse. For crying out loud, everybody needs some space, and we do not give Members of Parliament any space at the moment. We are constantly thrusting them towards conflict.⁸²

49. Dr Smith and Professor Childs made the case for additional childcare and family-related costs to be published by IPSA only at the aggregate level, rather than the individual MP level, as is the case with costs incurred in relation to disability and security needs.⁸³

50. Ian Todd, IPSA’s Chief Executive Officer, told us that IPSA’s “default position” was always full transparency of costs down to individual MP level, but he acknowledged that a precedent of exceptions in some cases, such as disability and security, had been set. While he envisaged some difficulties in drawing a sufficiently clear distinction between MPs’ childcare and parental costs and some more generic costs, he told us that publication of aggregate data only was “certainly something that we would consider”.⁸⁴

51. The last Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) of the IPSA’s Scheme of MPs’ Staffing and Business Costs was published in 2017, after the last comprehensive review of the scheme. Its Corporate Plan includes the intention to complete the next comprehensive review and EIA no later than 2024.⁸⁵

Parental leave: “locum” cover

52. The campaign group 50:50 Parliament called for further support for parent MPs in the form of proxy cover or an appointed “locum” to temporarily undertake the full range of MPs’ duties in Westminster while they take parental leave.⁸⁶ This is procedurally and constitutionally difficult and potentially legally problematic; only MPs, as elected public officeholders, are permitted to take part in House of Commons proceedings on behalf of their constituents. In June 2021, IPSA issued a statement on provision for MPs’ parental leave, emphasising that it had increased the maximum funding available for additional parental leave staffing costs from £50,000 to £60,000 to cover a wider range of duties, and introduced “a new job description for MPs to employ an additional senior member of staff.” However, the duties additional staff could undertake were limited because:

Constitutionally no one can take on the full roles and responsibilities of a Member of Parliament, who is an officeholder elected by the general public. Elected MPs are able to attend the Chamber, engage in debates, ask

81 See, for example, Sarah Childs and Dr Jessica C. Smith ([GSP0012](#)), appendix 1

82 Q57 [Sir Charles Walker]

83 Sarah Childs and Dr Jessica C. Smith ([GSP0012](#)), appendix 1

84 Q128 [Ian Todd]

85 IPSA, [Corporate Plan 2021–24](#)

86 Centenary Action Group ([GSP0018](#))

oral questions of Ministers and vote in Parliament. It is up to Parliament to decide if the law should be changed so that an unelected person can undertake these duties when an MP can't be there.⁸⁷

53. Ian Todd further elucidated the position in oral evidence. His view was that the current situation for MPs, of being paid in full throughout any period of parental leave, was a “very positive position to be in” compared to statutory maternity leave entitlements “or indeed to some of the best occupational schemes that are out there.” The new maximum additional parental leave cover of £60,000, just short of three-quarters of an MP’s salary, had been calculated using an “international benchmarking process”, which looked at the value of those elements of an MP’s role that an unelected senior staff member could fulfil. It considered the skills required, the level of autonomy, and the number of staff and size of budgets they would manage.⁸⁸

54. The Leader of the House’s view was that all parent MPs now had access to “considerable support”, including an on-site nursery (see chapter 4) and IPSA’s improved parental leave cover offer. That said, he told us that, “Everyone is very open to proposals that would make Parliament a more friendly environment to parents.”⁸⁹

55. **Like the House of Commons’ proxy voting for parental absence scheme, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority’s (IPSA) new MP parental leave cover fund is a major step forward. It is an important part of a raft of measures in recent years that make the House of Commons a more welcoming and accommodating place for MPs who are, or want to be, parents. However, in mirroring the entitlements of the proxy voting scheme, granting only two weeks leave cover for biological fathers, it entrenches damaging gender assumptions about primary responsibility for childcare. Like the proxy voting scheme, it makes no explicit reference to arrangements for parents of children born through surrogacy. We agree with Professor Childs that IPSA’s scheme should set a better example. *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.***

56. **We welcome the recent extension of the extended leave fund to cover a greater range of MPs’ absences from Westminster, including for ill health and wider caring responsibilities. We also welcome the establishment of a new working group in IPSA to consider how to further embed and improve extended leave support, in the interests of a more inclusive and family-friendly working environment. *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, which we recommend in chapter 5 of this Report.***

57. **We note that the last Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) of IPSA’s Scheme of MPs’ Staffing and Business Costs was published in 2017 and its intention to conduct an EIA alongside the next comprehensive review of the scheme, no later than 2024. *We recommend that IPSA ensures the EIA is comprehensive and fully in line with the***

87 [“IPSA provisions for parental leave”](#), IPSA press release, 29 June 2021

88 Q131

89 Q87

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.

58. Publication of MPs’ staffing and business costs incurred in relation to parental leave and other costs associated with having dependent children make parent MPs look “more expensive” than those without children. This could be perceived negatively by the public and may therefore be acting as a disincentive to claims. 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.

4 A gender-sensitive working environment

59. In this chapter, we consider the gender-sensitivity of the House of Commons as a working environment. We look at the House of Commons as a physical workplace, efforts to make it more family-friendly and inclusive and how opportunities for greater gender sensitivity and wider inclusion afforded by the Restoration and Renewal Programme can be realised. We also set out some of the benefits for gender-sensitivity and inclusion of the flexible working arrangements adopted out of necessity during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Buildings and facilities

60. The design and facilities of a building have an important role in making it an inclusive environment, for women, disabled people and ethnic minority and religious groups, for example. There is strong evidence that the design and facilities, or sometimes lack thereof, of the Palace of Westminster and parts of the broader parliamentary estate can make it feel exclusionary to some members of the public, members of staff and MPs.⁹⁰

61. There have been several positive developments in recent years. An onsite nursery opened in 2010, replacing one of the House of Commons' bars.⁹¹ The Clerk of the House of Commons also noted the longstanding provision of an MPs' family room and baby-changing facilities.⁹² Chris Clarkson MP told us that, "For a Victorian building I believe we have managed to adapt the palace well to serve members of both sexes."⁹³ Ellie Reeves MP described the family room as "incredibly useful", particularly in the evenings after the nursery had closed and she was waiting to vote in divisions. She told us:

In my case, if it were not for these reforms, I would never have felt able to stand for Parliament in the first place. When my local MP retired at the 2017 General Election, I agonised over whether to put myself forward, particularly as my son was only two at the time. It was the existence of the House of Commons nursery that made the decision to stand for Parliament possible.⁹⁴

62. But we also heard that the House of Commons has more to do to understand the diverse needs of its MPs and create a more inclusive work environment. For example, witnesses called for more dedicated spaces for breastfeeding and expressing milk.⁹⁵ Ellie Reeves MP told us she had used the family room for breastfeeding but had often found it being used by other MPs for meetings.⁹⁶ There were calls for fully inclusive and accessible toilet and washing facilities, better meeting the needs of women, Transgender and disabled people.⁹⁷

90 For a brief summary of the academic literature, see Dr Alexandra Meakin ([GSP0022](#)) and Q22 [Dr Meakin]

91 "[Mother of all Parliaments to open first nursery](#)", *The Independent*, 16 December 2009

92 Dr John Benger, Clerk of the House of Commons ([GSP0030](#)); a family room and adjoining baby-changing facilities have been available for many years, see Administration Committee, Third Report of Session 2005–06, [House of Commons Accommodation](#), HC 1279, para 81

93 Chris Clarkson MP ([GSP0027](#))

94 Ellie Reeves MP ([GSP0016](#))

95 See, for example, Northern Ireland Women's European Platform ([GSP0011](#)); Labour Women's Network ([GSP0015](#))

96 Ellie Reeves MP ([GSP0016](#))

97 Northern Ireland Women's European Platform ([GSP0011](#))

63. Safety was highlighted as a key issue. For example, witnesses called for better lighting in external areas and internal hallways on the parliamentary estate.⁹⁸ Dr Alexandra Meakin emphasised issues with the internal layout of the building, noting that Naomi Ellenbogen QC’s 2019 report on bullying and harassment in the House of Lords had explicitly linked the design of the Palace of Westminster to harmful behaviours within the building:

The Palace of Westminster is not designed to accommodate, or inculcate, modern ways of working. Staff work in small rooms (often housing only two individuals) on long corridors and can be physically distant from their managers and other colleagues. Contributors told me that, in particular when doors are closed, the environment can feel threatening and inappropriate behaviour can go unobserved by colleagues.⁹⁹

We look at the steps taken to address the culture of bullying and harassment in the House of Commons in chapter 5.

Car parking for parents with young children

64. Almost all car parking spaces in Parliament are in an underground car park. A lift down to most of the car parking floors can only be accessed via a steep flight of about 30 steps. Doors to the underground car park are not automatic, and therefore not fully accessible. The car parking spaces are narrow. Ellie Reeves MP called for dedicated parent and child parking bays on ground level, close to the House of Commons chamber. She told us:

One of the difficulties of being a parent of a young child and an MP is carrying your tired child and their belongings as well as yours to the underground car park after a late session. A simple practical thing like [ground level dedicated parent and child parking bays] would have gone a long way in making it easier and less tiring for me to do my job and be a primary caregiver.¹⁰⁰

65. When we asked the Leader of the House of Commons about this, he told us that all MPs should assert a right to “park wherever they like” on the parliamentary estate. Mr Rees-Mogg said that when he had brought his children into the House of Commons, he had parked his car wherever was “most convenient” and that he “would not have dreamt of taking them down to the car park.”¹⁰¹

66. However, a member of our Committee had a very different experience of trying to park her car, with her baby and a pram, in a bay close to the House of Commons chamber in October 2021. Even after she told security officers and a Doorkeeper that she had been advised of her right as an MP to park wherever was most convenient, she was told the bays in the area were reserved for contractors and she could not park there. We wrote to the Leader of the House for clarification of his evidence. While reiterating his view that all MPs should “feel empowered to avail themselves” of a right to unimpeded access to

98 Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform ([GSP0011](#))

99 Dr Alexandra Meakin ([GSP0022](#)); Naomi Ellenbogen QC, *An independent inquiry bullying and harassment in the House of Lords*, July 2019, para 149

100 Ellie Reeves MP ([GSP0016](#))

101 Qq 92–4

Parliament, he acknowledged, after consulting the House of Commons' Head of Access and Services, that there were in fact restrictions in place. MPs could request permission in advance to park in areas close to the Chamber, but the number of spaces was limited.¹⁰²

67. Provision of dedicated car parking bays for MPs with young children would be a simple way of making the House of Commons more family-friendly and a small step towards reducing the burden on MPs who are also the primary carers of their children. It is a straightforward measure that you would expect to see at any car park for a large public building. 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.

Babies in the House of Commons' chambers

68. Another issue that arose recently was access to debates in the House of Commons for MPs with children, particularly young babies who need to be with their mothers because they are breast-feeding.¹⁰³ The rules of "behaviour and courtesies" of the House, last updated in November 2018, state:

You may take babies or toddlers with you into the division lobby, and—if necessary, to get to the division lobby—take them through the Chamber. For safety reasons, you are asked to carry your child and not to bring pushchairs through the lobby. You should not take your seat in the Chamber when accompanied by your child, nor stand at either end of the Chamber, between divisions.¹⁰⁴

Mr Speaker has emphasised that, "It is extremely important that parents of babies and young children are able to participate fully in the work of this House." He asked the Procedure Committee to consider the matter and bring forward recommendations.¹⁰⁵ The Committee's inquiry was launched on 17 January.¹⁰⁶

The Restoration and Renewal programme

69. The Palace of Westminster is a highly protected building. It has Grade I listed status and is part of the Westminster UNESCO World Heritage Site.¹⁰⁷ Balancing its protection as an historic building, including ancient monuments, with its function as a modern workplace is challenging. Much of its design and internal layout remains faithful to the

102 [Letter dated 19 November 2021 from the Leader of the House of Commons, The Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, to the Chair of the Committee](#)

103 See, for example, "[No babies allowed in Commons, MP Stella Creasy told](#)", *BBC News*, 24 November 2021

104 House of Commons, [Rules of behaviour and courtesies](#), November 2018, para 42

105 HC Deb, 24 November 2021, [col 331](#)

106 House of Commons Procedure Committee, '[Call for evidence: Presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall](#)', accessed 20 January 2022

107 [Government response to the Report of the Joint Committee on the Draft Parliamentary Buildings \(Restoration and Renewal\) Bill](#), CP 90, May 2019, p 1

19th century visions of its architect, Sir Charles Barry, and gothic revivalist designer, A.W.N. Pugin. Its historic nature means that is a building originally designed by men, exclusively for men, more than 80 years before the first women could stand for election.¹⁰⁸

70. Many of the Palace of Westminster’s architectural features have never undergone major renovation since its design and construction in the mid-Victorian era. The long-standing approach of “patch and mend” is no longer sustainable, and the Palace is in desperate need of very wide-ranging restoration to prevent a “catastrophic failure” and ensure it can continue to safely serve as the home of the UK Parliament.¹⁰⁹

71. Plans to achieve this have been in development since 2013, which saw the establishment of the Restoration and Renewal Programme.¹¹⁰ The Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019 legislated for a Parliamentary building works Sponsor Body, which was established substantively in April 2020.¹¹¹ The Sponsor Body is required to propose a fully detailed and costed plan, known as an Outline Business Case, for the works and any decant and temporary accommodation of MPs, Peers and staff while the works take place. This will require the consent of both Houses of Parliament before work can start.¹¹²

Gender sensitivity and broader equality considerations

72. *The Good Parliament* report emphasised that Restoration and Renewal:

constitutes an unprecedented opportunity to imagine how Westminster might be. [...] Yet there is a risk of being so shaped by Barry and Pugin that any vision of a renewed parliament becomes blinkered by their Gothic grandeur.¹¹³

It made several specific recommendations to the Sponsor Body, which at that point in 2016 had not yet been established. These included trialling new layouts of the House of Commons chamber; provision of sufficient toilet capacity across the parliamentary estate; and separate baby-changing facilities accessible to all parents and carers.¹¹⁴

73. Some witnesses were in favour of quite radical redesigns to achieve a less adversarial and more practical, inclusive and accessible working environment, with benefits for gender-sensitivity and wider inclusion. Compassion in Politics argued for a larger chamber, which could comfortably accommodate all 650 MPs (the current chamber can seat only 427). It also recommended a circular or “horse-shoe” chamber with designated seats and desks for MPs, and replacement of division lobbies with electronic voting.¹¹⁵ The Institute for Government urged that:

When planning for the future Commons chamber—and any temporary chamber—consideration should be given to permanently incorporating

108 UK Parliament, ‘[The architects: Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin](#)’, accessed 30 November 2021

109 See, for example, [Government response to the Report of the Joint Committee on the Draft Parliamentary Buildings \(Restoration and Renewal\) Bill](#), CP 90, May 2019, para 1.4

110 House of Parliament Restoration and Renewal Programme, ‘[A structure for success](#)’, accessed 30 November 2021

111 [Parliamentary Buildings \(Restoration and Renewal\) Act 2019](#)

112 Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body (GSP0028); see also, [Restoration and Renewal - developments since October 2019](#), House of Commons Library Briefing Paper [08968](#), September 2021

113 Professor Sarah Childs, [The Good Parliament](#), July 2016, p 33

114 Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body ([GSP0028](#))

115 Compassion in Politics ([GSP0019](#)), paras 12–17

facilities that enable remote participation in Commons business, such as the screens that have been installed in the chamber during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹¹⁶

74. However, Dr Alexandra Meakin, a lecturer in politics and expert in the gender sensitivity of parliaments and buildings, told us that to date there was “little evidence” that the Restoration and Renewal Programme had given any proper consideration to gender sensitivity or broader equality issues since it was first established in 2013. Now that the Sponsor Body had been established in law and was working up the detailed business case, she believed that:

The Restoration and Renewal Programme is at a critical point. Without explicit political support for exploring the potential effects of R&R (and decant) on the gender and diversity sensitivity of Parliament, this analysis is unlikely to happen, and the opportunity to create a gender sensitive Parliament will be lost.¹¹⁷

75. The programme’s six strategic themes include “accessibility and inclusion”.¹¹⁸ Additionally, ahead of formal approval of the Outline Business Case, both Houses of Parliament “have provided direction that the Programme should aim to realise ‘exemplary levels of inclusion across the Palace’”.¹¹⁹ The programme’s March 2021 strategic review proposed an essential objective relating to this theme of providing “non-discriminatory and inclusive access to a substantial area of the building for the public, members and staff.” There is also a proposed “stretch objective” to, “Provide non-discriminatory and inclusive access for all users to all areas of the building within heritage and planning constraints.”¹²⁰ The Sponsor Body confirmed that it employed a small Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team and that a “process to conduct, review and feedback on Equality Analyses is well established and practiced within the Programme.”¹²¹

76. However, giving oral evidence in June 2021, Dr Meakin and Professor Childs were concerned about a lack of a “mechanism to ensure that [MPs’] gender and diversity sensitive issues are being raised through to the Sponsor Body or internally in the Commons.”¹²² Dr Meakin raised a concern about the diversity of the Sponsor Body itself, noting that:

Since the formation of the Sponsor Body in shadow form in July 2018, not a single female MP has served as a member. Indeed, out of the twelve current or former parliamentarians who have served on the Sponsor Body, eleven are men. The Sponsor Body has thus not had any direct input from any woman elected to Parliament. In addition, no person of colour has served as a parliamentary member of the Sponsor Body.¹²³

116 Institute for Government ([GSP0029](#)), para 14

117 Dr Alexandra Meakin ([GSP0022](#))

118 Restoration and Renewal Programme, *Strategic Review*, March 2021, para 54

119 Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body ([GSP0028](#)), para 27

120 Restoration and Renewal Programme, *Strategic Review*, March 2021, table 1, 5 - accessibility and inclusion

121 Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body ([GSP0028](#)), para 38

122 See, for example, Q4

123 Dr Alexandra Meakin ([GSP0022](#)), paras 19–20

She acknowledged that the Sponsor Body had a “very difficult job” in embedding gender and diversity sensitivity into the programme and believed that “it will need as much input as possible to make an informed decision.”¹²⁴

77. The Sponsor Body’s written submission in April 2021 emphasised that the programme was still at a “relatively early stage”. It said that:

A large amount of consultation is still to be undertaken with Members, Peers, parliamentary staff, and externally regarding the design of the renovated Palace and any temporary accommodation. As a result, we are unable to say with any certainty at this stage about how the Palace of Westminster might be changed to support a gender sensitive House of Commons.¹²⁵

78. In oral evidence in September 2021, Amanda Colledge, Business Case Director at the Sponsor Body, told us that it had recently consulted 370 people across the parliamentary community, including 120 MPs and Peers about “their experiences of inclusion on the parliamentary estate and what could be improved”. She said that several of the issues covered in our inquiry, including safety and family-friendly facilities, had been raised. There was “clear evidence that improvements are needed”. Ms Colledge confirmed that the Sponsor Body’s design team was working to implement improvements, but emphasised that, “Designing inclusivity and accessibility into a historic environment brings some unique challenges”.

79. We asked her whether there was a case for appointing an expert panel to advise the Sponsor Body on implementation of gender and diversity sensitive design in a highly protected historic building. She confirmed that it was “absolutely looking to get expert advice to make sure we overcome some of those challenges”.¹²⁶

80. **It is clear that gender sensitivity was not embedded in the Restoration and Renewal programme from the outset in 2013. We note that the programme now has accessibility and inclusion as one of its strategic aims and that the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body (Sponsor Body) has a small Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team. We welcome recent steps taken by the Sponsor Body to survey the experiences and needs of the parliamentary community, including MPs. However, we are concerned that there continues to be insufficient institutionalised focus on, and expertise in, gender sensitivity to support the programme. 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.**

124 Q40

125 Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body ([GSP0028](#)), para 13

126 Q147

Lessons from Covid-19 hybrid proceedings

81. The Covid-19 pandemic necessitated unprecedented changes to the way the House of Commons conducted its business. Hybrid proceedings, in which MPs could participate remotely via video call, were introduced for Select Committees from 24 March 2020, and in the Commons chamber from April 2020.¹²⁷ MPs were able to vote remotely, in an online ballot for two Select Committee Chair posts, for the first time on 6 May 2020.¹²⁸ On 12 May 2020, remote online voting was introduced across chamber proceedings.¹²⁹ In June 2020, the scope of proxy voting was extended to cover MPs' absences due to "medical or public health reasons related to the [Covid-19] pandemic", and these temporary arrangements were later extended until March 2021.¹³⁰ Hybrid proceedings remained in place until 22 July 2021.¹³¹

82. Witnesses were generally positive about the benefits of Covid-19-related hybrid proceedings, proxy voting, and remote online voting for gender sensitivity and wider inclusion. The Centenary Action Group pointed to evidence that in the first month of hybrid proceedings, female MPs were significantly more likely to participate virtually than their male counterparts.¹³² Labour Women's Network wrote:

Virtual access has dramatically reduced difficulties presented by parliamentary hours and childcare responsibilities, a disproportionate challenge for women. One MP told us, "The ability to have tea with my kids most nights, whilst still having my vote counted in Parliament, has markedly enhanced their wellbeing. They are handed from pillar to post much less, and I finally feel like I have found equilibrium between my responsibilities as a productive MP and as a parent."¹³³

The Centenary Action Group emphasised that hybrid arrangements had benefited disabled people as well as those with caring responsibilities.¹³⁴

83. In their February 2021 *Remotely Representative House* report for Centenary Action Group, Dr Jessica C. Smith and Professor Childs described the actions taken by the House during the pandemic as a "giant leap forward" for family-friendly inclusion. More than half of female MPs had used proxy voting for Covid-19 health-related reasons and for caring responsibilities, "which we know are overwhelmingly shouldered by women." Summarising the effects, the report noted that, "When given the option of some flexibility we have seen how much it is appreciated, particularly by women."¹³⁵

127 HC Deb, 24 March 2020, cols 319–20; HC Deb, 21 April 2020, cols 2–24

128 UK Parliament, '[Online ballot for Select Committee Chair posts](#)', accessed 24 November 2021

129 HC Deb, 12 May 2020, col 148

130 HC Deb, 22 October 2020, col 1338

131 HC Deb, 22 July 2021, col 1150. For a full timeline of Covid-19 measures taken by the House of Commons, see House of Commons Library, '[The coronavirus timeline: Measures taken by the House of Commons](#)', accessed 24 November 2021

132 See, House of Commons Library, '[Coronavirus: What does data show about men and women MPs in the hybrid Commons?](#)', accessed 24 November 2021

133 Labour Women's Network (GSP0015)

134 Centenary Action Group (GSP0018)

135 Dr Jessica C. Smith with Professor Sarah Childs, [The Remotely Representative House?: Lesson learning from the hybrid Commons](#), February 2021, p 4

84. In the context of Covid-19 vaccines and the prospect of a return to more normal parliamentary procedures, the report posed a question:

It is a critical moment to ask whether the UK Parliament *should* return to its previous operating mode. The *Remotely Representative House* suggests otherwise, seeing 2021 as an opportunity to further the Commons' progress.¹³⁶

Witnesses called for the long-term or permanent retention of elements of Covid-19 working practices. The Fawcett Society, for example, argued for the extension of permanent proxy voting arrangements to a greater range of MPs unable to attend Westminster, including for health and caring reasons.¹³⁷

85. UN Women's Primer for Parliamentary Action on Gender Sensitive Responses to Covid-19 calls on parliaments to "establish mechanisms to monitor and review digital participation and its effects on work/life balance for MPs and staff."¹³⁸ The Shadow Leader of the House, Thangam Debbonaire MP, told us she would write to fellow members of the House of Commons Commission urging a gender impact assessment of ending hybrid arrangements.¹³⁹

86. The Government favoured returning to pre-Covid-19 arrangements whenever possible, for example telling the Procedure Committee in March 2021 that, "Parliament best serves the public when MPs are present in Westminster to the fullest extent possible."¹⁴⁰ In oral evidence before us the Leader of the House elucidated that:

This becomes a matter of balance about how you best run a democracy and how constituents are best represented. I think that constituents are best represented face to face. There is an important part of the role that requires meeting people, talking to people, seeing people and having genuine debates rather than speeches read into the record. The Government have not been effectively scrutinised during the hybrid proceedings. It has been better than nothing, but it has made the role of government ministers much easier because the level of scrutiny has been less. It is really important that we remember why we are fundamentally here. We are fundamentally here to represent our constituents, to seek redress of grievances, to hold the Government to account and to legislate. We must never lose sight of that.¹⁴¹

87. Ken Gall, representing the trade unions in the House of Commons set out a counter argument, warning that:

The danger there is we end up, not intentionally, more in a culture in which certain groups of people, including the disabled, who are scandalously underrepresented across Parliament, are simply given a message that it is not really for them because they have to travel to Westminster, have to

136 Dr Jessica C. Smith with Professor Sarah Childs, *The Remotely Representative House?: Lesson learning from the hybrid Commons*, February 2021, p 11

137 The Fawcett Society (GSP0020), para 3.7

138 UN Women, *A primer for Parliamentary Action: Gender Sensitive Responses to Covid-19*, June 2020, p 6

139 Q114

140 Procedure Committee, Fifth Special Report of Session 2019–21, *Back to the future? Procedure after coronavirus restrictions: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report*, HC 1389, p 2

141 Q88

be onsite to vote or they cannot participate from their own constituency offices. It would be extremely regrettable if we simply turned off a lot of these opportunities that Covid-19 provided to us.¹⁴²

88. The Government has acted to return to pre-Covid 19 procedures in the House of Commons wherever possible, in the interests of effective representation of MPs' constituents and parliamentary scrutiny. However, elements of the hybrid proceedings approach adopted at the height of the pandemic had important benefits for inclusion, which should not be discounted. Measures adopted through necessity have demonstrated what is possible. The flexibility afforded by the approach was particularly welcomed by female MPs. In the interest of gender sensitivity, proper consideration should be given to the benefits of retaining aspects of the approach. As the Leader of the House of Commons said, it is a matter of balance. There is a balance to be struck between the effective conduct of the House's business, effective representation and the needs and interests of its diverse membership. Ultimately, procedure is a matter for the House as a whole and MPs should be given the opportunity to make their personal experiences and views known, free from party-political considerations.

89. There has been significant progress towards making the House of Commons a more welcoming and accommodating place for female MPs and those who are or want to be parents. But the House has work to do to fully understand and meet the needs and interests of women, parents and other groups, such as disabled people and those with long-term health conditions. *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, breast-feeding 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.

5 Transforming culture and behaviour in the House of Commons

90. As discussed above, the Palace of Westminster was designed by men for men and, despite significant progress towards equal representation and gender-sensitivity, the membership of the House of Commons remains male-dominated. Unsurprisingly, MPs often perceive a pervading male culture that can be damaging to both women and men. Several female MPs have described the House of Commons as a “boys club”.¹⁴³

A culture of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct

91. Deeply concerning evidence of a culture of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct in the House of Commons came to light in late 2017, when several female former members of House staff spoke out about their treatment at the hands of (mostly male) MPs and staff colleagues.¹⁴⁴ The issue, including its gendered dimension, was laid bare in Dame Laura Cox DBE QC’s independent report in October 2018:

The general description is [...] of a corrosive culture, in which bullying and harassment, in particular of women, have become normalised and which cascades down through the structures.¹⁴⁵

This harmful culture, including a “widespread problem” of unwanted sexual behaviour by men towards women, had been “known about and tolerated for far too long.”¹⁴⁶ There was no effective system by which those affected by harmful behaviour could raise concerns and seek redress. Dame Laura Cox found that:

The acquiescence of senior management, the institutional minimising of complaints, the lack of effective procedures to address them, and the lack of support for those targeted for such treatment has resulted in the stifling of potential, the blighting of careers and the loss of talented and dedicated employees, many of them women.¹⁴⁷

In July 2019, Gemma White QC set out her findings about equally unacceptable behaviour by MPs towards their own office staff, very often young women.¹⁴⁸

92. There has been a concerted effort since 2018 to transform the culture of the House of Commons by embedding inclusivity and respect for all, and instituting a clear, fair, and

143 See, for example, “[Mhairi Black brands Westminster an ‘old boys club’: ‘I am taken aback by how patronising and sexist people were’](#)”, *The Independent*, 17 March 2016; “[Johnson represents ‘boys’ club’ approach to Commons, says Rudd](#)”, *The Guardian*, 15 January 2021

144 See, for example, “[Bullying and harassment at the House of Commons](#)”, BBC News, 8 March 2018

145 Dame Laura Cox DBE QC, [The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff: independent inquiry report](#), October 2018, para 84

146 Dame Laura Cox DBE QC, [The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff: independent inquiry report](#), October 2018, para 30

147 Dame Laura Cox DBE QC, [The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff: independent inquiry report](#), October 2018, para 31

148 Gemma White QC, [Bullying and Harassment of MPs’ Parliamentary Staff Independent Inquiry Report](#), July 2019

effective system by which complaints about inappropriate and harmful behaviour can be much more effectively dealt with.¹⁴⁹ Below we consider the steps taken since 2018, and discuss three key areas of concern expressed in our inquiry.

Behaviour Code, Valuing Everyone and the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS)

93. In July 2018, the House of Commons endorsed a new Parliament-wide Behaviour Code, which applies to everyone working in and visiting Parliament and is now prominently displayed throughout the parliamentary estate. The Behaviour Code is clear that bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct will not be tolerated; they will be “dealt with seriously, independently and with effective sanctions”. The Behaviour Code requires everyone to:

- Recognise your power, influence or authority and don’t abuse them;
- Think about how your behaviour affects others and strive to understand their perspective;
- Act professionally towards others;
- Ensure Parliament meets the highest ethical standards of integrity, courtesy and mutual respect; and
- Speak up about any unacceptable behaviour you see.

There is a free helpline to report any concerns.¹⁵⁰ Adherence to the Behaviour Code is incorporated into *The Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament*.¹⁵¹ The Rules of Conduct within the MPs’ Code also includes treating “staff and all those visiting or working for or with Parliament with dignity, courtesy and respect.”¹⁵² Additionally, all parliamentarians and House of Commons, House of Lords and MPs’ and Peers’ staff have been invited to undergo inclusion training, called Valuing Everyone. As of June 2021, 92% of MPs, and 97% of House of Commons staff, had done so.¹⁵³

94. The House of Commons also endorsed policies and procedures set out in a new Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS), intended to codify a much more effective complaints procedure with a range of sanctions for those found to have behaved inappropriately. The scheme provides independent, externally contracted support and advice to complainants and respondents. There is an Independent Bullying and Harassment Helpline and a separate Independent Sexual Misconduct Advisory Service. Both complainants and respondents can access advice confidentiality. If taken forward, complaints are investigated by independent, externally contracted investigators.¹⁵⁴

149 See, for example, “[The new Clerk of the Commons on transforming Parliament’s culture](#)”, *The House*, 4 March 2019

150 UK Parliament, [Behaviour Code](#); Freephone helpline 0808 168 9281, Support@ICGShelpline.org.uk

151 House of Commons, [Code of Conduct](#), HC 1474, para 9

152 House of Commons, [Code of Conduct](#), HC 1474, para 18

153 Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, [Annual Report July 2020 - June 2021](#), October 2021

154 For a comprehensive summary of the development of the ICGS, see *Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme*, Briefing Paper [08369](#), House of Commons Library, April 2021.

Complaints can be made by and against MPs and Peers and their staff, and staff of both Houses of Parliament, the Parliament-wide Parliamentary Digital Service, or any other category of employee or contractor who holds a parliamentary pass.¹⁵⁵

95. Processes differ for different categories of respondent. For example, if a complaint is upheld against a member of staff of either House, the course of action is decided within the respective line management structures and Human Resources processes, up to and including dismissal for serious cases. In the case of a complaint upheld against an MP's member of staff, the MP is responsible for taking appropriate action as the employer. The processes for complaints upheld against MPs and Peers are more complex. For example, complaints upheld against MPs are initially considered by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, who can require the MP to issue an apology to the complainant, attend training or other remedial action. Before 2021, if the Commissioner considered none of these actions sufficient, the MP was referred to the House of Commons' Committee on Standards, which could require the MP to make a formal apology in writing or in the House of Commons chamber, or recommend more serious sanctions, including suspension or expulsion, for the House as a whole to approve.¹⁵⁶

96. In June 2020, the House agreed to establish an Independent Expert Panel (IEP) to determine sanctions against MPs in upheld complaints raised through the ICGS, replacing the Committee on Standards in the ICGS process. The first IEP was appointed in November 2020 and started hearing cases in early 2021. Sanctions recommended by the IEP require the approval of the House, but cannot be amended and are decided without debate. The IEP also rules on appeals, against the ICGS-related decisions of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and ICGS-related sanctions.¹⁵⁷ The establishment of the IEP implements a key recommendation of Dame Laura's Cox's independent inquiry, that the new approach should be "an entirely independent process, in which Members of Parliament will play no part".¹⁵⁸

97. Witnesses were broadly positive about the effects of the ICGS. While there was a sense that the scheme was "still bedding in", the system for dealing with inappropriate and harmful behaviour, including of MPs, was clearly now "better than it was".¹⁵⁹ Witnesses welcomed recent changes to the scheme, in particular the establishment and key role of the IEP.¹⁶⁰

98. There were some concerns about the complexity of the ICGS. The Shadow Leader of the House, Thangam Debbonaire MP, was concerned that there was not yet "enough understanding of how to use" the scheme, which "obviously needs some work".¹⁶¹ Centenary Action Group noted the finding of the 18-month review of the ICGS, that

155 House of Lords staff were included in the ICGS from November 2018. Peers and their staff were included from May 2019. Originally restricted to complaints dating from June 2017, in October 2019 the Scheme was extended to cover all historical complaints. See, Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, [Annual Report July 2020 - June 2021](#), October 2021, para 4.

156 Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, [Guide for complainants](#); see also, Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, [Guide for respondents](#) [UK Parliament intranet only]

157 For a summary of the development of the IEP see, [Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme: independent investigations](#), Briefing Paper 8944, House of Commons Library, July 2021

158 Dame Laura Cox DBE, [The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff: independent inquiry report](#), October 2018, p 6

159 Q61 [Sir Charles Walker and Karen Bradley]

160 See, for example, Centenary Action Group ([GSP0018](#)), para 29; Q41 [Ken Gall]; Qq 51–2 [Chris Bryant]; Q122 [Thangam Debbonaire]

161 Q106

there was a perception in the parliamentary community that the investigation process was “stressful, isolating and lengthy”.¹⁶² The ICGS’s Annual Report for 2020–21, published after we had taken evidence for our inquiry, notes several steps taken to address these concerns. For example, to improve accessibility of the scheme, there was a new ICGS Hub on the parliamentary intranet, which would soon include new video content explaining the scheme. In relation to timescales for investigations, the report notes that:

Every effort is being taken to reduce the length of time of investigations—through greater efficiencies, extra resources in the team, streamlining the processes, better training and guidance for investigators—while not compromising the rigour and robustness of investigations. However, the complexity of some ICGS cases inevitably means that such cases will take a great deal of time to investigate.¹⁶³

99. The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, alongside the Behaviour Code, Valuing Everyone training and the establishment of the Cultural Transformation Team, is a significant step towards effectively tackling the House of Commons’ damaging culture of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct. We welcome the steps being taken, following the reviews of the scheme by Alison Stanley CBE, to increase its accessibility to the whole parliamentary community and improve its operational efficiency, in particular to speed up investigations where possible. We will continue to scrutinise progress.

100. In addition to accessibility and operational concerns, evidence to our inquiry highlighted three major areas of concern in ICGS policy and procedures as they related to the behaviour of MPs.

ICGS: major areas of concern

Recall of MPs

101. Witnesses noted an apparent anomaly in the treatment of MPs against whom serious complaints, including of sexual misconduct, were upheld. The Recall of MPs Act 2015 allows for recall petitions (public votes on whether a by-election should be held, giving constituents the opportunity to remove an MP who has behaved poorly) in three circumstances: the sitting MP’s conviction and sentencing to detention for any offence;¹⁶⁴ the MP’s conviction for making false or misleading claims for parliamentary allowances; and the MP’s suspension from the House of Commons after a report from the Committee on Standards and recommended sanction of suspension from the House for 10 sitting days (or 14 days where the number of sitting days is not specified) or more.¹⁶⁵ There is no such provision in law for recall petitions arising from ICGS sanctions imposed by the IEP, no matter the seriousness of the case.

102. Chris Bryant MP, Chair of the Committee on Standards emphasised the anomaly as follows:

162 See, for example, Centenary Action Group ([GSP0018](#)), para 30; see also, Alison Stanley CBE FCIP, *Independent Complaints & Grievance Scheme: Independent 18-Month Review*, paras 94–119

163 Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, *Annual Report July 2020 - June 2021*, October 2021, para 71

164 [The Representation of the People Act 1981](#) disqualifies anyone convicted of a crime and sentenced to more than one year in prison from being an MP.

165 See *Recall elections*, Briefing Paper [5089](#), House of Commons Library, November 2021

if you are suspended from the House for more than 10 days for a misdemeanour over the registration of a financial interest, you are subject to the Recall of MPs Act, which means that your voters could effectively remove you, but that does not apply if you are suspended for more than 10 days by the Independent Expert Panel for sexual harassment. There are quite a few of us who are angry that we have not been able to close that loophole [...].¹⁶⁶

103. In August 2021, the Leader of the House wrote to us noting that the Government had tabled a motion before the summer recess to amend the House's Standing Orders to the effect that an IEP sanction of the minimum duration set out in Recall of MPs Act would lead to a recall petition. However, an Opposition amendment had been tabled and the motion could not be agreed by the House.¹⁶⁷ On 19 October 2021, the House agreed the Government motion to affect the change, through amended Standing Orders to be read alongside the Act, in relation to future cases. An Opposition amendment to apply the change retrospectively to cases determined by the IEP was defeated.¹⁶⁸

104. We welcome 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. While the delay in bringing forward the necessary motion was regrettable, the application of amended Standing Orders to be read alongside the Act should now correct the error. *This 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.*

Attendance at Parliament of MPs under investigation for sexual misconduct

105. While welcoming the ICGS and the establishment of the IEP as “huge steps in the right direction”, Ken Gall, President of the House of Commons Trade Union Side, raised one major concern. He noted that there had been several cases of sexual misconduct brought against MPs. There had been a variety of outcomes and sanctions where complaints had been upheld, such as removal of the party whip and suspension from the House. He noted that “the one constant” in all such cases was that the MPs concerned were “not excluded” from attending Westminster while under investigation. His view was that the House should give greater priority to the need to protect staff and the wider parliamentary community from the risk of potential harm:

We need to start considering seriously whether some form of exclusion from the estate, not suspension as an MP but exclusion from the estate during the investigation, strictly for sexual misconduct, is something that we might want to bring in. It feels to me like a bit of a throwback to the previous culture that the MP's rights to attend unencumbered seem to take precedence over what in a normal workplace would result in a suspension.¹⁶⁹

166 Q51

167 [Letter dated 18 August 2021 from The Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Leader of the House of Commons, to the Chair of the Committee](#)

168 HC Deb, 19 October 2021, [cols 631–48](#)

169 Q41

106. This is not an entirely straightforward issue and witnesses had mixed views. While the Chair of the Committee on Standards, Chris Bryant MP, believed it ought to be possible to exclude MPs under investigation for sexual misconduct, he noted several complexities. These included:

- how to deal with the confidentiality of complainant and respondent, which is guaranteed during ICGS investigations;
- the very lengthy timescales of some ICGS and police investigations into allegations of sexual misconduct, which might leave MPs “in limbo” and constituents without a democratic representative at Westminster for a protracted period;
- where an investigation period stretched across a general election, in which the MP under investigation would presumably be unable to stand, and subsequently found no case to answer, the investigated person “might feel that they had been permanently removed from the House without due process”; and
- the fact that MPs are not employees of the House, which, though “not a major obstacle to finding a solution [...], means that direct comparisons with other workplaces may be difficult.”

He noted that the House authorities could already restrict an MP’s access to facilities and services as a sanction for unreasonable or inappropriate behaviour, which he suggested could be used as a “precautionary measure to protect staff” in a case of alleged sexual misconduct. Mr Bryant also raised the question of whether exclusion from Parliament would be “sufficient to deal with the concern”, given that much of MPs’ work happens in their constituencies, where they interact very closely with constituency staff, constituents and others.¹⁷⁰

107. In oral evidence, the Leader of the House, Mr Rees-Mogg, emphasised that protection of House staff was a matter for the Clerk of the House of Commons and the House of Commons Commission, and that that he “did not have a particular responsibility in this area”. He also noted the complexities of protecting MPs’ staff, as they were not House employees, and many did not regularly work on the parliamentary estate.¹⁷¹ This point was echoed by the Clerk of the House, Dr John Benger, who emphasised that that the House of Commons was not a single workplace, it was essentially “650 separate workplaces”.¹⁷² There were measures he could take to protect his staff, such as restricting an MP’s access to services, based on case-by-case risk assessments, but he stressed that “it is not a perfect system, and there is not a simple, perfect solution”.¹⁷³

108. The Leader of the House elucidated his views on the matter in a letter of 18 August. He tended towards prioritising the constitutional principle of MPs having an inalienable right to attend Parliament, “by virtue of the fact that they have been democratically elected to represent their constituency” and their “special duty to their constituents as their sole representative in the House of Commons.” He also emphasised the importance of confidentiality and a presumption of innocence during investigations, which could be

170 [Letter dated 11 August 2021 from Chris Bryant MP, Chair of the House of Commons Committee on Standards, to the Chair of the Committee](#)

171 Q84

172 Q198

173 Q199

compromised if a decision to exclude an MP, and that MP's subsequent absence, drew media and public attention to the case at that stage. He believed there could be detrimental effects on the complainant, including loss of confidentiality, and the "prospects of a fair investigation". His view was that excluding MPs under investigation could also increase the risk of vexatious allegations of sexual misconduct being made against MPs.¹⁷⁴

109. On 25 November, Ken Gall of the House of Commons Trade Union Side wrote to us with some additional observations about the issue. The Trade Union Side was concerned that the emphasis on the "constitutional and traditional complexities" of implementing exclusion of MPs overlooked the potential risk to both individuals and the reputation of Parliament. The trade unions urged us to recommend that Parliament "look seriously at whether current procedures for dealing with these situations are still the right ones." Their view was that they were not, based in part on the advice of Dr Helen Mott, an adviser to Parliament during the development of the ICGS, on the risk of repeat behaviour:

The risk that a man known for sexual misconduct might repeat that behaviour is of course very high indeed. Sexual misconduct is usually very much tied to underlying attitudes about women and to a sense of entitlement: these are enduring traits and repeat offenders are, I would say, the norm rather than the exception.

110. Ken Gall emphasised that the Trade Union Side did not assume that those accused were guilty, and that it was calling not for suspension of those under investigation, only for their temporary exclusion from the parliamentary estate while being investigated. It acknowledged that in recent cases steps had been taken through "the usual channels" to reach informal agreements with the MPs in question to not attend Parliament. While welcoming this as an acknowledgment of the problem, the trade unions believed a formal system of exclusion while under investigation would be both proportionate and more effective:

[...] given the seriousness of sexual misconduct allegations, and Parliament's responsibilities to provide a safe environment for staff and others, informal agreements at unminuted meetings involving the respondent, senior officials and the Whips are entirely inappropriate and potentially prejudicial to any investigation. In addition, such an agreement simply may not be complied with by the MP concerned.

The Trade Union Side put forward what it believed was a "relatively straightforward and uncontentious" proposal: that the House of Commons Procedure Committee undertake a short inquiry into the "viability of formally excluding from the [parliamentary] Estate MPs facing sexual misconduct investigations for the period in advance of and during the investigation."¹⁷⁵

111. In other workplaces, suspension of employees under investigation for sexual misconduct is rightly considered the norm. We note that the House of Commons Trade Union Side is not arguing for suspension of MPs under investigation for sexual misconduct, only for temporary exclusion. However, exclusion of MPs from

174 [Letter dated 18 August 2021 from The Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Leader of the House of Commons, to the Chair of the Committee](#)

175 Letter dated 25 November 2021 from Ken Gall, President of the House of Commons Trade Union Side, to the Chair of the Committee [REF WHEN PUBLISHED]

Parliament is not straightforward. MPs are not employees, they are individually elected postholders, with a specific constitutional and democratic role as their constituents' sole representative in the legislature. This status must be balanced with the need to protect the parliamentary community from potential harm, particularly given the risk of repeat behaviour by men who engage in sexual misconduct. The complex employment relationships in the House of Commons and parliamentary constituencies may mean there is no perfect solution to this issue. *However, the House should consider whether the current approach, based on case-by-case risk assessments, potential withdrawal of services and facilities and, where necessary, informal agreement through the usual channels that an MP under investigation should not attend Parliament, provides the right balance. 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.*

Applicability of the ICGS to proceedings in the House of Commons

112. Chris Bryant MP, Chair of the House of Commons Committee on Standards, raised an issue with the scope of the ICGS, noting that it did not cover proceedings in the House of Commons chamber and a perceived lack of clarity around its applicability in other formal proceedings, such as in the division lobbies and during Select Committee meetings.¹⁷⁶

113. Neither the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards nor the ICGS can investigate complaints about matters which are the responsibility of the Speaker, which very clearly includes proceedings in the House of Commons chamber. In November 2021, the Committee on Standards noted that the Speaker's role in applying the House's rules and maintaining order in the House of Commons chamber was "deep-rooted in parliamentary history and practice" and did not propose that this should change because:

Events in the Chamber are fast-moving and discipline has to be instant; the Commissioner's investigation role is not appropriate. Conduct in the Chamber is properly a matter of order for the Chair, who has been given disciplinary powers by the House.¹⁷⁷

114. However, Mr Bryant believed there may be a case for change, or at least greater clarity, in relation to other proceedings in the House. In oral evidence, he discussed behaviour in the division lobbies:

[...] if somebody were to sexually harass another Member or, for that matter, a Clerk in a division lobby, because that is a proceeding in Parliament, that

¹⁷⁶ Q61

¹⁷⁷ Committee on Standards, [Review of the Code of Conduct: proposals for consultation](#), Fourth Report of Session 2021–22, HC 270, para 78

would be a matter solely for the Speaker. The Speaker does not have the resources or the powers to be able to deal with something like that [...] My suggestion is that the Speaker, in such a situation, should be able to refer that directly to the Independent Expert Panel, so as to be able to navigate around that.¹⁷⁸

Mr Bryant and the Committee on Standards noted that the House of Lords had amended its procedures to allow ICGS investigations into alleged bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct occurring during proceedings, with the proviso that the House of Lords Commissioner for Standards “would need to recognise freedom of speech as a primary consideration.”¹⁷⁹ The Code of Conduct for Members of the House of Lords has been amended accordingly.¹⁸⁰ The Commons Committee on Standards is currently considering whether the Speaker should have the option of referring MPs’ conduct in the chamber, committees and other proceedings to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, particularly in instances of “potential ICGS cases involving bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct”, as part of a wide-ranging inquiry and consultation on proposals for changes to the Code of Conduct for MPs.¹⁸¹

115. We were concerned that the options available to MPs, House of Commons staff and others who experienced inappropriate and harmful behaviour during proceedings such as debates, divisions and Select Committee meetings were unclear. We wrote to the Clerk Assistant and Managing Director of the Chamber and Participation Team, Sarah Davies, and the Director of the ICGS, Jo Willows, asking them to clarify the situation in the Commons.¹⁸² They confirmed that the ICGS did not cover anything said or written by an MP that “forms part of a proceeding”, including:

[...] speeches or interventions in the Chamber and general committees and, in select committees, questions put to witnesses and other things said in the course of formal meetings, whether in private or in public.

However, other forms of MPs’ speech, writing or behaviour that occurred during a formal proceeding would not be considered part of that proceeding, and would therefore fall within the scope of the ICGS. Examples given were: “bullying or harassment of another person via whispering or passing notes”; and “sexual misconduct in the form of unwanted touching of another Member, a clerk or other employee of the House, a witness or a visitor.”

116. While noting the “fundamental constitutional principle” of freedom of speech in Parliament, Sarah Davies and Jo Willows emphasised that there were options available to challenge abuses. In the chamber, the Speaker and his deputies in the Chair could take action to address an MP’s use of inappropriate language, for example. In Select Committees:

178 Q61

179 Q61; Committee on Standards, *Review of the Code of Conduct: proposals for consultation*, Fourth Report of Session 2021–22, HC 270, para 76

180 House of Lords, *Code of Conduct for Members of the House of Lords*, para 29

181 Committee on Standards, *Review of the Code of Conduct: proposals for consultation*, Fourth Report of Session 2021–22, HC 270, para 79

182 Letter dated 25 October 2021 from the Chair of the Committee to Sarah Davies, Clerk Assistant and Managing Director of the Chamber and Participation Team, and Jo Willows, Director, Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, House of Commons

the Chair could intervene (or another member of the Committee, if the Chair was the person behaving inappropriately) either during or after the proceedings. A member of staff could also intervene in a private meeting and/or speak to the Member afterwards about their behaviour. If appropriate, this could be supported by the ‘restrictions of service’ guidance for managers [...].

The Clerk Assistant and Director of the ICGS acknowledged the different approach recently adopted in the House of Lords. They told us they were preparing further guidance on these matters in the Commons.¹⁸³

117. We welcome the clarification by the House of Commons’ Clerk Assistant and Director of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) of the circumstances in which the policies and procedures of the ICGS apply to the behaviour of MPs in House of Commons proceedings. The distinction between MPs speech and writing, such as speeches and interventions in the chamber and formal discussions and papers in Committee meetings, that is part of a proceeding and therefore outside of the scope of the ICGS, and behaviours that might occur during a proceeding, such as whispering, note-passing and unwanted physical touching, but do not form part of the formal proceeding and are therefore covered by the ICGS, is a clear and helpful one. We recommend that this distinction 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.

183 [Email dated 9 November 2021 from the Clerk Assistant, Sarah Davies, and the Director of the ICGS, Jo Willows, House of Commons, to the Chair of the Committee](#)

6 Maintaining institutional focus and driving further reforms

118. This Report demonstrates that there has been significant, in some areas substantial, progress towards gender sensitising the House of Commons since *The Good Parliament* report in 2016 and the *UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018*. Equally, it demonstrates the need for further reform in each of the key areas we have examined. Some witnesses perceived a risk that the pace of progress will slow without a renewed plan of action and greater “institutional focus” on gender and wider diversity issues.¹⁸⁴ Professor Sarah Childs and Dr Jessica C. Smith emphasised that:

Gender Sensitive Parliaments do not just happen: they require much and, importantly, sustained individual and institutional political and administrative will.¹⁸⁵

119. *The Good Parliament* report found that a consequence of the House being made up of 650 individually elected and accountable MPs was that “reform is too often the result of individual MPs expending significant time and political capital.” The complex governance structure of the House of Commons, in which political and personal needs and interests do not always align, tended to “obscure a wider institutional responsibility to act”. The report made recommendations to a wide range of individuals and bodies across the institution, for example the then Speaker, the then Leader of the House, the House of Commons Commission, the Procedure Committee, the Liaison Committee of Select Committee Chairs, our predecessor Committee and the political parties.¹⁸⁶ Professor Childs stressed the difficulties in pressing ahead with reforms in Parliament: “it is not like an organisation with one chief executive who can just flick the switch”, she told us.¹⁸⁷

120. Professor Childs, Dr Alexandra Meakin and Ken Gall of the Trade Union Side mourned the end of the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, set up by the then Speaker of the House to deliver the reforms set out in *The Good Parliament* report in 2016.¹⁸⁸ The group has not met since 2018. Professor Childs and Dr Jessica C. Smith believed the group, to which Professor Childs was an adviser, had played a key role in driving through many positive reforms. They noted that the “success rate” of *The Good Parliament* report’s recommendations, 18 of 43 of which had been implemented, had been “higher than might have been expected”, in part because of the existence of a Reference Group with the backing of the then Speaker and then Leader of the House.¹⁸⁹ Given that the Reference Group had not met since 2018, Professor Childs was:

concerned that in recent years the leadership and the capacity of the institution to work very pointedly together through a particular institution tasked with the job of diversity sensitising a Parliament has declined [...

184 See, for example, Q2 [Professor Childs and Dr Meakin]

185 Professor Sarah Childs and Dr Jessica C. Smith ([GSP0012](#))

186 Professor Sarah Childs, *The Good Parliament*, July 2016

187 Q135

188 See, for example, Q3 [Professor Childs]; Q4 [Ken Gall and Dr Meakin]

189 Sarah Childs and Dr Jessica C. Smith ([GSP0012](#))

]. That is a real institutional deficit that means it is much harder for the House, as an institution, to reform itself in a coherent, planned, accountable and transparent fashion.¹⁹⁰

Professor Childs, Dr Meakin and Mr Gall all believed a replacement, “refresh” or “update” of the Reference Group, or similar central body, was key to making further progress.¹⁹¹

121. The views of MPs we heard from were more mixed. Chris Bryant MP, Chair of the Committee on Standards, and The Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP, Chair of the Procedure Committee, were sceptical about the likely effectiveness of a separate body, which would not have its own power to affect change within the House’s governance structure. They believed that the progress made after *The Good Parliament* report demonstrated that change was only affected when the Speaker and the Leader of the House of Commons worked in unison. Elucidating her scepticism about the effectiveness of a Reference Group or similar body in the current context, Karen Bradley said:

Unless they have the power to do these things and unless they have the full backing of the Government and the Leader to put things on the Order Paper, it is just another Select Committee that can make recommendations.¹⁹²

122. The Leader of the House’s view was that no single body’s remit could effectively encompass the multi-faceted aspects of gender-sensitivity and diversity across the House of Commons. He did not recognise the “institutional deficit” described by Professor Childs and believed there were “many within Parliament working hard to improve diversity and gender sensitivity”. He was, however, “always open to considering suggestions of how focus on these critical issues might be enhanced.”¹⁹³

123. Despite recent progress in several areas, the House of Commons currently lacks a comprehensive and systematic approach to driving forward reforms to promote gender and diversity sensitivity. This Report has demonstrated the need for further reforms in each of the key areas we have examined: equal representation; 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. There is clearly no room for complacency. Now is the time to review progress, build on it through a reinvigorated action plan and institute a systematic monitoring mechanism. *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 Inter-Parliamentary 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.*

190 Q2

191 See, for example, Q3 [Professor Childs]; Q4 [Ken Gall and Dr Meakin]

192 Q53

193 [Letter dated 18 August 2021 from The Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Leader of the House of Commons, to the Chair of the Committee](#)

Conclusions and recommendations

Equal representation in the House of Commons

1. There has been significant progress, particularly since 1997, towards women's equal representation in the House of Commons. However, women still only make up just over a third of the House of Commons' 650 MPs. There are considerable variations in women's representation in the House across the political parties, which have taken different approaches to their selection of parliamentary candidates. There are also very considerable variations in representation of minority ethnic women across the parties. Lack of equal representation undermines our democracy and, while selection processes remain predominately a matter for the political parties, the Government should take steps to incentivise effective action on gender sensitive and inclusive selection processes across the board. 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)
2. The rise of online abuse and harassment of female parliamentary candidates and MPs, including rape and death threats, is intolerable. It is unacceptable that such behaviour has become commonplace and contributed to female MPs standing down at the last general election. Vicious misogynistic abuse must not be accepted as an inevitable facet of a woman's life in politics. The Government points to the Draft Online Safety Bill and the Elections Bill as ways of addressing the issue. However, we are concerned that these pieces of legislation lack specific focus on the abuse currently being experienced by women, and particularly Black and minority ethnic women, in politics. It remains to be seen whether the Government's current legislative proposals will be sufficient given the sheer scale and severity of the problem. (Paragraph 31)
3. *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. We will return to the issue of online harassment and abuse of female politicians, including the case for further, specific legislation and new offences, in our work on preventing violence against women and girls.* (Paragraph 32)

Support for parent and carer MPs

4. *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)*
5. Like the House of Commons' proxy voting for parental absence scheme, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority's (IPSA) new MP parental leave cover fund is a major step forward. It is an important part of a raft of measures in recent years that make the House of Commons a more welcoming and accommodating place for MPs who are, or want to be, parents. However, in mirroring the entitlements of the proxy voting scheme, granting only two weeks leave cover for biological fathers, it entrenches damaging gender assumptions about primary responsibility for childcare. Like the proxy voting scheme, it makes no explicit reference to arrangements for parents of children born through surrogacy. We agree with Professor Childs that IPSA's scheme should set a better example. *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)*
6. We welcome the recent extension of the extended leave fund to cover a greater range of MPs' absences from Westminster, including for ill health and wider caring responsibilities. We also welcome the establishment of a new working group in IPSA to consider how to further embed and improve extended leave support, in the interests of a more inclusive and family-friendly working environment. *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, which we recommend in chapter 5 of this Report. (Paragraph 56)*
7. We note that the last Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) of IPSA's Scheme of MPs' Staffing and Business Costs was published in 2017 and its intention to conduct an EIA alongside the next comprehensive review of the scheme, no later than 2024. *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)

8. Publication of MPs' staffing and business costs incurred in relation to parental leave and other costs associated with having dependent children make parent MPs look "more expensive" than those without children. This could be perceived negatively by the public and may therefore be acting as a disincentive to claims. *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)*

A gender-sensitive working environment

9. Provision of dedicated car parking bays for MPs with young children would be a simple way of making the House of Commons more family-friendly and a small step towards reducing the burden on MPs who are also the primary carers of their children. It is a straightforward measure that you would expect to see at any car park for a large public building. *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)*
10. It is clear that gender sensitivity was not embedded in the Restoration and Renewal programme from the outset in 2013. We note that the programme now has accessibility and inclusion as one of its strategic aims and that the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body (Sponsor Body) has a small Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team. We welcome recent steps taken by the Sponsor Body to survey the experiences and needs of the parliamentary community, including MPs. However, we are concerned that there continues to be insufficient institutionalised focus on, and expertise in, gender sensitivity to support the programme. *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)

11. The Government has acted to return to pre-Covid 19 procedures in the House of Commons wherever possible, in the interests of effective representation of MPs' constituents and parliamentary scrutiny. However, elements of the hybrid proceedings approach adopted at the height of the pandemic had important benefits for inclusion, which should not be discounted. Measures adopted through necessity have demonstrated what is possible. The flexibility afforded by the approach was particularly welcomed by female MPs. In the interest of gender sensitivity, proper consideration should be given to the benefits of retaining aspects of the approach. As the Leader of the House of Commons said, it is a matter of balance. There is a balance to be struck between the effective conduct of the House's business, effective representation and the needs and interests of its diverse membership. Ultimately, procedure is a matter for the House as a whole and MPs should be given the opportunity to make their personal experiences and views known, free from party-political considerations. (Paragraph 88)

12. There has been significant progress towards making the House of Commons a more welcoming and accommodating place for female MPs and those who are or want to be parents. But the House has work to do to fully understand and meet the needs and interests of women, parents and other groups, such as disabled people and those with long-term health conditions. *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, breast-feeding 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)

Transforming culture and behaviour in the House of Commons

13. The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, alongside the Behaviour Code, Valuing Everyone training and the establishment of the Cultural Transformation Team, is a significant step towards effectively tackling the House of Commons' damaging culture of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct. We welcome the steps being taken, following the reviews of the scheme by Alison Stanley CBE, to increase its accessibility to the whole parliamentary community and improve its operational efficiency, in particular to speed up investigations where possible. We will continue to scrutinise progress. (Paragraph 99)
14. We welcome 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. While the delay in bringing forward the necessary motion was regrettable, the application of amended Standing Orders to be read alongside the Act should now correct the error. *This 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)
15. In other workplaces, suspension of employees under investigation for sexual misconduct is rightly considered the norm. We note that the House of Commons Trade Union Side is not arguing for suspension of MPs under investigation for sexual misconduct, only for temporary exclusion. However, exclusion of MPs from Parliament is not straightforward. MPs are not employees, they are individually elected postholders, with a specific constitutional and democratic role as their constituents' sole representative in the legislature. This status must be balanced with the need to protect the parliamentary community from potential harm, particularly given the risk of repeat behaviour by men who engage in sexual misconduct. The complex employment relationships in the House of Commons and parliamentary constituencies may mean there is no perfect solution to this issue. *However, the House should consider whether the current approach, based on case-by-case risk assessments, potential withdrawal of services and facilities and, where necessary, informal agreement through the usual channels that an MP under investigation should not attend Parliament, provides the right balance. 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)
16. We welcome the clarification by the House of Commons' Clerk Assistant and Director of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) of the circumstances in which the policies and procedures of the ICGS apply to the behaviour of MPs in

House of Commons proceedings. The distinction between MPs speech and writing, such as speeches and interventions in the chamber and formal discussions and papers in Committee meetings, that is part of a proceeding and therefore outside of the scope of the ICGS, and behaviours that might occur during a proceeding, such as whispering, note-passing and unwanted physical touching, but do not form part of the formal proceeding and are therefore covered by the ICGS, is a clear and helpful one. *We recommend that this distinction 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)

Maintaining institutional focus and driving further reforms

17. Despite recent progress in several areas, the House of Commons currently lacks a comprehensive and systematic approach to driving forward reforms to promote gender and diversity sensitivity. This Report has demonstrated the need for further reforms in each of the key areas we have examined: equal representation; 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. There is clearly no room for complacency. Now is the time to review progress, build on it through a reinvigorated action plan and institute a systematic monitoring mechanism. *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 Inter-Parliamentary 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)

Formal minutes

Wednesday 27 October 2021

Members present:

Caroline Nokes, in the Chair

Theo Clarke

Elliot Colburn

Jackie Doyle-Price

Carolyn Harris

Kim Johnson

Ms Anum Qaisar

Bell Ribeiro-Addy

Draft Report (*Equality in the heart of democracy: A gender sensitive House of Commons*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 123 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fifth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

[Adjourned until Wednesday 2 March at 2 p.m.]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Wednesday 09 June 2021

Professor Sarah Childs, Professor of Politics and Gender, London University Royal Holloway College; **Dr Alexandra Meakin**, Research Associate, University of Manchester; **Ken Gall**, President, Trade Union Side, House of Commons [Q1–46](#)

Wednesday 14 July 2021

Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP, Chair, Procedure Committee; **Chris Bryant MP**, Chair, Standards Committee; **Sir Charles Walker MP**, Chair, Administration Committee [Q47–64](#)

Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Leader of the House, House of Commons [Q62–102](#)

Thangam Debbonaire MP, Shadow Leader of the House, House of Commons [Q106–123](#)

Wednesday 15 September 2021

Ian Todd, Chief Executive Officer, Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA); **Amanda Colledge**, Business Case Director, Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body [Q124–151](#)

Dr John Benger, Clerk of the House, House of Commons; **Marianne Cwynarski OBE**, Director General, House of Commons; **Sarah Davies**, Clerk Assistant and Managing Director of the Chamber and Participation Team, House of Commons; **Sarah Petit**, Cultural Transformation Director, House of Commons [Q152–200](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

GSP numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 50:50 Parliament ([GSP0024](#))
- 2 A Member of the public ([GSP0001](#))
- 3 Administration Committee ([GSP0004](#))
- 4 Birkbeck Parliamentary Studies Group; and Birkbeck Parliamentary Studies Group ([GSP0014](#))
- 5 Centenary Action Group ([GSP0018](#))
- 6 Childs, Professor Sarah (Professor of Politics and Gender, Royal Holloway, University of London); and Dr Jessica Smith (Lecturer in Politics, University of Southampton) ([GSP0012](#))
- 7 Chris Clarkson MP ([GSP0027](#))
- 8 Clerk of the House ([GSP0030](#))
- 9 Compassion in Politics ([GSP0019](#))
- 10 Ellie Reeves MP ([GSP0016](#))
- 11 Equality and Human Rights Commission ([GSP0026](#))
- 12 Institute for Government ([GSP0029](#))
- 13 Guerrina, Prof Roberta ([GSP0017](#))
- 14 Labour Women ([GSP0015](#))
- 15 Lindsay, ([GSP0009](#))
- 16 Meakin, Dr Alexandra (Research Associate, University of Manchester) ([GSP0022](#))
- 17 Mermaids ([GSP0005](#))
- 18 Northern Ireland Women's European Platform ([GSP0011](#))
- 19 Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body ([GSP0028](#))
- 20 Pregnant then Screwed ([GSP0025](#))
- 21 The Fawcett Society ([GSP0020](#))
- 22 Woodham-Smith, Julia ([GSP0007](#))
- 23 Work Inclusivity Research Centre ([GSP0008](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the publications page of the Committee's website.

Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Levelling Up and equality: a new framework for change	HC 702
2nd	Appointment of the Chair of the Social Mobility Commission: Katharine Birbalsingh CBE	HC 782
3rd	Reform of the Gender Recognition Act	HC 977
4th	Ethnicity pay gap reporting	HC 998

Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Unequal impact? Coronavirus, disability and access to services: interim Report on temporary provisions in the Coronavirus Act	HC 386
2nd	Appointment of the Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission	HC 966
3rd	Unequal impact? Coronavirus and BAME people	HC 384
4th	Unequal impact? Coronavirus, disability and access to services: full Report	HC 1050
5th	Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact	HC 385
6th	Changing the perfect picture: an inquiry into body image	HC 274