

## Written evidence submitted by Stella Creasy MP (BIC 12)

I am writing to you further to my appearance in front of the Committee on 9th March to discuss the support required by parliamentarians who give birth.

When I had my first child, my “Locum” MP was able to attend MP-only meetings in my place in order to hear from Ministers and raise concerns on behalf of my constituents. Following the birth of my second child, I was not able to hire such a person, with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority stating that this was not required because a member of staff could substitute for me at events and meetings as an alternative.

Given this, senior staff in my office (my Research Manager and Office Manager) repeatedly requested to be allowed to attend briefings in my place on a case by case basis. During the months immediately after my son was born, they were regularly told they would not be able to attend calls and meetings as they were not MPs themselves, despite me being unable to attend. The following are dates and examples of meetings where this request was explicitly made on the basis that I was seeking to care for a baby and so could not attend:

- A call with the Foreign Secretary re Afghanistan on the 25th August
- A call with the Defence Secretary re Afghanistan on the 25th August
- A call with the Defence Secretary re Afghanistan on the 31st August
- A roundtable with the DCMS Secretary re Online Safety on the 7th September
- An event with the International Trade Secretary and the Board of Trade Advisors in early September
- A call with the Vaccines Minister re Covid vaccines on the 23rd September
- A recurring series of calls with the Vaccines Minister re Covid vaccines on every Tuesday in January 2022

Following the repeated insistence of officials at various Departments that staff were unable to attend these briefings in my place, it is understandable that my staff stopped enquiring about this when receiving notification of meetings, as there was little prospect of the position changing. As such, there are further briefings which my team were excluded from which are not recorded here. Please note my son was born on the 24th August, and given the response above I then attended the vast majority of the above meetings myself to ensure my constituents were represented.

Furthermore, where staff were allowed to attend briefings from Ministers, they were also explicitly told they would be unable to ask questions, or put in to ask questions. This means that specific concerns affecting my constituents were unable to be raised with Ministers. Even were all Departments compelled to admit a staff member as a proxy for MPs, it would not guarantee that equal access were available unless the staff member is treated in the same way as MPs when it came to raising constituency concerns. Whilst colleagues did offer on an ad hoc basis to raise matters for my staff, given the limited amount of time available to individual MPs in these meetings to speak it was not possible to rely on this for my constituents concerns to be raised.

Further to the questions asked, I am also sharing with the Committee details of correspondence I received from House authorities regarding my proxy vote arrangements for my son. These reflect both the difficulty of implementing the concept of ‘Keep in Touch’ days and the consequences of a lack of formal maternity and paternity policies. On September 14th I received the following message from the Chamber Business Team after I had attended and participated in a debate on childcare provision in Westminster Hall.

*“I noticed that you spoke in a Westminster Hall debate yesterday. I just wanted to make sure you know that the rules the House has agreed for parental proxy voting are that Members may not participate in proceedings (in the Chamber, Westminster Hall or Committee) while a proxy vote is in operation (the Standing Order states that a Member is eligible for a proxy vote “by reason of absence from the precincts of the House...”). If you do want to speak in a debate, you can do so by giving us notice by the rise of the House the sitting day before (or by 3pm on a non-sitting day before), and we can arrange for your proxy vote to be cancelled until you tell us you wish to*

*activate it again.”*

I received the following message on the 23rd November following my participation in another Westminster Hall debate that I had organised on Buy Now Pay Later lenders:

*“We have been made aware that you were accompanied by your baby in Westminster Hall earlier today. I just wanted to make you aware that the recently published Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons states that “you should not take your seat in the Chamber when accompanied by a child” (para 42). I would like to draw to your attention the fact that this also applies to debates in Westminster Hall. Please do get in touch if you would like to discuss this further.”*

Please note on the 23rd September I participated in the Commons chamber and on the 17th November, on both occasions with my son in attendance, in order to manage his needs and speak on issues of concern Constituents had raised with me. These attendances passed without comment from the House authorities. I have had no further contact from the House, or indeed any other entity, regarding the start or end of any period of leave following the birth of my son or any support required to participate in parliament. I continue to nurse my child despite the end of my proxy voting period in line with the recommendations from the World Health Organisation.

I set out for the Committee that I had attended the parliamentary chambers with my children due to the lack of appropriate maternity cover to ensure that my duties as MP for Walthamstow were covered and that I could nurse. Existing law ensures women are entitled to 52 weeks' statutory maternity leave, irrespective of length of service. The Court of Appeal has previously confirmed that the purposes of such leave are:

1. to prepare for and cope with the later stages of pregnancy:
2. to recuperate from the pregnancy:
3. to recuperate from the effects of childbirth:
4. to develop the special relationship between the mother and the newborn child:
5. to breastfeed the newborn child (recommended for a period of six months by the World Health Organisation): and
6. to care for the newborn child.

Any arrangements under which the maternity cover available is so inadequate that a new mother has to continue to perform or oversee her role would unlawfully deprive an employee of this statutory entitlement. Whilst a new mother need not take her full 52-week entitlement, it is mandatory that she does take at least the first two weeks following childbirth as leave for the sake of her health and safety. An employer would be guilty of a criminal offence if it allows a new mother to work during this two-week period. The right to maternity cover is determined not by the role a woman does, but whether she is pregnant, so in any other workplace this situation would be considered discrimination.

Whilst I recognise that the provision of a maternity and paternity cover policy for parliament is beyond the remit of this committee, as I highlighted to the Committee the lack of collective action on these issues to bring in any policies or coherent programme of support has consequences across both the parliamentary and constituency work of a Member. It is also clear from our work with the This Mum Votes campaign that it has a deterrent effect on women that parliament has no formal policies on this area.

Addressing these issues cannot be about a single policy directing any parent on how to manage the needs of their children, nor will it benefit equality to restrict where and how those seeking to manage these challenges can participate. With this in mind and in recognition of the limitations of the Committee's remit, before any recommendations are made I urge the Committee to take evidence from those who are not existing or former Members but are interested parties including campaign organisations such as Pregnant then Screwed, and to consider examples of policies from other legislatures. To that end I also attach the standing orders from the

Australian parliament which enable proxy voting for Nursing mothers.

I hope this information is helpful when you are considering your recommendations.

*16 March 2022*