

## Written evidence submitted by the Women and Equalities Committee

### **Improving the accessibility of Parliament**

- We would also like to see the Modernisation Committee consider how remote voting might improve the accessibility of parliament, enable a wider demographic of people to represent their constituencies and support a more modern workplace.
- Disability access to the estate needs to be urgently improved across the estate, for those who work here and those who visit. People with access needs should not have to wait for the realisation of a restoration and renewal project for their needs to be met. As a first step, we suggest the Modernisation Committee considers how the chamber and areas of the palace open to the public can be made more accessible. For example, we would like to see consideration given to how the chamber can be modified, so that MPs with disabilities have choice over where they can sit.

### **Modernising the language of Parliament**

- Language in the Chamber, and used more widely in Parliament is antiquated. It is not inclusive to new Members and prevents our constituents from understanding what is happening. It needs to be updated.
- The same goes for behaviour in the chamber. Booing and jeering does not belong in any workplace yet alone one that is subject to public scrutiny and which should be setting an example for others. Such behaviour must be addressed.
- The language of Parliament should also be modernised to become gender neutral. As a first step, we would like to see the use of the term 'Chairman', in the few places where it remains, abolished and replaced with the gender-neutral term 'Chair'.
- The language used to describe MPs' expenses must change. Staff wages and other operational costs are not expenses, they are costs that in other workplaces would be considered fundamental to running an office or workplace. Current terminology is misleading and provides a further basis for abuse. It can also discourage MPs from utilising their budgets to recruit and retain the skilled, experienced staff they need. MPs' costs should of course be transparent but should not unnecessarily misrepresent how MPs spend taxpayers' money.

### **Making Parliament a modern place to work**

- Parliament is more than just a workplace, however, it should be a modern place to work. There are rules and processes that affect Members' ability to perform their jobs. For example, rules that govern where we can produce social media content and communicate with our constituents are restrictive and do not allow for varied and immediate social media content to be produced. We suggest that the Committee reviews these rules to remove barriers to communication.
- Our calendars are set up to allow meetings to be placed in our online calendars by anyone with a parliamentary account, blocking up our calendars. There is a risk of causing unintentional harm to Members who may avoid meetings or events on certain topics due to their own

personal experiences. We would like to see meetings appear in our calendars only if we actively accept them.

- MPs' staff continue to lose out on basic protections by not having access to HR functions that exist outside of those provided by the MP as their employer, which risks their safety and rights. We acknowledge that this has been repeatedly considered in a variety of forums, but Members' staff deserve to work in a modern workplace that gives them access to HR services and protections. We suggest that the Committee considers alternative models of employment for staff, allowing for them to have access to HR advice and support while maintaining the ability for Members to choose their own staff.
- The Committee should investigate ways in which voting can take place more swiftly in the Commons, to ensure Members' time is used to best effect in representing their constituents.

### **Making Parliament a more family-friendly workplace**

- The Modernisation Committee should consider how Parliament can better support modern family life, where both parents are often involved in childcare,
- does not fully cater for families of older children, nor does it meet the requirement for the flexible childcare necessary for a workplace with often unpredictable hours. We welcome the recent holiday club initiative, and would like to see more initiatives like this introduced.
- The Committee should consider what lessons can be learned from other Parliaments that operate family friendly policies. We would be happy to discuss with you how the Women and Equalities Committee could support the Modernisation Committee to undertake this work.
- The Committee should consider representations to IPSA on behalf of MPs with parental responsibilities, to allow for an increased hotel budget on occasions when dependants need to stay with them in London. Currently, there is a budget for dependants to stay in rental accommodation, but not in hotels.
- The Committee should mandate Party Whips to include "family emergencies" officially in the criteria of reasons for requesting a slip.

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