

Submission from the Clerk of the House to the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into a Gender Sensitive Parliament

1. Thank you for the invitation to submit written evidence to the Gender Sensitive Parliament inquiry.

Which individuals or bodies are responsible for taking action, and who/what should be driving change?

2. The focus of my submission is to update the Committee on the actions the House Service has undertaken in support of a Gender Sensitive Parliament, in my role as Head of the House Service and chair of its Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group. I also offer some information, as Clerk of the House, on changes to the procedures and working practices of the House.
3. Parliament's governance arrangements are complex and, as with many issues, there is no single responsible owner for gender equality in Parliament. Broadly speaking (in the Commons):
 - The House is responsible for deciding the way in which the House of Commons carries out its work. The House often relies on advice from the Procedure Committee and changes are usually put to the House for decision by the Leader of the House.
 - The House of Commons Commission, of which I am a member, is responsible for the administration and services of the House of Commons.
 - As Head of the House Service, I am responsible for the House Service.
 - Other actors, including IPSA, the R&R bodies and the political parties can all impact on the gender sensitivity of Parliament through their decisions.
4. In the absence of a single decision-maker, the House of Commons Commission has to some extent taken on the role of setting direction and coordinating activity on gender equality in the Commons, formally noting the *Good Parliament* report and establishing (with the Lords Commission) the 2018 Gender Sensitive Parliament audit. The House Service provided the secretariat of the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, which met between 2016 and 2018 to progress the recommendations of the *Good Parliament* report, and of the 2018 audit.

How successfully have changes proposed in the past been implemented in practice?

5. The *Good Parliament* report made five recommendations to the House of Commons Commission, all of which have been implemented, as follows:
 - The Commission formally noted the report and the establishment of the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion (recommendation 17).
 - To make Parliament's diverse representation more apparent, we have made content on our social media channels more diverse and inclusive (recommendation 18).
 - The House Service has established a Pathways to Success residential programme for members of under-represented groups interested in standing for Parliament, with 60 individuals due to participate this year (recommendation 19).
 - The House Service has redesigned the Parliamentary pass so that it is double-sided (recommendation 20).

- Members have access to a refreshed programme of Continuous Professional Development, with details of the offer available on the [intranet](#) (recommendation 21).
6. The House Service also implemented further recommendations agreed to by the relevant decision-maker; for example, designing the proxy voting system for new parents following the decision of the House.
 7. In its inquiry terms of reference, the Committee highlights the major barriers to gender equality identified by the 2018 Gender Sensitive Parliament audit, namely:
 - The culture of Parliament as highlighted in recent reports of bullying and harassment, and sexual harassment;
 - The challenges that working in Parliament poses for family life, including the unpredictability of business and potential long hours;
 - The financial impact of standing for Parliament; and
 - Online threats and threats to physical security, in particular gender-based intimidation, harassment and violence against female Parliamentarians and female candidates.

Cultural change to address bullying, harassment and sexual harassment

8. Since 2018, Parliament has dedicated significant focus and resource to addressing bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct. For example, we believe we are the only Parliament in the world to offer specialist support to members of the Parliamentary community who have experienced sexual misconduct, as part of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS). In her recent 18-month [review](#) of the ICGS, while identifying a number of issues for improvement, Alison Stanley commended the commitment shown across the Parliamentary community to the Scheme “both as a complaints process and also as a signal of the intent to build a workplace culture of dignity and respect”.¹
9. The three fundamental recommendations of the 2018 [Cox Report](#) into the bullying and harassment of House staff have all now been implemented:
 - The Valuing Others and Respect policies were permanently suspended in October 2018, as recommended, with all formal complaints now made through the ICGS.
 - The ICGS is now open to non-recent cases and to former members of Parliamentary community, as recommended, following a decision of the House of 17 July 2019.
 - On 23 June 2020, MPs agreed to establish an Independent Expert Panel, thereby implementing the recommendation that complaints of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment against MPs be determined independently. The Panel is now operational.
10. *Valuing Everyone* training was developed to ensure that everyone working in the House can recognise and take action to tackle and prevent bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct. The training has been completed by 90% of MPs and a similar proportion of House Staff. An evaluation report in September 2020 found that over 90% of the MPs who attended the training and completed a feedback form found the course to be effective. In March 2021, in response to the 18-month review of the ICGS, the Commission: “agreed that all Members should attend Valuing Everyone training and noted that most Members had already done so. It agreed that the names of Members who

¹ Paragraph 3

have attended the training will be published from time to time, with early notification given of when the information will be published. While the Commission is not of the view that a three-year “refresh” is necessary, it will ask the House Authorities to look to refresh the content every five years or so, and/or at the beginning of a new Parliament.”²

11. A comprehensive programme of work has been undertaken in response to the 2019 [White report](#) into the bullying and harassment of MPs and MPs’ staff, including the establishment of a Members Service Teams providing professional HR support to MPs in their role as employers, the publication of good practice guides and pastoral care and wellbeing support for MPs’ staff.³

Supporting those working in Parliament with balancing work and family life

12. In January 2019, a new proxy voting system was introduced for MPs who have had a baby or adopted a child. On 23 September 2020, the system was made a permanent feature of House of Commons procedure.
13. Work has started to create an intranet hub to bring together the offering from the House Service for individuals with children and families. For House staff, this includes policies on Maternity, Adoption, Paternity, Additional Paternity, Parental Leave, Shared Parental Leave and Caring Leave.
14. Policies relating to MPs would fall under IPSA’s remit, but the House of Commons does provide facilities to support MPs (and others) with children, including the Westminster Holiday Playscheme, the LEFY House of Commons Nursery, the Members’ Family Room, a babycare room and baby-changing facilities.

The financial impact of standing for Parliament

15. This is not a matter for the House of Commons Commission or the House Service.

Dealing with online threats and improving physical security

16. All MPs have access to recommended security measures for their constituency offices and homes. In addition, there is a Parliamentary Liaison and Investigations Team (PLaIT) to assist Members and staff with advice on threats, urgent issues or to discuss general security concerns while on the estate. Up to date information is provided to all MPs reminding them of the importance of reporting any incidents or concern, particularly women, due to the fact female MPs are disproportionately subject to online abuse.
17. Table-top exercising and a recently completed annual review of the recommended security measures for MPs introduced by the National Police Chiefs Council ensures that existing security measures are kept relevant and up to date.

**What further changes do we need to make to procedures and working arrangements?
e.g. parental and carer leave; proxy voting; virtual attendance**

18. The 2018 Gender Sensitive Parliament audit recommended that a review be undertaken to assess options for reform of Parliamentary procedures and practices such as:

² [Decisions of the House of Commons Commission, 22 March 2021](#)

³ A detailed account of progress to implement the Cox and White recommendations is available [here](#).

Written evidence submitted by Clerk of the House [GSP0030]

- More advance notice of the Parliamentary calendar
 - More predictability in, and advance notice of the scheduling of business, including a set time for voting
 - Compressing the sitting week into fewer days
 - More closely aligning recess dates and school holidays
 - Setting expectations in relation to committee workload
19. This is a matter for the Procedure Committee, in the first instance. If such a review were to be commissioned, officials would readily offer advice as to how these might be implemented, as we have done with proxy voting and changes to ways of working during the pandemic. There would undoubtedly be benefits for all parents (and others) in the Parliamentary community, in more predictability in working patterns and alignment of recess dates with school holidays.
20. Separately from, and in advance of the arrangements for remote participation in the Chamber, the House agreed an order on 24 March 2020 allowing members of select committees to participate in select committee proceedings remotely. Although formally concerned with remote participation by Members, the use of Zoom has enabled much higher levels of remote participation by select committee witnesses. In June 2018, the then Liaison Committee agreed a target that at least 40% of discretionary witnesses should be female and that a panel of three or more discretionary witnesses should normally include at least one woman by the end of that Parliament. This target was close to being achieved by the end of the 2017-2019 Parliament, with the sessional return for the long Session in that Parliament reporting that 39% of discretionary witnesses were female and 35% of total witnesses were female.
21. Although equivalent figures for Session 2019-21 are not yet published, anecdotal evidence suggests that enabling remote participation by witnesses has supported efforts to enable a more diverse range of people to give oral evidence to select committees. This has probably particularly benefitted witnesses with caring responsibilities, and other witnesses for whom travel to Westminster may be a limiting factor. A staff-level group on witness diversity is considering issues such as promoting and monitoring diversity, ensuring appropriate safeguarding and protecting vulnerable witnesses. Proposals for improving processes for diversity monitoring of witnesses and monitoring the diversity of specialist advisers were recently considered by the Liaison Committee and will be rolled out from the start of the next Session of Parliament.
22. We are currently considering as a House Service the gender impacts of remote working during the pandemic and how to maximise the opportunities (such as increased flexibility) and mitigate any risks (such as missing out on opportunities through less visibility, wellbeing due to unsociable hours worked, or most seriously, domestic abuse) in our plans for the longer-term.

The major refurbishment of Parliament taking place over the next decade – the Restoration and Renewal Programme – creates opportunities for positive changes. How can our buildings and facilities be changed to support a gender sensitive House of Commons?

23. The Access and Inclusion Steering Group has fed recommendations for gender sensitive facilities improvements into the R&R Programme, including clear guidance on inclusive design principles.

How can we create a more inclusive culture?

24. Creating a diverse and inclusive working environment is one of the four goals of the House Service Strategy 2019-2025: this demonstrates our commitment to creating a more inclusive culture both within the House Service and via the services we provide.

Within the House Service: strengthening diversity and inclusion within leadership and management; achieving representation of women and ethnic diversity of staff at senior levels; supporting career progression opportunities

25. Some figures which demonstrate the progress made in recent years in relation to gender include:

- For 2020, female representation within the HOC and PDS stands at 45.3%;
- Currently, 8 out of 12 Commons Executive Board members are female; and
- In 2020 the mean pay gap for the House of Commons Service was 0.9%, whilst the median pay gap was 0.9%.

26. This progress in representation can mask the fact that women in the House Service have in some surveys reported more negative experiences of the workplace than their male colleagues, and work is underway to understand and address this. In a similar vein, I have established a BAME advisory group to tackle racial disparities in the workplace and we have also commissioned work to understand how we can support disabled colleagues.

27. Key areas of work include:

- A Press Pause policy aimed at ensuring diverse shortlists has been introduced for more senior paybands (SCS to grade B). We are reviewing our recruitment strategies and policies: in addition to identifying different ways of recruiting in today's market, we want to ensure that we reach diverse and wide-ranging communities. At the request of the Commission, I have recently reviewed the Management and Team Structure of the House Service. I believe my proposals will support increased diversity in recruitment, including via improved career paths which will open up more senior roles to a broader range of candidates.
- A new Connected Leadership programme has been introduced in October 2020, with ringfenced places for women and BAME staff. We have also adopted a coaching style approach to management and are setting standards for inclusive leadership.
- We are introducing new equality, diversity and inclusion programmes, training, toolkits and resources to develop cultural competence, general understanding of equality diversity and inclusion and to improve faith and belief literacy.

28. None of the progress we have made would be possible without the staff who volunteer their time as part of our Workplace Equality Networks (WENs) to provide support, information, challenge and ideas. All the WENs have a Board-level champion, with the Clerk Assistant acting as champion for ParliGender. A new Workplace Equality Network, ParliCare, has recently been introduced, aiming to raise awareness of and support for all Parliamentary staff with caring responsibilities.

Embedding diversity and inclusion in our service delivery and on the Parliamentary estate

29. In addition to our efforts to support a greater diversity of select committee witnesses, described at paragraphs 20-21, the UK Parliament Inclusive Communications and Public Engagement Policy formally sets out the principle and expectations for inclusive engagement with the public. This includes inclusivity relating to gender. The Participation team increased Parliament's engagement with audiences across the whole of the UK by improving online access during 2020.
30. The Parliamentary Digital Service has designed the parliament.uk website to meet all legal and best practice requirements for accessibility across 80% of the site; and we are developing further develop work around British Sign Language (BSL) and subtitling of parliamentary proceedings.
31. On the Parliamentary estate:
 - We are reviewing our accessibility standards and requirements to ensure when dealing with customers, in relation to room bookings, catering and accommodation, that we are responsive to all customers' needs.
 - More inclusive access rules, basing rules on business need and capacity rather than status, have been in place since January 2020.
 - The first stage of a review of the impact of pass checking on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic members of the Parliamentary community, looking at the processes and procedures for checking security passes, recently reported and the recommendations are due to be implemented by summer 2021.

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